

Prologue

What Falls off a Cart Is as Good as Gone

The first thing she became aware of was the sound of wind rustling the leaves in the trees and the feeling of warm rays of sunshine bathing her cheeks, neck, and arms. It had been so long since she'd felt that warm. Straightening her toes, then her legs, she stretched languidly, curling her back and wriggling as if trying to nestle deeper into the soft grass, not even bothering to blink open her eyes, fully intending to sleep longer. Then wisps of soft hair tickled Veru's nose.

Irritated, she brushed her fingers against her face and stretched an arm out, patting around for her travel blanket. Not finding it easily, she grunted and mumbled, "Nik, did you steal my blanket again? Give it back. Or go and find me another one, won't you? There's a good man." She yawned deeply, smacking her lips a few times, before snorting loud enough to startle herself awake more fully.

When she didn't hear a response or Nik's telltale scrambling to obey her orders, the tsarevna finally cracked open an eye and blearily studied her surroundings. "Nikolai?" she called out. "Where can that blasted, nikudyshnyi have run off to?" she mumbled. Then Veru used her palm to rub the sleep from her eyes and shouted for her sister. "Stacia?"

Almost in an instant, as the specter of sleep departed, awareness returned.

Something was very, very wrong. She was in a meadow. A green meadow. Alone. And she was . . . human. And . . . clean. Had it all been a dream? A strange nightmare? Veru quickly scrambled to her feet, teetering on legs she hadn't used to stand upright in months, and discovered to her shock that she was wearing a dress, not her typical fur-lined travel clothing or even her armor. Her upper lip curled in disdain when she plucked at the thin, gossamer-like skirt. Quickly, she searched the sides of the fabric, hoping for a belt with a knife or a sword or at least a pocket with some type of tool, but found only a wide ribbon cinching her middle. The pinching she felt came not from a weapon but from a corset.

Almost instinctively, she shook her whole body and felt the tiny hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stand up. *Is that the trigger?* She waited. Breathing deeply. Expecting the tiger to explode from her body and take over at any second.

She'd lived with the cat for so long that her human body felt almost unnatural. She couldn't have dreamed something so vivid. So real. Her mouth even watered at the thought of catching and devouring a raw fish. Veru touched her thumb to her lip to wipe away a drop of saliva as she told her stomach to stop rumbling.

She was surprised to find she missed her claws and teeth and ran her tongue across her smooth canines. For a moment, she thought about her situation. She was alone. She possessed no weapons. No armor. And she was in a strange, unknown place. There was nothing she and her sister had wanted more than to regain their humanity, but Veru was practical. Survival was key. As a tiger, she'd have natural defenses. *Not to mention a coat*, she thought as she rubbed her arms.

Decision made, she closed her eyes and tried to wish herself back into her tiger form. Nothing happened. "Come on. Come on!" she shouted at the sky. She felt vulnerable in her human skin and cursed again the fact that she didn't at least have her armor. But even begging and rubbing her fingers over the amulet that hung around her neck did nothing to help the situation.

Pacing, she bit her lip and tried speaking to her inner animal, but it was strangely silent. In fact, for the first time since her transformation, she felt as if she were completely alone, stripped of everything that made her feel . . . safe. "I guess she's really gone," Veru whispered, not sure if she meant her tiger or her sister or both.

"It's all up to me now," she said softly as she wiped away a hot tear that fell to her cheek.

With no other options, she yanked the ribbon from her waist and went to work on the laces at the back of her dress. It took some rather extraordinary feats of stretching and balancing on her part, but eventually she managed to get the top half of the sky-blue confection of a gown off so she could start working on the corset, which was laced even tighter than the dress had been. Veru figured if she could pry some of the boning out of the fabric, she could use it as a weapon or a tool that would help her hunt or start a fire.

So intent on her work was she that Veru didn't hear the noise of someone approaching until the whistle finally caught her attention. Veru recognized the musical sound and who it belonged to immediately.

"Danik?" she cried out, a wide grin on her face as she stood and rushed forward to find her friend, bunching the folds of billowing fabric in her arms to cover her chest.

She saw him as she rounded a tree, but, like her, he was dressed differently. Instead of his hunter's attire, he was clad in clothing more befitting a traveling musician. His hair was a bit longer, and he still had the blond stubble on his chin and cheeks. White loose-cut trousers were tucked into tall black leather boots, and he wore a beautifully patterned tunic tied at the waist with a belt. Instead of his hunter's pack, he carried only his domra, with a small bag tied to the instrument.

Veru grabbed hold of his arm. "Please tell me you have food or at least a knife in there. I'm starving."

Gently, Danik took hold of Veru's hand and stepped back, a look of deep concern on his face.

"My good lady. Of course I am more than willing to share with you

whatever victuals I have at my disposal. It is clear to me by your present state that you've been brutalized."

He clucked and tsked at her torn and bleeding fingers, something she'd done to herself while trying to tear the stitches from her corset using bits of stone and twigs. Hissing, she snatched her fingers from his, more of an involuntary response than because she actually felt any offense. Over the years, she'd become accustomed to treating men who touched her without permission in that manner. It was a way of protecting herself from unwanted attention.

In truth, she trusted Danik and even thought on occasion she might enjoy being close to him. She certainly did as a tiger, or at least, she'd learned to like being with him when there was no pressure. Still, at this point there was no reason to let things go too far. Friend or not, Veru was unwilling to let him know she'd actually liked his fussing over her.

Nonplussed, Danik placed his hand back on his bundle and gave her a kind smile despite her scornful expression. "Dobryy vecher. Though I'm a stranger in this land, I'll do my best to see you back to your hearth and home. I've no cloak to offer you, but perhaps I may be of service in helping you repair your . . . er . . . abused garment?"

"My hearth and . . . ?" Veru blinked, confusion replacing the ire. Then she laughed. "Oh, I believe I understand. You just don't recognize me as a person." She squared her shoulders, hoping he'd somehow recognize the fierce and powerful soul he knew inside the beautiful package who stood before him now. "Danik, I'm Veru, the tiger you've traveled with all these months."

"The . . . tiger. Yes." He nodded dumbly. "I see. I'm think I'm starting to understand."

When Danik's eyes melted in pity, she threw up her hands and shook a fist at the sky, which caused her loose dress to slide even lower. Only a thin slip of material above her ruined corset kept her from exposing herself. Danik shifted away from her uncomfortably, looking everywhere but at Veru's face or bosom, and Veru stomped off and let out a frustrated bark. "Unbelievable! You have no idea at all who I am,

do you? Or is it you just can't see past my . . . you know . . . all this," she finished, indicating her face and form.

The poor man simply shook his head while avoiding eye contact. "I'm not sure I . . . I take your meaning, good lady."

Veru mumbled curses about men and their eyes while shrugging back into the sleeves and bodice of her dress. Of course he couldn't think with her half dressed. Most men were so taken with her beauty that they stopped and stared, even when she was fully encased in armor and sweat poured off her body. It was the reason she covered her hair whenever possible and wore the heaviest of helmets. What was she thinking? Once she'd shrugged back into her bodice as best she could, she snapped her fingers to regain his attention. "What about Stacia, Nik, Zakhar, or Iriko? Do you recall them? Or have your brains disappeared into your nether regions?"

"Z-Zakhar? Oh. Yes. I know him. I believe he's the man I met along the trail. Nice fellow."

With her dress still gaping in the back where she'd torn her laces, Veru grabbed hold of Danik's shoulder and shook him. "Zakhar's here? Show me."

Chapter 1

There Is Plenty of Sound in an Empty Barrel

“You . . . you wish me to take you to the young man I found earlier?”

“Exactly. Yes,” Veru said, spinning and heading off in the direction from which Danik had appeared.

“I’m not certain I can find the young man you seek,” he said, trailing behind her.

“What? What do you mean you can’t find him?”

Danik cupped the back of his neck. “The sun will be going down in an hour or two, and without knowing where *I* am, how do you expect me to find your young man?”

Veru let out an exasperated sigh and turned. “I don’t know. How about *tracking* him?”

“That sounds good. Do you know how to do that?”

“I know a little, but you’re much better at it than I am. Of course, when I was a tiger, I was excellent at doing such things, but I seem to have lost that ability, for some reason.”

“A tiger . . . yes. And may I ask, when did the two of us meet, exactly? I’m afraid I can’t quite recall.”

“You must have hit your head somewhere. Hopefully, Zakhar will be able to come up with something that can help you remember.”

“I see.” Danik began walking beside her almost hesitantly. “If—if

it's not too forward, might I inquire as to the lady's name? I think you said it before . . ."

His walking companion snorted. "Sure. The full name is Verusha Irena Vasilia Stepanov. But you can call me Veru. And to answer your question, we met when you caught me in a trap."

"Stepanov . . . that seems familiar. I feel like I should know that."

"Yes. Yes. You should. But it's not important now."

"It isn't?"

"No."

"A trap? Why were you in a trap? And what do you mean when you say I was the one who 'caught' you?"

"I was a tiger, and you're a hunter. Do you see the connection?"

"Oh no, you are mistaken there." Danik laughed. "I could never be a hunter. I'm a musician. You must have confused me with one of my cousins. Some of us do look alike, though, so I can see how you could get it wrong."

"No, I'm not wrong, Danik. It was *you* who caught me. You caught me and then you freed me, and after that I saved your life when the wolves came for you. Truly you remember *nothing*? What of your parents?"

"My parents? Funny you should mention them. That's why I'm out here, you see. I'm searching for them. We've become separated somehow. But I know they're here somewhere. I just need to find them. If I think hard enough, I'll recall my home's direction. The songs help me. My mother taught me a remembering song when I was just a boy. It always helped me find my way when I was lost. When I don't sing, I fear I forget nearly everything."

"That's interesting. Perhaps this is a part of your trial."

"My trial?"

"Stacia, she's my sister, in case you've forgotten her too. Anyway, she mentioned that the voice told her we'd all be facing further trials before going home. Perhaps this is what was meant."

Danik peered at her for a moment, his brow furrowed in

concentration, but then his features relaxed and he fixed his gaze ahead. His eyes had that lost, dreamy look again. He seemed almost surprised to have a traveling companion. “Privet,” he said. “Have we met?”

“Ugh!” Veru could almost wrench her hair out in frustration. *What good is Danik in this state?* she thought. Then she tripped over the hem of her skirt and mumbled something under her breath about her trial being cursed by filmy, useless dresses and brain-fogged men.

Veru yanked her skirt free and straightened, throwing her shoulders back and promptly snagging her long hair in a tree branch. To his credit, Danik didn’t laugh as she unwound her locks from a thorny briar and began pulling seeds from her tangles. Instead, he stopped her, took a torn section of her dress, ripped it into two long strips, and deftly gathered all her hair at the nape of her neck, securing it with one strip of ribbon, then wove the other through her hair in loops and secured it at the end.

“Spasibo,” she murmured after introducing herself again. “How did you learn to do that?” Veru asked. “You don’t have any siblings.”

“No. I don’t,” he said, screwing up his face in deep thought. “I do have many nieces though. And I’ve strung many instruments in my day. It’s not a difficult thing when you’re working with fine material.”

Danik hadn’t called her hair beautiful or compared it to the sun like other men or prospective suitors, and somehow that made the compliment feel deeper and more genuine. She also liked the fact that he didn’t stand there mooning over her afterward to see if his words had any effect. He simply turned away and continued on as if he had no interest whatsoever in the result. Such a thing made her respect him all the more.

Of course, there was another possibility . . . she mused. There was a chance he didn’t mean it to be a compliment at all. Perhaps he was referencing the fabric of her dress and not her hair. Or it was more likely that he’d just simply forgotten she existed again. But Veru didn’t think so. She had felt the slight hesitation as he drew his fingertips away from her hair, and she was very familiar with the fine quality of it, having used it to her advantage many times in the past, despite her frequent threats to her sister to hack it off with her knives.

Despite his memory loss, it was clear Danik felt comfortable with her. His shoulders were relaxed, and he seemed like himself even if he couldn't recall certain details of his life. He also seemed to retain his tracking skills. When she pointed out signs of a trail, he knelt and easily picked up the path someone had made through the trees, spotting broken twigs, slight impressions, or plucked berries she would have missed.

At least he possessed something useful. Without her knives, claws, or armor, what good was having a memory? She was almost jealous of his constant mind resets.

When he again asked her who she was, which she calculated happened about once every twenty minutes or so, she wondered if there was a trigger or if it was happening automatically. She began paying attention to verbal cues in the conversation and wondered if singing would indeed help him retain more information.

"I miss my home too," Veru admitted, after a few moments of silent tracking.

"You do?" he asked, turning to her. "Are you lost like me?"

"I am."

"What's your name?"

"Veru."

Danik smiled and bowed. "A pretty name for a pretty girl."

"Thank you." Veru grinned this time instead of taking her usual offense, especially knowing he would forget her in the next few moments anyway. "Since we're both lost, you can sing, if you like. It might help us find our way."

"All right."

As the pair walked on, Danik began to hum and then sing. It was a haunting song of passing, one Veru remembered he'd written for his own parents. It reminded her of the loss of her own mother. Tears pricked her eyes. When Danik noticed, he stopped abruptly. "There now, kotenok. I didn't mean to cause you pain."

Taking her arm, Danik turned Veru toward him gently and swept a tear from her cheek. The gesture was tender and sweet, not at all

groping and needy like the men who'd tried to touch her before. Veru didn't feel the need to swipe at him this time. Instead, she looked into his ocean-blue eyes and felt like she wanted to sink into their mysterious depths and discover what secrets dwelled behind them.

The song *had* helped him remember. He'd called her *kotenok*, *little kitten*. There must be a part of him that remembered. But then his eyes fogged again, and Veru sighed and stepped back.

Danik cleared his throat, and only then did she realize those very eyes had drifted down her face to the gaping neckline of her dress. With her corset gone, her bosom was dangerously close to spilling out over the top of the now-too-small bodice. She could feel the heat in her cheeks. It slid down her neck until her pulse quickened as it did before battle. Her skin felt tight and warm.

"Perhaps I can help with this," Danik said gently. "If you'll allow me?"

Veru hesitated. It was interesting. This was the first time she ever recalled wanting a man to touch her, and yet she knew somehow that allowing it was dangerous. Not that she thought he'd hurt her. She had no fear of Danik in that way. No. What she feared was letting her guard down. Letting a man know her. As a tiger, she didn't need to worry about it. But as a woman . . .

She felt vulnerable. Exposed. As if an enemy was circling, but she stood weaponless, bathed in an orb of light, unable to see him. She felt the warning thump in the uptick of her pulse and the hitch in her breath telling her to run or reach for her knives. The sensation of Danik's presence, his offer, had suddenly changed their relationship. No longer were they friends, companions, colleagues. Now she was facing off against him, an opponent in battle. It was two warriors taking the measure of each other, scanning for strengths and weaknesses.

She was about to say no, but before she could protest, Danik spun her around and began deftly tugging at the torn laces of her dress, tying the sections one by one. Each touch was a brand, a fiery lash on her skin. The bodice tightened until it resembled something like a decent piece of clothing. Only then did she remember the carefully stitched rabbits

he'd thrown down to her when she'd been stuck in the pit. He'd filled them with sleeping herbs.

"Who taught you to sew?" she managed to say, trying to distract herself as he worked at her back.

"My . . . my uncle," he said after a moment.

Was that a quickening of his own breathing she heard, or was he forgetting again? "But isn't he a hunter?" she questioned.

"Yes. But his father was a bootmaker. I apprenticed with him for a time. He always brought my family the best sinews to make strings for our instruments."

Danik began to hum but paused when he reached the top of her dress, his fingertips resting for just a moment at the place the fabric kissed her bare skin. She could feel the fine hairs along the base of her scalp rise as if trying to reach out and touch him. Veru froze in place, wishing for the first time in her life that a man *would* draw her closer. She longed to feel Danik wrap his arms around her waist and pull her body tightly against his, or press his lips against her neck, but just as she wished it, he was gone and walking beside her again, once more her good-natured friend.

Peeking at him from the corner of her eye, Veru could see no reflection of the inner struggle that she felt at being near him in her human form. He was still humming—a sweet, happy tune that turned into a whistle—but she couldn't tell by his posture or his eyes if he remembered their recent encounter. Perhaps he'd already forgotten it. That was probably for the best. If she knew what was good for her, she'd forget it too.

What a curse it was, feeling an unfulfilled desire and being unable to act upon it. She suddenly felt great pity for all the men who had looked at her with lovelorn expressions over the years and her exploitation of them. It was a cruel thing she had done.

They walked for what seemed like an hour before they finally came across a small stream. Stopping, they drank deeply, and Danik agreed that it would be wise to stay close to the source of water to continue searching for her friend. Veru was surprised that he remembered they

were looking for someone. Perhaps the humming helped. Danik told her that not only would they need the water, but it was logical to assume that her friend would want to stay close to it as well.

In fact, they were about to make camp as best they could without food or fire when they spotted a sign of smoke not far from where they were.

“Should we go investigate?” Danik asked. “He could be the one you’re searching for.”

“It’s probably him,” she agreed, biting her lip and glancing at the quickly darkening sky. “Do you think we can make it?”

“If your feet can take it in those shoes, I’d say yes.”

Truthfully, Veru hadn’t given the shoes a thought. She glanced down at her slippers and smiled. “My paws are tougher than you think,” she teased.

“Let’s press on, then, if your, um, *paws* can take it.”

They ended up crossing the stream three times in an attempt to avoid the worst of the brambles, which made the trek to the source of the fire a much longer process than it should have been. Veru missed her tiger eyes as well as the stamina she used to have. Her body was weary. She couldn’t recall ever feeling as weak as she did now—even when she’d been human before. It was like all her muscles had turned into the wet noodles her nurse fed her with broth when she felt ill.

Perhaps that was the trouble. All the trekking through the cold and damp had made her sick. She wondered if Stacia and Iriko were facing the same thing. Perhaps it was a malady that affected only those with a tiger nature. Danik certainly looked like his normal, hardy self. They continued walking long past sunset, peering into the dark, searching for signs of the smoke, and stopped often to listen intently for animals that might be hunting them.

Both were grateful when the full moon rose, bathing the trees with dim light, and Veru swallowed her pride and stifled her nerves when Danik reached for her hand. Despite his denial of hunting ability, he appeared to possess a keen sense of direction, much more so than Veru herself. This both impressed the tsarevna and made her inwardly chafe

at the same time. Never in her life had she been dependent upon a man before. She loathed the very idea of it, and yet there was a sort of comfort in letting go and allowing him to bear the weight of responsibility.

She knew, if she had to, she could get them to the fire as well, but there was freedom in letting him take the lead. Veru trusted Danik, even if the musician didn't quite trust himself. Perhaps he only guided her out of a sense of chivalry or duty, but she knew better. She knew him. The tsarevna had traveled with him long enough to know that he was equally happy allowing others to take charge. Danik wasn't a glory hound, that was certain.

"You . . . you trust this man, I take it?" Danik asked. "Is he your brother, or a husband perhaps?"

Veru stared at the side of Danik's head in the darkness, studying his profile by moonlight, wondering why he asked. As he waited for her answer, his fingers squeezed hers as if he were worrying a knot, anxious and tense.

"Yes," she said softly. "I trust this man. And no. He's not my husband or my brother. He's a friend. Your friend, actually. He's a priest."

"Oh, a priest. That makes sense."

Tension melted away from his shoulders. "Still. Stay behind me. We don't know if all is well or if he's alone."

The pair crouched behind a copse of bushes, trying to make out the camp near the fire. It had taken them the better part of an hour after moonrise to find the camp. Once there, they finally spotted a lone man and studied his movements, watching him feed sticks into the crackling flames. The man hummed a little song as he worked, then sat back and rubbed his hands together.

"That's not him," Veru hissed quietly.

"No. He's not the one I met before," Danik admitted.

"Are you sure?" Veru asked. "You know you can't remember well."

"The man I met before was younger. At least I think he was."

"You two are welcome to come over and warm yourselves," the man by the fire said, keeping his back turned to them. "I promise I mean you no harm."

Danik and Veru glanced at one another, and though Veru meant to caution him and hold him back, Danik just shrugged and stepped out of the bushes, saying, “Thank you for your kind offer. I’m afraid we have nothing to trade. We’re strangers in this land who just stumbled into one another.”

“I’m new to this land myself. But I did manage to make some tea, and I do have some meager provisions to share, if you’d like.”

“I’m not sure I enjoy tea anymore,” Veru said, finally emerging from the shadows.

The man laughed, and Veru liked it. There was something about him that put her immediately at ease. She didn’t trust it. Circling the fire, she kept the flames between herself and the stranger, attempting to tug Danik close to her. He followed her amiably enough but didn’t have a natural sense of danger like she did.

Perching on a log, Veru studied the man. His hair was short and white, and his accent was like nothing she’d ever heard before. He stumbled over his words often and paused frequently as if searching for just the right word.

He handed her a steaming mug. It smelled sweet and warm, and there was something different floating on top.

“It’s called lemon,” the man said. “They don’t grow where you’re from. But I think you’ll like it.”

“It’s good,” she admitted, not tasting it at all, then closed her eyes and cursed under her breath as Danik gulped down his entire cup in three great swallows, then reached for her cup. She’d have to keep a careful eye on him. “But how do you know where I’m from?” she asked the stranger.

“I know a lot about you. I’ve been watching the two of you for some time. I . . . I’m something of a guide for those with a tiger nature, you see.”

Danik spluttered his tea.

“There now, son. Don’t waste it. It’s a good brew.” Leaning over, the man refilled Danik’s cup and gestured that Veru should commence drinking her own. She sipped carefully and found the beverage delightful. Still suspicious, but delightful.

“So you’re saying she’s a tiger?” Danik asked, confused.

“Oh yes. Indeed she is. Not at the moment, of course.”

“Not at all, apparently,” Veru countered.

“Really?” the man said. “That’s terribly interesting. You’re saying you can’t even change for a short time?”

Veru shook her head. “Not at all.”

“And do you possess the tiger’s abilities?”

“Not as far as I can tell.”

“How fascinating.”

Danik spoke up. “I don’t understand. What’s fascinating? Who are you, and what’s going on?”

“Ah yes.” The man set down his own cup on a nearby rock. When he leaned over, Veru noticed an amulet hanging around his neck. It looked similar to her own, but not quite. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Anik Kadam.”

“You’re a tiger too!” Veru exclaimed.

The man looked at her quizzically. “Why would you assume so?”

“The charm you wear. It’s like ours.”

“Hmm. Very astute.”

Anik pulled the charm out to show them. “Do you see the writing on the edge?”

“Yes,” they echoed, peering at it in the firelight. “It’s a different language,” Veru said.

“Exactly. This charm was loaned to me. I wear it for safekeeping and for protection, but the tiger remains with the owner.”

“Then there are tigers in your part of the world as well?”

The man paused. “Yes. I suppose that is the best explanation for the moment.”

Veru snapped her fingers. “It’s the scroll prophecy. It said something about learning from our elders.”

“Right. Well, I suppose you could call me an elder, though technically speaking—”

Veru stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles, and

interrupted the man. “So teach us. What do we need to do to get out of here, get home, and get rid of the tigers permanently? That is why we’re here, right?” She jerked her thumb at Danik. “Also, he needs his memory back. He must’ve been thumped on the head during the transition. He has no idea what’s going on.”

“I *can* speak for myself, you know,” Danik grouched.

Anik Kadam held up his hands. “Keep in mind, I am here as your guide, not as your fix-it man. I’m not the Wizard of Oz, young lady, here to give him a brain and you a trip home to Kansas. You young people have a set number of tasks ahead of you. How—or if—you complete your journey will determine the course of your life. This is true of all of us, of course. In your case, the process is simply accelerated. Trust me when I say it’s for your own good. It’s no small thing either. And definitely not something you want to face on an empty stomach or without a good night’s rest. I insist. Questions will wait. I’ll set you on your path in the morning. The others are being told the same thing.”

“Hold on. You know where the others are?”

“Yes. We are the ones who created this dream, after all.”