

PRIMAL TOUCH



AMBER JACOBS



CHAPTER 1

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

—“The Tyger” by William Blake

JAGGED SHADOWS TWISTED WRAITHLIKE THROUGH the jungle undergrowth, flickered between the trees and grasses, and formed a body for a pair of ice-blue eyes that gleamed in the darkness with feral intensity. She moved soundlessly along invisible trails, avoiding twigs and surface roots with uncanny ease, leaving not a trace of passage in the moist earth. From time to time she would pause, lift her face, and take several rapid breaths through her nose. The air was thick and humid. So little breeze stirred the dense undergrowth, she was able to detect distinct scents of sweat, leather, and gun oil lingering in the heavy air. Dappled shafts of sunlight filtering through the canopy reflected off pearly white teeth as her upper lip curled back in a snarl, the rumbling purr that followed almost subliminal.

She had stalked her prey for many hours, and the stress was starting to wear on her aching muscles. She would need to select a good striking position soon, before her energy flagged, but she had learned the merits of caution and patience a long time ago.

Prowling carefully around a shallow gully, body held close to the ground, she listened to the unaccustomed sounds of the men who had foolishly wandered into her hunting grounds. There were three of them, moving through the jungle in a loose single file. The high-caliber guns they carried and the weathered clothes they wore marked them as her enemy: poachers.

She picked her way forward, realizing the men were following an old, well-worn animal trail. Leaping over the broad, moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree, she risked a burst of speed to take up a position ahead of their path. There she crouched, studying the approaching trio through narrowed eyes, sharpening her focus as the moment approached.

With three-to-one odds, she would need to strike hard and fast before the poachers could recover and move to defend themselves. There wouldn't be a second chance.



David Tow swatted fiercely at a fly and scowled at his companions. “How much farther, Jaz? We’ve been walking for hours.”

The man in the lead glanced back with a smirk, taking a greater amount of pleasure in his irritation than Dave felt was polite. “What’s the matter, Dave? A few insects too much for you?”

“Damn straight. I can’t breathe in this place without swallowing a bloody bug.”

“Be another hour, at least, until we reach Corbin’s camp,” said Jaz, swinging his machete in lazy strokes to help clear the thicker branches from their path. “And that’s if he hasn’t moved on.”

“Moved on?” The third hunter, Tae, wiped his sweating brow angrily. Where Jaz was tall and rangy, Tae was short and wiry, his skin gleaming like burnished brass in the humid air. He had left his home in China—a country where it was growing increasingly difficult to make a living in the poaching game—to join this expedition, and Dave could see he didn’t like to think he’d come all this way for nothing. “What d’ya mean, ‘moved on,’ Jaz? He knows we’re coming, right? Why would he clear out?”

Jaz shrugged. “Jack Corbin don’t like to wait around. If he finds a trail, he’s gonna take after it, whether we’re there or not. So pick your feet up, boys, and hope we aren’t too late.”

Leaving off their grumbling, the two men followed in silence for long minutes. Dave eyed the jungle nervously, listening to the strange, alien cries of unseen animals. Even in the still air, the dense foliage seemed to be constantly in motion, giving the eerie impression that invisible creatures lurked behind every shadow. “This place gives me the creeps, Tae,” he muttered.

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Tae shrugged, unconcerned. “You never hunted in India before, huh?”

“Nope, mostly in Africa. You know, elephants and stuff. Bigger game, bigger target. It’s a lot more open than this. You can see what’s coming.”

Tae grinned. “Hunting tigers and leopards ain’t like that,” he said. “You just gotta be real careful and hope they don’t find you before you find them.”

Dave shivered and clutched his rifle tighter, his eyes wide as he scanned the jungle undergrowth. “I got a bad feeling about this gig,” he said in a loud whisper. “I’ve been hearing things about India the last few years.”

“Me too.” Tae’s expression hardened. “But I’m not gonna let a few rumors and ghost stories keep me from hunting the white gold that’s out here.”

“Damn straight,” Jaz put in, dropping back to listen to the conversation. “You know how much we stand to make from this hunt, Dave? Hell, the money’s spicy enough for Jack to get involved, and he don’t waste his time on bullshit.” He grinned wolfishly. “When we walk out of this jungle, we’re gonna be rich men.”

“That’s *if* we walk out of here, Jaz,” Dave said. “From what I hear, lots of guys like us aren’t getting to be that lucky.” He slapped at another flying insect, feeling sweat trickle down his spine. “You hear about the team that came out here three years back? Right in this same park, too, and hunting the same damn thing as we are.”

Tae’s face grew very still, and he nodded. “I heard the bodies were so ripped apart the rangers didn’t even know for sure if they were human. Had to get some medical guy out from Delhi just to figure out all the pieces.”

“Bah.” Jaz waved his hand dismissively. “Amateurs. So they made a mistake and got shredded, big deal. All I know is, there’s a helluva good chance there’s a white tiger out here, and I want a piece of it. If you babies want to back out, go ahead. But remember, a chance like this only comes along once in a lifetime.” So saying, the tall hunter stalked off, taking the forward position and eventually vanishing behind a curtain of lush greenery.

Tae and Dave exchanged glances. “He’s right, you know,” Tae said after a moment. “Poaching’s a dangerous game, any way you cut it. Word hasn’t got out about this yet, but when it does, every idiot out there is gonna want to take his shot. We got here first. We got Jack frickin’ Corbin leading the hunt. This is too good to pass up.”

“Yeah, I guess. Still...” Dave pulled the butt of his rifle into his shoulder. “I’m not letting some freaky tiger-ghost take me out.”

“That’s the spirit.” Tae grinned and slapped his companion heartily on the back. “Now, you guard the rear, and I’ll run the flanks, okay?”

Dave nodded. “Be careful,” he warned. “There’s rangers out here too, don’t forget.”

“I won’t.” Tae waved and then disappeared off the practically nonexistent trail, leaving Dave alone.

He scanned the jungle nervously, remembering some of the horror stories he’d heard before coming here. India wasn’t the same hunting ground it had once been, he’d heard. Since the government had implemented the so-called “Project Tiger” back in ’73, things had started getting tougher, but in recent years, they had gotten worse still. The Chinese were now almost militant about clamping down on poaching and were urging their neighbors to do the same. But the lure of hunting the great white tiger had called Dave away from the African savanna. He could only hope that the wild rumors of mysterious jungle terrors—the so-called “Indian Menace”—were nothing more than exaggerations intended to scare away the gullible. Patting his rifle reassuringly, he managed a weak smile.

“You won’t be sneaking up on me, whatever you—”

It happened so suddenly, Dave didn’t even have time to squeak. A tremendous force crashed into him from behind, knocking him to the forest floor and pinning him down. Dave struggled, winded from the impact, trying to flip himself over and call a warning even as the adrenaline surged through his blood. He felt a large, warm body pressing him down, smelled the strong animal musk of sweat, then something crushed his head into the moist earth, and stars flashed behind his eyes as his air supply was cut off. He desperately scrambled about for a weapon, but he’d lost his rifle in the fall. He tried to yell, then felt something burn across his shoulder. Panic engulfed him, and his struggles grew more frantic as the burning flared into searing agony.

Something was clawing at his back and shoulders!

With supreme effort, Dave managed to turn his head a fraction, just enough to dimly make out the light-orange stripes with shadowy dark lines that colored his attacker. Before he could draw breath to scream, however, something curved and sharp hooked itself under his throat and tore upward.

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Dave managed a strangled croak, which turned into a shallow gurgle. His vision dimmed, then faded into black.



“Dave?”

Cold eyes framed by darkness and death snapped up at the sound of someone crashing through the jungle. A low growl rumbled from deep within her throat as the one they'd called Tae appeared, his rifle shouldered. He stopped, frozen, when his wide hazel eyes settled on her.

“Dear God!”

Her upper lip curled back in a snarl, baring her teeth as she crouched low over her kill. She watched the tip of his rifle waver, then dip, as the poacher stood in hypnotized shock, too dazed to fire. She sprang before he had a chance to recover his senses, rushing forward with a feral growl. Only when her bloodied claws lashed out with the speed of a striking cobra did his finger clench desperately at the trigger.

The gunshot startled the birds in the canopy above, its sharp report echoed by quickly silenced screams.



“Jesus Christ!”

Ashley Richards covered her mouth, her dark eyes wide as she stared at the two mauled bodies lying on the forest floor. Grady Neilson, her friend and colleague, offered a comforting pat on the back and tried to urge her away from the grisly scene. Ashley shook off his hand and took a step closer. She spared a quick glance behind her to where Simon Reynolds was comforting his shocked assistant, before turning back to study their bloody discovery.

One man's body lay face down on the forest floor, his rifle a few feet away. Great tears in the back of his shirt revealed a series of deep, bloody gouges. From the amount of blood soaking the earth around his neck, it was obvious his throat had been torn out, and the churned dirt around him gave testimony to his desperate struggles before death. A second body lay nearby, similarly mauled.

Ashley studied the two bodies and the bloodstained ground around them, taking a careful step closer. “What the hell happened here?”

Despite the gory scene, Ashley felt only a flutter of queasiness, as she knelt to get a better angle to study the closest body. Her work often took her to remote and wild regions of the world, and she'd seen her share of animal attacks. It took a lot to turn her stomach.

"Uh...Ash?"

Ashley glanced over her shoulder to where Grady stood. "Hmm?"

Grady lifted an eyebrow and looked pointedly to the camera she held—the camera which was somehow focusing on the dead man's torn throat.

"Not a good time," Grady said quietly.

"Oh...right." Ashley blushed, regarding her hands with a stern, slightly puzzled look; they had an unfortunate habit of doing this.

Grady did a bad job of hiding his smile as she lowered the camera. Ashley's first instinct upon encountering anything new or interesting had always been to take a photograph, and it took a conscious effort on her part to restrain the compulsion. Sometimes taking a photo crossed cultural boundaries, sometimes it was simply inappropriate, and other times it could be hazardous. Grady still liked to remind her of the time she'd stood in the path of an oncoming elephant stampede, oblivious to the danger while snapping away merrily. Though he rarely argued with her about how reckless she could sometimes be, Grady had had some choice words for her after he'd rushed in and pulled her back to safety.

That fearlessness, driven by her innate and insatiable curiosity, made Ashley a difficult, yet colorful, friend to have around.

It also made her one of the best wildlife photographers in the business.

The two of them had been in India for eight weeks now, and were about to wrap up their assignment, when rumors filtered down from the Parks department that a white tiger was sighted in the Bandhavgarh National Park. Unwilling to pass up such a remarkable opportunity, Ashley had used her considerable charm to convince a reluctant Grady to delay their return to the United States. Joining Simon and his assistant Grace—two scientists who were tagging and monitoring the Bengal tiger population in the area—the group had set out into the jungle, accompanied by their Indian guide and tracker, Tarun.

No sooner had base camp been established than the sound of a gunshot echoed from the forest depths. Tarun had rushed to investigate. Though he

warned the group to remain at camp, Ashley insisted on going with him, and the others had joined her, their curiosity piqued.

None of them had expected the carnage they found.

Ashley looked up from her study of the dead man as Tarun appeared from the undergrowth. The guide was a tall, muscular man, given to wearing open-necked shirts and cargo pants.

Ashley raised a blonde eyebrow questioningly at his dark expression.

“There’s another one not far down the track,” Tarun reported calmly in his heavy Hindi accent. “Looks like he tried to make a run for it. Made it about thirty paces before he was taken down.” Hands on his hips, Tarun scowled at the torn bodies, then at the ground around them.

“What killed them?” asked Grady, the slight quaver in his voice giving lie to his outward calm.

“A tiger?” Ashley guessed.

Tarun shook his head. “I doubt it. Tigers don’t kill like this, and they typically avoid humans.”

“Looks like a big cat of some kind. I mean, look at those claw marks.” Ashley pointed at the bodies. “What else could it be?”

“Tigers don’t slit their prey’s throat,” Tarun argued, “not so cleanly. And they leave tracks. I can’t find a single trace of whatever did this—no scent markings, no prints, nothing.” He shook his head, clearly more upset by the lack of tracks than by the bodies themselves.

“What should we do?” asked Simon timidly. The prematurely balding, middle-aged zoologist looked at the bloody remains for a second, then hastily averted his gaze. “We can’t just leave them here, can we?”

“No.” Tarun sighed. “Ashley, could you and Grady go find some good-sized branches? I’ll get the rope from the packs and we can make a set of litters. We’ll drag them back to camp, call the rangers, and get them to come deal with this.”

Ashley frowned. “Are you sure we should move them? Won’t someone want to investigate the scene of the crime? Look for evidence?”

Tarun gestured to the ground. “No one will find anything here,” he said. “Look around. There’s no evidence, no tracks, and frankly, I doubt the rangers or the police will bother investigating this at all. They’ve got better things to do with their time.”

“What do you mean?” asked Grady.

“Look at these guys.” Tarun pointed to the rifle one man still clutched in his bloody hand. “What do you think they were doing out here with guns like that? They’re poachers. Probably here to kill the same tiger you people came for.” He shook his head and spat angrily on the ground. “We take them back to camp and turn them over to the authorities. Where it goes from there is none of our business.”

Ashley glared at the dark man for long moments, not entirely happy with how casually he was treating the incident. Then she smiled a little coldly and said, “Fine,” grabbed Grady by the arm, and pulled him away to look for suitably strong branches to make a litter.

Nearly five hours later, Ashley watched from her fallen-log seat as Tarun shook hands with a uniformed ranger and exchanged a few quiet words. It had taken over two hours to drag the bodies back to their base, even with all five of them putting in an effort, and it was now dark. A quick radio call had alerted the proper authorities, who immediately sent out a Jeep team to relieve them of their charges. Although Ashley didn’t speak Hindi, from the tone of the conversation shared by Tarun and the head ranger, it seemed the uniformed man wanted to deal with everything as quickly and quietly as possible.

As their visitors left, Tarun strode over to the others. Taking his seat beside the small campfire, he offered the group a grim smile.

“Well, that’s that,” he said simply.

Ashley struggled to keep her expression neutral. “So they’ll look into it, right?”

Tarun shrugged. “Maybe. But like I said, a couple of poachers won’t warrant much interest.” He paused a long time, then continued in an ominous-sounding tone. “Besides, they know they won’t find anything. From what the head ranger told me, they’ve been seeing this sort of thing a lot the past few years.”

Grady leaned closer. “What sort of thing?”

“Poachers turning up dead in the jungle, ripped to pieces.” Tarun pulled a toothpick from his pocket and chewed it thoughtfully. The look on his face was the same one Ashley remembered seeing her father wear when he told ghost stories during family camping trips. “Not just here, either. Up in the Himalayan mountains, and on the grasslands, something’s hunting them down, then disappearing. It leaves no trace except the dead.”

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Grace's eyes were as wide as saucers, and she stared at him in terror. "What is it?"

Tarun shrugged and sighed dramatically. "No one can tell for sure. But some of the more superstitious elders are spreading rumors about a spirit at work." He eyed his attentive audience. "They say the goddess Durga has sent the great tiger she rides down here to protect its children."

Ashley snorted. "You don't believe that, do you?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Whatever killed those men was flesh and blood," he said quietly. "I don't know what it was. But I've seen tiger attacks, and that wasn't like any tiger attack I've ever heard of."

Simon cleared his throat. "Could it have been..." He hesitated. "Well, could it have been a man?"

"Humans leave more tracks than any cat." Tarun fixed each member of the group with a hard stare, finally settling his gaze on Ashley. "I think it would be for the best if we take extra care when we go out there. I'd like the chance to spend my commission."

Each of them nodded, their expressions serious and somber.

"Good." Tarun clapped his hands and stood up. "Anyone hungry? I know I am, after all that excitement."

Somewhat unenthusiastic murmurs of agreement met his change of subject; Ashley could see that Grace and Simon were still a little queasy with the memory of the slashed bodies so fresh in their minds. While Grady helped Tarun with the supplies, Ashley took out her camera and a soft felt cloth, beginning the familiar routine of cleaning her equipment. She paused, repressing a sudden shiver as she felt the hairs at the nape of her neck prickle. Glancing over her shoulder into the pitch-dark jungle, she frowned thoughtfully a moment, then turned back to her task with a shrug.

She had the eerie sensation that someone—or something—was watching her.



Perched in the branches of a giant tree, she watched the campfire illuminate the faces of the group below. These people were not here to hunt, she could tell. Poachers liked to stay mobile and inconspicuous, and this group was carrying far too much equipment to qualify as either. Still, she intended to keep an eye on them all the same.

As she looked on, her eyes slightly narrowed at the obvious spirit of camaraderie displayed by the group, she found her attention settling more and more on the shorter of the two women. Something about the blonde stranger fascinated her. Called by a rare curiosity she couldn't explain, the shadowy figure abandoned her lofty post and crept slowly closer to the camp, nostrils twitching at the dimly remembered scents of civilization. Eventually, she settled down in the thick undergrowth, perfectly camouflaged by the dark stripes across her form. Her shimmering blue eyes held an expression of fascination as she watched the young woman pick at her food.

The woman was small of frame, almost elfin, yet even her simplest movements bespoke a natural grace and strength. Her features were beautiful, but not uncommonly so. Still, the flash of her smile when one of her companions said something funny lit up her face and made her stand out from the others. Merriment and life sparkled in her mahogany brown eyes. There was something strange about her, something unusual. For the first time in years, the watcher felt a tingle of interest grip her, making her want to move closer to the woman.

For over an hour, she lay hidden in the shadows, body pressed against the dewy earth, watching, unable to tear herself away from the clearing. She knew she needed to leave, knew she would need to hunt soon if she wanted to eat that night. But she couldn't convince her limbs to move. Even when the various people in the camp bade one another goodnight and retired to their individual tents, she couldn't shake off the stranger's lure. For another hour, she lay there in silence, frozen, wrestling against the inexplicable desire to actually enter the camp and see the woman again. Eventually, realizing she wasn't going to get anywhere if she didn't satisfy this interest and move on, the dark figure rose and prowled forward, leaving the shadows behind.

Wary, alert, ready to bolt at the least sound or scent that was out of place, she ventured slowly toward the small, domed tent into which the blonde had disappeared. Pausing outside, she sniffed the air cautiously, uncertain whether to proceed or retreat. After a minute, she eased down the tent zipper, pushed her head through the gap, and stepped inside.

It was dark in the tent, but years of hunting at night allowed her to make out the softly snoring form wrapped in a sleeping bag. Head cocked to the side, she moved closer, only barely resisting the urge to brush aside a lock

of honey-colored hair that obscured her view. The stranger looked peaceful in slumber, her lips bowed slightly as though smiling at a pleasant dream. The dark figure bent forward, memorizing the woman's scent, mesmerized, unable to prevent the low, rumbling purr that rose from deep in her belly. So caught up was she in watching the sleeping woman, it took her several seconds to acknowledge when the pale lashes flickered and parted, revealing sleepy brown eyes that quickly widened.

A flurry of movement startled her as the wakened blonde surged backward, tangled in the sleeping bag, frantic to escape. A heartbeat later, the still night was shattered by a piercing scream. Stunned, she stood frozen for a long moment; sapphire eyes locked with woodland brown, both of them breathing hard in shock. Finally, the sounds of alarm coming from the other tents managed to penetrate her momentary shock, and she snapped into motion.

Before the panicked blonde could draw breath for another scream, she whirled around and fled back outside, barely sparing a glance for the beams of torchlight already scanning the darkness. Diving back into the safety of the dense undergrowth, she scolded herself for ever indulging such a foolish curiosity.



Ashley struggled to regain control of her rapidly beating heart, still trying to get her mind caught up with what was going on. The strange creature was gone. She stared wide-eyed at the tent doorway, shaking, her breath coming in hard gasps. A moment later, Grady and Tarun appeared, the guide holding a rifle and sweeping the surrounding area with a torch.

“What happened?” Grady demanded, moving forward to check on her.

“I saw it!”

“What? What did you see?” Tarun stood guard at the doorway, still scanning the jungle.

Ashley stammered, confused. “I-I don’t...really know. It was gone so quickly.” Her eyes narrowed as she tried to remember exactly what she’d seen in the indistinct light. “It had light eyes...and stripes.”

“A tiger?” Tarun eyed her nervously. “Are you saying a tiger was in the camp?”

Ashley shook her head. “No, it wasn’t a tiger. It looked almost...human.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure.” Ashley shrugged helplessly, recovering her nerve quickly now that the intruder was gone. “I couldn’t see it very well. But it stood upright like a human. And its eyes seemed more human than feline.” She put a hand to her forehead, wishing she’d gotten a better look. “I’m sorry. I just woke up and there it was, right in front of me.” She chuckled shortly, willing herself to calm down. “It scared the shit out of me.”

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re safe now.” Grady gave her a quick hug and a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Tarun had moved away from her tent, shining the beam of his torch over the ground and kneeling to inspect something. When he looked back up, he was scowling. “There are no prints, human or otherwise.”

Ashley eyed him a little defensively. “Are you saying I imagined it?”

“No, I’m saying that what you saw was probably the same thing that killed those men.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

He smiled at her. “That’s okay.”

“Why did it come here?” Simon asked, shining his own flashlight over the surrounding jungle with a jittery hand. The timid man looked somewhat ridiculous standing there in his flannel pajamas, and Ashley stifled the urge to giggle at him.

Tarun shouldered his rifle and glared toward the jungle. “Maybe it was curious about us,” he guessed. “Perhaps it wanted to get a closer look. Let’s just hope it doesn’t decide we’re some kind of threat.”

“Maybe.” Ashley gave her friends a slightly embarrassed smile. “I’m sorry I woke you all.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Grady. “But you still look pretty shook up. Sure you don’t want some company for the night?” he offered. “I’ll be a gentleman.”

“Hah!” Ashley punched him softly on the arm. “I’ll be fine. Whatever it was, I think I scared it as much as it scared me.” Her eyes softened. “But thanks for the offer.”

“Okay. You call if you need anything.”

“I will.”

Grady and the others trailed back to their own tents, leaving Ashley to herself. She could hear them whispering among themselves and felt a

bit sheepish. She hadn't been that frightened in a long time. The shock of waking up to those piercing eyes still made her tremble.

Acknowledging that her keyed up nerves had chased away the prospect of sleep, Ashley lit a kerosene lamp and reached for the pile of books that lay next to her backpack. Grabbing one, she flipped it open and began to read about the great cats she was there to shoot.



Not so far away, a dark, striped figure used sharp claws to pull herself up into a tree. Settling down, still breathing hard from the encounter, she rested long moments in silence, wrestling with the desire to return and see again those mesmerizing eyes that seemed to call to her with a song stronger than any she'd heard before.



The next morning, Ashley slept in. She had finally drifted off early in the morning, her eyes strained from reading by lamplight. By the time she emerged from her tent, tousled and blinking in the light, all the rest of her companions were already up and about. She joined them around the cold ashes of the fire, and noticed that Tarun was absent. She guessed he was off checking for signs of their midnight intruder.

"Sleep okay?" Grady inquired as she sat beside him, his sincerity ruined only by the amusement in his eyes.

Ashley scowled. She usually had to kick him in the ribs to get him moving in the morning. "Fine, from about three o'clock onwards. After that thing woke me up, I had so much adrenaline in me I could have run a marathon. I stayed up and did a bit of reading."

"Mmm, I saw the light. I'm afraid the coffee's cold, but I saved you some breakfast." He handed her a bowl of porridge, and she rewarded his consideration with a charming smile.

"Thanks." She ate the sweetened oats eagerly, humming as the sugar helped kick-start her recalcitrant body. "Are we going to get the hide set up today?"

Grady nodded. "Yep. Tarun already found us a spot down by the river. Said there were a number of tracks and markings there, so you should

get some good shots if you're lucky. Once we've got you all set up, I was thinking I'd head over to the east ridge." He gestured with a stick toward a ridge of rocky, treacherous-looking mountain that rose from the plains some distance away. "The view should be terrific."

"Great. Maybe I'll go up there with you tomorrow."

"Sure, if you'd like."

Ashley finished her breakfast and turned her attention to Simon and Grace. "Will you guys be staying with me in the hide?"

Simon nodded. "If a tiger shows up, we'll let you get your shots, then tranquilize and tag it. It's pretty routine stuff. If we can provide evidence to back up the reports of a white tiger, we'll probably call in a team to come out and collect it." He shook his head ruefully. "The zoos will go wild if we find it."

Ashley had done her research, and knew the potential benefits that could be derived from the discovery of a white tiger in the wild. In the last hundred years, only a dozen or so white tigers had been reported, and with the rapid decline in the population of Bengal tigers—the only species to produce the white strain—that number was likely to drop a good deal farther, very quickly. The few specimens in captivity in the United States all owed their ancestry to Mohan, a white male who had been captured by a maharaja in 1951, and who had then been mated with his daughter to produce more white tiger cubs. This inbreeding was the only way of securing the color strain, unless another tiger could be captured that had the double recessive allele that produced the white pigmentation. As a result of inbreeding, the possibility of genetic defects, miscarriages, and early death rose with every new generation.

Ashley recalled the white tiger pictures she'd seen, taken of captive specimens in the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. Feline eyes that would normally be a tawny gold were instead a clear, piercing blue, and chocolate-colored stripes patterned snow-white coats. She shivered in anticipation. If she could bring home photos of a white tiger from the wild, her already impressive reputation would soar. Not to mention the sheer challenge of such an endeavor. It was an opportunity few ever saw, and Ashley didn't intend to screw it up.

"Well," she said, as she slapped her thighs and stood up, "sitting around here won't get the hide built. Grady, why don't you get the gear and meet

me down by the river?" She scooped up the dirty dishes. "I'll go on ahead. I can get these washed up and look for a good place to set up."

"Fine. Simon, would you give me a hand with the heavy stuff?"

"Sure."

Leaving the others to organize the aluminum poles and camouflage netting that formed their traveling hide, Ashley made her way to the river with the dishes.

She and Grady made a good team, and the magazine they worked for took advantage of their dynamic by sending them out together as often as possible. Though only twenty-six years old, Ashley possessed an innate talent for photographing wildlife, and it hadn't taken long for her to impress her peers with a seemingly endless run of breathtaking shots. Not wanting to rely on talent alone, Ashley believed in always being prepared. Even now, with her arms cradling a load of dirty dishes, her camera was strapped around her neck and ready in case an opportunity presented itself.

Grady, on the other hand, was a scenic photographer. He never failed to find beauty and majesty in whatever landscape presented itself, whether deserts and grass plains or oceans and cityscapes. Ashley enjoyed having him as her partner largely because of his adaptability and patience; his work often required him to wait hours for just the right lighting, and some of the prep-work setting up his shots could get pretty elaborate. It also didn't hurt that he rarely tried to discourage her when she wanted to do something a little "out there."

Since they'd started going on expeditions together, three years ago, their body of work had attracted national acclaim and earned them a string of prestigious and ever-more-challenging assignments. Ashley knew she had particularly impressed her superiors with her work capturing dangerous wildlife in spectacular settings, and it showed in the fact that in the last year or so, more and more assignments took her and Grady into potentially hazardous regions of the world. Ashley had enough professional ambition that she was willing to take greater risks to find the perfect images she wanted, and this had earned her a reputation for fearlessness and tenacity.

They had set up camp some distance from the water source, not wanting to scare the wildlife away from their drinking spot, and the hike served to wake Ashley more thoroughly. By the time she reached the edge of the sluggish river, she was sweating lightly in the humid heat, but feeling quite

happy. Ashley liked the jungle, and the Bandhavgarh National Park was one of the nicest she had ever visited. Located in the Vindhya Mountains of Madhya Pradesh, the small park boasted the highest population density of tigers in the country. Furthermore, it was known for its white tigers, sometimes going by the name of “White Tiger Territory.”

Of course, tigers weren’t the only thing worthy of note. In any direction were insects of every type and birds of every color. It was never truly quiet here; the jungle creatures constantly communicated in a myriad of fascinating ways—the stuttering chatter of monkeys, screeches and cries of parrots and hornbills, and more ominous sounds less easily identified.

This was Ashley’s first trip to India, and what she had seen so far was enough to make her want a return visit. While she didn’t much care for the crowded cities—she had never liked the feeling of being crushed against so many other people—the rural areas were fascinating. There was a general atmosphere of respect for the animals of the land that was rare in most developed countries. Ashley had seen monkeys, peacocks, and even the deadly cobra living in apparent harmony with the people, who tolerated, and even paid tribute to their company. In one of the larger towns, Ashley had seen street performers dress up like monkeys and mimic the actions of the mischievous creatures. An English-speaking tourist had told her the performers were paying homage to Hanuman, one of the Hindu gods.

As someone who had always loved animals, and who now made a living from photographing them, Ashley could appreciate the kind of relationship the people of India had with their native wildlife. Outside of tribal cultures, it was rare to find such deification. Wandering along the course of the river now, stepping over a downed tree that crossed her path, Ashley started looking around for a safe place to wash the empty bowls.

Distracted by the sights and sounds of the jungle around her, Ashley’s attention was brought back to sudden focus when she rounded a bend in the river and found she had company. A large, burly man stood not thirty feet from her. Crouched low against a tree, dressed in army fatigues and camouflage shirt, he was studying the edge of the water. Ashley first thought he was a ranger, and she very nearly called a greeting. Then she noticed the menacing-looking hunting rifle he held. Rangers didn’t carry such formidable equipment. Ashley’s eyes widened. She gave a silent prayer

of thanks that the man, whom she now realized must be a poacher, had his back to her.

Very slowly and carefully, Ashley edged a few steps backward, considering her options. This man might have friends out there somewhere—she knew poachers generally worked in groups—and she scanned the dense jungle cautiously for any sign that she had been spotted. Nothing seemed amiss, but that didn't count for much. There was enough cover to hide an army of poachers. She needed to get back to Tarun so he could alert the park rangers. They'd know how to deal with this. Decision made, Ashley continued backing slowly away from the man.

Her luck held for a few more paces, before her heel snagged a treacherous root. Ashley might have been able to keep her balance, but for the dirty dishes still clasped in her hands. She toppled backward.

The fall to the soft ground was quiet enough, but the tin plates clattered loudly, despite her best efforts to cushion them. She saw the man's head turn toward her, and she quickly rolled off the trail and into the jungle.

Lying in the dense undergrowth, she held her breath as she heard the man coming closer. He was taking his time, and Ashley held herself perfectly still as he passed by her position. *Please, don't let him see me*, she thought. *Just for a few more minutes, until Tarun and Grady get here with the hide, please let him not notice me.*

Ashley wasn't the type to get scared needlessly, but she breathed a sigh of relief when the poacher moved past her without incident. Unfortunately, she also shifted her body a little against the ground. Her elbow was pinned against a branch, and the movement caused a noticeable rustle.

The poacher froze in his tracks. He turned. Through the undergrowth, Ashley saw his eyes home in on her hiding spot and knew she'd been found.

She took half a second to mentally compare her chances if she stayed put against her chances if she ran. The man was large and thick-bodied, with tangled red hair and a bushy beard. He looked tough, but probably not too fast. Ashley concluded she was better off making a run for it. She got her legs under her and broke from her cover.

Head down, she sprinted toward camp. She heard a shout, then a string of curses and the sound of pursuit. Chancing a quick glance behind her, she caught another moment of bad luck—a downed tree blocked her path.

She hit the obstacle at full speed and went down hard, the wind knocked from her body. Pain flared in her legs, and she tumbled into a headlong roll.

The poacher was on her before she could recover. Red-faced and sweating, the man grinned cruelly at her “Not so fast now, huh, blondie?”

Ashley’s dark eyes were wide, and she held up her hands in surrender. “Please, don’t hurt me. I promise I won’t tell anyone you’re here.”

The man shook his head. “Sorry, lady,” he said gruffly. “Can’t trust no one in my line of work. Guess this is what you get for straying off from the tour group, huh?”

“I’m not a tourist. I’m a photographer,” Ashley explained, holding up the camera around her neck as evidence. “I have friends, and they’re not far away. If you kill me, they’ll call in help and this whole place will be swarming with rangers.”

The poacher’s eyes narrowed. “That true?”

“Uh huh.” She nodded frantically. “Let me go, and I swear I won’t tell them about you. You can just go your way, and I’ll go mine. What do you say?”

He considered for a long moment, obviously wondering whether to believe her or not. Eventually, he shook his head again. “Sorry, lady, but I ain’t in the market of taking chances. Only one way to make sure you stay quiet, so don’t make this harder than it has to be.” He worked the bolt on his rifle and pulled the butt into his shoulder.

Ashley started backpedaling furiously away from the man, her eyes glued to the barrel of the gun as it swung up and fixed on her with unavoidable precision. She was drawing breath for a final scream, when a chilling, terrible sound stopped her. The low, rumbling growl, so primal and fierce, drained the blood from the poacher’s face in a heartbeat. The man turned away very slowly, and Ashley was able to see behind him.

Two sets of eyes widened. Ashley’s jaw dropped. She wanted to finish her scream, but could only stare past the man to the strange figure crouched on the mossy trunk of a fallen tree.

It was a woman. A woman unlike any Ashley had ever seen before. Even though she was bent in a crouching, feline position, the woman was clearly tall and powerfully built. She wore a brief outfit consisting of a halter top and a short skirt, both made from what Ashley was certain was genuine tiger fur. The outfit was almost invisible, however, for the woman’s entire

body was painted in ochre and pale ivory tones patterned with tawny brown stripes. Even her classic, angular face was done up to mimic the mask of a tiger, the stripes framing cold, clear blue eyes that were fixed firmly on the frightened poacher. A mass of dirty black hair tumbled over the woman's shoulders, much of it woven into a chaotic tangle of thin braids. Ashley noticed the woman's right hand tapping against the bole of the tree, four hooked talons jutting from between long, powerful fingers. Though the claws were primitive, Ashley had no doubt that they were as effective a weapon for the woman as they would be for a real tiger.

Hearing a hoarse, strangled gurgle from the poacher, Ashley tore her gaze from the strange woman and glanced at her former adversary. The man's face was extremely pale behind his thick beard, his eyes bulging from their sockets in abject terror. The hands that gripped the rifle were shaking so badly that Ashley thought for a moment he was about to have a heart attack. Frantic eyes darted left and right, searching for an escape. When the tiger-woman's rumbling growl rose an octave and her lips parted to reveal pearly white teeth, the man apparently decided to take his chances. He dropped the rifle, turned, and ran into the jungle as fast as his trembling legs could carry him, leaving Ashley behind with the strange intruder.

Ashley found herself caught in the penetrating gaze of sapphire eyes.

Uh oh!

Ashley swallowed hard as the tiger-woman gave a feral smile, revealing what seemed to be uncommonly large canine teeth. The full force of those unsettlingly clear cobalt eyes settled on her, the growl still rumbling, but softer now. Ashley wanted to follow the poacher's example and run away, but her legs refused to obey her.

When she heard a quiet *snick* sound, she looked down and was appalled to realize her hands had lifted the camera about her neck and—entirely of their own volition—snapped a quick shot of the predatory figure on the log.

The striped woman rose from her crouch and stalked closer. Ashley held perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe. "Shit! What the hell have you gotten yourself into this time?" she muttered under her breath, her eyes trained with fatalistic fascination on the sharp, claw-like weapons held in each of the woman's hands. The tiger-lady approached along a zigzag path, her expression intense and curious. Ashley remembered watching her

niece's two-year-old cat move the same way when she was stalking a mouse. The comparison was not particularly comforting.

The woman closed the distance between them, pausing when she got to within a few feet. She leaned forward, her head cocked to the side as she sniffed interestedly, then stepped nearer still, until Ashley could see the grainy texture of the paint that covered her body and make out the highlights in her ebony, tangled hair. The woman circled, sniffing, her eyes roaming up and down. Ashley held herself stiffly under the scrutiny, following the stranger with wide eyes.

"I really hope I don't smell like dinner," she breathed quietly to herself. Then she noticed that the woman was no longer growling. Instead of that low, ominous rumbling, the stranger made a series of short, sharp, barking coughs that Ashley wasn't quite sure how to interpret. When the tiger-lady finished her inspection and stopped in front of her, Ashley gave her a tremulous smile. It was met with a slight softening of stern features, and she noticed for the first time an expression of wary intrigue and reluctant fascination on the stranger's face. The woman made the strange coughing bark again, the sound completely inhuman and beyond Ashley's ability to replicate.

"You're not planning to eat me...are you?" Ashley asked.

The dark head cocked to one side and a crooked smile tugged at painted lips. Before Ashley had time to wonder whether her words had been understood, the sound of crunching footsteps and echoing conversation came from around the river-bend. Blue eyes widened instantly, darting to the forest. The woman gave Ashley a last, curious look, then whirled around and fled back into the jungle, wild hair whipping about her face as she ran. Ashley noticed that her running style was quite unique, shifting unpredictably between short, swift steps and long, leaping strides that carried her swiftly through the dense, unpredictable undergrowth. Within heartbeats, she had disappeared as though she'd never been there.

A moment later, Grady and Tarun rounded the bend in the river, lugging between them the heavier components of the hide. Behind them trailed Simon, carrying coils of rope. "Hey, Ash," called Grady. "Are you done there? Give us a hand."

Ashley shook her head dazedly, still rooted to the spot. It took Grady a moment to realize something was wrong. Then his eyes fell on the poacher's abandoned rifle, and he dropped his load and rushed to her side.

“Ash! What happened? Are you okay?”

Ashley pointed a shaking finger to the jungle. “Did you see her?”

“See who?”

“The tiger-woman.” Ashley finally snapped out of her dazed state and gestured wildly at the jungle. “She ran off when she heard you guys coming. She saved me from a poacher I found here. He was going to kill me, and then she was there, and she scared him off. She had claws, and she was all stripy—”

Grady grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to stop jumping around. “Hey, slow down,” he said, glancing worriedly at Tarun, who had picked up the rifle. “Tell us what happened from the beginning.”

Ashley began describing the strange encounter, her excitement building. While she talked, Tarun carefully inspected the rocky ground, then moved over to the fallen log. When Ashley had finished, the tracker pointed to something.

“There are scratch marks here on the wood,” he said. “No tracks of the woman, but the poacher left a trail so obvious a blind elephant could follow him. He was running from something.”

“Of course he was running,” Ashley said, planting her hands on her hips. “I just told you about the woman.”

“And I believe you. I’m just saying she didn’t leave any footprints, only those scratch marks. Did she threaten you at all?”

Ashley considered. “I don’t think so. She growled a bit, but she didn’t seem to want to hurt me. It was more like... I don’t know. Like she was curious about me.”

“Did she say anything?”

Ashley shook her head. “I don’t know if she knew how to talk. She looked like some freaky, female version of Tarzan, only with tigers instead of gorillas.” She sighed, wishing now that she’d had more time with the bizarre woman. “I wonder what she’s doing out here.”

“Killing poachers,” Tarun stated. He scowled. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t think we’re here to harm anything. Come on, let’s get this hide set up.”

“Wait a minute!” Ashley glared at the man. “Aren’t we going to report this? She’s out here all alone. Shouldn’t we tell someone?”

“And what would we report? That there’s a jungle-woman out here who thinks she’s a tiger? Bah! No one would believe us for a minute. We’ve got no proof, no evidence, and no tracks.”

“We do so!” Ashley held up her camera. “I took a picture of her. If we show it, they’ll have to believe us.”

“She has a point,” Simon chimed in, catching her excitement. “Imagine it, a woman living out here alone in the jungle! Without any sort of contact with outsiders! She could have been living in the park for years! If we could find her...”

Tarun considered, but again shook his head. “I’m not calling out the rangers for this. She could be anywhere, and there are too many places she could hide. We’d never track her down.”

“So we just forget about her?” Ashley spluttered, furious. “How can you be so cavalier about this?”

“Because there’s nothing we can do,” Tarun said. “You’re here to photograph and tag tigers, not some crazy woman who thinks she’s a tiger. I’m not being paid to track down someone who doesn’t want to be found.”

Ashley glared at him, about to argue further when Grady stopped her. “He’s right, Ash. We’ve got a job to do. Let’s not get sidetracked. If we try to hunt her down, she might turn nasty. Let’s just do what we came here to do and get out before she decides we’re a threat.”

Ashley looked at the others, but now even Simon shrugged helplessly. It was clear she was on her own. “Fine. We’ll let it go.” Folding her arms across her chest, she frowned at her companions and gave every indication that she was not pleased.

Grady sighed. “Should we at least report the poacher?”

“I suppose. But the rangers are aware there’s been increased activity.” Tarun hefted the poacher’s rifle. “Without his gun, at least this one shouldn’t be able to do much damage.”

The four spent the next hour setting up the hide, with Ashley giving her companions the silent treatment and occasionally complementing that with cold glares, aimed mostly at Tarun. How could the man have so little reaction to her bizarre encounter? Where was his curiosity? Ashley, who never failed to let curiosity guide her course, found his ambivalence infuriating.

By midday most of her frustration had burned off; the familiar task of tying down the plastic camo netting was a good distraction, allowing

her thoughts to settle so she could consider them clearly. Perhaps in his role as a guide, Tarun had simply seen too much of the death and cruelty wrought by heartless poachers for him to feel much compassion when they were being slaughtered in kind. Perhaps that accounted for why he, like the rangers, seemed to hold so little interest in tracking down whoever was killing them. It didn't change Ashley's opinion that they should investigate further, but she decided there was no point staying mad at Tarun.

Although the conventional way to deal with tigers was to track them on elephant back, Grady had insisted a hide would work better. Though she didn't say anything, Ashley suspected her partner was afraid of riding the great beasts. He'd refused to ride camels before, too. Still, she didn't mind. The lumbering, awkward gait of the elephant made it difficult to focus her camera, and Ashley thought the added danger of being on the ground would be more than compensated for by the increased quality of the pictures she could take.

Once the hide was up, the group decided to take a hike along the river to where Tarun knew a waterfall was located. Grady spent over an hour setting up shots and capturing the beauty of the scene, while Ashley wandered around looking at the various birds and the group of curious monkeys that had decided to investigate their presence.

All through the day, however, her mind kept returning to the strange woman. Who was she? What was she doing out here? By the time they finished and returned to camp for dinner, she had worked herself into a nice little obsession, and she knew without a doubt that she had to learn more of the stranger. Fortunately, she considered, the woman seemed very interested in them. Ashley suspected that in time, she would return. Perhaps she was watching them even now.

After the others had gone to bed, Ashley stayed awake beside the dying campfire, hoping the tiger-lady would pay another visit now that she was alone. She waited nearly an hour, concentrating carefully, trying to sense the woman's presence. Eventually, she reluctantly accepted that the stranger wasn't going to be stopping by tonight. Rising from her solitary vigil, she rubbed sleepy eyes with the back of her wrist. She had barely taken two steps toward her tent, when something in the distance drew her attention. Squinting a little, Ashley smiled to herself.

About halfway up the side of a nearby ridge, a faint speck of orange light glimmered in the darkness like a lonely star.

“There you are,” Ashley whispered, grinning as she marked the location in her mind. “Well, well, well. It seems you’re not so much an animal that you don’t know how to light a fire.”

Ashley hummed to herself as she went to bed, already planning a hike out to the mountains in the morning.



Ashley wolfed down her breakfast the next morning, asking Simon and Grace to mind the hide without her. She was going on a hike. Grady watched her with a frown, as she stuffed a rubber poncho into her backpack and slung it over her shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

Ashley glanced back at him with a smile she knew he would recognize from years of experience working with her.

“Shit, Ashley. Please tell me you’re not going off hunting that damn woman.”

Her smile grew a fraction wider.

Grady threw his hands up in the air in disbelief. “Jesus! What the hell is wrong with you? Why do you have to go looking for trouble all the time?”

“I’m not looking for trouble,” she said calmly. “I’m going on a little hike out to the ridge, just like you suggested.”

“Then at least wait for me to get my gear so I can come with you. Or wait for Tarun to get back.” Their guide had gone off to search the forest for fresh tracks; Ashley had deliberately timed her departure so she could avoid an argument with him.

“Sorry, Grady, I’m going alone. I don’t want to spook her off by bringing an entourage. Besides, you have your own work to do, remember?” She smiled fondly at his exasperated expression. Grady was always trying to look out for her, and while Ashley knew she didn’t need his help, it was nice to know someone cared. “Relax, I’ll be fine.”

“Ashley, this woman almost certainly killed those poachers. I doubt she wants people just dropping by,” Grady argued. “You saw the bodies. She’s a murderer. Do you want to end up like those hunters?”

PRIMAL TOUCH

Ashley paused as she remembered the shredded, mauled bodies and the blood-soaked ground. Then she shook away the memories. “She’s had two opportunities to hurt me, and so far all she’s done is growl a bit. I don’t think she sees us as a threat.”

“Then can’t you just leave things be? Please?” He clasped her gently by the shoulders and caught her gaze. “For me? You know I try to stay out of your way when you want to go off and do something dangerous, but this is just plain foolish. I’m asking as a friend, Ash. Just leave the woman alone.”

The sincere, pleading tone of voice very nearly worked. Ashley could tell Grady was genuinely concerned, but she couldn’t let a mystery this intriguing go without investigating. Her curiosity simply wouldn’t permit it. “I can’t,” she said softly. “If I don’t do this, it’ll eat me up from the inside out. I have to try to find her.”

“But why?”

Ashley shrugged. “I just do.” Standing on tiptoes, she planted a quick, soft kiss on Grady’s cheek. “It looks like about a two-hour hike out to the mountain. If I’m not back by nightfall, don’t come looking for me.” She held up a hand to forestall his next words. “I mean it. You’ll only get lost in the dark. Wait until morning, at least. Okay?”

He nodded reluctantly. “Just be sure that doesn’t happen.” He ran his fingers through his hair in what Ashley knew was a gesture of frustrated acceptance. “What makes you think she’s over near that mountain anyway?”

Ashley winked. “Just women’s intuition, I guess.” Adjusting the straps on her backpack a final time, she waved back at Grady and made her way out of camp.

The hike was as long as she had anticipated, so Ashley took her time and enjoyed the journey. At a few places along the way, she stopped to take photographs, capturing occasional shots of young monkeys as they played among the short, twiggy bushes under which their parents sat. By the time she reached the ridge, Ashley was breathing hard and the front of her loose cotton shirt was damp with sweat. Her active lifestyle kept her extremely fit, but that didn’t count for much in the Indian heat. Thick, ominous clouds had moved in from the north, turning the air more humid. Taking a rest and refilling her water bag at a fast-running stream near the base of the mountain, Ashley studied the slope before her, searching for the most likely site for a camp.

Half an hour of exploring later, she found a broad-entranced cave that tunneled into the side of the rocky mountain, about halfway up. Ashley examined the dusty ground at the mouth of the cave, smiling when she saw scuff marks that might have been footprints. Pulling out a flashlight, she hesitated only long enough to flick it on before creeping into the cave.

The artificial light quickly revealed the signs of occupation Ashley had hoped to find. Several small boulders were positioned around a modest fire pit in the center of the spacious cave, and a blackened, cast-iron pot sat in the cold ashes. There was no sign of the mysterious woman, and Ashley didn't know whether she felt disappointed or relieved. She shone the light on a simple sleeping mat, then spotted several wooden crates stacked at the rear of the cave. Investigating, she found cans of fruit, burlap sacks filled with rice, a fully stocked first-aid kit, as well as toiletries and hygiene products. The discovery prompted a full grin.

"Not enough of a ghost that you don't need to eat, I see."

The cave narrowed toward the rear but continued on about ten feet and opened up again beyond that. Ashley was just about to continue her explorations when a familiar rumbling growl stopped her, raising gooseflesh on her arms. Her eyes widened in alarm as she felt the dark presence behind her, and she slowly turned around toward the mouth of the cave.

Sure enough, there stood the tiger-lady, watching her with eyes that gleamed with a feral intensity in the dim light. Remembering the torn bodies in the jungle, Ashley wished she'd listened to Grady's pleas. There was little doubt the claw weapons the woman held had produced the bloody carnage.

"Um..." Ashley held up her empty hands. "I-I didn't mean to intrude," she stammered. "I saw the firelight last night, and I just wanted to, um... say thank you. In person. You know, for yesterday, when you saved me from that guy by the river? My name's Ashley. Ashley Richards."

The glittering sapphire eyes held her for a long moment, then the growl died away to silence. The painted woman glanced around the cave and, apparently deciding everything was as it should be, strode toward her visitor.

Ashley swallowed, her hands trembling nervously, but the tiger-woman ignored her completely and simply scooped a wooden dipperful of rice from one of the sacks of supplies. She then went back to the fire pit and emptied it into the pot, stirring in water dipped from a cask before she

began to build a fire over the dead ashes. From time to time, she glanced at Ashley, but for the most part seemed to ignore her presence.

Ashley stood frozen as she watched the strange woman light the fire using sparks struck by hitting an old knife against a shard of flint. When the light grew sufficient, she shut off her flashlight and slowly moved closer to the crouched figure.

“Listen, I really didn’t mean to just barge in on you like this,” she said in a low voice. The strange woman glanced up, her expression blank. Ashley studied her curiously with narrowed eyes. “I don’t suppose you speak English by any chance?”

No reaction.

“Hindi?”

Nothing.

Ashley sighed. “Great. I guess you’re not going to be much of a conversationalist then, huh?” She ran her fingers through her hair and watched as the woman stirred the rice with the dipper, then added a handful of raw, finely chopped vegetables from a nearby pouch. “Well, I came out here to thank you, but you can’t even understand me, so I guess that’s going to be tough. I should probably just be thankful you haven’t decided to add me to your dinner menu.” Ashley shrugged helplessly. She wanted to sit down and study the woman further, but the silence was getting oppressive. Nervously, she started backing toward the mouth of the cave. “Look, I think I should probably head back to my friends. They’ll get worried if I don’t return by sundown. You know how it is. But it was really nice to meet you, and I really appreciate you scaring that poacher off yesterday.” She paused. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later.” Turning, she took a step away.

“Stay.”

The single word, spoken in a raspy, hoarse whisper, stopped her instantly. Ashley spun back around to find the tiger-woman studying her.

“What did you say?”

There was a long silence as the woman turned her attention back to her cooking. “There’s a storm coming down from the north,” she said in a low, ragged tone. “You’ll never make it back to your friends before it hits. If you like, you can stay here until it passes.”

Stunned, Ashley stared at the crouched figure. “You can talk!”

The woman glanced up again, a hint of humor touching her eyes and a smile twitching her lips. “So can you.”

Ashley moved closer, amazed. “I mean, you speak English. Why didn’t you say something instead of letting me prattle on like an idiot?”

The woman’s smile widened, teeth gleaming in the firelight. “I enjoyed listening to you talk,” she said, coughing to clear her throat when her voice broke. “It’s been a long time since I last spoke.”

Ashley shook her head in wonder, then remembering she’d been invited to stay, quickly claimed the boulder opposite the painted woman. “I’m Ashley,” she said, holding out her hand.

The woman studied her hand for a moment, but made no move to shake it. “I know. I heard you the first time.”

Unperturbed, Ashley grinned and took her hand back. “Do you have a name?”

The woman hesitated, and Ashley had the impression she was taking a moment to remember something. “Leandra,” she said after a long moment. “My name is Leandra Thornton.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Leandra Thornton,” Ashley said politely. Outside, a sudden clap of thunder exploded in the distance. The wind began to pick up, and Ashley recognized that her companion was right. A storm was about to break. “Thanks for letting me stay here. I’d hate to be walking back in that.”

“You hungry?” Leandra held up the still simmering rice. “It’s not much, but it’s quite edible. There’s enough for both of us.”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Ashley then realized something familiar about Leandra’s accent. “You’re an American, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I was, before I came here.” Leandra hesitated, then added, “I moved around a lot.”

“I see.” While the striped woman stirred their meal, Ashley found herself contemplating her situation. Here she was, in the wilds of India, sitting in a cave opposite a woman painted up as a tiger, who was cooking them lunch. The scenario was so bizarre it felt surreal. Still, Ashley wasn’t going to complain. She let herself study her companion more openly.

Leandra was long and lean, but her body rippled with powerful muscles beneath the paint. Ashley guessed she was at least six feet tall, positively dwarfing her own five-foot-four stature. Her motions were graceful and

elegant, yet Ashley detected a slight stiffness in the way she used her right arm. She had high cheekbones that made her vivid blue eyes stand out all the more, and angular features reminiscent of those found on ancient Greek sculptures. Her hair, which looked as though it hadn't been introduced to a brush in a long while, framed her face in a wild mass of braids and tangles. Her feet were bare, and she smelled pleasantly of musk and earth. In all, Ashley thought the strange woman was probably quite beautiful under all the paint and hair.

She glanced to the side and saw the two sets of handheld claws and reminded herself that this woman was a killer. Each set consisted of four hooked talons, made from what looked like bone lashed to a wooden grip. Simple tools, Ashley thought, but obviously capable of extremely lethal acts of violence.

"Something wrong?"

"What?" Ashley looked up to find Leandra regarding her curiously. "No, nothing's wrong. I was just..." She gestured to the claws. "I mean..." She studied the woman with what she hoped was a non-judgmental expression. "We found the bodies in the jungle. You killed those men, didn't you?"

Leandra reached for the claws and held them up to the firelight. "They came to hunt the tigers," she said. "I hunted them."

"You murdered them," Ashley corrected.

Leandra's eyes hardened. "They were scum," she hissed. A growl rumbled in the back of her throat, and her lip curled into a snarl. "They deserved what they got."

"Deserved to be slashed to pieces?"

"Yes." Leandra settled down, and the growl vanished. "Have you ever seen what poachers do to the animals they kill?"

Ashley shook her head.

"They butcher them completely. Not a single part of a tiger is wasted. The bones are ground up and used in medicines that claim to cure muscle pain and arthritis. The tails are made into soaps to cure skin diseases. The flesh is cooked and made into Tiger Soup, the brain into a cure for acne. Even the whiskers are made into charms for courage and protection. Those men hunt tigers without a care for the fact that they're almost wiped out. All they care about is their own greed."

Ashley swallowed, made nervous by the intensity of Leandra's description. "So you pass judgment and execute them?"

"Yes." Leandra scowled, anger gleaming in the depths of her eyes like fiery coals. "They deserve to die. I know. I used to be one of them."

"Oh." Ashley blinked in surprise. "You were a poacher?"

Leandra looked away, her expression impossible to read. "A long time ago, in another life...yes."

Ashley considered the dark-haired woman carefully. "And now you're...what?"

A slight shrug. "Something else. Something better, I hope."

"Seems like quite a dramatic change," Ashley commented, her eyes roaming meaningfully over the painted skin. "What was the reason?"

Leandra's smile was wistful. She stretched her right arm stiffly and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Let's just say someone sat me down and gave me a stern talking to."

An awkward silence reigned for long minutes, and Ashley barely repressed the urge to fidget. "How long have you been out here?"

"Not sure. What year is it?"

"You mean you don't know?"

Blue eyes scanned the Spartan cave. "No calendar. Out here, there's only day and night, not month and year."

Ashley considered that, then said, "It's April 14, 1998."

Leandra seemed to take a long moment to absorb her words, dark brows drawing low over her eyes as she reflected on the news. "In that case, I've been out here nearly four years." She shook her head, adding almost to herself, "It feels like so much longer."

"Four years?" Ashley stared at her in wonder. "All alone in the jungle for four years?"

"Not alone. The tigers keep me company."

There was silence, except for the sounds of the storm that had settled in outside, until Leandra decided the rice was properly cooked. "I don't have any bowls or spoons," she apologized, dishing the meal out onto two huge palm-type leaves and handing one to Ashley.

"That's okay. I'm sure I'll manage." Hungry enough not to care, Ashley used her fingers to shovel the rice and vegetable mix into her mouth.

After a moment, her eyes widened in surprised pleasure. "This is pretty darned good."

Leandra shrugged. "Hunting's been poor the last few days. These are my emergency staples."

As she ate, Ashley noticed the clear blue eyes would frequently dart up to study her, then quickly look away. Leandra seemed every bit as curious about her as she was about Leandra. She couldn't help but find the tall woman's nervous, shy interest a little bemusing. She was also surprised to hear the low, rumbling sound of a feline purr coming from her companion as she enjoyed her meal, and she smiled. "I guess you don't get many visitors out here, huh?"

Leandra shook her head, eating her meal slowly and carefully. "None that are welcome."

"And I guess, from all the stories of poachers being killed in other parts of the country, you must travel around some, right?"

"Wherever they go, I go." Silence for a moment. "I like it here," Leandra continued quietly in her deep, raspy voice. "Sometimes, I camp near the Himalayas. It gets cold up there."

Ashley gestured to the wooden crates. "Where do you get the supplies?"

"Sometimes from the poachers. Sometimes from the villages. I take what I need."

Ashley gave the carefully painted body a meaningful once over. "Why do you paint yourself like that?"

The way Leandra's eyes instantly avoided Ashley's indicated her discomfort with the subject. "It helps me to hunt...to blend in, like camouflage. Out here, being human is a disadvantage, so I learned to live the way they live."

"They?"

"The tigers." Leandra pointed at Ashley's camera. "You're a photographer?"

Ashley recognized that Leandra was changing the topic of conversation, and chose not to press her interest further. For now. "One of the best," she said proudly.

"Here to photograph the tigers?"

"Yep, among other things."

Leandra grinned fractionally. “I could smell the plastic sheeting from your hide at fifty paces. A tiger could smell it from a hundred.” She gave Ashley a knowing look. “I think you’re after the same thing those poachers were hoping to find.”

“The white tiger?”

Leandra nodded.

“Well, sure, I heard rumors about one...and I can’t deny it’d be a dream come true to see a white tiger in the wild. But I only want to take pictures of it. The poachers want to kill it. There’s a big difference.”

“Is there?” Leandra chewed thoughtfully, her expression difficult to read. “Sometimes people come here hoping to find a particular thing, but find something much different than what they expected.” She smiled coldly. “Those three men came to hunt a white tiger. They weren’t prepared for what they found instead.”

Something about the strange look in Leandra’s eyes clicked in Ashley’s mind, which raised and then confirmed her suspicions. She stared at the woman. “There isn’t any white tiger, is there?”

Leandra’s expression didn’t change. “Out here,” she said quietly, “things get mixed up so easily. The jungle is all shadows and light, constantly in motion. It doesn’t take much for your eyes to play tricks on you. Sometimes in the jungle, what you see isn’t what you see at all.”

“It was you all along, wasn’t it? Some idiot tourist or something got a quick look at you, and thought you were a white tiger.”

“Maybe.”

“That’s just great. You know, I’m supposed to have already finished this assignment and been back on a plane for home. I only delayed it because I wanted a shot of that damn cat.” She snorted ruefully as she finished the last of her rice. She and Grady had tickets to fly out in a fortnight, and they couldn’t change them. Still, ever willing to look at the positive side of life, Ashley decided not to let the delay bother her. “I guess I should make the best use of my time, though, as long as I’m stuck here.”

Leandra licked her fingers as she studied her companion. “So you’re disappointed?” she asked. “About not finding what you came for?”

“Well, yeah. Like I said, it’s a once in a lifetime thing, you know? But I’m glad I tried. And on the bright side, I got to meet you.” She grinned.

“It’s not every day I run across a unique individual like you. So, I guess the trip out here was worth the hassle I’m going to get when I return to work.”

After licking the last hint of flavor from her palm leaf, Leandra stood and wandered over to the cave mouth. Outside, the rain began to ease. The thunder moved into the distance, as the storm slowly passed over them.

Fascinated, Ashley watched the strange woman. Her feet seemed to flow over the ground rather than touch it. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

She gestured to the ground, which was almost barren of footprints. “You don’t make any noise when you walk, and you don’t leave footprints. How?”

Leandra’s smile was mysterious. “When you spend enough time in the jungle, you learn to hide your movements. It’s simple, really, once you get the hang of it. See?” She demonstrated how she placed her feet when she walked, the weight evenly distributed, then rolling with the heel as she lifted up. Ashley shook her head in amazement.

“That’s pretty cool. You know, you’ve got half the people out there thinking you’re some kind of vigilante ghost. I’ll bet the poachers are terrified.”

“They are, and with good reason.”

Ashley joined Leandra at the cave entrance, and they watched in companionable silence as the rain pushed farther south, eventually diminishing to a light drizzle. It was after midday, and Ashley knew she had to get back to camp before Tarun decided to come after her, but she was reluctant to part from her new acquaintance. Leandra may have felt the same way, given the curious glances she kept throwing her way.

Still...

“I really should get going, I suppose,” she said quietly.

“Mmm.”

“You know, if you’d like to come down and join us at the camp, I’m sure you’d be more than welcome.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I’d fit in. I’m, um...not really dressed for company.” Leandra held up a painted hand and wiggled her striped fingers.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Ashley was disappointed. “Well, it was really nice meeting you, Leandra. And I really do appreciate you saving me yesterday.”

“You’re welcome.”

Ashley had turned to leave when a hand grabbed her arm and stopped her. She glanced back, an eyebrow raised, and saw Leandra obviously struggling with something. She waited patiently for her to sort through her thoughts.

“I know a place not too far from here,” Leandra said very quietly. “It’s a favorite roosting spot for peacocks. If you wanted to, maybe I could take you out there before you leave? I’m sure you could get some good pictures of them.”

Ashley’s smile lit her face. “Sure, that sounds great. How about we go there tomorrow?”

Leandra smiled too, her expression relieved but still shy. “Okay. I’ll come get you in the morning, all right? Just take a walk out of the camp and I’ll find you.”

“Absolutely.” Ashley brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “I don’t suppose you want the others knowing about you, huh?”

“Tell them what you want,” Leandra said, her voice starting to crack from the unaccustomed use. “As long as they don’t mention me to the rangers, it’s okay.”

“Great. So, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

With a smile and a happy wave over her shoulder, Ashley started making her way down the slope, back to her friends.



Leandra watched from the mouth of the cave as Ashley carefully picked a path down the rain-soaked terrain, feeling a residual smile still curving her lips. She hadn’t had much to smile about in a long time, and it was a nice feeling. Only when her visitor was out of sight did she return to the cave and seat herself on one of the boulders by the fire.

It was strange, she mused. She had been alone a long time now; four years seemed like too short a figure to measure the length of her self-imposed exile. It had been so long since she’d last spoken that the sound of her voice had surprised her when she’d used it today. It seemed deeper than she remembered it. Even her own name had taken a moment to dig up from where it had lain for so long, unused, in the back of her mind.

PRIMAL TOUCH

If she took a deep breath, Leandra could still detect the last traces of the young woman's scent in the air. Deodorant, perfume, cotton. Things she hadn't thought of in a long time. Ashley hadn't just brought herself into the cave; she'd brought a glimpse into a world Leandra had turned away from years ago. She now remembered what it felt like to hear another person talk and to have company. She recalled other things, as well. Flashes of various images and remembrances returned to her: the tall, monolithic skyscrapers of the city, the softness of clean, down-filled quilts, the simple luxury of being able to eat without having to hunt first.

The faces of loved ones lost before she came here.

Leandra sat quietly, remembering things she had thought forgotten, looking forward to hearing more of the sound of Ashley's voice in the morning.



Returning to the camp, Ashley endured Tarun's frustrated scolding with a patient smile, content to ignore his reminders that he had been hired to guide them and keep them safe, and that he couldn't very well do that if she was constantly running off alone.

When his words had no visible effect, Tarun threw his hands in the air and stormed off, muttering about how he'd never get work again if one of his clients got killed while under his care. Ashley watched him go with an amused smile, then settled herself comfortably on the ground by the fire. Grady immediately joined her.

"I'm guessing from the satisfied look on your face that you found what you were looking for?"

"Indeed, I did." Ashley folded her hands behind her head and leaned back against a tree branch, teasing Grady with the simple reply.

"And?"

"And her name is Leandra, and she's very nice."

Grady made an impressed sound and raised an eyebrow. "You spoke with her?"

"Yep. Just so happens she's an American. We had quite a nice little chat. She even cooked us lunch."

"Leave it to you to find an adventure wherever you go," he said, shaking his head a little. "So, what's her story? Why is she out here?"

Ashley's smile faltered. "Actually, she didn't say exactly why she's out here," she admitted after a moment of reflection on her meeting with Leandra. "I got the impression she follows the poachers around and...well—"

"And kills them," Grady finished.

Ashley shrugged. "There are militant groups all over the world that track down and exterminate poachers," she argued in Leandra's defense. "We saw some of that in Africa." The situation with the African elephants was so dire, the government had been forced to take drastic action to stem the trade in black market ivory. "Leandra's not any worse than the men who are hunting the tigers to extinction."

Grady merely grunted. "Did she mention why she dresses up like a tiger?"

"I think she wants to live like they do, and it helps her to look the part," Ashley explained. "She's strange. Even when she talks normally, her voice sounds like it comes from deep in her chest. She actually purrs when she's relaxed. And I mean real purring too, not fake stuff...like she has no control over it." She shook her head, remembering. "She really does behave a lot like a cat."

"So I take it she's going to leave us in peace?"

"She knows why we're here, and she doesn't mind." Ashley considered whether to tell Grady there was no white tiger, but decided against it. While Grady probably wouldn't care, Simon and Grace would be very disappointed. Ashley thought it would do the scientists good to have the hope of finding the rare creature. "I think she was just curious about us before, and that's why she came snooping around the other night."

"Uh huh. So, I guess she wants to be left alone now, right?"

Ashley grinned, knowing Grady was hoping that with her questions about the tiger-woman answered, she would let the matter go. "Actually, she invited me out for a walk tomorrow morning. There's a place she knows where I can get some good shots of peacocks, and she offered to show me."

Grady eyed her intently. "Are you certain that's a good idea? Is she safe?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, Grady," Ashley said with a snort. "She's not going to hurt me. She's been out here a long time with no one to talk to. I think she just wants a little company, and I'm more than happy to give it to her." She glared at her partner until he looked away. "She's interesting and

unusual, and she's probably very lonely. It doesn't do any harm to be nice to her. Especially if she can get me closer to the animals."

"All right." Grady held up his hands in defeat. "Do what you want. You always do, anyway. I'm just trying to watch out for you, that's all."

"I know that. But you haven't even met her, so don't judge her by the fact that she's a little different. I'll be fine."

Grady let the matter rest and turned the conversation to work-related issues. Ashley spent the afternoon seeing to her equipment, then wandered down to the river to join Simon and Grace at the hide. When night fell, the group came together around the campfire for dinner. Tarun was still upset at Ashley, but it was clear Grady had spoken with him about her and he didn't argue further about her actions.

Retiring to her tent, Ashley lit the kerosene lamp and began leafing through her texts on the great cats again, this time looking at the descriptions therein with her thoughts on her new acquaintance. She already knew tigers were solitary animals: their only contact with others of their species occurring during breeding times, or the long period a cub would spend with its mother. Their habitat was widespread. The great cats seemed able to survive in any terrain that provided cover, large prey animals, and water. She read a few passages about their hunting methods, not surprised to find they relied mainly on stealth and camouflage to capture prey. Tigers could charge with tremendous speed and power, but only in short bursts. Tigers took their prey from behind, if possible, using their weight to bring the quarry to the ground, then biting the neck while holding the animal down with a forelimb. Sometimes they would break the neck, or sometimes bite down on the throat and strangle their prey (a technique that had given rise to the legend of blood-sucking tigers, which Ashley thought was ridiculous since cats didn't have lips and therefore weren't able to suck anything).

Reading that passage, Ashley remembered the bodies of the poachers they'd found: the deep, slashing claw marks across their backs and the way their throats had been torn open. She shuddered, certain Leandra had learned her killing style from the creatures she protected and imitated.

Ashley wondered what Leandra must have experienced in her four years in the jungle. She didn't need to be a psychologist to realize that such an extensive period without social contact must have taken a toll on Leandra's mind.

“Four years,” she mused quietly. “Four years of living like an animal, of trying to be an animal. I wonder how much a person could forget about being human in that length of time.”

After putting aside her books and shutting down the lamp, Ashley lay in her sleeping bag, deep in thought. She pictured Leandra’s behavior today. She had seemed okay. While her voice had been raspy from lack of use, she had spoken clearly and thoughtfully. She was polite. She probably relied more on her sense of smell than a regular person would, but that was understandable.

So, you said you used to be a poacher, Ashley thought, trying to piece together her history from the sparse information Leandra had given her. I can picture that. It would probably be the sort of thing that would teach good survival skills. But then, one day, someone says something that maybe gives you an attack of conscience, so you decide to turn over a new leaf and do something to help the animals you used to hunt. And so you...

Unfortunately, that was where Ashley’s pondering ran into a brick wall. There were safer, smarter, and more effective ways to fight poaching than to come out here alone, dress up funny, and start killing off the hunters one by one.

“There’s something else,” she whispered. “I’m betting it takes a lot for someone to turn away from the rest of the world and decide to live with wild animals.”

Ashley recalled the strange, almost desperate look in Leandra’s eyes as she’d been about to leave. The yearning expression that had crossed Leandra’s face just before she’d offered to show Ashley the peacocks.

“You’ve been out here a long time,” she whispered to the absent woman. “No one to talk to. No human contact except the men you hunt. You probably feel more kinship with the tigers than with your own species. And yet today, you not only talked to me, but you wanted to see me again.” Ashley felt privileged that Leandra had opened up to her, even if only a little. “I bet you’ve forgotten what it’s like to have a friend who can actually talk with you.” She smiled to herself. “Perhaps I should remind you.”

Closing her eyes, Ashley snuggled into a pillow of folded clothes and let herself drift off, the image of piercing blue eyes and a powerful, tawny-gold figure the last thing she remembered before sleep claimed her.



Ashley grinned with delight as she finished off another roll of film and changed the cartridge with an automatic ease gained only after years of practice. A group of four peacocks and perhaps a dozen peafowl ranged before her, the males displaying their magnificent, shimmering tail-fans in the early morning light. She gave her unusual companion a radiant smile before focusing for more shots.

“This is fantastic!” she exclaimed for the fifth time. “I can’t believe how close they let us get.”

They had come out here just after first light, hiking the short distance to the clearing in relative silence. Upon arriving, Leandra surprised her by folding her hands over her mouth and giving a piercing, very authentic-sounding peacock call. The sound attracted a host of preening and excited birds, much to Ashley’s delight. Now the sun was well into the sky, and Ashley was almost out of film. Leandra hadn’t spoken much, so Ashley talked a little about her family and her work just to fill the quiet. The peculiarity of the scene, with Leandra sitting back on her haunches listening to her with a slight smile playing about her lips, made for a slightly awkward atmosphere. Still, it was worth a little awkwardness to be here.

Finally finishing off the last role of film she’d brought, Ashley fiddled with her camera a few moments before settling down next to her companion, trying not to be too obvious about sneaking sidelong glances at Leandra’s unusual appearance.

“Wow! I can’t believe how many pictures I got. I mean, I already had a few shots of peacocks, but nothing like these. I only wish I’d brought more film.” Grady was always trying to get her to update her equipment, raving about the superiority of the new digital cameras over the older models, but Ashley refused to listen. She preferred the comforting reliability and simplicity of using real film. Now, she smiled at her striped companion, noting that even Leandra’s sitting style was vaguely feline. She could also hear the sound of quiet purring, and from that she surmised her companion was in a good mood. “Thank you for bringing me out here.”

“You’re welcome.”

They watched the magnificent birds continue their antics, enjoying the display. Though she tended to judge her own work with a strict eye, Ashley

felt confident she had captured at least a few terrific shots this morning. Photographing in the wild was a tricky game, and getting that perfect image relied on luck every bit as much as planning, equipment, or setting.

“You know,” Leandra said quietly after a long period of silent contemplation, “if you wanted me to, I could show you some other places. There’s a spot, upriver a few miles, where the elephants usually water. And there are lots of other birds and animals you could photograph. I wouldn’t mind taking you to see them.”

“That’d be great.” Ashley could sense again that her companion was very nervous, and she actually found the strong, predatory woman’s uncertainty rather cute. “But you know, Leandra, if you want to spend time with me, you don’t have to go to all this trouble.”

Leandra’s expression grew even more nervous, and she started fidgeting with one of the cords of hair hanging over her chest. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s okay if you want company,” Ashley said gently, her expression soft and open. “I guess you haven’t had a friend for a while, right?”

Shy, timid blue eyes glanced up, then quickly away. “Well, maybe not in the people sense, no. But I do have friends out here.” She nodded at the peacocks.

Ashley chuckled. “I probably don’t want to meet some of your other friends, huh?”

“Probably not.”

Ashley studied the painted woman for a moment. “I’d really like to be your friend, too, Leandra,” she said quietly. “If you want some company, you can just say so; I’m more than happy to spend time with you. Even if it’s for no particular reason. You don’t have to take me to see animals. You can just ask.” She paused, uncertain. “You know, I read that tigers are solitary. They spend almost all their time alone. But you’re not a tiger, you’re a human being.” From the guarded look that dropped immediately over Leandra’s face, Ashley realized she’d hit a nerve. “It’s not such a good thing for a human to be alone for too long.”

Leandra’s posture stiffened, her expression guarded. “I know that.” The purring was replaced by a threatening growl.

Ashley raised her hands in a calming gesture. “I’m not trying to make you angry,” she said. “I’m sure you have a reason to be out here like this, and I’m not saying you shouldn’t be here if it’s what you want. I’m just

saying that, maybe, it would be good for you to be around another person. Like me, for example.” She smiled, reassured when Leandra realized the unfriendly noises she was making and stopped them, looking embarrassed. “When was the last time you spoke actual words? I mean, before we met?”

“About three years ago, I guess.”

“Does anyone in the outside world know you’re here?” Ashley probed gently. “Family? Friends?”

Leandra shook her head. “Anyone who knew me probably assumes I’m dead,” she whispered. “I doubt they miss me much, anyway.”

Ashley scooted closer, amused to see Leandra’s nostrils twitch as she sniffed the air. There were a thousand and one questions burning on the tip of her tongue—a thousand things she wanted to ask Leandra about her life and what had brought her here—but she resisted the desire to give them voice. Working with animals all her life had taught her that you couldn’t get close to a wild animal if you moved in too quickly. Calm and patience worked best. She decided to employ those same tactics with Leandra. “I think you need to be reminded that you’re not an animal,” Ashley said, very slowly reaching out and pushing back the mass of hair. “Under all this paint and hair, there’s a beautiful woman, not a giant cat. You don’t want to forget that.”

Leandra sat frozen, trembling slightly, and it seemed for a long moment she had forgotten to breathe. She stared back at Ashley with wide eyes, visibly struggling not to retreat from her more intimate proximity. Ashley held her position until she saw the wild, instinctive urge diminish, and Leandra relaxed.

“I haven’t forgotten,” Leandra whispered in a hesitant voice. “But it’s nice to be reminded, sometimes. And I’d like to show you the animals anyway, if you want to see them.”

“Okay, then.” Ashley backed away and resumed her seat. “I’d like that.”

“Good.”

A long period of silence followed, and then Leandra glanced shyly at Ashley. “You know,” she said quietly, “I’m not crazy or anything.”

Ashley chuckled. “I never thought you were.”

“Good.” Leandra offered a slight smile. “I was just confirming it.”

Ashley cast her eyes over the tall woman’s striped body. “I’m not going to lie and say I think you’re exactly ‘normal,’ but I’ve been around long

enough to tell the difference between eccentricity and madness. I wouldn't be here with you now if I thought you were insane."

Leandra considered that before giving her a grateful smile. Ashley could read Leandra's body language well enough to recognize her longing for company after such a long period of isolation. Utterly intrigued by the strange woman, Ashley was more than happy to provide some human contact; she couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to endure four years alone in the wild. How lonely it must be.

The two women sat quietly and watched the peacocks finish their preening and wander off. They lingered even after the birds had left, exchanging a few words now and then but mostly just enjoying the sounds of the jungle creatures at play all around them.



Dressed in camouflage fatigues, a tall, well-built man watched through a pair of binoculars as the group of five gathered around a small fire to share their evening meal and talk as the sun went down. With a rifle slung over his shoulder and basic essentials like a water flask, a compass, and a broad-bladed hunting knife belted around his waist, the six-foot-tall man cut an impressive, confident figure. His dark-blond hair was held back in a loose ponytail, a few strands pulling loose in the humidity and clinging to his sweat-streaked face. His skin was deeply tanned, and wrinkles had formed at the corners of his eyes from years of squinting into the sunlight. Intense, green eyes burned from deep-set sockets as he observed the gathering.

Behind him, another man watched in similar fashion, this one sporting bright red hair and a thick beard. A deep scowl pulled the corners of his mouth down when he spotted a familiar figure sitting on a fallen log, laughing with her friends.

"That's her," he said. "The little blonde bitch on the right." He shook his head. "Told me she was a photographer or something. Guess it's lucky for me I didn't kill her, right, Jack?"

Jack Corbin grunted, as his shrewd eyes took in the details of the camp and its inhabitants. "That balding guy's no photographer," he decided quickly. "From the looks of the gear they're toting, him and that brunette sitting next to him are scientists or some such. Probably doing research. The Indian guy must be their guide, getting paid to babysit, make sure

nothing bad happens.” He worked the binocular focus wheel and brought the petite blonde into sharper detail. She didn’t look like much, he thought, wondering whether he should believe the man behind him. “Blondie’s no worse for wear after your little encounter with the ‘Indian Menace’,” he observed.

The grizzly redhead scowled. “Maybe she ran away like I did. Or maybe that thing only kills guys like us. How should I know what happened?”

Corbin replaced his binoculars in a case attached to the belt around his waist. “Tell me again what it looked like.”

“It was a woman,” the man explained for the dozenth time. “Only she was like a tiger. She had claws, her skin was stripy, and she moved like a cat. I swear it’s the truth.”

“And you ran away.”

“Damn right I ran. If you saw that thing, you’d have run away too.”

Corbin just grunted, still unsure what to make of this report. “I had three other men coming in for this hunt,” he said quietly. “They’re two days late now. I guess that means they didn’t make it.”

“If they got caught by the ghost, they sure as hell didn’t make it.”

Jack Corbin was not prone to flights of fancy. He had traveled every continent on Earth, had tracked and hunted almost every creature capable of killing a man, and had never encountered any beast that couldn’t be overcome with caution and a loaded gun. His reputation was widespread among those who lived in the shadowy world of the black market animal trade, and though he could have lived a soft life of luxury from the money he’d made in his dealings, Jack preferred the excitement and danger of his work.

Three years ago, he’d heard the reports of a poaching expedition that had been massacred in the Indian forests, the details of which had been enough to make even a ruthless hunter like him a little nervous. At the time, he’d assumed it was some kind of scare tactic the rangers were using to frighten away poachers. The stories told of some mystical, tiger-like spirit stalking the jungle, ravaging those who dared to hunt the great cats. He’d scoffed at the lunacy of it, even as many of his comrades started avoiding the Indian territory.

In the years that followed, more rumors had filtered down to him of men lost in the jungle—some never found; some discovered by rangers,

their bodies mauled and shredded with fearful savagery. Now, lured here by the chance to hunt the rare white tiger, Jack wasn't sure what to make of the story brought to him by his companion, but he intended to tread carefully. He hadn't become successful as a poacher and smuggler by being rash.

Having never hunted with Shaun Duggan before, Jack trusted his bizarre story just enough not to discount it. The man seemed a touch too eager to believe in a superstitious explanation, but he'd obviously seen something. Jack could hear the nervousness in his voice.

"So what're we gonna do?" Shaun asked.

Jack considered long and hard. Eventually, he nodded toward the distant campfire. "We'll watch them closely," he stated. "If they're here for the tiger as well, maybe we won't have to work so hard to find it. We can let them do the work for us."

"And what about the ghost?"

"We find it, and we kill it." Jack turned away, unslung his rifle, and headed back to his camp, some two miles to the west. "If it's real enough that it can kill a man, it's real enough that we can kill it."

"But how?"

"Simple." Jack shot him a withering glance. "First, we lure it out of hiding. Once I get a good look at it, I'll decide the best way to take it down."

Shaun's expression suggested he still had reservations, but he was smart enough to keep them to himself. On the way back to camp, Jack pondered the safest way to lure out the strange menace, rather enjoying the first true challenge he'd had in a long while.

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PRIMAL TOUCH

BY AMBER JACOBS

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