

The Brood:
The Prophecy
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Prologue

“Quickly, there isn’t much time left before the caravan arrives. They will take you and the boys to safety far away from here.”

Irena glanced out into the chilly night, thankful that the thick clouds masked the bright full moon. Tonight she would need darkness to protect her and her family. And darkness suited her. It was with a heavy heart that she would leave this place. Her surrogate home.

“You have been more than generous to us so far, Great One, and I am forever grateful. But must we leave?”

She held her breath as the old man gazed upon her with warmth. They had taken her in here when no one else dared. They had provided a safe haven for her delivery and a peaceful period of time with her sons. She put them in danger by staying. Still she could barely stand to go.

“It is said your son will bring unprecedented change to the Tiger clan. And even though they may deny the truth to this prophecy, they hunt for your boys even now. They seek to destroy the possibility, to protect their way of life. The temple is no longer safe.”

She sighed, her heart weary.

“But is there no way to prevent those events from materializing? Will I ever be able to roam amongst my family again?”

The man simply patted her hand with a soft, gentle touch as the last of her belongings were brought to the steps. He spoke with a seriousness that could not be masked by his tender tone.

“I’m afraid not, my child. You gave birth here to protect yourself and your children. In doing so, you’ve set the pendulum in motion. Alexei has already begun to fulfill his destiny.”

They glanced towards the temple floor where two tiny kittens, one black and one striped circled the space. The leopard looked wary, having been wounded by the tiger’s sharp claws once already.

“Your son has marked a leopard as his future mate. One day, Irena, he will return to claim her. I cannot predict how or when that day will arrive or even if he will realize his fate by then or not, but he will come back. And together they will fulfill this prophecy.”

Chapter One

Alexei was remarkable as a man.

He stalked through the dense forest brush with all the innate skill of a mighty animal. His step was light but his body driven by a powerful purpose. Every sense his body had available was focused on the task he set out with.

Today he hunted.

And she was the prey.

Anna eyed the intruder cautiously from her perch in the thick tree top. The dim light of the afternoon was beginning to fade and there was no question she could easily elude him and his rifle once night fell. She did not fear the human hunter.

Anna feared the animal she knew him to be.

Alexei sought vengeance this afternoon. Misguidedly it was aimed towards her but it was still deeply rooted inside of him. His brother had been murdered and based on the fierce passion that blazed in his sinful dark eyes, someone was going to die for it. The only question was why he wasted his effort with the human weapon in the first place.

It was the pull of the unknown that had her trailing him this afternoon. She could smell the animal inside him. She could sense the power clawing to be unleashed from its human restraint. She sought to protect herself by keeping tabs on the man but deep down she was apprehensive of the beast he could be.

A man she could strike at. A tiger would kill her before she had the chance.

There had been much talk of the brothers' return to the forest. Had they returned to claim their birth right among the tigers, to fulfill the legend that was known amongst them all? The leopards had reason to be wary. A united tiger pack held many implications. The smallest concerned their food supply. The largest meant their extinction.

But it was one of their own that had slain Alexei's brother. The tigers were evidently just as edgy about the change Alexei brought with him. They had killed to scare him away, to keep their clan status quo. She doubted they would hesitate to slay again to preserve their current way of life. So, why hadn't his animal instincts shown him that?

Graceful and stealth like, she descended from the shelter of the tree to follow the intriguing stranger. Her senses elevated on alert, she stalked the handsome man further into her territory. It had been a long time since she had enjoyed the sight of another human. And it had been even longer since she had sated her sexual appetite on such a desirable man.

Alexei might have danger written all over him. His current state of anger very well might be her demise if she wasn't careful but that didn't stop the powerful lust that drew her closer. The hard planes of his muscular body as it stalked through the forest, the scent of masculinity that enveloped him heated her in a way that had long been dormant.

She was lusting after a known enemy and the distraction would prove deadly if she wasn't careful. Slowly she lowered herself to the ground and listened. Her wandering thoughts had caught her off guard, and Alexei's path had led them to the waterfall where her ears were filled with gushing water and were distorted to other movement.

She cursed her stupid hormones.

Cautiously, she raised her head and soaked in her surroundings. She was cloaked by the thick vegetation and knew her black coat of fur blended in well with the darkening evening. Failing to capture his location by sight, she sniffed the night air and froze.

Anna smelt tiger and not tiger in human form. Someone else was hunting where they shouldn't be. Whoever that intruder was, he was far more of a threat to her than Alexei and his gun.

Of course an obvious conclusion was that the animal wasn't after her at all. Rather him. Quietly, she moved forward, climbing the nearest tree trunk to better assess the situation. There she was suddenly struck by a foreign feeling, one of protection.

She attempted to shake it off. She had only one responsibility here and that was to herself. Living in the forest meant kill or be killed and she had no intention of succumbing to the latter. So why in the world was she suddenly gripped by the need to keep Alexei safe?

She wasn't a nurturing creature. She had no family and certainly no children. No one had ever looked out for her in the wild and never had she been confronted with a situation like this. Taking a calming breath, she shook off her uneasiness. Alexei was a Siberian Tiger for crying out loud. The man represented everything that was strong, powerful, and dangerous. He didn't need any help. Certainly not from the likes of a black leopard.

His brother had died as a human though. The events surrounding his murder filtered through her already fogged mind. He hadn't been out prowling and the attack had been swift enough that Dimitri hadn't been able to shift. Alexei's fate was starting out to be quite similar.

Her hearing still impaired by the roar of the thundering falls, she inhaled once again to gather her bearings. The scent of the intruding tiger was faint now and her nostrils filled with a delicious combination of raw male and sweat. She shuddered from the intense desire that coursed through her before realizing that it was far too strong a scent to be taking in.

Glancing out, she saw her hunter in the clearing and knew before another second had passed what a foolish woman she had been. With only a split second to escape, she had only been capable of twisting herself around when the shot rang through the night air and pierced her side.

* * * *

Alexei slowly lowered his rifle once the black leopard had fallen from the tree it was perched in. The evening air was chilly and his breath clouded around his mouth with each firm exhale. All day he had hunted the forest looking to strike back at the creatures that had murdered his brother in cold-blood. Dimitri had posed no threat to their kind. They had relocated here to find solitude and start fresh, a lucrative possibility that had been stripped from his brother before it could even begin.

There was no new beginning for Alex now. He would forever live with the knowledge that his decision to move them out here into the wild had caused Dimitri's demise. He might not be able to forgive himself for what had transpired but he was able to seek vengeance on those who had done the original wrong doing.

Only in that final moment before he pulled the trigger, all his senses screamed for him to wait. For some reason, he hadn't felt his actions were justified. The leopard had looked oddly vulnerable and saddened by the next second's obvious outcome. He shoved the discomforting thoughts aside.

Today had been about vindication and he had succeeded. All that remained was to take one final look at the dead animal and know his message would be received. If you messed with a Gerbera, they would strike right back.

No amount of bullying from the animals was going to send him packing. He had nowhere left to pack up and go. His brother had needed the isolated refuge to embrace the tiger inside him without endangering any of the villagers they lived with. Alexei had simply craved the solitude.

Alex wouldn't shift. He hadn't in years and he was certain he would never need to again. Embracing the tiger was to embrace an inner violence, a power that he had never learned to control and that had nearly cost him his own life. The consequences of that day still squeezed his heart. He hadn't meant to kill her. He hadn't meant to let his animal get that out of control. But he had been powerless to stop the surge of emotions he had experienced shifting that day.

He had been attempting to protect her, his wife. Instead, in the commotion and confusion of the assault they had been under, he had slain Sarah instead. The animal side of him held no appeal. He would continue to suppress it for as long as possible. He owed it to her and his brother.

Alexei progressed faster towards where he had shot the leopard. Night was settling in and although he knew the Leopards to be nocturnal hunters, it wasn't them he was concerned about. The urge to shift came strongest at night. He ached to let go, to succumb to the change and welcome it but his mind fought back fiercely.

The struggle had been more intense lately and never before had he fought as deeply as he did out in the wilderness. It practically called to him and he was beginning to believe one day soon he would be forced to listen.

Nearing the kill spot, he raised his gun once again in case he had only wounded the creature. The last thing he needed was to fight it off him and risk shifting just for survival. Only the second he stepped beneath the tree, his heart stopped.

Quickly, Alex grabbed a flashlight out of his pocket and clicked the light towards the ground. Lying unconscious in front of him was a slender, petite woman. A bloody arm was sprawled out at her side and images of a scene still very familiar came swarming into his mind. He lowered himself next to her and swore.

Slowly, he exhaled as he saw her chest rise and fall with breath. Oddly enough, relief tugged at his insides. His mind began wrapping itself around what had happened. He had shot a shifter.

One of his own.

He shook his head violently to prevent the foreign thought from taking hold. He was foremost a human, not an animal. Quietly, he pulled some twine out of his pack and bound her feet together. He wasn't heartless enough to leave her out in the wild to die or be eaten.

Alex would take her back with him and fix up her wound but he wasn't going to risk having her attack him if she woke up on the way. Double checking his knotting, he carefully lifted her into his arms and began the long journey back in the dark, confident that now that he had one of them in his possession, he would finally start to get the answers he was searching for.

Beginning with why they had killed his brother.

Chapter Two

The stranger had returned.

She shouldn't have been so surprised for he had come frequently as of late, tempting her, teasing her, tasting her. But each and every time he left her wanting. The fire blazing in the depths of his black as coal eyes told her this encounter was different.

This time he would ravage her.

He arrived at her bed naked, equipped with a wicked tilt of his firm lips and an erection that pushed impressively against his stomach. She trembled uncontrollably with need, aching to touch him once again and to feel on fire from his touch, too.

He never spoke during these encounters, and she didn't know his name. Yet there was a surprising familiarity to him. She sensed she belonged with him, whoever he was. She craved nothing but him when he was near. It was impossible to think of anything but the insatiable heat that consumed her entire being when he was with her.

She was his for the taking.

Anna lifted away the covers to reveal her own nakedness, partly for his benefit, partly to cool herself down. He devoured her body with his gaze as he stepped closer, sinking down on the massive bed beside her. He stroked her heated skin, caressing her shoulders, her breasts, her hips. Each spot he moved over burned for him.

"Please."

He smoothed rough fingers over her sensitized folds, smearing the cream that had already moistened her opening. She had been ready since he had first come to her all those nights ago. She wasn't sure she could take the agonizing wait much longer. She repeated her plea, her voice quivering with need.

"Please. Take me."

Sensing she was finally going to find release, she opened her legs to him as he moved above her. He lifted his hands to cup her breasts, kneading them, pinching her hardened nipples until she was breathless with desire. She rocked with the motion, aching to have him fill her. Satisfy her.

Just when Anna thought she wasn't going to be able to survive the torment of it anymore, he thrust into her opening and she gasped for air. He pulled back and thrust again, harder this time, showing a rough side she craved.

She knew it wouldn't be slow and delightful. She was captivated by a powerful man, a demanding, harsh, and dark individual that would be capable of satisfying even her darkest, deepest desires. He pushed her to the brink and beyond as he pumped inside her. And she matched each and every move.

She arched her back on the bed as she wrapped her legs around his waist, pushing him deeper. She craved him. All of him. He still tweaked her nipples to the point of pain but it only heightened her need. He drove her to the shattering point of pleasure and beyond.

Anna bucked and thrashed beneath him as his touch throttled her over the edge into ecstasy. Her mind was void of all thought except the exquisite pleasure that coursed through

every vein in her body. Her stranger followed her orgasm up closely with his own, slowing his movement so she could feel him pulsing inside her, sated.

She let her gaze travel up his muscled chest and past his sinfully broad shoulders, and shuddered when she saw the look of possession in his eyes. He dropped his fingertip to the faded scar on her chest and circled it firmly.

“You’re mine now, Anna. All mine.”

* * * *

The moment Anna woke, all remnant pleasure from her vivid dream quickly dissipated as pain pierced her nerves, reminding her of her current predicament. Focusing desperately on survival, she remained silent and unmoving. She was no longer in animal form but she still had her sharp instincts to guide her. And they were shooting out warnings that rivaled the pain of the gunshot wound.

Keeping her breathing steady, she took in what she could of her surroundings without sight. The last thing she wanted was to open her eyes and look into those of Alexei’s—fierce, dark, and intent on revenge.

She was obviously no longer in the woods because her body was comfortably warm and she could smell the distinct scent of a wood burning stove. All around her she could smell Alexei’s powerful, masculine flavor. Was she in his home?

Anna still couldn’t believe the ass had actually shot her. She had been a fool to waste her precious thoughts on him. He was as far removed from her as humanly possible. The man was a freaking tiger. Needing to assess her injury, she cautiously let her eyes drift open.

Looking to her side, she found the flesh wound. Her right arm had been cleaned and bandaged, a gesture she was surprised he had taken the time to complete. Someone out to avenge their sibling didn’t just go and repair the damage they inflicted.

Again, curiosity pulled at her. Why was he breaking all stereotypes?

Slowly, she soaked in the room or what little she could without moving her head and drawing unnecessary attention to herself. She was indeed inside his home, a modest log building she had only previously observed from the distance as it bordered her hunting grounds.

Then she saw it. The outside door. If only she could reach the wilderness she could shift back into a leopard and heal herself. Her wound and the pain she felt numbing her shoulder and side would subside far faster that way. The second she attempted to move, however, a low, chilling laugh rolled across her.

Snapping her head to the side, Anna found her captor. He leaned rigidly against the wall and it supported him as if he were simply another board himself. She tightened at the rest of him. His chest was bare and she soaked in nothing but tan, chiseled muscles from his shoulders down to where his jeans joined his waist as if they had been painted on. The only thing ruining the whole sex appeal was the pistol he had holstered in a leather strap beneath his arm. She let her eyes drift shut and attempted to calm her flaring libido with a few deep breaths.

When her gaze returned to Alexei’s, she was unnerved by his caustic grin. *A familiar grin.* Fighting the urge to wipe that grin clean off his face she struggled to sit up, only to find her legs bound to the base of the bed.

His bed.

She groaned as her vivid imagination created quite the naughty sex scene.

“You didn’t honestly think I brought you here to heal, did you?”

Ignoring the biting sarcasm in his deep voice, she struggled to think of a way out of this predicament. There had to be something.

“Since you’re not so eager to talk, I’ll take a moment to lay out the ground rules.”

Defiantly she lifted her chin so her eyes could meet his steel gaze. Silently, she waited.

“There’s only two and they’re easy to remember. Number one, tell me what I want to know when I ask and I’ll consider letting you go.”

Anna rolled her eyes. As much as she enjoyed a man capable of such intimidation, between the injury and being chained to the bed, she was merely annoyed. She leaned back and relaxed the pressure she had exerted on her arm. “And two?”

“If you so much as think about trying anything funny, I won’t hesitate to shoot you again. Only this time I won’t just wound.”

Watching how tormented he had been these last few days over the death of his brother, she cringed. The man probably wasn’t capable of making idle threats and, truthfully, she wasn’t looking forward to dying.

“I don’t claim to be an expert on human hunting but my guess was you didn’t intend to *just* wound the first time you shot me either.”

His jaw clicked. Anna enjoyed the small victory. If she had to endure the seductive pulls his bed and body were giving her, she was going to take what shots she could.

“Count your blessings I did, sweetheart.”

Actually she felt more like kicking herself for getting caught in the first place.

“Why, so I could awake chained to your bed, forced to comply with your every demand?”

His laugh raised goosebumps on her skin. But that didn’t compare in half to what it felt like beneath his devouring gaze. He lit her skin on fire as he raked those liquid, black eyes over her legs, across her waist and settled for a long moment on her chest. Her breasts firmed in traitorous anticipation. His smile darkened his features.

“You would like that wouldn’t you?”

Careful not to put weight on her bad arm, she propped herself up and stretched like the glorious cat she was. She could smell the desire on him. He wasn’t immune to this chemistry. “I don’t take orders from anybody. Human or otherwise.”

His eyes narrowed at her accusation. She hardly cared whether or not he liked her tone. It wasn’t like she was going to play nice just because he said so. It hinted at a lack of strength, something she wasn’t short on.

“Speaking of that, did you purposely shift back out in the woods in hopes I would take pity on you as a woman?”

She schooled the laugh that threatened to rise out of her throat. Why would he ask her such a basic shifting question? Perhaps, she underestimated his knowledge of their kind. “Worked, didn’t it?”

The low growl that he emitted sounded more animal than human. Slight fear mixed with her growing desire.

“Rule number one was answer the questions, sweetheart. Do you want to find out what the consequences are?”

If it involved his half naked ass closer, then yes.

“The name’s Anna, not sweetheart.”

She winced when she accidentally leaned on her injured arm. He didn’t smile at her obvious pain like she had expected but moved closer, taking a seat in the chair beside the bed. His proximity to her sent shivers of need down her spine.

“Alright, Anna, did you shift back in hope of sympathy?”

Well if he wanted to play stupid and act like he wasn't a shifter himself and didn't know these things, fine. She'd play his little game. For now.

"I can't stay in animal form unconscious. I didn't have much of a choice. Hitting the ground knocked me out cold."

She glared towards him. This whole situation was his fault. Well, maybe it was partly hers. But who could blame her? The man was a walking God complete with bronzed body. Who wouldn't be distracted?

"You're awake now. Why haven't you shifted back?"

"I can't change indoors. I need nature, the woods, fresh air."

He laughed and leaned forward towards her, his voice tight. "Now's not the time to be caught lying, Anna. Animals shift indoors all the time."

Annoyed by his lack of understanding and his ridiculous accusations, she also leaned closer, so close she could practically touch him. "Well, I can't, Alex. Call it a weakness or whatever you want but as much as I'd like to it won't happen in here."

He sat back and seemed to soak her words in. Had he been frightened by the possibility? Alexei, the great Siberian Tiger?

She fidgeted with her leg bindings, drawing attention to herself. "You have to let me outside, Alexei."

"So you can shift again?"

"No, so I can heal. It's the only way this wound is going to go away."

Carefully, he lifted her injured arm with firm hands and pulled it towards him. She was helpless to move herself away from his touch, a touch that sent waves of sensation through her body and singed her core.

"Not a chance of that happening."

She groaned. Why did he still view her as a threat? She was weak, vulnerable, and obviously not the stronger of the two. He checked the tightness of the bandage and the area near the wound for swelling.

"I'm not going hurt you by shifting, Alexei."

His bitter laugh was hollow and empty. "It's not you I'm worried about."

* * * *

Alex let his statement sink in for both their sakes. Earlier today he was consumed by a powerful rage, one he feared hadn't quite left his system. Perhaps it had been there all along. Still, if he saw her as an animal once again there was no telling what might happen. He might kill her once and for all to avenge his brother, though he was far more concerned about the other possibility.

The desire to shift into his long dormant tiger form had been intense recently. It had soared to new levels out in this wilderness as it was. Watching her transform, viewing that change might be all the impetus needed for him to finally lose control and become the animal he had sworn he'd never be again.

He wouldn't allow it.

The saddened look on her face was disappointing but her wound would heal. It would take longer if she stayed human but he could mend the flesh wound easily enough. When she spoke again her voice was tender and soft. It almost seemed to comfort his grief despite knowing that she probably didn't care.

"I didn't kill your brother, Alexei."

He dropped her arm and kicked the chair backwards, rising to pace off his resurging frustration. "Perhaps not, but one of your kind did."

He listened to her struggle to sit up comfortably but avoided glancing in her direction. Her words were sympathetic but they were not comforting. His brother had died far too early, and it had been at the hands of a leopard. He had seen the marks. They were forever engraved on his memory when he discovered his brother cold, murdered by an animal.

Again she tried to soothe but he would not be swayed no matter how tempting. "This won't ease your pain, but it wasn't one of us. It wasn't a leopard, Alexei."

He whirled back on her and grabbed her shoulders, ignoring the pain he inflicted. "I saw the marks, Anna. A leopard is responsible for Dimitri's death."

She didn't fight him as he shook her fragile body. The compassion she exuded angered him even more, if possible.

"You saw what the killer wanted you to see. A tiger killed your brother, Alex. Open your eyes and your senses and see the truth."

He dropped her and moved away. It wasn't possible. A tiger wouldn't kill another. They would have known who he was. They wouldn't have attacked. It had to be someone else. His temple throbbed from frustration.

She was manipulating him. "I've warned you once about lying, Anna. Don't try my patience. There is fairly little of it."

She didn't sink back onto the bed as expected. She didn't cower from his threats. Suddenly he wasn't so certain he wanted this conversation to continue. His emotions were too raw, too fresh. Her passionate blue eyes narrowed on him.

"You don't scare me, Alexei. You asked for answers and I'm providing them to you. Now be man enough to accept them."

Outraged that she would push him so defiantly, he hardened his gaze on her once again fury rising in his chest. "A tiger didn't kill my brother."

Her long, blonde hair swayed slightly with her head as she shook it from side to side. Again he glimpsed the sadness in her soft eyes. Needing to remain bitter, he turned from her.

"Just because your brother was a tiger, doesn't mean they wouldn't attack him, Alex."

Her statement echoed through the silent cabin. *She knew*. She knew that his brother was a shifter just like her. He took a deep breath. Of course it was probable that animals sensed others like them. Did that mean she already knew what *he* was, too?

He paced the room, remaining safely at the edges of it away from her. Knowing did not give her any advantage nor change the situation. His voice was hauntingly empty when he spoke. "It doesn't matter, Anna. An animal did this to my brother and an animal will pay for his death."

The shock on her face was tucked away after a moment and she resumed her calm, rational stance. She questioned him in disbelief.

"Are you referring to me? Because I'm hardly suffering."

His laugh was cold as he strode over to her and lifted her injured arm up a fraction higher than necessary despite her silent protest. "Cute lie, sweetheart. I see the pain."

"And I see the honorable man, Alex. Let me outside to shift and heal."

He lowered his face until he felt her soft breath on his lips. "No."

He felt, rather than saw her shoulders sag in defeat. Good, she was learning he was not going to go easy on her. She might have not have purposely shifted back to a woman when he shot her but being one wasn't going to get her any sympathy points from him.

No matter that he responded to her closeness in a very primal way.
“Please.”

It was nothing more than the merest whisper and he got the distinct impression she was no longer referring to their argument. He tensed as he drew away, her delectable scent following in the air as he rose. A long dormant desire broke free inside him and he fisted his hands to ward off the unwanted feeling.

“Alexei?”

He walked to the bedroom door and didn’t glance back as he gripped the knob. “Get some rest, Anna. I have more questions for you and when I come back, I intend to get all the answers I’m searching for.”

Listening to her exhale deeply, he strode from the room and knew something was shifting inside him. Something better left dead.

Chapter Three

Her breathing was deep and rhythmic. Without wanting to acknowledge it, Alexei realized watching her soothed his grief. It allowed him to relax and focus on thoughts separate from those surrounding his brother's death.

Alex wanted to know the truth. He craved for the knowledge of who killed his brother but for a moment he let those bitter and angry feelings subside. He found himself soaking in her fragile beauty, enjoying the rise and fall of her breasts as she lay on his bed resting.

Oddly, she looked far more vulnerable in sleep. Awake she was strong and unmovable but now in her quiet slumber she was delicate. Seeing her like this entranced him. He was driven by a powerful need to go to her, to tuck her in his arms and soothe her discomfort.

The sensation was new and entirely agitating to him. He dragged thick fingers through his unkempt hair. Why did this woman, this possible enemy, drag these emotions out of him? He wanted Anna. There wasn't a doubt in his mind. And with each passing moment his desire to have her grew. It rose in him so violently that he practically trembled to go to her.

Alex wanted to bury himself inside her and forget his troubles. He wished for release from the dreariness that held him right now. He wished to satisfy his physical desires and forget about the mental ones. Quietly, he strode towards her side.

When he neared her slender form, his gaze locked onto the faint scar on her chest that peeked out of her tank. He had seen it before when he brought her in and it had intrigued him then just as it did now.

Carefully, he lowered his fingers to push the light fabric of the shirt back to look upon the whole mark. Perhaps it was nothing more than a battle wound. She was a Leopard living in close proximity to the Tigers hunting ground, a mark like that would make sense.

One thing was certain, it was definitely the mark of a Tiger. Softly, his forefinger traced the first mottled line that comprised the mark. There were four claw marks in total and he let one finger drift over each.

Her skin was surprisingly hot to his touch, and the instant his hand rested completely on her chest she began whimpering on the bed. Actually, moaning was more like it. Startled, he remained absolutely still and watched her features shift. Her breaths grew shallow and her head tilted back on the pillow as she pushed her chest outward.

When she mouthed the slightest noise with her soft lips he moved over her to hear. Not knowing why, he spoke into her ear, hoping she would acknowledge him. "Talk to me, Anna. What's the matter?"

She continued to move herself about on the bed, despite his added weight partly on top of her. He lifted his hand from her chest and raised it to her cup her face, holding it steady for him to see. He watched her lips part and when a soft, pink tongue darted out to lick them with moisture, need slammed into his gut.

And it catapulted into oblivion when she breathed her next words.

"Please. Take me."

Driven by her plea and a desire that burned fiercely inside him like never before, he lowered his lips to hers and tasted. What he intended as just that, a taste, quickly turned into a

steamy frenzy of need. He crushed his lips down onto hers and pushed his tongue into her mouth, seeking hers, tasting her essence.

She slid beneath him and the friction of the contact caused a painful erection to swell in his pants. He couldn't stop. He was drawn to her. He drank from her lips with fervent need, and she matched his every movement. Their tongues twined and danced together, their limbs tangling with one another on the bed.

Alex didn't know why she didn't wake. He only knew that he couldn't stop this powerfully physical reaction to her. He couldn't stop himself from wanting more of her. All of her.

He tore his mouth away from hers and ran his hands alongside her face, down her neck and across her chest. Heaven help him, he wanted to drive himself into her. To drown in the erotic pleasure her gentle curves could provide.

"What are you doing to me, Anna?"

Suddenly, her movement ceased and her eyes fluttered open. He sat up partially, shocked.

"Alexei?"

He remained on the bed, unable to move away. "Yes, it's me."

He resisted the urge to smooth a finger over the frown on her soft face. She struggled with something inside of her it seemed, as she shook her head side to side.

"No, it can't be you. It can't."

He held her face still with his hands, forcing her to look into his eyes and see for herself while his cock protested the interruption. "Yes, it is me, Anna. What can't I be?"

She gasped and her eyes winced shut. "You can't be him."

They opened again and a sheen of moisture covered bright hues. Unsure of this new, fragile woman, he slowly scooped her into his arms, seeking to comfort despite the raging inferno that pummeled him. "Everything's fine."

In reality nothing was fine, he realized and both of them knew it. Alex had detached himself from women after his wife's death, detached himself from the animal inside him. Being near her was forcing raw desire to come clawing back to the surface. He craved her and her innate femininity. And the longer he remained here, in this forest, the more intense the longing to become the animal that he had permanently suppressed became.

Slowly, her breathing calmed and she struggled to break free of his hold. Regretfully, he released her.

"What are you doing in here with me?"

Her voice was scolding but her eyes, her watery blue depths could not disguise her curiosity.

"I came to see if you were awake, if you were ready to answer more questions."

Alex peered at her, unable to look away. He had questions alright. Only the ones he had come here prepared to ask her had taken a drastic turn. Quite possibly into territory better left unexplored.

"You should have been able to notice I was asleep from across the room, Alexei. Yet, here you are, practically sitting on top me on this bed."

She shifted slightly on the firm mattress and they touched once again, sparking a heat that fueled him on.

"You didn't protest to my presence a few moments ago."

Alex reached out a finger to stroke some stray strands of hair off her face. Anna was flushed from their kissing and his finger lingered on the curve of her cheek as if to prove a point.

“A few moments ago I was asleep.”

Still her statement lacked the power she strove for when she made no movement to get away. He continued to push the limit, drawing his hand down her neck and circling the scar that had sparked it all.

Anna sucked in a sharp breath as his thumb padded across it and instantly she backed away.

“Please do not touch that again.”

Intrigued, he silently questioned her. What did the mark mean to her? And why if it was as old as it looked, did it bear any feeling at all? “How did you get a scar like that, Anna?”

Sensing that pieces of a long broken puzzle were about to be placed together, he waited watching the color shift in her telling eyes.

“I was struck by a Tiger a long, long time ago. I don’t even remember it happening, I was so young.”

She bit her lower lip and glanced down upon it, and Alex struggled to uncover the rest of the story. What wasn’t she telling him and why? He felt as if he were placed beneath a heavy weight and this knowledge would release him.

“And yet it still reacts to a touch.”

She slowly drew in a deep breath and exhaled before looking back up at him.

“It reacts to *your* touch, Alexei.”

His chest constricted as the imaginary weight doubled. What nonsense was this woman, this stranger, trying to tell him? Carefully, he lifted his fingers to the mottled skin again. “Why mine, Anna?”

Quickly, she swatted his hand away but he held hers in his, demanding an answer from her. She sighed.

“Because you put that scar there, Alexei. I didn’t truly believe it until just now but once you touched me I knew. Thirty-four years ago you marked me, claiming me since infancy as your mate.”

Suddenly, the suffocating weight came crashing down.

* * * *

Anna wasn’t surprised by the stiffening reaction Alexei delivered her at hearing her news. What surprised her was that she actually felt hurt by his disbelief. She reached out to grasp his hand with hers as he stood to move away but he shoved it aside and she knew.

Knew that Alex thought she was lying to him.

Denying the truth would get him nowhere though. “Alex, please. Please listen to me.”

He spun back to face her, his features twisted and angry. It was his eyes that pierced her though. The black depths were hardened, narrowed on her. He shot a finger out towards her, accusingly.

“I’ve listened enough, Anna. I don’t know what game you’re playing at, but I’m finished with it. Best you understand that now.”

She struggled against the bindings that held her feet, carefully moving closer towards the end of the bed. “It’s not a game, Alex. It’s the truth. I can’t tell you exactly how I know for sure, but deep inside me, I know.”

He faced away from her and she waited for him to respond, to get past the anger and denial and see what she saw. And he must because there was more. The rest of the prophecy, one he obviously knew nothing about.

"I have never been here before, Anna. I don't know yet what you seek to gain by attempting to manipulate me with tales of your mark, but I will not believe you. Not now, or ever in the future."

His dark gaze swallowed her but she would not falter. Regardless of his denial, she believed in the power of that mark. She had wondered for her entire life whether or not it was true, whether or not she would feel the deep pull of desire towards one of *them*, a Tiger. His touch, her reoccurring dreams, her powerful interest that led to their reunion, all collided to make sense now.

He *was* the one.

Her mate.

Which meant she was bound to his destiny, as well. "You felt something when you touched that mark, didn't you, Alex? Perhaps it was a connection, or some desire, maybe a strange familiarity. But don't pretend to stand there and tell me nothing happened just now."

Anna held herself steady on the bed as he stalked towards her, his fury barely contained on his face. He stopped, inches from touching her and breathed his words down her throat.

"What happened, sweetheart, was nothing more than pure male need. I'm attracted to your beauty and my body reacted accordingly. Any male would have done the same."

She struggled to squash the climbing disappointment. Firmly, she reached out and took hold of his hands in her own. She gripped hard when he pulled back, and he stayed. The heat from his touch climbed up her arms and crept through her awakened system.

Slowly, she looked back at him once again. The fire had died down a little in his dark eyes. Hope surged through her. Her voice was a soft whisper when she thought of what to say next.

"If you're so certain, Alexei, then touch the mark again."

He gazed at her, hunger etched on his tanned face.

"Go on, touch me."

For a moment they were frozen in time, standing next to each other, unmoving. And then with precision, his fingers caressed down her neckline and pushed back her tank, exposing the mark to his sight once again.

"You won't make me a believer, Anna."

She closed her eyes and exhaled, listening to the sound of Alexei's deep breaths barely audible above her own pounding heart.

You already believe, Alex. You just don't realize it yet.

Anna's eyes flew open when his firm hand bypassed her tingling scar and instead pushed her hard on her chest so that she fell back against the solid mattress.

"What are you doing?"

He smiled sinfully as his rough fingers slipped around her slender waist, caressing the exposed skin they found there, heating her. She squirmed from the intimate contact, becoming further aroused and demanding more at the same time.

"I don't need to touch an ancient scar to know I want you, Anna. And you don't need me to either."

He skillfully stroked her waist and stomach with his hands before pushing upward, blazing a trail of heat across her sides. Desperately she gulped air into her lungs. "Alexei."

“It’s purely physical, Anna. Two sexual creatures drawn to each other to satisfy a craving. Nothing more.”

He succeeded in bunching her tank up to her chest, where his fingers toyed with the undersides of her breasts. They molded to his touch. Again she hissed in much needed air.

“Now tell me, do you want to be satisfied, Anna?”

The closer his voice was, the harder it seemed for her to hear. Anna’s ears exploded with noise from her breathing, her erratic heartbeat, and the throbbing of her tell tale scar.

He massaged her tender flesh with nimble hands, igniting a burning passion inside her. She wanted more than just her dreams. She craved Alexei, the man.

Her eyes met his and she was consumed by the hunger she found blazing there. His eyes were jet black and fierce, conveying a power every inch of her wanted to become a part of.

“Answer me, Anna.”

Forcefully, Alex pushed her shirt over her head, giving minimal caution to her bandaged arm. She felt no physical pain. She was far too wound with a more carnal need.

“I-I want you, Alexei. Now.”

The second her words escaped her parched lips, he complied. Naked from the waist up, she closed her eyes as knowledgeable fingers smoothed down her quivering frame.

His touch was new yet familiar. Each stroke of his hand had her senses fighting off overload. She whimpered when he finally cupped her breasts firmly with both hands.

“I’m going to enjoy these.”

His ragged voice was hot on her skin as his mouth unexpectedly crashed down on her belly. Tortuous and slow, he kissed her skin, and the more she bucked towards him, the harder he squeezed her hardened nipples with his fingers.

His mouth seared her body with a trail of wet, hot kisses as he made his way up her chest, leaning down on top of her, encasing her with heat. He was firm, hard, and every bit what she had dreamt of as she moved her hands across his bare back, and downward.

She ached to have more of him, all of him inside her, immediately. Her desire for him was so intense she couldn’t breathe. Yet she gasped when his tongue darted out to flick a nipple before he drew it tightly inside his greedy mouth.

Words failing her, Anna dug her nails into his flesh, silently pleading him to take her to oblivion and back. She rubbed herself against his hardened body, squirming to relieve the tension building inside her. Alex ignored her pleas and instead continued his onslaught, rolling her nipples tightly between thumb and index finger before sucking each tip.

“Please, Alex. I want more. I *need* more.”

Sensing the desperation in her voice, he moved his rough lips downward, biting and sucking her soft skin as he went. He masterfully worked open her jeans, sliding both them and her panties down her legs in one smooth stroke to bunch at her ankles where her feet were bound to the bed.

Alex stood away from her and striped himself of his pants, pausing before returning to the bed to let his eyes roam across her exposed, naked body. Any other time she might have reveled from the undivided attention, but now she was practically crying with a need so powerful it caused her to tremble.

Still he stood there, hesitating and fighting an unknown that Anna could only vaguely read in his expression. His features were glorious. Firm muscles covered his chest and arms, working down to tight thighs and a very large, impressive erection.

She closed her eyes and remembered how complete she had felt in her dream, how full and satisfied to have him inside her. She licked her lips, thinking about touching it, sliding her tongue along his hardened length and taking him in her mouth. Dear lord she needed him.

Opening her eyes to him, she was startled by the restraint on his dark face. What was he fighting? Why was he? Carefully, she reached out and stroked a lone finger along his upper thigh, beckoning him back to her.

“Take me, Alexei. I’m all yours.”

* * * *

Every part of him hungered to devour her. Never before had he felt any emotion so intense that it robbed him of all other rational thought. All he could wrap his mind around at the moment was how intense his need was to take her, ravage her, and make her his.

The deep pull rattled him.

Still, he wasn’t going to deny himself, or her of this satisfaction. He craved her and ached for release. He’d have both soon. Afterwards, he would worry about the consequences.

Anna’s silky finger sent a shiver straight to his throbbing cock.

“Oh, I intend to take you, sweetheart. The question exactly, is how.”

Her bright blue eyes lit up at his suggestion and her tongue slipped out to wet her luscious lips. He stepped closer and smoothed his fingers down her body, circling her pert nipples, moving down her quivering stomach before dipping between her legs.

The moisture he found at her opening was not surprising. Alexei knew she ached for him. Desperately she sought the same release he did. He slipped two fingers inside her entrance, thrusting them in and out, working her need closer towards a blissful release.

“More, Alex. Give me more.”

Alex knew she wanted his cock buried deep inside her, but he wasn’t ready. He needed to regain a little control. Instead, he added a third finger and pushed hard inside her. She bucked against his hand, her pleasure torturing the delicate features on her face.

He struggled to stay focused while edging closer towards disaster. He felt the carnal desire building. He felt his animal impulses resurging. Anna was dragging everything out of him. The closer he was to her, the harder it became to separate himself from his other half.

He couldn’t lose control over that. He wouldn’t believe in her little game. He had never seen her before, had never marked someone as a mate. The sexual act itself was the cause for his struggle. It was animalistic, plain and simple.

She closed her hand tightly around his pulsing erection and stroked it, destroying any restraint he was finally mustering up. She worked his body like he toyed with hers. In and out. Up and down. The synchronized rhythm was intoxicating and erotic.

“Whatever it is, Alex, let it go. Take me. Take me now.”

Unable to ignore her breathy plea, he slipped his fingers out and quickly undid one of her foot bindings. She looked towards him curiously, but his body pulsed with unshed need. He wasn’t going to wait any longer.

“Turn yourself over, Anna. Get on your hands and knees, now.”

She listened without question and within seconds she was positioned in front of him on the edge of the bed, her delicate ass filling his view. He spread her legs open wider as he moved forward, his cock slipping deeply into her moist opening.

Alex pressed his hands around her, gripping her breasts and massaging them as he began pumping fiercely inside her. She pushed back with each stride, quickly increasing the pace,

seeking oblivion. She moaned and cried as he worked her nipples, pulling and teasing them harder if possible.

“Come for me, Anna. Right now. Come.”

One hand slid back down her stomach and his thumb pressed her clitoris, rubbing and stroking the last of her restraint away. She bucked back against him wildly as she came, her pussy clenching his cock in tight spasms as he throttled her over the edge of ecstasy.

“Alex, yes. Yes.”

He pumped into her softness harder, his own release following closely upon hers. He slammed his eyes shut as an orgasm rocked him, his seed emptying inside her. A deep groan tore from his throat at his release.

Spent, Alex fell forward with her, spooning her closely to him.

His mind raced again, as if the timeframe it had been put on hold for pleasure caused it to speed into overdrive. And one thing rattled over and over again. Something had been different. Anna was different. Never before had sex been so desirable, so damn powerful and uncontrollable.

Alex drew her tighter against him, unable to stop himself. He reasoned that it had purely been the time lapse since his last release that had brought on this sudden urgency. Not to mention, Anna’s innate sensuality fueled his burning desire. Yet, his mind wasn’t buying it.

Before he knew what he was doing, he moved his hand across her warm chest to touch the scar he had sworn was nothing more than an old battle wound. The familiar sensation he found there scared the hell out of him.

Chapter Four

Alexei stood in the shadows and waited. For what, he wasn't sure. He was in a memory that was totally unfamiliar. Only when he saw her did he know. It was her memory he was invading. Quietly, he stepped closer.

"You foolish child. What on earth were you thinking risking your life like that?"

He was startled to see a much younger version of Anna, laying on a mat, a doctor of some kind stitching up her leg. She was in obvious pain but still held her head high and stuck her chin out defiantly towards the older man.

"I made it out just fine. It's just a little scratch. It will heal."

Her statement fell flat though when she winced as the doctor tugged on the sewing thread.

"You cannot keep pushing the boundaries like this, Anna. You will die before your time if you keep acting so immature."

Anna and the elder shared a long, silent look that made Alex wonder exactly what was meant by the strange comment. His mind spun trying to make sense of what was happening to him here.

"You keep saying that, Great One, but I haven't died. And even so, I would much prefer death to the fate you say is in store for me."

The old man shook his head at her in disbelief and she continued, her face a mix of anger and uncertainty.

"Not that I believe in this fate, of course. None of the Tigers I've run into seem to like me so far."

She gestured towards her sutured leg.

"If they knew who you were, Anna dear, they would kill you not just toy with you. Make no mistake they are waiting for signs this prophecy is coming together. They will not simply wound like they have today. But there is one Tiger who will protect you."

The doctor started wiping the dried blood from her leg but she pushed him away and stood, her frustration evident. A sense of familiarity hit him. Hadn't he been just as eager to push the limits one time, too?

"I am of a perfectly acceptable age, Great One. How come this Tiger hasn't stepped forward to claim me as you say will happen?"

The old man patted her shoulder gently as they walked back towards the temple entrance. Alex moved forward out of the shadows to keep up.

"Your Tiger will come, Anna. When he is ready, he will come. You will know it is him and you will feel his power over you right here."

He motioned to where Alexei knew her scar to be though it was covered with clothing. Uneasiness tossed his insides about like a shipwreck at sea. Could Anna really have been telling the truth?

"Your destiny lies with him, Anna. Eventually, you will learn to accept and cherish that."

* * * *

Alex forced his heavy eyelids open, startled to see the mottled patches of sunlight filter through the skylight above him. He inhaled deeply to rid himself of the groggy sleep that still clung to his system and was intoxicated by the feminine scent of the beauty beside him.

Anna.

His Anna.

She stirred softly beside him, asleep. He desired nothing more desperately at this moment than to remain closed tightly around her. Her bare skin was warm and enticing and the remaining scents of sex caused a demanding need inside him to take her again.

Despite all that, he carefully extracted his hands from around her, his mind struggling to decipher what he had just dreamt. Immediately, he rationalized it had been a dream, *not* a memory. Yet, it was so real, so strange.

It was as if he had dipped into an intimate part of her, some long slumbering memory. Strange as it was, he felt connected to this passionate woman in a sense that went far deeper than any bond sex alone could produce.

It did nothing but fill him with questions. Questions that would need answers. Today.

Silently, he slipped from the bed and reached for his pants.

“What’s bothering you, Alex?”

He stiffened from the sound of her soft, whispery voice. He finished pulling on his pants but failed to button them as she turned to face him, her cheeks flushed from sleep, her eyes barely open. It was breathtaking really.

Alex thought about kissing her sleep away, awakening her body with his eager touch. She had been so responsive to him last night, her reactions fueling his own until they were completely and exhaustingly satisfied.

He shook the pleasantries out of his mind. “Nothing’s bothering me, Anna. In case you have forgotten, I didn’t bring you here for your pleasure. I have a job to finish.”

It wasn’t entirely a lie. Alex needed time to assimilate the past twenty-four hours. He couldn’t do that here, with her tempting presence surrounding him.

She smiled and it softened something inside him. He tightened his jaw from the unfamiliar attack on his senses. Sometime in the night she had undone the bandage he had secured around her injury and the swollen bullet wound stuck out at him, a stark contrast to her natural beauty. He moved closer to check on it.

“I can sense your unease, Alex. Ask me whatever you want. I already told you I would answer the questions.”

Did she know somehow that he had new ones? That despite the pain and suffering that had consumed him from his brother’s death he was caught up in the new web of uncertainty about what finding her here meant? Not to mention the haunting reality of what sharing her memories said about them.

“How is your arm this morning?”

She glanced momentarily upon it before focusing her startling blue eyes back on him.

“It would heal faster and more completely if you would let me shift.”

He smoothed his rough fingers over the scabbed wound before releasing her and striding a safe distance away. “I already told you I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

He turned back just in time to catch the glimpse of hurt on her face. Had she really believed that sex would create trust? Surely she realized that he couldn’t trust her. Anna and her tales of destiny were reason enough. The strange reaction her presence drew from him was even more of a warning.

“Why don’t you believe me, Alexei?”

Part of him wanted to but still he kept a firm grip on the rational side. “I’m the one asking questions today, Anna. And I have plenty to ask.”

His voice was firm and she shivered against the bed, the lone sheet that covered her shifted to reveal her smooth, white bare skin. He shook with renewed hunger. A powerful desire to take her again just as rough as the first time, settled inside him.

Alex stomped it out. Barely.

“What is the rest of the prophecy, Anna?”

She couldn’t disguise the startled look on her face. Nor could he fight off the urge to go to her if she didn’t cover her luscious body soon. His hands began to tremble. His iron will struggled to stay intact.

“I never mentioned any prophecy, Alex. What makes you assume I know of one?”

Her tone was quiet and he registered the caution in her body language. Thankfully, it involved sinking back to the covers, as well. “You know of one, Anna, and you’re going to tell me what you know about it.”

Alex couldn’t very well tell her he learned of it in a dream. *Her dream*. That was begging for punishment. She would have a powerful argument against him then and he wasn’t prepared to lose control of this fragile situation.

“You already told me you don’t believe, Alex. So, why does it matter?”

Her haughty attitude pushed his anger forward fast. He took hold of her wrist, gripping it tight to get her undivided attention. He glared deeply into her face, making sure there was absolutely no room for misunderstanding.

“I want to know why my brother was murdered. If learning of this supposed prophecy helps me in that cause, then so be it. I never said I have to believe in it.”

Her shallow breaths were hot on his skin and his body softened despite him not wanting the distraction. Her free hand reached out to stroke his face and scratched across the stubble there.

“You should believe, Alex, because they know you came back and when they discover you haven’t left, they’ll come for you next.”

She was chillingly solemn and there wasn’t room to doubt she was very afraid of this threat. To him or her was the question.

“Who will?”

He leaned closer towards her warmth, toying with danger. His pounding heart drowned out any warning bells that had begun to clang and he felt compelled to protect her.

“The Tigers. Your birth pack.”

The seductive cloud of her closeness thinned and Alex stared at her in total disbelief. Obviously she didn’t listen well. Or quite possibly she had taken a nasty bump on the head during her fall. He ground his teeth together.

“I already said I have never been here before, Anna.”

Alex stated it as fact but Anna shook her head at him, allowing her long, glorious hair to frame her slender face. Gently, she pulled him to sit beside her on the firm bed, taking his hands in hers and squeezing tight.

“You were born here, Alexei. You were born, you put this mark on my chest, and then you were secreted away to be protected.”

His eyes immediately darted towards the alleged mark, focusing on the mottled tissue he found there. Meanwhile his mind spun, unable to break through the darkness and believe her wild tales.

“Protected from what?”

The idea that a person as strong as him needed protection was absurd.

“The Tigers believed that you were born to fulfill a prophecy. One that they felt threatened by. The Great One said that your mother brought you and your brother to the temple for safety and he secured your escape.”

Oh, it just got better and better. He laughed at her, not failing to notice that not even a hint of a smile played on her delicate features. His frustration escalated.

“So all of this, your recollection of where your mark came from, what this prophecy is, all comes from some crazy old man’s mouth?”

His words as he stood were laced in bitterness and she recoiled as if he had physically slapped her. Her eyes darkened before she bit back her own acid response.

“I thought you would have a little more respect for someone who risked his own life to save yours, Alex.”

He paced beside her, raking a hand through his thick hair in consternation.

“And I thought that maybe you had enough brains to think for yourself and not listen to old wife’s tales.”

Alex could tell she wanted desperately to hit him but the second she lunged forward, she discovered her leg still bolted to his bed. He watched her furiously sink backwards, narrowing her eyes to mere slits before speaking again.

“There is no doubt in my mind that this is real, Alex. And I know that you feel something here, too. I don’t know what, but you’re struggling mighty hard to ignore it. Maybe if you embraced it, the truth would become clearer.”

Alex clenched his fist together. He didn’t want to listen to her rationale. He hadn’t come here to be hunted by his own kind. He had strayed this far distance for solitude.

“You still haven’t told me what the prophecy involves.”

She repositioned herself on the bed and absently rubbed her injury as he spoke. The movement caused her bare breasts to bunch together and beckon him back. He silently groaned in agony.

“Well, that’s the interesting part. You’ve already fulfilled it.”

Anna smiled smugly when their eyes met and he realized she knew exactly how much he was appreciating the view.

“And how exactly, have I done that?”

She laughed, her chest rising and falling with each soft hiccup. His erection tightened in his pants, and he swore from the distraction. This wasn’t the time to let his body run rampant with pleasure. He was ashamed he could want something so trivial during a time of mourning, a period for revenge.

“The prophecy said a Tiger would mate with a Leopard.”

He glared at her incredulously. All this bullshit and his brother’s death were from something as miniscule and ridiculously retarded as that! “That’s it?”

Anna nodded and he let his eyes drift further downward, unable to stop himself from soaking in her taut stomach and quivering body. Evidently he wasn’t the only one affected by this palpable desire.

“Essentially. And you may ignore the animal inside you, but you’re still one of the most powerful Tigers I’ve run into and guess what?”

His eyebrows raised a fraction as he anticipated her next statement.

“We’ve mated.”

He ground his teeth since he could hardly disagree with her. He had mated her alright. Fucked her in the most animalistic ways. He tightened remembering exactly how satisfying she had been for him.

And how perfect.

Automatically, he shut that alien feeling down. “And then what’s supposed to happen? What has the Tigers so up in arms about this whole thing?”

She pondered his question, her face a mix of concentration and something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He waited, needing to discover what all this meant, aching to put it behind him and get on with other issues.

Large, throbbing issues that were about to consume most of his rational ability to think. He folded his arms firmly over his bare chest.

“The Tigers are a very exclusive breed. They felt threatened by the possibility that they might not stay that way. This pairing could create half-breeds, or brothers and sisters who are Tigers and Leopards thus linking the two species. It could force them to integrate with the Leopards and that wasn’t taken lightly.”

Alex had spent most of his adult life shunning his existence as a shifter. Frankly he didn’t understand why this mating thing was such a big deal. He felt his blood boil over the consequences. Innocent blood had been shed, his brother’s, all in order to prevent something so trivial.

His body went rigid.

“So they murdered my brother? Did they kill him because they thought he was this chosen one?”

Alex was startled by her gentleness, unable to pull back when her fingers reached out and took hold of his. Slowly, she pulled him towards her, rubbing the tension out of his hands and soothing the resurging grief with nothing more than a kind look.

“I can’t say if they thought it was him or if they sought to scare you away by murdering him. Either way, I’m sorry for your loss, Alexei. Deeply sorry.”

Alex believed her.

He knew that she wasn’t responsible for killing his brother, that she wasn’t a threat to him. Sorrow washed over him rapidly, filling the gaping void the receding anger had left. Her strong, slender arms took his body in, wrapping them in comfort.

His voice was deflated when he spoke. Surely if they had killed once, he had no reason to believe Anna wasn’t serious when she said they would come for him next. “And what happens next?”

Nimble fingers weaved a soft pattern across his back, driving away the tension. Her bare chest was warm against his, her scent intoxicating. He hungered for her again.

“I don’t know what you mean. That’s all I’ve been told.”

His fingers weaved through her golden hair, bringing her face closer towards his. He kissed her forehead, her cheek, and his mouth moved delicately close to her ear. “You mean your *Great One* didn’t give you the rest of the tale?”

She arced her head backwards, offering her neck for his tasting and he was unable to resist. He nuzzled her delicious neckline, sliding his tongue lower, reveling in her quickening breaths. His body hummed with desire for her.

"I assume you are supposed to somehow make it work. Otherwise, your future, and mine, looks pretty grim."

Slowly he worked his way down her body, kissing and touching each and every nook, cranny, and curve that he could. She spread herself on the bed before him, and he appreciated her unashamed attitude.

Anna wanted him just as much.

His hot tongue circled her navel before he lifted his eyes to hers. The heat he saw burning there was the mirror image of his own need.

"Where is this temple?"

Alex pulled the sheet away from her and he stroked skilled fingers down the length of her shapely thighs and calves. She quivered on the upstroke, growing more violent with each second he delayed reaching the apex of her thighs.

He paused, waiting.

"It's tucked away, a distance from here. It is a sacred ground to the Leopards."

Satisfied with her honesty, he smoothed his hands back down her body, caressing the goosebumps that formed under his touch. With one hand he withdrew the key out of his back pocket and reached down to unhinge the lock that bound her foot to the bed.

Anna was giving him her trust by divulging all this. She wasn't a threat he need worry about. His voice was firm when he spoke to her, conveying there was no amount of room for negotiation.

"Take me there then. Take me to this Great One and let me hear the rest of this prophecy from him."

He swung her feet from the bed and forced her to sit up. She stood, her warm body touching every inch of his where possible and reached for the button of his jeans.

Her eyes held the same steel his had only moments before.

"If you don't believe me, Alex, he isn't going to be able to convince you."

She worked her fingers beneath his waistline and pushed downwards, sliding the fabric off his hips to reveal his pulsing erection. She slid with the direction of his clothing, positioning herself even with his cock.

His eyelids slammed shut as her sweet mouth encased it, her tongue licking a delicious and sinful path around its width. He gripped her hair with his hands, his mind shutting down. The sensation was so damn good, his voice was cracked and hoarse when he finally did find it. "Why not?"

Alex didn't know if she heard him, her mouth and tongue still issuing mind blowing pleasure to his cock. She sucked tightly as she pulled back before slipping her tongue in a lazy pattern down the length to his balls.

He bucked towards her, greedy for more. She rested her head on his stomach as she spoke.

"In all my life he had never succeeded in convincing me of my fate. I felt the same detachment from this prophecy as you did until your arrival recently. Your closeness convinced me of its truth."

Alex gripped her shoulders with strong hands, mindful of her injury, and pulled her up to sit back on the bed. He cupped her chin and raised it to his as he bent down, focusing on getting what he wanted.

Answers.

Then sex.

Maybe sex first.

“You will take me there, Anna. I’m not giving you a choice.”

Her nostrils flared at his tone. Clearly she wasn’t used to taking orders from anyone. Too bad she wasn’t in the position to argue. He didn’t hesitate to use pleasure as a bargaining tool. He wanted both badly enough.

He slipped his fingers down, easing between her legs until he found her dampness. He circled her clit, pressing harder, and she lay back, helpless to his onslaught.

Or so he thought.

“I only travel there as a Leopard, Alex. And I will only make the journey with you as a Tiger.”

He froze, his fingers poised to thrust into her. His muscles became so tense he thought they would snap him in two. “Absolutely not.”

He wasn’t going to shift here. The desire to reclaim his animal side was already extremely great. There was no telling how violent he would become, if he would even have control over his actions. No one stood to gain anything from the transformation.

It wasn’t an option.

She worked her hands across his chest and brought him back to the present. She yanked on his arms until he fell beside her, distracted by her touch, the sizzle of the thick chemistry.

“It is a great distance and your human form will slow you down. It will make us vulnerable to being discovered and I’m not going to risk that.”

He tried to understand where she was coming from. This was her home, obviously she had the upper hand out there. But there was no way he could risk it. He had promised himself when Sarah died that he was through. There was no reason strong enough to embrace that vicious animal.

Yet, avenging his brother’s death was as tempting a reason as ever.

“I will not slow us down, Anna. I will trust you enough to shift but you will take me there as I am now.”

Alex didn’t know whether or not he would be able to sustain viewing her change into such a magnificent creature without feeling the overwhelming desire to do so himself. The very forest called to him. His instincts ached to be set free.

She shook her head and pushed her fingers into his solid chest.

“You are an arrogant man to believe you will be safe like this, Alexei. Your power and your self protection lie asleep inside of you.”

He closed his eyes, pulling her tightly against him so that she wouldn’t bully him further. Alex wanted these answers, but at what cost?

“The animal inside me is dead, Anna. It cannot return.”

Her voice and skin were like velvet as they collided with his senses all at once. She sprawled her length out alongside him, pressing her face close to his, whispering.

“It can but you refuse to let it. You waste all your energy suppressing the creature inside of you. Don’t you see it’s a natural extension of who you are?”

He felt as if he was swallowing a brick. His brother had told him those exact words once. That to embrace the Tiger was to embrace his personality. It was a part of him no matter how hard he tried to erase it. Except the animal was responsible for someone's death. His wife's death. No natural part of him had ever wished for that outcome.

It was the ultimate disconnection.

"I am not a violent beast, Anna. I will never believe that to be a part of me."

He shook her beside him, but Anna wouldn't let go. Quietly, she clung to him, waiting for him to relax, his mind to rationalize.

She reached a tender hand up to touch his face and smooth its way down his cheek and neck. Slowly she worked a steady path over his chest and downward.

"Are you worried that you'll hurt me?"

Hell yes, he was. Didn't she see he would be a powerful adversary as a Tiger? He would possibly rely on natural instinct and attack her regardless of this bond they seemed to foster.

"I already have as a man. You know I would be far more dangerous as a Tiger."

She laughed at him and the soft sounds shook something loose inside him. How could she be so unafraid? It unnerved him that she wasn't taking this seriously.

"I have dealt with dangerous Tigers in the past and I've escaped unscathed. I'm a strong woman, Alexei."

He didn't doubt it. And he wanted to believe that he would pose no risk to her. That they would reach their destination unscathed together. But it was too risky.

She snaked a hand down his side and encircled his cock.

And suddenly so very unimportant.

"But you're overlooking something, Anna."

Hungry, he dipped his head down and took a beaded nipple into his mouth, drawing the tip between his teeth and flicking the point with his tongue. She moaned from his touch and the carnal sound fueled him.

"Oh?"

Taking his sweet time he moved to give the same undivided attention to her other breast. He stroked her warm body, working her breasts up to his mouth, caressing her.

"I've already gotten you once."

He lightly fingered the scar on her chest and she sucked in a deep breath, gasping for air. "And chances are I'm going to want to do the same thing again and again."

* * * *

Anna shivered involuntarily as his hot breath hissed across her already damp skin. Alex's proximity was driving her senses wild. She wanted to surpass these barriers that stood between them, but she wanted release even more.

She craved to feel him moving with her, moving *inside* her. Every nerve ending in her panged with desire for this man, this powerful, hungry being. She gripped his firm back with tight fingers as he greedily sucked on her nipples, the pleasure exquisite.

"God, you taste like heaven."

He lay on top of her, her legs spread wide open beneath him and she felt herself cream from his touch, his words. With each passing second she burned hotter, and grew restless needing everything he could give her. "More. I want more."

He slipped his sinful mouth lower over her pulsing stomach, licking her navel, her waist and teasing her thighs with hard little bites. Slowly he blew a soft breath over her throbbing cunt. Her whole body tightened in anticipation.

“You want more, Anna? Or you need it?”

Anna grasped the sheets haphazardly as his tongue seared a blazing path around her entrance, torturing her body’s need for release. He pressed her legs apart with unyielding hands, holding her open, helpless to his desires.

“Please, Alex.”

She glanced down her body towards him, his black hungry eyes consuming her. Again, he delicately tasted a path across her sensitive flesh, flicking the tip of her clitoris with his moist tongue. She whimpered, the sensation almost unbearable.

“Tell me you need me, Anna. Say it.”

Her mind reeled. Did she *need* Alexei? The physical part of her craved him to a point bordering on insane but did the rest of her?

He thrust a finger into her opening and shattered her concentration. He worked her desire, pumping in and out. Curling first one finger and then two, deep inside her. She bucked her hips up against him, silently begging for more.

“You’re not playing nice, Anna.”

Another finger joined the other two, stretching her walls, filling her tightly. His fluid movements drove her need higher, hurtling it closer towards the edge of ecstasy.

“I don’t play nice, Alex, I play rough.”

He laughed against her, removing his fingers for just a second before his tongue replaced them. Her back arched off the bed as he licked across her opening before sucking the delicate skin into his hot mouth.

She practically cried out in joy.

Then he thrust his tongue inside her opening, licking her, lapping the moisture. His skillful hands roamed up her aching skin, searing a path of heat as they traveled to her breasts, pulling her distended nipples even further.

Strung tight, she dug her fingers into his exquisitely thick hair pushing his head closer towards her, craving the last couple inches until her orgasm would wash over her.

Then he stopped.

“No!”

“Say it, Anna. Say you need me and I’ll give you everything your body craves. Just a few simple words.”

He pulled himself up towards her, pressing his firm erection on top of her, his mouth crashing down to meet her parched one. Greedily, he took her. He tasted sweet, like her, and she was helpless to the invasion of his tongue when he thrust it into her mouth, toying with her, probing her.

He assaulted all her senses at once, capturing every part of her and taking her closer. Vaguely she was aware of him moving above her and his cock nudging the opening of her pussy. Her muscles tightened in response, desperately aching to feel his wide girth fill her wholly.

Finally, she could hold out no longer. “I need you, Alex. And I need you right now. Take me. Please don’t torture me another second.”

Breathless and feverish, Anna slammed her eyes shut as he drove himself deeply inside her.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, sweetheart.”

Their body’s slick with a sheen of sweat, he pumped into her, never stopping for her to adjust. Then again, she didn’t figure it was necessary. Her body, her mind, and spirit all knew the man better than she had realized. He was her mate.

There was no room for doubting that powerful connection any longer.

Free of their binding, she wrapped her legs around him, pushing him closer, clamoring to discover the mind shattering release of orgasm once again. He pressed quick kisses across her face, her neck, and chest. They played in perfect harmony. Together their breaths quickened, panting to the frantic beats of their own hearts.

“Harder, Alex.”

She smiled happily at him as he complied, their eyes locked on each other as he furiously pumped inside her. She tightened around his cock, pulsing and throbbing until she felt her need explode inside her, her orgasm shattering every ounce of resistance remaining.

“God, Anna, you’re fucking perfect.”

She felt his release follow almost immediately on the heels of her own as he tightened and his face pinched in pleasure. He slowed his movements, lowering himself to lie beside her but not breaking the connection between their bodies. Her hands slid across his body, memorizing the few details about it she hadn’t already.

He was perfect too.

And he was hers.

She hoped.

Suddenly doubt crept into her foggy mind. This activity had been about recognizing that. It had to have been. He was drawn to her in a way neither of them had control over. Surely he must feel that, understand that now. Right?

Carefully, Anna opened her eyes to peer into his confusing face. He was staring back at her with an expression she couldn’t understand. The panic started to build. She needed him, that much was true. She could no longer deny the fact. But did he need her?

Did the powerful Alexei need someone like her? Or was this all just part of his plan to avenge his brother’s death?

When the quiet words finally escaped his mouth, they hit her like a pile of bricks straight to her stomach. There was no softness in his eyes, no room for error. She had been a fool.

“I need you to take me to that temple, Anna. And I need you to do it right now.”

Chapter Five

Never before had Anna had such a desire to run—run away from Alex who stubbornly insisted on traveling to the temple as a human—run away from her troubling thoughts of love and happiness. She was positive if she could only race through the forest fast enough she could abandon the consuming anger at herself, as well, anger over believing for the first time that this prophecy held any good purpose for her.

She had been foolish to believe that finding truth in the mark on her chest would ultimately mean finding satisfaction and contentment with her life, that everything would fall into place and she would finally find happiness.

She had found *something* in Alex's arms. The sizzling chemistry and physical release she discovered was ten times that of anything she had ever experienced before. He was demanding and ultimately satisfying. She craved his touch more than that of any other man.

Alexei had spoiled her for life, ruined her chances of finding anything nearly comparable in another. She hated him for it.

Yet, she wanted more.

Conscious all of a sudden that with her mind racing she had picked up her tempo, she turned back to find Alex, cursing his stubborn as hell attitude. The man was a freakin' tiger and yet he insisted, for reasons unknown, to remain human.

She could smell his desire, sense his struggle to fight off the beast inside him. Why didn't he give in? Why didn't he recognize that being an animal was part of him, just as much a part as his human counterpart?

Anna might fear the powerful creature he could be, but she would respect him, as well. She wanted to see the magnificence he was as a Siberian Tiger. She wanted to know all of him.

Maybe then she'd realize it wouldn't work out, that the prophecy held no solid future for either of them. But despite all her hard wishing for some common sense, her heart practically tripped over itself as he stepped into the clearing, sweat covering his brow, his body magnificently chiseled as he worked the rough terrain.

Anna could soak in that sight for hours and never get tired of it. Too bad for her, twilight was starting to close in and she would soon lose sight of everything. If it wasn't for his damn stubbornness they would have been able to make the trip in one day easy. Now because of his arrogant decision to remain a weak human, they were forced to seek shelter in the wilderness, keeping themselves vulnerable to attack should any rogue Tigers be out on the prowl for a certain Gerbera brother.

Her body shook in anger. He was foolish and not worth an ounce of her time. She could easily abandon him in this jungle now that he had let her out to shift. She could disappear and without the aide of his animal instincts, Alex would never find her as a human again.

Yet, something kept her here. She had promised him she'd take him to the temple, allow him to listen to the prophecy from the Great One himself and see if hearing it told from another would make him a believer. She doubted it, but in some deep corner of her mind she hoped he would.

Because believing would make things a lot easier on the both of them.

* * * *

Alex's mind took a far more wicked beating than any trip through the forest did to his body. His head spun with confusion all day while they traveled together. If you could even call it that.

He had trusted Anna enough to allow her to shift. Hell, she had been so damn adamant about the whole ordeal that he really had no choice in the matter. He needed to see this temple, to hear the rest of his destiny from someone of supposed authority and she refused to travel as a human.

Watching her shift this morning, seeing her glorious body transform from a sensual creature of passion into a dark creature of strength and stealth was agonizing. Each and every moment that he followed her deeper into the wilderness beat against his resolve to remain human. Viewing the shifting and seeing her control over her body as an animal sent unfamiliar pangs of confidence through him that he could control himself the same way.

Except Alex knew differently.

Inside him was a slumbering beast, a menacing, uncontrollable animal that would terrorize him if he let it gain control. For all he knew his instincts might lead him to slay Anna as a Leopard, to kill her just because of their differences.

He wouldn't travel that slippery path again, no matter how potent the urge continued to be. He would resist because it was necessary. There was no other choice.

Night was falling and Alexei figured they wouldn't be able to travel much farther like this. He caught sight of Anna at the other edge of the clearing, her splendid cat silhouette filling his gaze. In the next moment her body was changing, shifting smaller, the color lightening to match her pale skin and features returning to the familiar sensual woman he had been captivated by since the very beginning.

Instantly, he felt a powerful jolt shock his body. The hungry itch to make a similar transformation in the other direction shook him like an earthquake. He fisted his hands as he stood there, his mind struggling to remain in control. He could do this.

He would.

His resolve strengthening, Alex carefully glanced back in her direction, startled by the intensity he could distinguish in her blue eyes from this distance. Another powerful, demanding urge swept through his body, except this was one of hunger. He desired to have her body once again, to feel her writhing beneath him as ecstasy washed over the both of them.

It pulled him forward at a rapid pace. The connection he felt in that instant was as strong as the ones that had been reoccurring since their paths crossed. The sensation was awkward and foreign. What did this attraction mean? Was it all because of a silly mark on her chest or did these changes signify something deeper, more meaningful?

One thing he was remarkably sure about, though. With each passing hour, his need for her grew. His body craved her. His mind ached to talk to her some more. She was so familiar to him, so perfect it seemed, and yet he still didn't feel as if he had ever been here before.

His mind raced with questions, questions surrounding the details of his brother's death, about his future with Anna, his life in general. His heart beat rapidly as he climbed the last of the rocks to where she stood, a look in her eyes that was a combination of irritation and something more carnal.

"I was starting to wonder if it would take you all night to catch up."

Her caustic tone only fueled his quest to get his answers. Dropping his pack beside her, he peered into the entrance of a dark, unfriendly looking cave before glancing back at her rigid posture.

“This is your temple?”

She laughed but it wasn’t like the pleasant and seductive ones of this morning. Her voice was cold and irritating. Alex wanted to erase this side of her, remind her exactly how satisfied he could make her.

“You travel too slowly as a human to make it to the temple. This is a safe house my family uses when traveling overnight. It’s equipped with the necessities we’ll need.”

She moved forward without another glance his way and he struggled to find the anger to bite a scathing comment back at her with her delicious ass filling his view. He was physically exhausted, yet the captivating sight of her feminine figure was enough to wet his sexual appetite.

Alex craved her. And he would have her.

Again.

As many times as he chose.

He followed her inside, momentarily taking in the less than primitive set-up. Easily he caught up to her, gripping her fragile arms with his firm hands, halting her movement.

“Don’t think I’m going to let you walk away that easily, Anna.”

His body remained firm as she moved to pull away. Her struggle useless, she gave in after a moment and he slowly slid his fingers down the length of her arms, molding his hands to her slender waist as he turned her towards him. Desire coursed through his veins.

He saw the struggle on her face in the dim light. She was angry yet very much amenable to what his touch did to her. He waited for her to speak, his hands continuing their journey, relearning her curves as they snaked up her sides beneath her arms to drift lightly across her firm breasts.

Her breath hissed through clenched teeth.

“Was there something you wanted to tell me, Anna?”

Alex enjoyed watching her fight to maintain composure, glad to know it wasn’t just him who was afflicted. He circled her chest with his fingers, massaging her nipples hard through the thin fabric of her shirt. Her eyes flickered closed.

“Please, stop.”

Alex stilled his hands momentarily, his mind registering the quiet command and her thinly set lips. Only his desire pushed him forward, testing her resolve. He pressed her tightly against him, allowing her to feel his heated body and already tense erection.

“Now why would you want me to do that?”

Lengthy lashes lifted slowly to reveal her darkening eyes. He searched them for reason, for anything that would tell him she was serious, because every inch of her body was screaming to him otherwise.

“You’re exhausted. It’s been a trying day.”

He wasn’t going to argue. The trip through the dense forest had been incredibly difficult and the terrain murderous. Still no amount of physical exhaustion could stop him from satisfying this very primitive need of theirs. “I’ve been through worse.”

He weaved his fingers underneath her shirt, bunching and tugging it off her head without giving her time to argue. Anna stepped back away from him, her silhouette becoming a shadow in the darkening cave.

“Tomorrow will be just as harsh. Get some rest, Alex.”

She turned away from him and bent down by a pile of supplies lying next to some embers that glowed orange when she fanned them. It took her no time at all to light a small kindling fire from the coals and soon he could feel the heat spread around him.

“Do you normally find warm coals in your safe houses?”

Anna shrugged as she continued to stoke the fire to life and placed a few larger logs on top of the now crackling flames.

“My cousin had been out this way earlier today. I could smell his lingering scent as we approached.”

Satisfied with her answer, he focused once more on his growing hunger watching as her shadow danced along the wall, mocking him, teasing him to push onward. Quietly, he began to undress in the darkness stripping off his damp t-shirt and dirty jeans. The cold air whipped against his naked skin and swiftly he moved toward the fire, intent on claiming Anna once again.

For as much as she verbally denied him, Anna didn't move when he stepped behind her, pressing his hard chest to her back as he once again resumed a sensual massage on her breasts. They were firm and heavy in his hands and her head fell backwards onto his chest as he stroked them in unison.

Alex lowered his mouth to her ear. “I want you, Anna, and I will have you tonight even if it takes everything in my power to do so.”

Confident she wasn't going to move away again, he stroked his hands lightly over the warm flesh of her stomach before working open her pants and shoving them impatiently down her legs. Anna didn't move but then again, he didn't let her.

He brushed his hands over her waist before his fingers dipped between her legs, eager to feel the desire he knew she had for him.

He wasn't disappointed either as he massaged downward, smearing the moist cream around her opening. Quietly, she whimpered in his arms. God, he loved how sensual she was, how responsive to his touch and his body she could be.

Without warning, she lifted herself away from him again and stepped out of her partially discarded pants. Her eyes when she faced him were dark and tumultuous. Slowly, she backed away like she was facing danger, not satisfaction.

His voice was rough when he spoke, his body not willing to settle for anything short of ultimate completion. “Come back here, Anna.”

Alex watched her swallow the lump in her throat as she shook her head at him, silky tendrils of hair catching the firelight and glowing around her. His pulse pounded in his chest.

“Are you afraid of me then?”

Her fists tightened momentarily as she shook her head once again.

“I will never be scared of you as a human, Alexei. You can bet your money on that.”

Unsure he wanted to press this sensitive issue with her, he moved forward, eager to taste her lips with his own. She danced backwards around the bed and out of his reach. He smiled at her agility, realizing he had no choice but to give in.

“Then you better tell me quickly what it is that is scaring you away, Anna, because I'm only going to wait so long before I have you.”

The fire snapped suddenly and Anna looked towards it distracted. He used the opportunity to round the end of the bed and close in on her. He snagged her unsuspecting hands, and pulled her onto the soft mattress with him. Anna hollered as she fell beside him, but it was soon silenced by his hungry lips, tasting her sweetness.

She resisted for only the briefest of moments before her lips parted, yielding to his pressuring tongue. He tasted her slowly, sliding his tongue deep into her warm mouth and toying with her tongue before slipping back, teasing her to do the same. Her body curved around his, molding to his hardened muscles as he pressed against her.

He moved his lips downward, hungry for a more thorough taste. He kissed her cheeks, her pale neck and slid his tongue across her shoulder. Her hands pressed firmly against his chest.

“Tell me why you’re afraid to shift, Alex.”

Alex ignored her demand, focusing instead on the burning desire inside him, but when he moved his lips closer to her sizzling body, she pushed them back.

“Anna, now isn’t the time.”

Her hands moved to take his, to hold them away from doing anything more seductive.

“Tell me, Alex. I want to know.”

He stifled a deep groan and tried concentrating on something other than the throbbing pain in his cock.

“Just explain to me why you refuse to embrace who you are and you can have me. All of me. Just tell me first.”

Alex closed his eyes, wishing that this would all just be a bad nightmare that would disappear when he opened them. But when he did, he saw the concern etched on her soft features and knew he owed her an explanation. Slowly, he sat up on the bed, smoothing a hand over her side, caressing her as he struggled to find the right words to make her understand.

“When Dimitri and I were growing up, we knew we were different. Our mother never allowed us to shift in the village, not even in our own home for fear of being discovered and executed as a potential threat to the others. Only when we went to gather supplies in the woods were we allowed to test our other halves.”

Alex swallowed the lump rising in his throat and glanced down at Anna. Her warm, liquid blue eyes quietly gave him strength to continue. She reached her hand out and stroked his.

“I recognized my unordinary strength, even then. I thrived on being the better of the two of us, constantly challenging and beating Dimitri at everything we attempted back then. As time passed, I began to trust my instincts enough to shift in the village unbeknownst to our mother and learned that I could easily get away with it. I never saw any need for caution.”

Alex closed his hand tightly as he remembered the next few years, the pain that still ached from time to time and the scars that he wasn’t able to let heal. “My downfall had been falling in love. I had married a beautiful, intelligent woman in our village. A woman many other men had also sought as their wife.”

“The jealousy amongst the others was ripe especially since I wasn’t the most loved or popular man there. Despite the acceptance by most of our union, there were a few rogue bachelors who sought revenge on me.”

Alex stopped, unable to swallow the rising grief. How did he tell Anna about Sarah? He didn’t know if Anna would understand, if he even wanted her to. He had locked his Tiger up deep inside him because that was his punishment. If it happened once, it could easily happen again.

“It’s okay, Alex.” She gently gripped his hand with her own and he glanced at her, startled from his melancholy. “Please tell me.”

He nodded and looked back at the fire, his voice hoarse with emotion. “One night a few of them had broken into our home when I was known to be out and intended to take turns raping my wife.”

Vaguely he was aware of the pressure he squeezed her hand with.

"I had arrived home in the midst of this hideous event, fury exploding inside of me. I sought to protect Sarah, to strike back at the vile and disgusting men who had exploited her. I became a Tiger without even realizing it really. My contempt at their insidious act, and my anger collided as I moved to attack them. I was blinded by a powerful hatred that night."

Alex's fought to contain the familiar grief that threatened to consume him. His life had ended that night. He had never been the same since.

"I swiftly retaliated against each and every one of them. Except when I came to the very last and strongest of them, I made a fatal error because he held Sarah tightly in his grasp."

Alex felt the embarrassing burn of tears in the back of his eyes and forced them away. He didn't deserve to cry over what had transpired that night. He was the murdering individual. It was entirely his fault Sarah was gone.

"I struck out at that man and succeeded in striking him with deadly force. However the rest of that blow also hit Sarah." Reliving that night was like having a weight press down heavily on his chest.

Quietly, Anna rose beside him and lowered him back onto the bed with her. She feathered her smooth hands across his chest and massaged the pain. Delicate fingers weaved their way up towards his face, caressing the sorrow that was etched there.

Alex didn't know whether it would help any but he was too consumed by the nightmare to say any different.

"You were trying to save her, Alex. You can't blame yourself for that."

He narrowed his eyes towards her, anger swelling inside him. "She died at my hands, Anna. I learned a very powerful lesson that night. I can't control the beast in me."

Patiently she circled her fingers around his dry lips.

"It was an accident. Don't punish yourself forever over it, no matter how horrid that day might have been."

He gripped her shoulders and shook her hard. "It's not punishment, Anna, its self preservation. The Tiger in me died that night. Accept that as a fact."

Effortlessly, she shrugged his grip away and shook her head.

"Thank you for telling me, Alex. I know the strength your confession took."

Startled by her compassion, Alex let her lay him flat on the bed once again as she moved over him. He let his eyes drift shut as she straddled his lap and dipped her head closer, soft strands of hair tickling his bare chest.

Gently, she brushed her lips across his skin. He sucked in a deep breath as she pressed a long kiss over his heart before pecking her way up, showering attention on his upper body, his shoulders and neck before reaching his face.

The warmth of her naked body on top of his was invigorating and despite the grief that he had experienced reliving his personal nightmare, he found himself wanting her. He wanted to bury himself in her to forget the pain.

And evidently Anna was willing to play along.

Her soft, luscious lips grazed his and nibbled playfully on his lower lip before pressing deeper, slowly building his hunger. Gradually his mind released the sorrow filled memory and slid into the highly gratifying gift she was giving.

He stroked his hands down her body, cupping her ass and pressing her firmly against him. He enjoyed the way her hardened nipples scratched a pattern across his chest the same way his pulsing cock did against her stomach.

She let him control the speed and he was subconsciously grateful. He deepened their kiss as he explored her a little faster, frantic to lose himself in the mind numbing pleasure that she could provide. She raised herself above him on her knees and drew his thick shaft into her hands, stroking the hardened flesh, thrusting him closer to the edge of release.

He pushed her ass forward, maneuvering her above him and let their eyes meet as she slowly lowered herself onto him, her tight, warm cunt closing around him. The connection was almost too intense. His body tightened in reaction.

Alex used his hands to guide her waist, moving her up and down on his rock hard shaft. Once she was comfortable with the fluid tempo, he stretched his hands upwards, cupping her breasts and kneading them as they bounced with her body.

“Go ahead, Alex. Let it go.”

Shaking, his eyes closed, aware of her dual meaning, Alex was helpless to stop the crushing orgasm that pulsed through his body when she firmly thrust herself on top of him over and over again. She continued her frenzied movements as his seed spilled into her and didn't stop until his face relaxed, the aftershocks of sensation riding through him.

Alex slowly pulled Anna upward to lie on top of him, encasing him in soft warmth. His satisfaction delivered, he was surprised by the overwhelming tug of sleep and exhaustion that began to set in. Unable to even exert enough energy to open his eyes, he just held her tightly against him, silently thanking her for what she attempted, even though he didn't think she truly understood.

As sleep claimed him, he was struck with the harrowing realization that he deeply wanted her to because if she didn't understand there was a strong possibility that she might not stay. And that simply wasn't an option any longer.

Chapter Six

Anna was finally home.

Well, as good a home as she had ever found anyway. The temple wasn't exactly the most domestic of places for one to have grown up around but it was all she had and for that she was deeply grateful. She paused in the clearing, thanking her luck that she had been able to make the trip home once again and tapped her foot impatiently as she waited for Alex to catch up, eager to get inside and see everyone.

Her heart pounded fiercely in her chest. She had so much explaining to do. How happy would her dad be to finally know that she believed in her destiny? She had denied his wisdom staunchly for so many years now that she deserved a big *I told you so* from him for sure. But she had a feeling he would only smile and nod, having known all along one day she would.

But even though she had finally found truth in the prophecy she had become a part of so long ago, she doubted there was any future happiness for her because of it. Last night had opened her eyes to the new level of stubbornness that Alex possessed, one that she was powerless to change or compete with and, ultimately, it was what had made her decision that much more permanent.

Alex would never accept who he was, a shifter. That knowledge left her positive that this current attraction would eventually fizzle out. Embracing the Leopard side of her was a natural extension of her being, part of her whole. He was living with only half himself and that disconnect would always stand in the way of their true happiness.

Whatever the rest of this prophecy held, she was bound and determined to convince her dad to leave her out of it. Alex wanted his solitary environment. He wanted to remain convinced that his wife's death was the immediate result of a negative side to himself and she had no control over that. That was why she found it necessary to make sure he left here without her.

Last night had been about saying goodbye in a way. She loved him without a doubt and all day long she had struggled with finding a way to muddle through this insurmountable wall and find common ground, but she had failed. So it was time to let go. She could be the stronger of the two.

There was no other choice.

The distinctive crunch of boots brought her out of her solemn thoughts and she turned to find Alex emerging from the bush behind her. Immediately, her heart hammered against her ribs. The grief of last night had been replaced by a second day of brutal hiking and she could see the exhaustion now clinging to his features. But as soon as he glanced in her direction, he was smiling and the sudden giddiness that filled her entire being unnerved her greatly.

"You found it."

She turned back to appreciate the magnificent stone structure. "Did you really ever doubt my ability to?"

He stopped beside her and reached for her hand, which she provided tentatively.

"I find it impossible to doubt you about anything for too long." A shiver rippled down her spine as his intense, dark eyes focused right into hers. "Do you usually stand outside of your home or can we go in?"

She laughed off her unease and pulled away from him, eager to lead the way inside. So many people were bound to ask questions—a tiger and a leopard mating prophecy fulfilled.

There would be talk. Surely people would be anxious to discover what this finally meant. Would it bring retaliation from the Tigers? Would it bring their clans strangely closer? She was sick with nervousness as she climbed the stone steps to the sacred building and slowly stepped inside.

What greeted her was a completely unexpected silence. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her keen senses went on instant alert.

"Is it normally this quiet?"

Anna held up a hand to silence Alex as she looked around the empty entrance hall. Normally there were people milling about, children playing between the great statues that lined the length of this room. Her gaze darted towards the exits. The large entry way had been dimmed, its lanterns almost extinguished. There was no muffled noise to be heard anywhere.

"What is it Anna?"

Cautiously, she glanced back at Alex, who had dislodged his weapon from its holster. She could feel the apprehension he had picked up from her body language. Slowly, she started moving forward into the hall, carefully picking her way towards the back exit, the one that led towards the living area.

When she reached the back, she stopped, noticing the heavy, dark colored cloth that had been laid over the doorway. It was the sign of death and it sent chills spiraling down her spine.

"Something terrible has happened here, Alex. I can feel it."

He nodded and moved away from her towards the second exit in the hall. She silently prayed that this strange arrival wasn't linked to her father's prophecy in anyway. She would never forgive herself if she learned that there had been an attack because of her.

"Don't move."

Alex's deep voice boomed through the hall and had her head whipping around to find his pistol cocked towards a prowling leopard. A very familiar, over protective cat.

"Alex, no."

Alex's head tilted slightly towards her but that was all the advantage the animal needed to pounce, hitting him square in his broad chest and leveling him. She ran forward to stop the fight as Alex struggled beneath the Leopard's paws.

"Andre let him go."

Frustrated over her cousin's lack of listening, she arrived next to the stubborn pair and kicked her boot at him. The leopard howled and slinked back, shifting in the shadows.

"What the hell was that?" Alex ground out. He quickly pulled himself back to his feet and gripped his gun, aiming the weapon towards where her cousin emerged—human. Cautiously, Anna moved to lower his arm, easing the tension from the moment away.

"I'm sorry, Alex. Are you alright?"

Despite her determination to put some distance between them, she touched the scratch on his neck, wiping away the small trace of blood. Angered, she whirled towards the other man.

"What in the world were you thinking, Andre?"

Her cousin shrugged, a noncommittal gesture that agitated her fury even more.

"I smelt a Tiger, Anna. I acted accordingly."

She flung an accusing finger at his chest. “Don’t tell me that you didn’t know I was here with him.”

Andre laughed heartily and swatted her hand away with ease.

“No, I sniffed you all over him, little one. All the more reason to attack.”

Anna felt the blush sting her cheeks and glanced away. Andre still had no right.

“What were you thinking bringing one of them in here anyway?”

Andre raised his eyebrow at Alex, who stood just as solidly, the same hardened glare working back towards him. What was it with men?

It was Alex who answered first.

“She didn’t have a choice.”

Anna narrowed her gaze towards Alex, knowing this conversation was taking a drastic turn towards the worst. Andre huffed.

“So you’re saying you’ve been forcing your will on her? In that case”

Anna screamed as her cousin’s fist connected with Alex’s chest, knocking him flat on his ass again. Alex quickly stood, his dark eyes stormy, his own fists balled.

Swiftly, she stepped between them. “Enough. For starters, I had every choice, Alex. No amount of coercion would have been able to keep me by your side once we hit the outdoors had I wanted to leave.”

Andre smirked and she whirled back towards him, her anger almost boiling over. “And you, I expect more of. This is a guest, *my* guest. He is here to talk with my father and not to be attacked. Next time I won’t stop him from shooting.”

Andre’s face paled but she was jerked away by Alex’s strong grip on her forearm.

“This Great One is your father?”

Skepticism covered his handsome face and she nodded. “Does that matter?”

Maybe knowing of the family attachment would cause Alex to simply become a permanent non-believer. He could leave and never hear the rest of the story, if there was a rest of the story. She wasn’t up-to-date on the inner guidelines of prophecies, but she didn’t think there necessarily needed to be more to it.

“Nick and I have been trying to find you for days, Anna. We were forced to abandon the search yesterday to return.”

A chill settled deep inside her bones and Anna shivered uncontrollably. She was a frequent journeyer and her family was accustomed to the large quantities of time she spent alone in the forest. Never before had they come searching.

“What happened here?”

Her mind shot out warnings as she began to put the pieces together. The darkened entryway, the large cloths of mourning over the doorways. Andre stepped closer. His face softened.

“I’m sorry, Anna. It was your father. He tried to wait.”

Anna barely choked air into her lungs they suddenly burned so badly. Someone grabbed a hold of her as the room spun, her legs too rubbery to hold her own weight. Slowly, she was escorted into the adjacent room and laid upon one of the soft, worn couches there.

Salty tears burned her eyes and threatened to stream out. She watched Andre swallow a large lump in his throat before continuing. Sweat dampened her palms.

“We wanted to give him a proper funeral, sweetheart. We couldn’t wait for you any longer. I’m sorry.”

Her tears came in earnest now, sliding down her cheeks unnoticed. Suddenly, she was on her feet, struggling to detach Andre from her side. It couldn't be true. She hadn't yet said her goodbyes. She hadn't been able to tell him everything she had wanted to.

"Anna?"

It was Alex's deep, soothing voice that called her, but she was too stunned to give him notice. Her father had died while she had been away. While she had been doing nothing but wasting her time with frivolous things like sex and pleasure. How had she let this happen? How had she not seen it coming?

Her father was supposed to know that she believed in the prophecy before his death. She wasn't going to be able to learn the remainder of it now, not ever. She swallowed her misery, thinking that she got exactly the outcome she had hoped for, Alex leaving without her, except at an expense far too costly.

She moved forward, knowing she would go to her dad. She would grieve for him now, alone. Alex grabbed her arm as she slid past, holding her tightly next to him, forcing her to recognize his presence and look into his face.

Once she stopped moving away, he released her, reaching his fingers up to touch her delicate face and swipe softly at her falling tears. She closed her eyes and trembled.

"I'm sorry, Anna."

Anna's eyes flashed open and a new fury started burning inside her. She hadn't intended to feel this way, to place blame but it made so much sense now. Alex had caused this delay of their arrival. He had unnecessarily hindered their progress here by stubbornly remaining human. Would she have been able to say goodbye otherwise?

Her heart pounded aching in her chest.

"I can come with you to see your dad, Anna, if that's what you'd like."

Anna shook her head, startled by the comfort that this dangerously strong man was trying to provide. It didn't feel right, taking it from him. She wanted to hate him, forever, but she couldn't.

"I'd rather be alone, Alex. You should go home."

Conscious of nothing but his commanding presence, she let herself momentarily be wrapped in his powerful arms. She knew this was the end for them. He wouldn't learn of the prophecy, wouldn't be satisfied with the unknown. He would move on, forever denying the power of the animal inside him.

She ached so much, she thought she would burst.

"You shouldn't be alone now, Anna. I'll stay."

What he didn't say was to find out whatever else he could. But then, he didn't have to. She knew what his true motive was. He was driven to this temple on a mission and he was going to fail.

It was time to visit her father, to say her goodbye and grieve silently for him. There were details that needed to be taken care of, people to thank. Everything had been done without her and she would make up for that. No matter what.

"There's no reason for you to stay, Alex. The knowledge of the prophecy died with my father. He was the Great One you came to see. You're not going to get answers now."

Calmly, he stroked his large hands down her back, soothing her anger despite Anna not wanting to let it go.

"I don't need the answers now. Right now I want to make sure you're okay, that someone's here to take care of you."

Her eyes stung with fresh tears over his evident concern. Was it all an act? If not, why did he have to be so damn sentimental now, after she had decided that it wasn't going to work? He wasn't like her. He didn't embrace the animal, didn't live for the life she did.

Slowly, she pulled away, stopping him with her hands from following her.

"Leave, Alex. Go home to your village and get on with your life. The prophecy is dead now. There's no reason for you to be here any longer."

As quick as possible, Anna darted away and raced from the room, her heart and mind shattered over the events of the last few days. Her life seemed suddenly empty, devoid of purpose and strength. Struggling for air, she made her way down the maze of halls towards where she knew her father would be. She needed to see him. She needed to talk one last time to the man who had believed in her success from the very beginning.

She would tell him she loved him and pick herself up. It was exactly what her dad would have wanted her to do.

It was exactly what she would do.

* * * *

Alex watched her step quietly from the burial grounds back towards her room. He stayed still, silently aching for her. Her grief was powerful, her sadness almost overwhelming and for some unnatural reason he was feeling it right along with her. His heart ached with hers, and he felt the weight of her love for her father.

All afternoon he had wanted to go to her, to soothe away her pain and relax her mind. He had been through these motions with the same heavy heart. His grief over the loss of Sarah had been unbearable but he had had support from his family.

Anna was attempting to go it alone.

Alex had no intention of letting her.

He had suffered alone when his brother was ruthlessly murdered. He knew how swallowing the depths of those dark emotions could be if there was no one there to ease them. It could eat at a person. It had consumed him.

Silently, he slipped from his dark spot in the foyer and followed her back to her room. Despite her weary steps and sullen face, she was even more gorgeous than he had ever seen her. Her full, long hair had been left untied to cascade down her back, and he pictured that hair as it had been the night before, tickling his chest as she moved above him.

She had clothed herself in the most feminine of dresses. Unlike the customary black, she had a wispy, white silk gown on that trailed on the ground by her bare feet. The ensemble was strangely provocative given the circumstances, but he found he couldn't help himself.

He intended to change Anna's mind tonight. He would take her thoughts away from those of the tragic events and replace them with a soothing pleasure, just as she had done the night before. And once he had accomplished that, well, then he would figure out exactly why she was shoving him away because he had finally seen the light where she was concerned and he wasn't about to give it up now.

The volume of love and compassion she had shown him last night had moved him. She understood and he realized that he *had* wanted her to. They connected on a level he never had with anyone before. It was unreal and frightening, but he couldn't deny it any longer. Prophecy or not, he was going to find a way to keep her in his life. That much he knew.

Alex stepped quickly behind her as she opened her bedroom door. His ears filled with her sharp intake of air as he pushed her forward and closed the door behind them, locking any disturbances out.

She whirled around to face him, hair and dress swirling magnificently with her.

"I thought you had left."

He wasn't sure if it was real or imagined but he was almost positive she was a bit happy to be proven wrong. He grinned.

"I had some unfinished business to take care of."

Her startled blue eyes sucked him in and for a moment he was lost at sea. He snapped himself out of it, lust pounding thickly through his veins.

"I already told you my father was the only person with detailed knowledge of the prophecy."

The dim candles lighting the room illuminated her soft skin. She glowed like a goddess and he hungered to touch her once again. He stepped forward.

She inched back.

"I'm not concerned about the prophecy, Anna. I'm concerned for you."

Her step faltered and he caught her, gathering her into his greedy arms and holding her tight. The tremble that started in her whisked through him, as well.

"There's no reason to be. I'm fine, Alex."

Gripping her tightly, he slid his face down her hair and nuzzled his lips gently beside her ear. Her body responded to his commanding touch, and she eased against him. The movement fueled his desire.

"People who lose their loved ones aren't just fine, Anna."

Softly, he pressed his lips to her cheek, kissing his way tenderly down her jaw before brushing against her moist lips. Her mouth parted from his presence and he barely restrained himself enough to finish his thought. "But I thought I could take your mind off that for just a little while."

She pressed her lips forward to seal against his and the conversation ended before any of it really began. He drank from her mouth like it was golden nectar, each taste more delicious than the previous. He recklessly caressed his hands down her slender figure, gliding over the smooth silk material until they could reach no further.

He pressed her body to his, aching to have more. He cupped her ass in his hands and lifted her higher, easing her back onto the bed. She lay out before him, the silk pooling around her and she focused her gaze tightly on his.

"Promise me you will leave tomorrow, Alexei."

Heavy pressure constricted his chest as he gazed upon her beauty. He wasn't prepared to talk about that, not now, not after they tasted each other like they were starving. "Why are you pushing me away, Anna?"

He had noticed it last night when she had tried for argument. He had seen it again this morning and now tonight. Was she suddenly afraid of the bond they shared? Had something changed inside her that she couldn't accept?

Anna captured his hand in her delicate one as she pulled herself up towards him, masterfully making quick work of his clothing.

"There is no future for us, Alex. I meant what I said earlier. You are not one of us. You need to go home."

Pain blindsided him. He hadn't been prepared for her repeated rejection. Not now that he had finally come to the realization that he wanted her in his life – desperately. He used his hands to slow hers as he towered above her.

"I don't take orders from anyone, Anna. And that includes you."

He fondled the thin straps of her dress with his fingers, toying with them momentarily before flicking them over the sides of her shoulders and letting the gown's weight pull it down her figure.

Her nakedness was like finding heaven and, immediately, he moved his mouth down to taste her silken skin, feathering rough kisses across her shoulders and neck.

Anna leaned her head back to offer him access, her tone still just as harsh.

"There is nothing for you to decide, Alex. If you aren't gone in the morning, I will be."

He stilled his mouth as her command echoed through the bedroom. Would she really abandon her home and her family during this time of mourning? He let the silly notion sift right out of his mind. She was bluffing.

And he was through playing with her.

"I'm done talking about the morning, Anna. Right now, all I'm thinking about is tonight."

Alex ran his hand firmly over her curves, stroking every inch of hot flesh on his path towards her center. She sighed against him and he continued moving, inching her back on the bed and laying her out before him to feast on.

He dipped his head lower, letting his tongue dart out to flick one distended nipple and then the other. Back and forth he moved between her breasts, massaging them with his hands and caressing them with his mouth.

Her flowery scent filled his senses and his heavy erection throbbed against her stomach. He would devour her tonight, but first he would please her at least once before having that pleasure himself. If not with words, he would show her with actions exactly how serious he was.

She tangled her hands in his short hair as he slid his lips lower, past her quivering abs and moved them lightly over her damp mound. He kissed the insides of her thighs, and moved his hands to hold her vulnerable and open to him.

Softly he blew on her sensitive flesh. She moaned and writhed on the bed in response.

"Please, Alex."

The need in her soft voice was unmistakable and he feathered his lips over her smooth pussy, nipping the sensitized outer lips. She bucked against him and his cock pounded in response.

He pressed his mouth to her more firmly this time, drawing a long line across her opening before tasting her deeper, thrusting his tongue deep inside her. She pushed against his mouth, silently begging him for more and he responded to her erotic demand eagerly.

Alex moved his tongue up to tease her clit as his fingers dove inside her, curling and twisting in and out, working her need into a frenzy.

"Take me, Alex. Now."

He chuckled against her and moved his mouth up to kiss her stomach and chest as he continued to press his fingers into her, increasing their rhythm as she quickened her movements against him.

"I just said I didn't take orders, sweetheart. Besides, isn't it ladies first?"

Alex grazed a pert nipple with his teeth pinching it in his mouth and she cried out the same time he thrust another finger deep inside her. She bucked wildly against him, gripping his fingers and creaming around them.

Her breath was ragged and Alex found his own quickening, his desire to ravage her nearing the exploding point. Swiftly he moved over her, spreading her legs and pulling them to wrap around his waist as he sunk deep inside her hot, wet tunnel.

She dug her fingers into his chest and he could still feel the last spasm of her orgasm clenching through her. He pushed deeply inside, burying himself to the hilt and sinking down on top of her.

Heaven on earth she felt marvelous.

His pulse racing, he began to pump inside her, deep, hard strokes that had her thrusting off the bed to match his movements. He clenched his jaw as her hand snuck around to toy with his balls beneath their movements.

“I will never have enough of you, Anna. Never.”

He pounded into her, making her breasts bounce heavily, shaking the bed and them as he pushed harder, his orgasm exploding instantly. He tightened as she held him deeply. The only sound audible was their short, erratic breaths.

Quietly, Anna pulled him lower to rest alongside her, never unlocking her legs from around him. She kissed his chest and his face and her warm breath soothed him. They lay there not speaking and before he had time to extract any more answers out of her, his exhaustion from the journey kicked in and he slept, slept more soundly than he had in months.

Chapter Seven

"Your mate is the missing piece to your happiness, little one. Once you find him, your outlook on life will change."

Together they walked through the great hall. Anna was used to this conversation by now. He spoke of her destiny at each visit.

"I don't need it to change, Great One. I am fine just the way I am. I enjoy my solitude in the forest and the fulfillment it provides." She picked her pack up and gazed eagerly towards the outdoors.

"Who's to say that your mate will not enjoy those same things, as well, Anna? Once you feel that happiness, here," he placed a large, warm hand over her heart, "you will understand."

"What will I understand?"

The intoxicating scents of summer filled her nostrils and she longed to be on her way. Destiny or not, there was a life to be lived out there.

"That there is no other place you'd rather be than wrapped in that comfort."

Anna shrugged. "I wish I had your faith, father. I cannot see any Tiger loving me any more than I can see myself experiencing more to life than I already have."

Anna was content with her life most days and when she caught herself wishing for something more it usually brought trouble. She was already happy in her mind's eye.

"Sometimes you do not get to choose who you fall in love with, Anna. You'll believe me some day, little one. Just you wait and see."

* * * *

Anna's eyes flew open and immediately she shielded her view from the painful rays of sun that filtered onto her bed. Her heart was pounding in her chest as if it would burst through at any minute so she sat up to better take in a few deep breaths. Her entire body sighed.

It had been a dream, a memory of a past conversation with her father. Yet, it had felt so real, like he had purposely willed her to remember. It was a ridiculous notion but then her father had always persistently held out hope that his daughter would believe in her destiny.

As she smoothed her hands out over the covers and turned to find the empty spot on the bed beside her, she realized suddenly that she did.

Deep inside, maybe she always had.

She was in love with Alex.

Anna had pushed him away and he had pushed right back. Despite her annoyance over him not embracing his Tiger side, she still deeply respected and desired the man he was otherwise. Somewhere in the course of the last few days she had fallen in love with the stubborn human, her mate, and knew nothing was going to be the same again.

The full realization of what she saw finally sank in. He was not in bed with her where he had been last night when they fell asleep still tangled together. His spot was cold and the clothing she had hastily removed from him in her quest for release last night were gone, as well.

Panic started tingling its way across her belly as she quickly jumped out of the bed. She had, no *needed*, to find Alex immediately. She would explain herself in some way or another and he would understand.

Anna prayed that this time he would listen.

Grabbing the nearest sweater and thick pants she could locate, she dressed in haste, hoping that he had merely gone out for a stroll of the grounds or in search of breakfast. Surely after his talk about not taking orders he wouldn't have actually left.

She swallowed in a quick breath and shook away her fear. There was no way Alex was going to walk away from her now. Not after she finally believed. Not after she realized that she could be happy with him, human or Tiger.

Flinging the door open, she smacked right into Andre. He gripped her arms tightly to steady her.

"Is something wrong, little one?"

Anna tried calming herself, knowing how out of sorts she appeared to her cousin. "I need to speak to Alex. Where is he?"

Impatiently, she waited as Andre slowly answered.

"I passed him earlier this morning. He was heading out the front gates."

Anna trembled with both anger and worry. Had he really left her?

"And you did not think to stop him?"

Andre looked down at her, shock crossing his handsome features. His hands rubbed her shoulders to soothe her.

"I did not realize he was a prisoner here, Anna. He said he needed to take care of something alone and I continued on my way."

Anna blinked back the stinging tears. She would not break down and cry. She was a strong woman and fully capable of finding one stubborn human out in the woods. She could move faster than him if she was an animal and her senses would easily pick up on the scent of his familiar body.

It was a woodsy masculine flavor she would never forget.

She pushed her way past Andre. "I'm going to find him. If he comes back here, do *not* let him leave. Otherwise, if you don't see him, don't expect me either."

She took off jogging down the long hall, figuring if she had the luck of her father on her side she could find him before the sun hit mid-sky.

* * * *

The time was right.

Alex struggled to mentally remove the last remaining barriers that stood in his way as he made his journey further into the forest away from the temple. He didn't know how this prophecy was supposed to pan out and truthfully he no longer cared as long as it involved Anna in his life. But the last thing he needed during this little experiment with his past was to be attacked by a pack of Leopards, or better yet Tigers, and never make it back to her.

Because as soon as he shifted and proved to himself that he had some level of control over his animal instincts, he intended to return to her. He would lock her inside that bedroom and whittle her defenses into sawdust if that was what it took. He didn't care how long, he was going to make her love him back.

All he had to do first was prove to himself that he could embrace the animal she stubbornly swore was an integral part of him.

Stepping deeper into the thick foliage surrounding him, he sank down on his haunches and took a few deep breaths. Changing wasn't rocket science but it had been such a long time since the last fateful occurrence that he figured it wasn't going to be as easy as closing his eyes and opening them as a giant cat.

He would have to concentrate and clear his mind if he was going to slip past the remaining insecurities he had. He focused on letting Sarah and the pain surrounding her death go, but as he quietly concentrated on the task at hand, a blood curdling scream shattered his focus.

His heart pounded against his rib cage as he stood, realizing instantly that that voice belonged to none other than *his* Anna. His blood boiled as he heard her shout once again and immediately he began racing towards her, his entire mind and body focused on finding out where she was and making sure she was safe.

His need to protect overwhelmed his senses and as his frustration over being slowed up by the dense foliage grew, he harnessed his energy on getting to her faster, no matter what it took. His body hummed with adrenaline as he sank lower towards the ground. Every muscle screamed with renewed energy, a power that he had kept dormant for too long now.

Startled by the ease of the transformation, he instantly picked up on her fragrant scent as if it were a homing beacon. Desperate to find her, he rushed in that direction, his paws pounding the ground. He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her.

Never.

* * * *

Anna struggled to get back on her feet. The Tigers toyed with her, circling around her and probably waiting for her to simply bleed out and faint.

Fat chance of that, boys.

Standing once again but clutching her injured arm to slow the bleeding from the claw marks, she knew that outrunning them was no longer an option. She was too weak and had already shifted back to a human once again. For once she realized she needed someone else's assistance to survive.

She needed Alex.

She had sensed him close right before these two rogues attacked. Her encompassing desire to reach him had evidently masked the danger she walked into. Foolishly, she had stepped into their trap. This wasn't a chance meeting. These two bad asses were hunting.

And she had a strong feeling they had easily found half of who they were looking for. Alex's scent was oozing off her and fear hit her gut as she realized they didn't need to kill him to end this prophecy. She was equally as good.

Probably even better.

Striving for confidence, Anna squared her jaw and keenly watched them stalk, praying Alex had heard her cries. Would it be enough for him to come back and help her? Would his gun even be of any use against them?

Dizzy she shook her head to ward off the powerful urge to simply lie down. Her stamina dwindling, she ached to go to sleep, it hurt so badly. These Tigers obviously had no fear to be prowling so near a healthy thriving pack of Leopards, but before she could think of how else to survive, a third Tiger broke through the woods and joined the party.

Shit.

Anna sank down on her knees and tried to keep a steady eye on the group of them now, but she noticed something different suddenly. This animal wasn't circling her, joining in on the kill. And it certainly wasn't welcomed by the original pair. It growled, baring its sharp teeth at the attackers, positioning itself between her and the rogues.

Anna figured she had really lost it. Why would one of them protect her? This Tiger had definite size to his advantage and she was awestruck by his magnificent fur and strong stature.

Clearly her mind had taken a blow because all she could imagine was Alexei, defending his mate.

The two initial Tigers snarled back at him, pacing back and forth, edging closer but not within striking distance. Her protector circled inward, rubbing his thick fur against her as he continued to block the others' target. Anna felt a shocking surge of awareness at that moment.

A shiver of knowledge told her she wasn't crazy. Alex *was* here for her. He had embraced the animal inside him to protect her. But would it be enough?

She knew that they would attack. Somewhere in her foggy mind she wanted to warn him but before she could say a word one sprang forward and Alex attacked back, striking the other Tiger with a force that knocked him backwards.

Alex was powerful and calculating, obviously knowing that he was much larger than the two rogues. He struck again at the pursuing beast and she knew that he would continue to defend her until one of them lay dead.

Just as the second Tiger moved in to double up on Alex, two flashes of black darted past her and roared a familiar tune. Her vision started to blur but she saw her cousins bravely attacking the second pursuer alongside Alex.

Never before had she felt so safe, and so completely loved by those around her.

Anna watched them battle but suddenly it was difficult to keep her eyes open. She spun forward, the trees and her world spinning before her. She tried to reach out and stop it, afraid that if she fell to the ground now she might never wake to tell Alex everything he wanted to hear.

Before she could part her lips to shout out for the world that she loved him, however, the pain blinded her and she blacked out, falling to the ground behind him.

Chapter Eight

Anna didn't have to open her eyes to feel the intense light surrounding her. For a moment she thought for sure she had died in the attack, losing her opportunity after all to hold onto the happiness that Alex provided her with, a happiness her father said she wouldn't ever want to live without.

He was right.

But then she felt the searing pain shooting across her arm and shoulder and knew she had lived. She opened her eyes and sighed heavily, silently thanking her luck that she hadn't lost everything. Sunlight covered her in delightful warmth as she slowly took in her surroundings.

Her heart stopped when she saw Alex standing along the far wall, his dark eyes shimmering when he saw her look upon him. He was dressed just as she preferred, his jeans covering his muscled legs but his chest bare for her to soak in. God, she loved looking at him.

He moved closer and she let her gaze wander past him, taking in the now familiar room as she tentatively positioned herself on his bed. He stopped beside her, reaching a rough hand down to cup her cheek.

"We're back here again."

Her voice was weak and her lack of energy angered her. But then she saw his wounds and all her pain evaporated with concern for him. His glorious chest had a few deep gashes across the side that had been stitched together and his hands were mottled with scratch and bite marks.

He lifted her chin towards him, catching her gaze.

"Yes, but I didn't think there was a need to chain you up this time."

Anna smiled. "So it wasn't me who made those awful marks?"

Tentatively she fingered one of the lacerations with her stable hand. A deep sadness over what had transpired filled her. He sat beside her.

"They will heal and disappear with time, Anna."

She swallowed. Now that she had the opportunity how would she tell him everything that needed to be said? What if he didn't listen or didn't want her? How would she handle that rejection?

She leaned forward onto his chest. "It's entirely my fault this happened, Alex. If I hadn't been so concerned"

He brought up an index finger to graze her lips and quiet her rambling. When she finally met his black eyes again, hope flitted across her belly.

"I carry just as much blame, Anna. I shouldn't have left that morning. I shouldn't have risked you following me."

Alex brought his lips down to her trembling ones, sweeping lightly over them. It was a warm touch, but it fueled something more powerful inside her. He held her against him, their bodies brushing, their hearts pounding in unison and she wanted to have more of him—all of him.

Slowly he withdrew and she felt the void. She knew she couldn't, wouldn't be able to live without him in her life now.

“What were you doing in the forest, Anna?”

Her heart hammered against the inside of her chest as he wrapped her in his arms and pulled him onto his lap. Immediately, she was comforted by his warmth. Her hesitance evaporated.

“There was something I needed to tell you, Alex, a confession that couldn’t wait.”

She sighed when he tangled his hands through her unruly hair before stroking down her back, edging her closer to him. She struggled to stay tightly against him, her bandaged arm a bothersome hindrance.

He dropped his mouth to taste her neck, sending shivers of anticipation through her as they navigated a path up her neck to her ear.

“I’ve been waiting to hear your little confession, Anna. For three days now, I’ve waited for you to wake.”

She gulped in a needy breath of air as his deep, rough voice rippled through her. Had she really slept that long? Deliberately, she wiggled her rear against his lap, laughing when he groaned, his erection pressing back against her.

“Are you sure you want me to tell you now? There seems to be other things that can’t wait either.”

He gripped her waist with strong hands and held her still against him. Heat spiraled around his touch. Despite her injuries she wanted him, and she was quite certain he wanted her just as much.

“You’re not getting out of this, little one. I can torture you just as much.”

Swiftly Alex moved one hand up her torso and caught a nipple in his fingers. She gasped as he tugged it, warmth and desire pooling between her legs. She arched her back to give him better access and he brought his other hand up as well, tweaking her other breast in the same manner. The pleasure made her delirious.

“Is this any way to treat an injured woman?”

She had meant it as a joke but he paused momentarily his dark eyes smoldering, but when she opened her mouth to give him the okay, he cupped her mound through her panties and sent shocks of sensation bolting through her. He relentlessly stroked his fingers against her pussy through the damp fabric.

“Is this anyway to reward your rescuer?”

She gripped his shoulder as he continued his onslaught, one hand manipulating her breasts into fine peaks and the other torturing her clit and pussy, working her into a frenzied ball of need.

He dipped his fingers below her panty line and parted her folds, slipping easily into her moist opening. She hissed in delight over their coolness on her heated skin but then easily lost herself in the sensation of his gift. He thrust his fingers in and out of her, pushing into her as deep as possible and retreating until just the very tips tickled her entrance.

The combination of it all was overwhelming. Anna hungered for more from him, greedily pushing herself on and off his fingers with increasing speed, begging for a shattering release.

He grazed her neck with sharp teeth, nibbling and sucking a sensuous pattern across her heated skin. She bucked wildly against him as her temperature soared higher, a tightness coiling in her belly. He pushed harder, deeper into her and Anna screamed out in ecstasy, her orgasm exploding inside her.

Her head fell back and she smiled deeply as waves of bliss rolled through her entire body. She clenched her pussy tightly around his fingers as he stilled them inside her and she slowly opened her eyes to gaze upon the man who had satisfied her like no other.

Alex was her mate, her soul mate, and there was no living without him in her life now. He completed her in a way that no one else had ever come close to. And deep down she knew she did the same for him, as well.

“I love you Alexei Gerbera. And I don’t intend to let you get away. Not now or anytime in the future.”

Carefully, Anna laid herself back onto the bed and reached a firm hand out to pull him down beside her, figuring there was plenty of time to talk about their feelings later. Much later. Right now the only things needing to do any talking were their bodies.

“That’s good, sweetheart, because I’ve already told you you’re mine.”

His wicked smile set her skin on fire.

“All mine.”

The End