

PROLOGUE



blood in the water

Behind the thick glass of his Mumbai penthouse office once again, Lokesh tried to control the incredible rage slowly circling through his veins. Nothing had gone according to plan in the Baiga camp. Even the villagers had turned out to be weak and disloyal. True, he had captured Dhiren, the white tiger-prince, and taken a vital piece of the Damon Amulet from the girl, but he hadn't been able to finish what he'd started.

Breathing deeply to calm his rage, he pressed his fingers together and deliberately tapped them against his bottom lip as he pondered the fight. *They'd possessed special weapons. His underlings had discovered that the weapons were somehow tied to the goddess Durga. Clearly, there was some kind of magic involved, and it wasn't the weak country magic of the tribe.*

Magic was a tool, a gift to be used by those wise enough to understand and manipulate it. A trick of the universe that only a few sought and even fewer could harness. Lokesh had it, and he would use it to bring him even more power. Others thought him evil. He didn't believe in good and evil—only in powerful and powerless. Lokesh was determined to be the former.

Why Durga? Perhaps the goddess is somehow guiding them.

Like good and evil, he didn't believe in gods. Faith was a crutch, a convenient way to control the masses who would become mindless slaves, choosing not to use whatever meager intellect they possessed.

Believers sat at home and wept and prayed, prostrating themselves for divine assistance that would never come.

An intelligent man takes matters into his own hands. Lokesh frowned as he remembered the girl slipping from his. To her, it must have seemed like he ran. He'd sent in reinforcements, but the idiots had returned empty-handed. The command center had been destroyed. The cameras and video records were missing. The Baiga, the tiger, and the girl were nowhere to be found. It was extremely . . . vexing.

A chime rang as his assistant entered the room. Lokesh listened as the man nervously explained that the tracking device he'd implanted in the prince had been found. The man opened his shaking hand and dropped the smashed remains on the desk. Without a word, Lokesh picked up the broken chip and, using the power of the amulet, threw it and the quivering assistant out of the sixtieth-story window. He listened to the assistant's screams as he dropped floor by floor. Just when the man was about to hit bottom, Lokesh murmured a few words that opened a hole in the ground under his assistant and buried him alive.

Disappointing distractions dealt with, he pulled his hard-won prize from his pocket. Wind whipped through the broken window, and the sun rose higher above the bustling city, casting a beam of light on the freshly acquired fourth piece of the amulet. Soon, he would unite *all* the pieces of the amulet and would finally have the means to accomplish what he'd always dreamed of since he'd learned of the amulet's existence. He knew that the completed amulet would fashion him into something new . . . something . . . more. Something . . . perfect. Though he had deliberately prolonged starting the process and relished the anticipation almost as much as the victory, it was time.

The moment had arrived.

A crackle of pleasure raced through his blood as he touched the fourth segment to his precious amulet collection.

It didn't fit.

He turned, twisted, and tilted the wedge, but it would not mold to the others. *Why? I snatched it from the girl's neck in the Baiga camp. It was the same amulet piece she had worn in both visions.*

Instantly, a heavy black shadow of loathing fell upon him. Gnashing his teeth, he crushed the offending amulet imitation and let the powder trickle through his tight fist as each cell of his body burst with a blazing tempest. Sparkles of blue light popped and crackled between the digits.

Waves of anger washed through his mind, pummeling against the thin barrier of his skin. Without an outlet to assuage his violent urges, he clenched his fists and buried the power deep within him. *The girl! She tricked me!*

Anger pulsed at his temples as he considered Kelsey Hayes. She reminded him of another from centuries ago: Deschen, the tigers' mother. *Now there was a woman full of fire*, he remembered—unlike his own wife whom he had killed when she bore him a girl, Yesubai. He'd wanted a son. An heir. *My son and I would have ruled the world.*

After his disappointment with the birth of his daughter, he'd come up with a new plan—kill Rajaram and take Deschen for his own bride. Part of the fun would have been breaking her spirit. The fight would have been exquisite.

Deschen was long gone now, and fortunately, the tigers had brought him Kelsey. She was more than he bargained for. *Much* more. Slowly, his seething rage transformed into something else. It cooked and bubbled in his mind, thoughts forming and bursting like cankerous blisters until his determination boiled down to a dark, maddening desire.

Kelsey had the same fiery bravery that Deschen had possessed, and he would have a perverse pleasure taking her away from the sons of Rajaram. Suddenly, his fingers itched to touch her fine skin again. How pleasant it would be to put his knife to her flesh. As he pondered that thought, he ran a finger along the sharp edge of the broken glass window. *Perhaps* he would even let the tigers live so he could revel in the turmoil

it would cause them. *Yes. Caging the princes and making them watch as I subdue the girl will be highly pleasurable. Especially after this.*

So long. I've waited so long.

Only one thought calmed him: The battle was far from over. He would find her. His team was already searching all over India, monitoring Durga's temples, and watching every transportation hub by land, air, and sea. He was a man who took no risks and left no stone unturned. He would strike again. After all, she was only a girl.

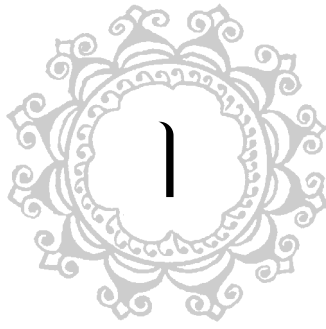
Soon, he thought. Lokesh shuddered as he imagined touching her again. He could almost sense her. I wonder what she'll sound like when she screams. It surprised him that he was almost looking forward to capturing the girl more than to obtaining the amulet. The need to have her was vicious. It tore through him as his fingers itched again. Soon he would have the girl and unite the pieces of the amulet. *Once I get my hands on her though, I'll have to be patient. Rushing things has been my downfall.*

He twisted one of the rings on his finger. Perhaps he shouldn't have expected grappling with the tigers to be easy. They'd caused so much trouble the first time. However, they weren't the only predators in India. He too was a creature to be feared. He was like a shark, cutting silently, swiftly, and fatally through the water.

Lokesh smiled. Sharks were creatures to admire, the ultimate predator, the dominant fish in the ocean. In the animal world, predators are born. However, a man chooses to be a predator, ripping to pieces those who stand against him, cracking the backbones of all who would oppose, and swallowing his enemies. He chooses to be the predator, or he chooses to be the prey.

Long ago Lokesh had decided to be at the top of the food chain. Now there was only one family and one young girl left that stood in his way. *And no girl stands a chance after I catch the scent of her blood in the water.*

Lokesh thoughtfully stroked his beard and smiled as he pictured circling her. The waters were chummed. They would never see him coming.



living without love

Is he going to do it?

I stared at Ren, searching for a hint of emotion.

A full minute ticked by. The second he made his choice, I knew it.

Ren stretched out his hand to make his move.

“I win.” He smiled as he knocked Kishan’s pawn off the board and moved his HOME. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Told you,” he said. “I never lose at Parcheesi.”

It had been more than a month since we rescued Ren from being tortured and held prisoner at Lokesh’s Baiga camp and three weeks since my terrible birthday party—and life was purgatory. Even though I gave him my journal and used up all the flour baking my mom’s famous double-chocolate peanut-butter cookies, Ren sadly had no memory of me. Something had happened with Lokesh to cause Ren’s amnesia. Now we were reunited, but we weren’t together.

Still, I refused to give up hope that somehow he might miraculously recover our past, and I was determined to free him. Even if Ren could never be mine again, I had made a commitment to seek the other two gifts to fulfill the goddess Durga’s prophecy and break the tiger’s curse so that both princes could once again be normal men. The least I could do for the man I loved was to not let him down.

Every day being near Ren but not being *with* him was harder than

the last. Mr. Kadam did his best to distract me, and Ren's brother, Kishan, respected my feelings and stood by me as a supportive friend, though every look and touch made it very clear he was still interested in something more.

Neither Ren nor I knew how to act around each other. The four of us seemed to be walking on eggshells, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Only Nilima, Mr. Kadam's great-great-great granddaughter seemed to keep us all breathing, eating, and sane.

One particularly tear-filled night, I found Mr. Kadam in the peacock room. He was reading a book by the soft light of a lamp. I sat down next to him, put my head on his knee, and cried softly. He patted my back and hummed an Indian lullaby. Eventually, I calmed down and shared my fears. I told him I was worried that Ren was lost to me and asked him if a broken heart could really heal.

"You already know the answer to that, Miss Kelsey. Was your heart full and happy when you were with Ren before?"

"Yes."

"Your heart wasn't too damaged to love Ren because of your parents' death?"

"No. But those are two different kinds of love."

"It's different in some ways but the same in others. Your capacity for love does not ebb. You love your parents still, do you not?"

"Of course."

"Then I would suggest that what you are feeling is not the scarring or the diminishing of your heart, but the absence of your loved one."

I looked at the wise Indian businessman and sighed. "It's pretty sad when I feel the absence of my loved one while he's standing in the same room."

"It is," Mr. Kadam admitted. "Maybe it would be best to do nothing."

"You mean let him go?"

He patted my arm and, after considering a moment, said, "One of my sons once caught a small bird with an injured wing. He longed to care for it and keep it for a pet. One day he brought his bird to me. It was dead. He explained that the bird had healed and flapped its wings. But my son panicked and caught the bird before it flew away. He held it so tightly it suffocated.

"The bird may have chosen to stay with my son or may have flown away. Either of those events would have led to a happier conclusion. If the bird had left, my son would have been sad, but he would have remembered it with a smile. Instead, my son was devastated by the death of his pet and had a very hard time recovering from the experience."

"So you *are* saying to let Ren go."

"What I'm saying is . . . you will be happier if *he* is happy."

"Well, I definitely don't want to smother Ren to death." I sighed and tucked my legs under me. "I don't want to *avoid* him either. I like being around him and avoiding him would make finishing Durga's quest together difficult."

"May I suggest trying to be his friend?"

"He was always my friend. Maybe if I could get that part of him back, I won't feel like I've lost everything."

"I think you are right."

Friends with Ren? I pondered as I pulled out the ribbon holding my braid and climbed the stairs to turn in. *Well, something is better than nothing, and right now I have a whole lot of nothing going on.*

The next day Mr. Kadam and Nilima had set out a brunch. They'd already come and gone, but I found Ren in the kitchen piling a plate high with fruit and sweet rolls. He looked more like himself every day. His tall frame was filling out, and his dark hair had regained its glossy

sheen. His gorgeous blue eyes watched me with a concerned expression as I took a plate.

When I got to the strawberries, I bumped him with my hip and he froze.

“Can you move down a bit please?” I asked. “I’d like to have a go at those cheese Danishes before Kishan gets here.”

Ren snapped out of it. “Sure. Sorry.”

He set his plate on the table, and I took the seat across from him. He watched me as he slowly peeled the paper away from a muffin. My face burned slightly from his attention.

“Are you okay?” he began haltingly. “I heard you crying last night.”
“I’m fine.”

He grunted and started eating but kept his eyes on me. When he was half finished, he looked away.

“Are you *sure*? I’m sorry if I upset you . . . again. I just don’t remember—”

I stopped him right there by raising my hand. “How you feel is how you feel, Ren.”

“Still, I apologize for hurting your feelings,” he said softly.

I stabbed my melon with a fork. Despite my protestations and my attempt to be nonchalant, I was having a hard time following Mr. Kadam’s advice. My eyes felt hot.

“Which time? On my birthday when you said I’m not attractive or that you can’t stand being in the same room with me or when you said Nilima is beautiful or—”

“Okay, I get the point.”

“Good, because I’d like to drop it.”

After a moment, he elaborated, “By the way, I didn’t say you weren’t attractive. I just said you’re young.”

“So is Nilima by *your* standards. You’re more than three hundred years old!”



“That’s true.” He grinned lopsidedly in an attempt to get me to smile.

“Technically, you should be dating a very old lady.” A tiny smile passed my lips.

He grimaced. “I also want you to know that you’re perfectly easy to be around and very likeable. I’ve never had this reaction to anyone before. I get along with almost everyone. There’s no legitimate reason why I should feel the need to escape when you walk into a room.”

“Other than the pressure to remember, you mean?”

“It’s not the pressure. It’s something . . . else. But I’ve decided to ignore it.”

“Can you do that?”

“Sure. The longer I stay near you the more intense the response. It’s not talking with you that’s hard; it’s just being in close proximity. We should try talking on the phone and see if that makes a difference. I’ll just work on building up immunity.”

“I see. So your goal is to build up a tolerance for me.” I sighed. “Okay.”

“I’ll keep trying, Kelsey.”

“Don’t strain yourself *too* much, because it doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve decided to just be friends with you.”

He leaned forward and said conspiratorially, “But aren’t you still, you know, in love with me?”

I leaned forward too. “I don’t want to talk about that anymore.”

Ren folded his arms across his chest. “Why not?”

“Because Lois Lane never suffocated Superman.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ll have to watch the movie. The point is, I’m done holding you back, so if you want to date Nilima, go for it.”

“Wait a minute! You’re just going to cut me off?”

“Is that a problem?”

“I didn’t say it was a problem. It’s just that I’ve been reading your



journal, and for a girl who's supposed to be crazy about me, you're sure giving up pretty quickly."

"I'm not *giving up* anything. There's nothing *between* us now to give up."

He stared at me as I speared another piece of fruit.

Rubbing his jaw, he said, "So you want to be friends."

"Yep. No pressure, no tears, no constant reminders of things you forgot, no anything. We'll just start over. A clean slate. We'll learn how to be friends and get along despite your inner trigger to run. What do you say?" I wiped my hand on a napkin and held it out. "Want to shake on it?"

Ren considered, smiled, and took my hand. I pumped his up and down once.

"What are we agreeing on?" Kishan asked as he walked into what was the longest conversation Ren and I had had since before he was captured.

"Kelsey just agreed to give me a demonstration of her lightning ability," Ren smoothly lied. "Being able to shoot fire from your hand is something I've got to see."

I looked at him with a raised eyebrow. He smiled and winked, then stood and took both of our plates to the kitchen sink. Kishan's golden eyes cast a doubtful glance at me, but he sat down and snatched the remaining half of my cheese Danish. I smacked his hand playfully before picking up a towel to help Ren. When we were finished, he swiped the towel from me, snapping it lightly against my thigh. I laughed, enjoying our newfound repartee, and turned to find Kishan frowning at us.

Ren put his arm lightly around my shoulder and dipped his head closer to my ear, "'Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.' Better keep an eye out for him, Kelsey."



I laughed, glad that he remembered his Shakespeare, if not me. “Don’t worry about Kishan, Caesar. His growl is worse than his bite.”

“Has he bitten you lately?”

“Not recently.”

“Hmm, I’ll keep an eye out for you,” Ren said as he left the room.

“What was all that about?” Kishan growled, giving me a brief glimpse of the fierce black tiger hiding behind his eyes.

“He’s celebrating his emancipation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve told him that I’d like to be friends.”

Kishan paused, “Is that what *you* want?”

“What *I* want is irrelevant. Being my friend is something he can do. Being my boyfriend is not in the stars right now.”

Kishan kept thankfully silent. I could tell he wanted to offer himself as a replacement, either seriously or in jest, but he bit his tongue. Because he did, I kissed his cheek on my way out.

With the ice finally broken between Ren and me, we all could finally move on and soon settled into a routine. I checked in with my foster parents, Mike and Sarah, every week, telling them virtually nothing but that I was fine and busy assisting Mr. Kadam. I assured them that I’d finished my freshman year at Western Oregon University online and that I’d be spending summer break doing an internship in India.

I practiced martial arts with Kishan in the mornings, had late breakfasts with Ren, and helped Mr. Kadam research the third part of Durga’s prophecy in the afternoons. In the evenings, Mr. Kadam and I cooked dinner together—except when he wanted to make curry. Those nights I made my own dinner, using the Golden Fruit.

After dinner we played games, watched movies, and sometimes read in the peacock room. Kishan stayed in the library only if I was



telling a story, and then he'd curl up at my feet as the black tiger. We began reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together. Mr. Kadam bought several copies of the play so we could take different parts to read. I liked being able to share those times with Ren.

Mr. Kadam had been right, as usual. Ren did seem happy. Everyone responded to his improved mood, including Kishan, who had somehow changed from a brooding, resentful younger brother into a confident man. Kishan kept his distance, but his golden come-hither eyes made my face burn.

Sometimes in the evenings, I'd find Ren in the music room playing his guitar. He'd strum through songs and laugh when I requested "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. One such night, Ren played the song he'd written for me. I watched him carefully, hoping a memory might be coming back. He was concentrating deeply as he picked softly through the notes. He kept getting stuck and started over again several times.

When he caught my gaze, he dropped his hands and grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I just can't seem to remember this one. Do you have a request this evening?"

"No," I said curtly and stood.

Ren took my hand but dropped it quickly. "What is it? You're sad. More than usual."

"That song . . . it's—"

"The song? Have you heard it before?"

"No," I lied and smiled sadly, "It's . . . lovely." I squeezed his hand and stumbled away before he could ask any more questions. I wiped a tear from my cheek as I climbed the stairs. I could hear him working on the song again, trying to figure out where the notes belonged.

Another evening, I was relaxing on the veranda, smelling the night jasmine, and looking up at the stars when I overheard Kishan and Ren talking.



“You’ve changed,” Ren pointed out to his brother. “You’re not the same man you were six months ago.”

“I can still whip your white hide if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“No, it’s not that. You’re still a powerful fighter. But now, you’re more relaxed, more certain, more . . . composed.” He laughed. “And much harder to get riled up.”

Kishan replied softly, “She’s changed me. I’ve been working hard to become the kind of man she needs, the kind of man she already believes me to be.”

Ren didn’t respond, and the two entered the house. I sat quietly, thinking deeply about Kishan’s words. *Who knew life and love would be so complicated?*





getting reacquainted

A few days later, Mr. Kadam called us together in the dining room. As we all took seats around the table, I secretly hoped this wasn't bad news and that Lokesh hadn't found us again.

"I'd like to propose an idea," Mr. Kadam began. "I've figured out a way to make sure we can find one another if, perchance, someone is abducted again. It won't be comfortable, but I feel a little discomfort is a small price to pay to make sure no one is lost."

He opened a box and took out a bubble-wrapped package. Inside was a black velvet bundle that unrolled to reveal five thick syringes with needles the size of a giant porcupine quill.

Nervously, I asked, "Umm, Mr. Kadam? What exactly do you mean by a *little* discomfort?"

He opened the first syringe and took out a bottle of saline solution and some alcohol wipes. "Have you heard of RFID tags?"

"No," I responded with alarm as I watched him gently take Kishan's left hand, swipe the area between his thumb and forefinger with an alcohol wipe, and then dab a yellow topical ointment in the same place.

"It stands for Radio Frequency Identification tags. They're used in animals."

"You mean to track whales and sharks? Things like that?"

“Not exactly. Those are larger and drop off after they lose power.”

Ren leaned forward and picked up a chip about the size of a grain of rice. “It looks similar to what Lokesh implanted in me.”

He set the chip down and rubbed his hands together slowly, looking off into the distance.

“Did it hurt? Could you feel it inside your skin?” I asked tentatively, trying to bring him back from whatever dark place he had gone.

Ren let out a breath and gave me a small smile. “The pain was minimal at the time, but yes, I could feel it under my skin.”

“This tag is slightly different.” Mr. Kadam hesitated and added, “We don’t have to use them, but I think they will be a protection for all of us.”

Ren nodded in agreement, and Mr. Kadam continued, “These are somewhat similar to RFID tags which are used in pets. They emit a frequency, usually a ten-digit number, which can be scanned through the skin.

“The chips are encased in biocompatible glass to prevent them from coming in contact with moisture. RFID tags for humans are not commonplace yet but are beginning to be approved for medical purposes. They identify medical history, allergies, and the types of medication a person is currently taking.”

He drew some saline solution into the syringe and replaced the smaller needle with the giant one. Then he placed a tiny chip into the needle’s groove. He pinched the skin between Kishan’s thumb and finger and carefully inserted the needle. I looked away.

Unperturbed, Mr. Kadam continued, “Now for the large marine animals you were speaking of, researchers use satellite tags that transmit anything from the current location in longitude and latitude, to the depth of the animal, the duration of the dive, and the swimming speed. That type of tag is external and is attached to a battery that eventually is used up in the transmission of information. Most of them last only

a short time but some of the more expensive ones can last for a few months.”

He pressed a cotton ball to Kishan’s hand, removed the needle, and covered it with a Band-Aid. “Ren?”

Kishan and Ren switched places, and Mr. Kadam began the process over with Ren.

“There are a few internal tags put into marine animals that can record the heart rate, the temperature of the water, the body temperature, and the depth of the animal. Many of them transmit information to satellites when the animal surfaces.”

He selected a new syringe, drew a bit of saline solution, replaced it with the larger one, and placed another chip into the needle’s groove. When he pinched the skin and moved closer, I grimaced. Ren looked up and made eye contact with me. He smiled and said, “Easy as peach pie.”

Peach pie. The color drained from my face.

He tried to reassure me, “No, really. It’s not that bad.”

I smiled weakly. “I’m not sure your tolerance for pain and mine are the same, but I’ll survive. You were saying, Mr. Kadam?”

“Yes. So the problem with the RFID chips and the satellite tags is power. What we have here is technically not on the market and will likely never be, due to the general public’s fear of identity theft and having government agencies monitor them.

“Almost every technological development can be used for either the benefit or detriment of mankind. I understand the fear associated with such a device but there are many valid reasons for exploring technologies such as this one. Luckily, I have military contacts, and they often walk where others fear to tread. Our tags can do all of those things and much, much more, transmitting data constantly even well above and below sea level.”

He finished with Ren and looked at me. Hesitantly, I pushed back my chair and switched places with Ren. When I sat down, Mr. Kadam

patted my hand briefly. I found myself staring fixedly at the needle as he switched needles again. He chose the hand not marked by Phet's henna tattooing and repeated the wipe-ointment process.

"I'm giving you a topical medicine that will numb the area slightly, but the injection will still hurt."

"Okay."

He placed a chip into the tip of the large needle. When he pinched my skin, I shut my eyes and drew in a tight breath through clenched teeth as he found the right spot.

Kishan's warm hand took mine, and he said tenderly, "Squeeze as hard as you need to, Kells."

Mr. Kadam slowly inserted the needle. It hurt. It felt like he was shoving one of my grandma's giant knitting needles through my hand. I squeezed Kishan's hand and started breathing fast. Seconds ticked by that felt like minutes. I heard Mr. Kadam say he had to go a little deeper.

I couldn't bite back the whimper of pain and wiggled in my chair as he twisted the needle and pushed it farther. My ears started ringing, and everyone's voices became thick. I was going to faint. I never thought of myself as wimpy, but needles, I realized, make me sick. About to keel over, I cracked my eyes open to look at Ren.

He was watching me with concern. When our eyes met, he smiled my favorite lopsided grin, the sweet expression he used only with me, and for just a moment the pain disappeared. For that brief instant, I allowed myself to believe he was still mine, and that he loved me. Everyone else in the room vanished to leave only us.

I wished that I could touch his cheek and brush back his silky black hair or trace the arch of his eyebrow. I stared into his handsome face and let those feelings overwhelm me, and in that fleeting time, I felt the ghost of our emotional connection.

It was just a mere whisper, like a scent on the breeze that blows



past too quickly, bringing with it a memory of something you can't quite grasp. I wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light, a flicker of something real, or something I fabricated, but it captured all of my attention. My entire being was focused on Ren, to the point that when Mr. Kadam pulled out the needle and replaced it with a cotton ball, I realized that I'd dropped Kishan's hand completely.

Voices rushed back into my consciousness. I nodded in answer to Kishan's question and looked from my hand to Ren again, but he'd left the room. Mr. Kadam asked Kishan to assist him in placing his own device. He began explaining the difference between our technology and the others he'd described.

I only half-listened, but I did hear him say that we could access one another's tags with new cell phones, which he then distributed. He explained how the power source worked. I sat nodding slightly but snapped out of my trance when Kishan stood up several minutes later. Mr. Kadam offered me some aspirin and water. I swallowed the pills and headed to my bedroom.

Restless and uncomfortable, I lay on top of my covers unsuccessfully trying to fall asleep. My hand was sore and sleeping with it tucked under my cheek was out of the question.

I heard a soft knock on the door. "Come in."

"I heard you wiggling around and guessed that you were still awake," said Ren, closing the door softly behind him. "I hope I'm not bothering you."

I sat up and clicked on the bedside lamp. "No. It's fine. What's the matter? Do you want to go out onto the veranda?"

"No. Kishan seems to have taken up permanent residence out there."

"Oh." I looked through the window and saw a black tail hanging over the edge of the loveseat twitching lazily back and forth.

“I’ll talk to him about that. He doesn’t need to babysit me. I’m perfectly safe here.”

Ren shrugged. “He likes to watch over you.”

“So what did you want to talk about?”

He sat down on the edge of my bed. “I . . . I’m not sure exactly. How’s your hand?”

“It stings. How’s yours?”

“Mine’s healed up already.” He held up his hand for inspection.

I took his hand in mine and studied it. I couldn’t even tell anything was under his skin. He wrapped his fingers around mine briefly. I blushed, and he brushed the backs of his fingers lightly against my warm cheek, which caused my skin to burn even hotter.

“You’re blushing.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s . . . quite becoming.”

I sat very still and watched his expression as he concentrated on my face. He lifted his hand and touched a strand of my hair. He trailed his fingers down the length of it. I sucked in a breath, and he did too—but for a different reason. A bead of sweat trailed from his forehead down his temple when he pulled back.

“Are you alright?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “It’s worse when I touch you.”

“Then don’t touch me.”

“I need to get past this. Give me your hand.”

I placed my right hand in his, and he covered it with his left. He closed his eyes and held my hand for a full minute. I felt a light tremor in his arm as he cupped my hand gently between his. Finally, he let go.

“Is it time for you to change back to a tiger?”

“No, I have time left. I can remain in human form for twelve hours now.”

“Then what is it? Why are you shaking?”

“I don’t know. It feels like something’s burning me when I touch you. My stomach cramps, my vision blurs, and my head throbs.”

“Try sitting over there.” I pointed to the couch.

He stubbornly sat on the floor with his back to the bed and brought up a knee to rest his elbow on.

“Is that better?” I asked.

“Yes. The burning is gone but the blurry vision, headache, and stomach heaving is still there.”

“Do you feel pain when you’re in another part of the house?”

“No, only touching you causes the blistering pain. Seeing you or hearing you brings on the other symptoms in varying degrees. If you’re sitting far enough away, it’s barely a twinge. It’s merely uncomfortable, and I have to fight the urge to get away. Holding your hand or touching your face is like handling red hot coals.”

“When you first came back and we talked, you put my foot in your lap. Didn’t that hurt?”

“Your foot was on a pillow. I touched it for only a few seconds, and I was in so much pain at the time anyway that I barely noticed more.”

“Let’s test it. Stand over there by the bathroom door, and I’ll go to the other side of the room.”

He moved.

“So right now, how do you feel?”

“I feel like I need to get out of here. The discomfort has lessened, but the longer I stay, the worse it will get.”

“Is the need to leave a creepy feeling, like you need to run to save your life?”

“No. It’s a desperation that builds . . . like when you hold your

breath underwater. It's fine at first, maybe even nice, but soon it feels like my lungs are screaming for air, and it's all I can do not to claw my way to the surface."

"Hmm, maybe you have PTSD."

"What's that?"

"Post-traumatic stress disorder. It's a condition you get when you've been exposed to terrible trauma and high stress levels. Soldiers in combat usually have it. Remember when you told Kishan that when you heard my name, all you could picture was Lokesh torturing you, questioning you?"

"Right. There's still some of that, I guess. But now that I know you better I don't associate you with him as much anymore. I can distance that from you now. It wasn't because of you that it happened."

"Part of your symptoms with me might still be related to that. Maybe you need a therapist."

Ren chuckled, "Kelsey, first of all, a therapist would put me in an asylum for claiming I was a tiger. Second, I'm no stranger to bloody battles or pain. It wasn't the first time Lokesh has tortured me. It was definitely an experience I wouldn't want to go through again, but I know that you are not to blame."

"It doesn't make you less of a man to ask for help once in a while."

"I'm not trying to be heroic about it if that's what you're getting at. If it makes you feel better, I've already started talking with Kishan about it."

I blinked. "Has he been helpful?"

"Kishan is . . . surprisingly sympathetic. He's a different man now. He said he's changed because of you. You've influenced him. Brought out a side of him I haven't seen since our mother died."

I nodded. "He's a good man."

"We've talked about many things. Not just about Lokesh but about



our past too. He told me about Yesubai and about how the two of you have become close.”

“Oh.” For a panicked moment, I wondered if Kishan had shared other things with Ren, things like maybe his *feelings*. I wasn’t sure I wanted to broach that subject, so I changed it. “I don’t want you to feel pain or suffer when you’re near me. Maybe it would be better for you to avoid being around me.”

“I don’t want to avoid you. I like you.”

“You *do*?” I couldn’t help but smile.

“Yes. I imagine that’s why I dated you,” he said dryly. He slid down to the floor and rested his back against the bathroom door. “Let’s see how long I can last. Come closer.”

Obediently, I took a few steps forward. He gestured to me again. “No. Closer. Sit on the bed.”

I got on the bed and watched his face for pain. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He stretched out his long legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Tell me about our first date.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s tolerable now.”

I scooted to the edge of the bed farthest away from him, crawled under the covers, and put my pillow in my lap. “Okay, our first date would probably be the one you tricked me into.”

“When was this?”

“Right after we left Kishkindha. In that restaurant at the hotel.”

“The restaurant? Is that the one right after I got six hours back?”

“Yes. What do you remember about that?”

“Nothing, except eating dinner for the first time in centuries in a nice restaurant with a table full of food. I felt . . . happy.”

“Ha! Well, I imagine you *did* feel happy. You were very smug, and you flirted shamelessly with the waitress.”

“Did I?” He rubbed his jaw. “I don’t even remember the waitress.”

I snorted. “How is it you always know the right things to say even when you can’t remember anything?”

He grinned. “Must be a gift. So about the waitress . . . was she pretty? Tell me more.”

I described our date and how we’d fought over dinner. I told him about how he’d ordered a feast and tricked Mr. Kadam into bringing me there. I described how handsome he looked, about how we’d argued, and how I’d stomped on his foot when he winked at the waitress.

“What happened after dinner?”

“You walked me back to my room.”

“And?”

“And . . . nothing.”

“Didn’t I at least kiss you goodnight?”

“No.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

I laughed. “It’s not that you didn’t want to. You were punishing me.”

“Punishing you?”

“In a way. You wanted me to admit my feelings.”

“And you didn’t?”

“No. I’m pretty stubborn.”

“I see. So the waitress flirted with me, huh?”

“If you don’t stop grinning at the thought of the waitress, I’m going to punch your arm and make you physically sick.”

He laughed. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“I’m too fast for you to even come close.”

“Want to bet?”

I crawled across the bed while he watched me with an amused expression. I leaned over the side, made a fist with my good hand, and



swung, but he quickly spun away, got to his feet, and was now standing at the foot of the bed. Getting off the bed, I walked around the side, trying to corner him. He laughed softly and motioned me closer. I stalked toward him slowly.

He stood his ground with a soft smile of confidence and let me approach him. When I was five steps away, he lost his smile. At three steps, he grimaced. At one step, he groaned and staggered. He moved several feet away and clutched the back of the couch for support as he took some deep breaths.

"I think that's all I can handle tonight. Sorry, Kelsey."

I took several steps backward and said softly, "I'm sorry too."

He opened the door, and gave me a small smile. "I think it was worse this time because I touched your hand for so long. The pain built up too quickly. Normally, standing next to you doesn't affect me so strongly."

I nodded.

He grinned. "Next time I'll just have to remember to touch you at the end of the evening. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

A few days later, our tiger's curse adventure started up again. We set off to visit the shaman Phet who had finally replied to Mr. Kadam's courier and indicated that he wanted to see "Tigers, Kahl-see, and Durga's special gifts." He was adamant that just the three of us make the journey.

Although I didn't voice the thought, I hoped Phet, with his odd, mystical ways and herbal potions, would be able to reverse Ren's memory loss.

Even though Ren and I were on much better footing and both brothers seemed to get along since our last road trip, I still felt a bit uneasy about being trapped in a small space with two hot-headed tigers.



Well, if they act up, I'll just blast them with a little lightning burn. That'll teach them not to fight when I'm around, I thought with a grin and stepped into the morning sunshine.

The men were standing by the newly washed and gassed-up Jeep when I walked out the front door. Mr. Kadam placed the backpack full of weapons on the backseat, winked at me, and hugged me. I swung another bag containing my grandmother's quilt, which had so far proven to be lucky, next to our weapons.

We were all wearing hiking boots and smooth seamless cargo pants that Ren had made with the Divine Scarf. He had looked up styles on the Internet and had the Scarf create them in multiple colors. He claimed my apple-green shirt would protect my body from UV rays and could wick moisture away and be breathable at the same time. I had to admit the shirt was comfortable, and to show him how much I liked it, I had twisted my hair into two long French braids and tied an apple-green ribbon to the bottom of both tails.

Kishan wore a brick-red shirt of the same fabric, but it had a pocket on the side seam, while Ren wore a seamless cerulean-blue shirt that clung to his muscular frame. He was still thin, but he'd started to gain weight back in the weeks he'd been home, and his daily workouts with Kishan were showing results. It obviously didn't take long for his muscles to make a comeback.

"Can you even breathe in that shirt, Ren?" I teased lightheartedly. "You probably could have gone a size up."

Ren replied, "The shirt is tight so it doesn't inhibit movement."

My snort turned to a giggle. Then, spurred on by Kishan, the giggle changed to loud peals of laughter.

"It's not like there are any pretty waitresses out there in the jungle, Ren. There's no reason for you to show off your muscles."

Still laughing, Kishan claimed the driver's seat.



As I grabbed the door handle, Ren leaned over and murmured in my ear. "In case you didn't notice, your shirt is pretty tight too, Kelsey."

My mouth dropped open.

"And there it is."

I punched him on the arm and hissed, "There *what* is?"

He winced and rubbed his arm, but grinned. "Your lovely blush."

He hopped into the car and playfully shoved Kishan aside so he too could listen to Mr. Kadam's driving instructions along with his plea that Kishan maneuver carefully and not crash the car.

I got in the back and clicked on my seatbelt, deciding to ignore the brothers' antics. They tried to bring me into the conversation, but I paid no attention to them, burying my nose in a book instead.

They talked the entire way, and I was fascinated by their conversation. I'd never heard them speak to one another so . . . *civilly* before. Ren told Kishan about the first time we'd visited Phet and politely asked me to fill in the blanks. He remembered a lot of it. He just somehow forgot anything that applied to me.

I spoke of the amulet around my neck, the henna hand tattoo that Phet had given me, and of how we figured out it gave me the power to access the mythical cities. Ren didn't remember that at all and had no idea how he got into places with me out of the picture. He just drew a blank.

By the time we arrived at the Yawal Sanctuary, Ren was pretty desperate to get out of the car and away from me. He took off on foot, walking through the trees.

Kishan watched him go and reached around me to grab the big backpack with all the weapons. He slid it over his shoulders before he locked the Jeep.

"Shall we?"

"Sure." I sighed. "He's pretty far ahead now, isn't he?"

“Yes. Not too far though. I can easily follow his trail.”

We walked silently for a few minutes. Teak trees loomed over us, which was nice, because they provided shade from the hot sun.

“We’ll hike to Suki Lake and then have lunch and rest during the hottest part of the day.”

“Sounds good.”

I listened to the crunch of my steps as I walked over the bracken covering the jungle floor. Kishan was a silent, steady presence beside me.

“I miss this,” he said.

“Miss what?”

“Hiking through the jungle with you. It’s peaceful.”

“Yeah, when we’re not running from things.”

“It’s nice. I miss being alone with you.”

“I hate to break it to you, but even now, we’re not alone.”

“No. I know that. Still, it’s more alone than I’ve been with you in weeks.” He cleared his throat. “I heard you the other night when Ren came to your room.”

“Oh. Then you know he gets sick around me. He can’t touch me.”

“I’m sorry. I know it causes you pain.”

“More like it causes him pain.”

“No. He’s only hurting physically. You’re hurting emotionally. It’s difficult to go through that. I just wanted you to know that I’m here if you need me.”

“I know you are.”

Kishan reached over and took my hand as I looked up into his golden eyes and asked, “What’s that for?”

“I wanted to hold your hand. Not everybody cringes in pain when touching you, you know.”

“Thanks.”

He smiled and pressed a kiss on the back of my hand. We walked



another couple of hours in silence, holding hands the entire time. I reflected again on the differences between Kishan and Ren. Ren was always talking or writing. He liked to think out loud. He said that not communicating was the most frustrating thing about being a tiger.

In Oregon, Ren would bombard me with questions every morning. He'd answer questions I'd long forgotten and talk about things he'd been thinking about all afternoon as a tiger and couldn't tell me.

Kishan was the opposite. He was still, silent. He liked to just *be*, just *feel*, just *experience* the things around him. When he drank a root beer float, he delighted in the experience and gave 100 percent of his attention to it. He soaked in his environment, and was happy keeping to himself.

I was comfortable with both men. I could appreciate the quiet and the nature more with Kishan. But with Ren near, I was so busy talking with him and, *I'll admit*, staring at him that everything else diminished.

As Suki Lake came into view, we found Ren standing at the water's edge skipping pebbles across the surface. He turned to us with a smile and saw our clasped hands. His grin faltered briefly, but then he teased me and smiled again. "It's about time you two caught up. You're slower than honey in the refrigerator. I'm starving. What's for lunch?"

I shrugged off my backpack. My shirt was stuck to my skin. I peeled it away and crouched down to unzip the pack. "What would you like?"

Ren crouched down next to me. "I don't care. Surprise me."

"I thought you didn't like my cooking."

"Nah. I like it fine. I just didn't like all of you staring at me while I ate, expecting each bite to jar a memory. In fact, I wouldn't mind some of those chocolate-peanut butter cookies."

"Okay. Kishan? How about you?" I shaded my eyes and looked up at him. He was watching Ren.

"Just make me the same thing you make him."

The brothers went off to throw pebbles across the lake and I could



hear them laughing as they competed with each other. I asked the Golden Fruit to create a picnic basket for us filled with lemonade; fresh hot biscuits with butter and an assortment of jams and marmalades; a cold pasta salad with olives, tomatoes, carrots, and a lemon vinaigrette; a giant box of tangy Hawaiian BBQ chicken; and my chocolate-peanut butter cookies.

I used the Divine Scarf to create a red-and-white-checked blanket and spread it under a tree. Our picnic was ready.

“Lunch is served!” I shouted.

The brothers wasted no time. Kishan reached for the chicken, and Ren, the cookies. I smacked their hands away and handed each one a bacterial wipe.

Kishan grumbled, “Kells, I ate my food raw off the ground for three hundred years. I really don’t think a little dirt’s going to kill me.”

“Maybe not, but clean hands make me feel better.”

I handed them the giant box of chicken and took a biscuit out of the basket, buttered it, and spread marionberry preserves over it. Leaning back against the tree, I watched the dappled sunshine through the leaves as I slowly ate my biscuit.

“How far to Phet’s? It only took Ren and me a day or so to hike out there last time.”

“We’ll have to sleep in the jungle tonight,” Kishan answered. “We’re on the far side of Suki Lake.”

“Oh. Hey! Save some chicken for me!” I cried as the box was quickly emptying. “How can you two wolf down that much chicken in just a couple of minutes?”

“Serves you right for staring into space,” Ren said.

“I wasn’t staring into space. I was appreciating the environment.”

“I noticed. Gave me a good opportunity to ‘appreciate the environment’ myself,” he smirked, teasing me.

I kicked his foot. “You should have at least saved me *something*.”



Ren grinned and handed me one of the last drumsticks. "What did you expect? Two or three *tiny* chickens to feed two hungry tigers? We need something at least the size of . . . what would you say, Kishan?"

"I'd say something the size of a small buffalo."

"A small buffalo *would* be good or maybe a goat or two. Did you ever eat a horse?" Ren asked.

"Nah, too stringy."

"What about a jackal?"

"Nope. Killed several though. They liked to hang around and wait for me to be done with my kill."

"Boar?"

"At least one a month."

"What about a . . . are you okay, Kelsey?"

"Can we change the topic of conversation?" The chicken leg drooped in my fingers. I stared at it and imagined the animal it used to be. "I don't think I can eat this anymore. In fact, no more talk about your kills at the dinner table. It's bad enough I had to see you two hunt."

Ren chewed and teased, "Now that I think about it, you're just about snack-size. Don't you think so, Kishan?"

Kishan studied me with a teasing glint in his eye. "I've often thought Kelsey would be fun to hunt."

I glared at Kishan. He bit into a biscuit and winked.

Ren pulled his knees up to his chest and laughed. "What do you say, Kelsey? Want to play hide-and-seek with the tigers?"

"I don't think so," I said haughtily as I carefully cleaned my fingers with another wipe.

"Aw, come on. We'd let you have a head start."

I leaned back against the tree trunk. "Yes, but the question remains . . . what would you do when you caught me?"

Kishan buttered another biscuit while he tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile.

Ren leaned back on his elbows and tilted his head as if seriously considering the question. "I guess that would be up to the tiger that caught you. Wouldn't you say, Kishan?"

"She won't run," he said.

"You don't think so?"

"No." Kishan stood and suggested we walk another hour or two then set up camp for the evening. He crouched down next to me and touched my shoulder. "It's pretty hot now. Let me know when you get tired," he said and walked off into the jungle to find the trail.

"Kishan's right. I won't run," I affirmed as I sipped my lemonade.

Ren sighed. "That's too bad. Most of the time the fun is in the chase, but I suspect with *you* the capture would be equally interesting." He stretched out a finger and brushed it against my cheek. "Made you blush again."

"I suspect it's a sunburn," I said and glared.

He stood and offered his hand to pull me up. Once upright, I let go immediately.

Grabbing the box of cookies, Ren said softly, "It's *not* a sunburn."

He swung my backpack onto his shoulders and strode off after Kishan. With nothing to carry, I mentally instructed the Golden Fruit and the Divine Scarf to make our picnic scraps disappear and trotted after Ren.

We hiked another two hours before I had to call it quits. Ren leaned up against a tree a few feet away, and Kishan used the Scarf to create a small tent.

"That's not big enough for two tigers, Kishan."

"We don't need to sleep next to you, Kells. It's hot. We'll just make you miserable."

"I don't mind it, really."

Kishan wet a cloth and touched it to my face.



"That feels good," I said gratefully.

"You're overheated. I shouldn't have made you walk so far in one day."

"I'll be fine. Maybe I should make up a magic milk bath with the Golden Fruit, huh?" I laughed.

Kishan considered and grinned. "A giant bowlful of milk with you in the middle might be a little too much for us cats to resist."

I smiled but was too exhausted to come up with a flip response.

"I want you to relax now, Kelsey. Take a nap."

"Okay." I went into my tent to bathe my arms and the back of my neck with the wet cloth. The tent was so stifling, I was soon back outside. The two tigers—one black and one white—were resting in the shade of a tree nearby. I heard the soft gurgle of a stream. The heat was definitely making me drowsy.

I sat down between the tigers with my back to the tree. After my head dropped for the third time, I cushioned it on Kishan's soft back and fell asleep.

Fur tickled my nose. I mumbled and turned my head. I heard the call of a bird, blinked open my eyes, and saw Kishan sitting with his back against the tree, watching me quietly. He was barefoot and wearing the black clothes that appeared every time he changed back from a tiger.

"Kishan?" I lifted my head, confused, knowing I had fallen asleep on his soft, sable fur. My hand was pressed against Ren's white shoulder. "Ren?" I quickly scooted back next to Kishan, who put his arm around my shoulders. "Ren? I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?"

I watched as Ren's tiger body morphed into his human frame. He pushed up from all fours into a crouch. The late afternoon sun glinted off his white shirt while he considered me musingly. "It didn't hurt."

"Are you sure?"



“Yes. You moved in your sleep. It didn’t burn or cause me any pain at all.”

“How long?”

“A little over two hours.”

“You didn’t feel the need to escape? To get away from me?”

“No. It felt . . . good. Maybe I need to be a tiger around you more often.”

He smiled, switched back into a tiger, walked up to me, and stuck his nose in my face. I laughed and awkwardly reached up behind his ear and scratched. He made a rumbling sound in his chest and collapsed at my side, twisting his neck so I could reach the other ear.

Kishan cleared his throat, stood, and stretched. “Since the two of you are . . . getting reacquainted, I’m going to stretch my legs a little, maybe do a little stalking just for fun.

I stood up and put my palm on his cheek. “Don’t get caught in a trap.”

Kishan lifted his hand, placed it on top of mine, and smiled. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be back in an hour or two around sundown. You can practice tracking me on the new cell phones if you want.”

Kishan morphed into the black tiger. I stroked his head briefly before he ran into the jungle.

I settled down next to Ren with the cell phone tracker. It took me the better part of an hour to figure out how it worked. The screen looked like a Google map. I was the dot marked *Ke*. Ren was *R*. Kishan was the *Ki* dot, and I could see his blip move around the screen. He was about two miles away, quickly moving east.

Widening the map, I figured out how to zoom in on Mr. Kadam and Nilima’s location. If I clicked on one of their dots, a small window popped up telling me the exact latitude and longitude, as well as their vital signs. *Pretty cool little device.*



I petted Ren's fur absently and explained how everything worked. His ears flicked back and forth attentively. Then suddenly he sprang to his feet and stared at the darkening jungle.

"What? What is it?"

Ren changed to a man. "Go inside the tent and zip it up."

"It doesn't have zippers. The Scarf can't make them. What's out there?"

"A cobra. Hopefully it will move on and leave us alone."

I went into the tent while he switched back to the tiger.

Ren padded in front of the tent and waited. I peeked out and saw a giant black-and-olive green snake slither out of the jungle. Its head was disproportionately bigger than its body. When it saw Ren, it stopped to taste the air. Ren growled softly, and the snake's head shot up, which showed the pale yellow skin of its belly. As its hood opened and it hissed a warning, I realized I was looking at a king cobra.

Ren didn't stir. The snake would likely move on if we were quiet. It slowly lowered its head and slithered forward a few more inches, but then I saw Ren shake his head just before a loud tiger sneeze tore through his body. The snake lifted its upper body again and spat twin jets of poison from its fangs about nine feet. The stream didn't hit Ren's eyes, fortunately, or it probably would have blinded him. The cobra moved a bit closer and tried again.

"Ren! Move back! It's aiming for your eyes!"

Something moved in my bag. It was another snake! A golden head slipped through the tiny gap in my backpack and shot out of the tent.

Fanindra?

Ren backed up, and I untied a couple of knots so he could come into the tent with me. We watched from inside.

Fanindra wound her way right up to the king cobra, raised her head, and opened her hood. Her jeweled emerald eyes twinkled despite the

diminishing sunlight. The king cobra swayed back and forth, tasted the air, and then lowered his head under hers. She slowly dropped her head to rest it on top of the cobra's, which ran its head down the length of her body, turned, and slid off quickly through the jungle. Fanindra returned to the tent, wound her body into a coil, tucked in her head, and became inanimate.

Ren changed to a man. "We got lucky. That was an angry snake with an attitude."

"She calmed him down pretty quickly."

The tent had become dark. Ren's blue eyes and smile flashed in the dimness. I felt a light touch on my jaw. "Pretty women have that effect on men."

He changed back into a white tiger and sat at my feet.

Kishan soon returned and made a throaty, rattling sound as he entered the camp. After changing from a tiger to a man, he ducked his head into the tent. "Why are you guys hiding?"

I stepped outside and told him about the snake. "What was that noise you just made?" I asked as I started to prepare dinner.

Ren switched to a man and sat across from me. I handed him a plate as he answered for Kishan. "It's called chuffing. It's a tiger hello."

I blinked and looked at Ren. "You never did that."

He shrugged. "Never wanted to, I guess."

Kishan grunted. "Is that what it's called?" He elbowed Ren. "Now I guess I know what all those lady tigers were saying. Where did you learn that?"

"The zoo."

"Huh."

Ren grinned. "So . . . you and lady tigers, eh? Is there something you want to share, Kishan?"

Kishan shoved a forkful of dinner into his mouth and mumbled, "How about I share my fist with your face?"

"Wow. Sensitive. I'm sure your lady tiger friends were all very attractive. So am I an uncle?"

Kishan growled angrily and set down his plate. He morphed into the black tiger and roared.

"Alright. That's enough," I threatened. "Ren, do you want me to share your white tiger breeding program story with Kishan?"

Ren paled. "You know about that?"

I smiled naughtily. "Yes."

Kishan switched back, picked up his plate, and smiled. "Please go on, Kells. Tell me all about it."

"Fine," I sighed. "Let's get this all out in the open. Kishan, did you ever engage in any . . . promiscuous activities with female tigers?"

"What do you *think*?"

"Just answer the question."

"Of course not!"

"That's what I thought. Ren, I already know you didn't either, though the zoo tried very hard to get you to breed. Now no more teasing or fighting about that subject, or I'll shock you with lightning. I expect you both to be on your best off-the-leash behavior." I grinned. "Hmm . . . perhaps we should invest in shock collars for the two of you. Nah, better not. It would be *way* too tempting for me."

They both snorted but soon settled down and had about five plates of dinner each.

After we ate, Kishan started a fire to keep animals away, and I shared the story of the lion and the mouse but changed it to a tiger with a porcupine quill. This led to a conversation about hunting and the brothers' greatest kill stories, during which I squirmed and tried to ignore them.

As we watched the sunset, Kishan put his arm around me and described the changes he could feel in the jungle as day turned to night. It was fascinating but also frightening to know just how many creatures began to move through the trees at sundown.

Later that sweltering evening, I climbed into my tiny tent and lay down on top of my bedroll, twisting the lighter blanket around me mummy-style.

Ren ducked his head in to check on me and laughed. “Do you always do that?”

“Only when camping.”

“You know bugs can still get in there.”

“Don’t say that. I like to live in ignorance.”

I heard his soft laugh as he knotted the ties for me.

After I’d spent a restless hour tossing back and forth, Kishan appeared at my tent door. “Can’t sleep?”

I leaned up on my elbow. “I’d really prefer to have a tiger near me. It helps me sleep in the jungle.”

Kishan sighed. His golden eyes shone in the moonlight. “Alright, scoot over.”

I happily shifted to make room for Kishan. He switched into a black tiger and pressed his body up against my back. I’d just settled down when I felt a wet nose on my cheek. Ren had squeezed his giant body into the miniscule space between the tent wall and me and lay down—half on top of me.

“*Ren!* I can’t breathe. And my arm is trapped under you.”

He rolled over and licked my shoulder. I pushed his heavy body and twisted away.

Exasperated, I said, “Divine Scarf, can you make the tent big enough for all of us, please?”

I felt the tent shake lightly and heard the whisper of threads as they



shifted. A short time later, I was pressed comfortably between both my tigers. I rolled to one side, kissed Kishan on top of his furry head, and petted his neck. "Goodnight, Kishan."

Then I rolled to the other side and came face-to-face with my blue-eyed white tiger. I patted his head and said goodnight before closing my eyes. Soon I felt fur tickling my nose. Ren's head was pressed up against my face. I knew what he wanted.

"Fine." I kissed his head too. "Goodnight, Ren. Go to sleep."

He started purring and closed his eyes. I closed mine too and smiled into the darkness.



phet

The next morning, we decided to set out early. The temperature had dropped overnight, and the jungle was relatively cool and fragrant. I took a deep breath, stretched, and inhaled the spicy, sweet smell of the olibanum trees. After breakfast, Kishan headed off into the jungle to dress in the new clothes he'd created with the Divine Scarf.

Ren stirred the cold black ashes of our fire with a long stick. I stood a good enough distance away so my presence didn't bother him. This new "being friends" thing was awkward. I wasn't really sure how to talk to him. This is who Ren was before me. I wanted him to be like *my* Ren. In many ways he was. But how can you be the same person with a chunk of your life missing?

Ren was still charming, kind, and sweet. He still loved all the same things, except he wasn't as self-assured. Kishan had always been the follower and Ren the leader, but their roles were now reversed. Kishan was confident; he had direction. Ren had been left behind, like he no longer had a place in this century.

Ren didn't seem to know who he was anymore or how he fit into this world. It was startling for me to realize that his sense of belonging was gone. He didn't seem to want to write poetry anymore. He seldom played his guitar. He read literature only when encouraged by Mr. Kadam and me. He'd lost his sense of self, his conviction.

In making decisions, Ren didn't seem to care about much of anything and was happy to do whatever or go wherever Kishan wanted. Visiting Phet was just an activity rather than a way to get his memory back or break the curse. Ren didn't resist it, but he wasn't pursuing it either. It was sobering to recognize that losing me had changed him that dramatically. I was worried about him.

I crouched down across from him and smiled. "Aren't you going to change clothes too? We've got another full day of hiking planned."

Ren threw the stick into the fire circle and looked up at me. "No."

"Okay, but your bare feet aren't going to feel too good after a while. The jungle is full of sharp rocks and prickly thorns."

He walked over to the backpack, took out a tube of sunscreen and handed it to me. "Put this on your face and arms. You're turning pink."

I dutifully started rubbing it into my arms and was surprised to hear him say, "I think I'll be a tiger today."

"What? Why would you do that? *Oh*. It's probably more comfortable on your feet. I don't blame you. If I had the option, I'd probably be a tiger too."

"It's not because of the hiking."

"No? Then why?"

At that moment, Kishan emerged from the jungle with his hair slicked back. Ren took a step closer as if he wanted to say something more, but Kishan's appearance caught my attention.

"No fair! You took a bath?" I asked with only a tiny hint of jealousy in my voice.

"There's a decent stream out there. Don't worry. You'll have a nice bath when we get to Phet's."

I smeared sunscreen across my nose. "Okay." I smiled in anticipation at the thought. "I'm ready, then. Lead on, Lewis and Clark."

I turned to Ren, who had switched into a tiger and sat watching the



two of us. Kishan raised an eyebrow and worked the muscles of his jaw as he stared at his brother.

“Is something wrong?” I asked him.

Kishan turned to me with a smile and offered his hand. “Nothing at all.”

I took it, and we started off. We’d walked only a minute or two when I felt Ren’s furry body brush against my other hand. The thought occurred to me that Ren might be more comfortable as a tiger, much as Kishan had been for all those years. I bit my lip, worrying, and massaged the ruff of Ren’s collar, then pushed the thought to the back of my mind and told Kishan all about frankincense.

We walked all morning and then stopped to rest and eat. After napping through the hot afternoon, we hiked another couple of hours and finally came upon Phet’s clearing. The shaman was outside working in his garden. He was on his hands and knees, pulling weeds and talking to his plants as he carefully tended them.

Before I even called out a greeting, I heard him holler, “Hallo, Kahl-see. Joyous meetings happen with you!”

Kishan stepped over Phet’s stone wall, then lifted me over, and set me gently down on the other side. Ren leapt over easily next to us.

I rushed up to the garden. “Hello, Phet! It’s so nice to see you too!”

Phet peered at me over a lettuce plant and cackled with delight. “Ah! My flower grows hardy and strong.”

He stood up, dusted off his hands, and embraced me. A small puff of dust floated into the air. He adjusted his robe and shook it out. Clumps of rich, fertile dirt fell off the front where he’d been kneeling.

Phet was about my height but his back was hunched, probably due to age, so he appeared shorter. I could clearly see the shining bald spot gleaming in the center of his wiry bird’s nest of unruly gray hair. He



looked at Kishan's hiking boots and let his gaze travel slowly up Kishan's tall frame until his shrewd eyes stopped at the younger brother's face.

"Considerably sized man travels by you." He took a step to stand toe-to-toe with Kishan, put his hands on Kishan's shoulders, and tilted his head up as he peered into Kishan's golden eyes.

Kishan patiently withstood Phet's scrutiny.

"Ah, I see. Deep eyes. Many colors there. The father of many."

Phet turned around to pick up his garden tools while I gave Kishan a surprised expression and mouthed, "The *father of many*?"

Kishan shifted uncomfortably. Color flooded his neck as I elbowed him and whispered, "Hey, so what do you think he meant by that?"

"I don't know, Kells. I just met the guy. Maybe he's crazy," Kishan said nervously as if trying to hide something.

I pressed, "What? What is it? Wait a minute. You're not *already* a father, are you? Did you and Yesubai—"

"No!"

"Huh. I've never seen you look so disconcerted before. There's something you're not telling me. Well, doesn't matter. I'll weasel it out of you sooner or later."

He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I eat weasels for breakfast."

I whispered back, "I'm pretty wily. You won't catch me."

He grunted in response.

Phet chanted singsong, "Crazy, crazy. Lazy, daisy," then hummed happily as he ducked into his hut.

"Come, come, Kahl-see," Phet announced. "Talk time."

Ren changed to a man and touched my arm briefly, but then took a few steps back. "Phet's not crazy," he said to Kishan, and then turned to me and grinned. "'Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.'"

I smiled at him and countered his Shakespeare with an African proverb. "'When the fool speaks, the wise man listens.'"

Ren bowed gallantly. "Shall we?"



Kishan grunted and shoved Ren aside. "Ladies first. After you, Kelsey."

Kishan put his hand on my back and ushered me inside, not moving it from my waist. I got the distinct impression he was trying to prove something. I turned to see Ren grinning good-naturedly as he followed us in and sat on the bed.

Bustling around in the kitchen, Phet began making us a meal. I tried to tell him it wasn't necessary, but he insisted and soon set large platters filled with a spicy vegetable stir-fry and eggplant fritters on the table. Kishan filled a plate for me before preparing his own.

I took mine to Ren, who accepted it with a cocky smile and winked. I stumbled as I walked back to the table, feeling his eyes on me. Ren sat on the bed and watched me openly as he ate by himself.

Kishan had already filled another plate for me after glaring at Ren. I thanked him and then Phet, who dismissed my gesture.

"Phet knows you coming, Kahl-see." He touched his nose and winked, "Bird's soft voice to Phet's ear. Tell me tigers approach soon nearing."

I laughed. "How did you know it was the right two tigers?"

"Birds glimpse the whole lot. Birds are knowing many thing. Say two tigers smitten. Only one garl." He laughed uproariously and then smiled and patted my cheek happily. "Be-u-ti-full flower captivate many. Beforehand petite bud. Now bud is ajar, half-blossom. Next, the rounded bloom come into flower. Then the perfect bloom and flower life complete."

I patted his brown, papery hand and laughed. "Phet, would you mind if I took a bath after dinner? I feel sticky, dirty, and tired."

"Yes. Yes. Phet talk tigers."

After the dinner dishes were cleaned, I laughed softly as I saw Phet waggle his finger in Kishan's face and point sternly at the door. Ren shot

a grin over his shoulder at me, and the two men followed Phet outside, closing the door quietly behind them. Hearing Phet direct them to take over the weeding made me smile.

Kishan had been kind enough to fill the bucket dozens of times at Phet's kitchen pump so I would have a full bath. I shrugged out of my dirty clothes and asked the Divine Scarf for new ones as I slipped into the tub. Scrubbing my skin with a bar of Phet's homemade lilac soap, I listened to him chastise the brothers as I soaped through my hair.

He was gruff with them. It sounded like he was giving them a stern lecture. Frustrated, he said, "You must take *care* fragile flower! Delicate and fine petals damage easy, bruise. Spoil it and harm it. Garden is no mischief! Rough handling, battle for flower destroy it. Cut the stem, the flower dies. Needs flourish be radiant for admire. Love is look, no pluck. Endeavor gather before harvest ready is waste energy, lost everything. Remember."

I tuned him out and enjoyed my bath, thinking that scented water beat a buttermilk bath any day. Then I remembered Kishan's milk-bath comment, which made me blush furiously.

Phet's voice carried through the walls again. *He sure is raking the guys over the coals about his flowers. Funny, I didn't notice any flowers*, I thought and sank lower into the tub.

After my thorough soak, I had the Scarf make me a couple of soft fluffy towels and wrapped one around my wet hair and the other around my body. I stepped out of the tub onto a woven bamboo mat and slipped on a set of comfortable, thin cotton pajamas. The T-shirt said:

I ♥ TIGERS

The bottoms had pictures of black and white cartoon tigers snoring peacefully away. I frowned.

I didn't remember asking the Scarf for tiger pajamas, but my thoughts must have drifted when I was creating them. I asked the





Scarf to get rid of the tigers, and the fabric shimmered as the black and white threads changed to baby blue to match the top. I created some blue cashmere socks and slipped my feet inside, sighing happily.

By the time the men came in, I was sitting on the bed with a pillow on my lap reading, my long wet hair in a braid down my back. It was dark, so I'd lit the lamp and wished up a snack from the Golden Fruit. Both Ren and Kishan made eye contact with me briefly, gave me weak smiles, and headed to the table. Their downtrodden expressions made them look like they'd just been chewed out for an hour by their grandfather. I stayed on the bed so Ren wouldn't be too uncomfortable. Phet bustled in last and hung a straw hat on a peg.

"Ah. Kahl-see. You clean? Feel refreshed and invigorated?"

"Yes. I feel 100 percent better. Thank you. I made you a snack. It's from Shangri-la."

He approached the table and sat next to the boys. I had created a tea party of Shangri-la delicacies: honey-cherry-blossom tea, buttery peach fizzy tarts, cinnamon-sugar crumble clusters, mushroom-acorn butter spread between layers of cheesy crisps, delicate berry crepes with sour cream sauce, and blueberry dip with sweet fairy crackers.

Phet rubbed his hands together, delighted, and smacked Kishan away before he could grab the peach tart. The shaman filled his plate, ate the tasty morsels with pleasure, and grinned at me with his funny gap-toothed smile.

"Ah. Phet no go Shangri-la long time. Scrumptious foodstuffs there."

Kishan asked, "Want some, Kells? Better speak up now."

"No, thank you. I'm still full from dinner. You've been to Shangri-la, Phet?"

"Yes, yes. Many year ago. Many hair ago," he cackled.

For some reason, I wasn't surprised. I closed my book and scooted forward on the bed. "So, Phet, you wanted to talk with us? Can you help Ren?"



Ren's bright blue gaze turned to me. He stared at me thoughtfully while Kishan slowly tore a crepe into pieces. Phet dusted powdered sugar off his hands.

"Phet long time thinking this. Fix maybe or maybe not. Tomorrow best time looking tiger's eyes."

"Looking into his eyes? Why do you need to do that?"

"Eye is glass. Not mirror. Inside eye is buzz like a bee. Skin is flesh? Not important." He grabbed a fistful of his wiry hair. "Hair is nothing." He smiled at me. "Teeth and tongue? No buzz. Words is no buzz. Only eye is talk."

I blinked. "Are you trying to say that the eyes are the windows of the soul?"

Phet laughed happily. "Ah! Very good, Kahl-see. Smart garl!"

He slapped the table and pointed at the boys. "I tell you, young mans. My Kahl-see vastly quick."

I stifled a snigger as Ren and Kishan nodded their heads like chastised schoolboys.

"Okay, so you want to give him a checkup tomorrow," I continued. "We brought you Durga's weapons. You asked to see them, right?"

Phet stood up, pushed in his chair, and waved his arms. "No, no. Tomorrow is time for weapon. Tonight is for gifts. Gifts for be-u-ti-full goddess."

"Oh! You want the gifts. Okay." I dug through my backpack. "It will be hard to give them up. They do come in handy. Having the Fruit means I have to carry around a lot less as we walk through weeks of jungle, plus we don't have to eat power bars all the time. But, technically they don't belong to us. They're for Durga."

I pulled the Golden Fruit and the Divine Scarf out of my backpack, set them carefully on the table, and then quickly backed away when Ren shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Phet cupped his hands around the Golden Fruit which began to shimmer in the flickering light of the hut.

“Splendid gift. *Ama sunahara.*”

He stroked the skin of the Fruit and murmured to it softly as it glowed under his attentions. Then he turned to the Scarf. He stretched out his fingers, gently touched the iridescent fabric, and said, “*Dupatta pavitra.*”

The threads at the edge stretched out toward Phet’s palm and began weaving between his fingers as if they were the warp on a loom. The Scarf attached itself to his hand while he cooed over and petted it, and then the colors swirled faster and faster. It sparkled and crackled until it burst like a tiny nova and the material became pure white.

He spoke to the Scarf like he had to the Fruit, murmuring words and clicking his tongue as the Scarf slowly unwound itself from his hand and resumed its resting shape. Orange, yellow, and red shapes poked through the white surface like gleaming fish bodies in a clear ocean. The colors darted more rapidly until the white was overrun and it assumed its normal form, settling on a golden orange color. The fabric seemed to vibrate or hum with contentment as he stroked it idly with his hand.

“Ah. Phet missing gifts long time. Very, very good, Kahl-see. Gift as good for you. Bestow two gift, acquire two gift.”

He picked up the Golden Fruit and placed it in Ren’s hands. Then he picked up the Scarf and gave it to Kishan. The Scarf immediately shifted color, turning green and black. Phet looked at the Scarf then pointedly at Kishan, who blushed and folded the Scarf, setting it on the table in front of him.

The shaman cleared his throat loudly. “Phet assign to you for a second time. Relieve, make easier for you.”

“You mean you want us to keep using them?” I asked.

“Yes. Now Phet present fresh offering to you.”

He stood up and gathered several herbs and jars of liquid. Placing spoonfuls of ground herbs into a cup, he trickled in several drops from different jars and then ladled in some steaming water. He stirred it slowly and sprinkled in some white granules. I couldn't really see what he was doing, but I was curious.

"Phet? Is that sugar?"

He turned to me with a gap-toothed grin.

"Sugar as sweet. Drink bitter, sugar better."

He laughed as he stirred and began humming and singing "medicine bitter, sugar better" over and over. After he was satisfied, he scooted the cup over to Kishan who, with a puzzled expression, shifted it over to Ren.

Phet clucked his tongue, "No, no, tiger of black. Is yours."

"Mine? I don't need any medicine. Ren's the one with the problem."

"Phet knows all problem. For you, this drink."

Kishan lifted the cup, sniffed it, and made a face. "What will it do to me?"

"Nothing and everything." He laughed, "Give you what most in world your desire and leave you lacking, not including what most want."

Ren was studying Phet intently. I tried to figure out what Phet meant too.

Kishan picked up the cup and hesitated, "Do I *have* to drink it?"

Phet threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "You choice. Choice always drink, not drink. Eat, no eat. Love, no love." He raised a finger in the air. "But you choice, shape many."

Kishan peered into the cup and swirled the liquid then looked at me. His eyes tightened, and he lifted the cup to his lips and drank it down.

Phet nodded, pleased. "Gift one, one another give you now."

"That was a gift?" I asked.



“Yes. Two and two.”

“But you gave us back the Fruit and the Scarf. You’re still giving us two gifts?”

He nodded.

“If that drink was a gift for Kishan, what was it?” Ren asked.

Phet leaned back in his chair and, with an odd expression on his face, said, “*Soma*.”

Kishan began coughing violently and Ren froze.

“What’s *soma*?” I asked.

Ren turned to me. “*Soma* is the Hindu version of ambrosia. It’s the drink of the gods. In the modern world *soma* is also a hallucinogenic.”

“*Oh*.”

Phet grunted. “My *soma* no dream.”

“Does that mean he becomes a god?” I asked Phet.

The brothers were staring at Phet too.

He just shrugged his shoulders. “Phet not know everything, only some thing. Now gift other one.”

He picked a jar from his shelf that had a sticky, clear, pink substance in it.

“You, white tiger, sit here.”

He directed Ren to sit in the middle of the room and lean his head back. Then he scooped up a palm full of the pink goo and smeared it into Ren’s hair. Ren stood up immediately.

“No! No! Phet no done. Sit, tiger!”

Ren sat and Phet hummed as he scooped another palmful and slicked Ren’s hair back with it. Soon his entire head was covered with the sticky stuff, and Phet began massaging it into Ren’s scalp like a bizarre hairdresser. Kishan leaned his chair back to watch with a mocking grin on his face. Ren seemed irritable. I couldn’t help but laugh at him, which made him scowl even harder.



“What is this supposed to do?” he asked Phet warily.

Phet completely ignored him and was now clawing through Ren's hair like a monkey looking for nits. Blobs of pink stuff coated every inch of his scalp. Finally, Phet announced he was finished.

“Now time sleep.”

“You expect me to sleep like this?”

“Yes. All night time sleep. Witness what take place mornings.”

“Great.”

Kishan laughed outright. Phet went to the sink to wash his hands. Ren stared at me with sullen unhappiness, like a wet dog with soap on his hair sitting in a tub staring moodily at the master who put him there. I stifled a giggle and had the Scarf make a towel. He sat there with his arms folded and a scowl on his handsome face. I approached him with the towel as a giant blob of the stuff dropped onto his nose and slid off onto his cheek.

“Here, let me help. I'll try not to touch you.”

He nodded, which caused another blob to start making its way down his neck. I grabbed my comb and drew it through his black hair, slicking it all back from his face and collecting the excess goo in the towel. When that was done, I summoned another towel, wet it, and cleaned the back of his neck, his ears, and then his face, starting at his hairline, moving down his nose, and across his cheeks.

I was gentle but thorough. As I slowly swiped the towel across Ren's cheek, I absently stroked his skin with my thumb. Something inside me switched on. A tender emotion slowly rose to the surface of my mind. My hand trembled, and I froze. The room had become silent. All I could hear was the hitch in my breathing as my heart began to beat faster.

I felt him cup my wrist, and slowly, I shifted my gaze to his eyes. He stared into mine with a tender smile. I lost myself in his eyes until he softly said, “Thank you.”



Abruptly, I pulled the towel away, and he let go of my wrist. I saw him rubbing his fingers with his thumb. *How long was I staring at him like an idiot?* It must have burned him terribly. Quickly, I lowered my gaze and stepped away. Everyone was watching me now. I turned my back on them and arranged the bed. By the time I turned back around, I'd composed myself.

I smiled brightly. "Phet's right. It's time for bed."

Phet clapped his hands. "Kahl-see in house. Tiger outside. Phet," he grinned, "with Scarf."

He cackled with glee and created a nice tent for himself. Then he opened the door and waited stubbornly for the tigers to leave.

Kishan touched my cheek, said, "Night, Kells," and ducked under the door awning.

Ren followed but paused at the door and gave one of his traffic-stopping smiles. My heart burned with a hopeful pain. He inclined his head roguishly in my direction and stepped outside. I heard Phet murmuring directions to both of them as they settled down for the night.

The next morning, I woke to Phet humming in the kitchen.

"Kahl-see! Awake. Eat!"

His little table was full of a variety of dishes. I joined him and scooped up fruit salad and something that looked like cottage cheese.

"Where is everyone?"

"Tigers have a bath by means of river."

"Oh."

We ate in silence. Phet studied me and gently grasped my hand in both of his. He twisted it and stroked it in different places. When he touched the skin, the henna markings he had given me on our first visit surfaced and glowed red for a short time before disappearing.



“Hmm. Ah. Hmm.” He picked up a slice of apple and bit into it juicily, keeping his eyes on my hand while he smacked his mouth.

“Oh, Kahl-see, you set eyes on many thing, go a long way away places.”

“Yes.”

He peered into my eyes.

“Are you staring into my soul?”

“Huh-uh-huh. Kahl-see extraordinarily depressing. Why damage?”

“What’s my damage?” I laughed dryly. “It’s mostly emotional. I love Ren, and he doesn’t remember me. Kishan loves me, and I don’t know what to do about that. It’s one of those awful love triangles in which no one is happy. Everyone is miserable. Except for Ren, I guess. He can’t remember if he’s miserable or not. Any advice?”

Phet considered my question seriously. “Love resembling water. Water on all sides of us everywhere. Ice, river, cloud, rain, ocean. Some is big, some is tiny. Some good drink, some too salty. Every one usefulness for earth. For all time be in motion cycle. Necessitate water to endure. Woman like earth; need immerse water. Water with earth sculpt each other, grow.

“Earth change for river, make waterway. Lake bed know how to hold water in basin, all contain. Ice water is glacier; move earth. Rain make mudslide. Ocean make sand. Always two: earth and water. Need each other. Become one together. You be required to choose. Soon.”

“What if I can’t choose or don’t get to choose? What if I make the wrong choice?”

“No wrong choice. Your choice.”

He went to his bed and picked up two pillows. “You be fond of round pillow or square pillow?”

“I don’t know. They’re both pillows.”

“You like round? Choose round. You like square? Choose square.

Not matter. You want sleep, use pillow. You pick rock? No! Pillow is good. Same water. You choose ice? River? Ocean? Is all good. Pick ocean, you change sand. Pick river, you grow to be silt. Pick rain, you are garden soil.”

“Are you saying I choose the man based on what I want to become? What kind of life I want to have?”

“Yes. Both man put together your life special. Choose ocean or choose river. No matter.”

“But—”

“No but. *Is*. Kahl-see back is sturdy. Can embrace many burden, many duty. You like earth. Your back transformation shape to be same with man your picking.”

“So basically what you are trying to tell me is that Ren and Kishan are both pillows in a world of rocks and that I’d be happy with either one?”

“Ah! Smart garl!” Phet laughed.

“The only problem is . . . one of *them* is not going to be happy.”

Phet patted my hand. “You no be troubled. Phet be of assistance tigers.”

The brothers stomped noisily into the hut a half hour later. They both greeted me politely: Kishan squeezed my hand, and Ren nodded to me from the table.

I quietly asked Kishan, “Did it work? Does he remember?”

He shook his head no and retreated to the table to help Ren quickly polish off every dish that Phet had created. Their hair was slicked back and wet. Ren had gotten all the pink stuff out.

I smirked, thinking, *either that, or it had been absorbed into his brain overnight.*

While the brothers ate, I thought about what Phet said. *Could I*

really be happy with either one of them? Could Ren and I fall in love again? And if so, what would we do about our physical relationship? Would I ever be able to touch him again without inflicting pain? I'd never really considered a future with Kishan before. I was always so sure about my relationship with Ren. Now that his memories of us were gone, I didn't know if it was even possible to get back what we'd lost.

I caught Kishan watching me from time to time as he listened to Phet. Could Kishan have been right? Was losing Ren somehow part of my destiny? Was Kishan the person I was supposed to be with, was meant to be with? Or, as Phet said, am I just supposed to choose which one I want to be with? Which one I want to make a life with? I just didn't see how I could be happy when one of them wasn't.

After breakfast, Phet asked to see the weapons. I dug the *gada*, the *chakram*, Fanindra, and the bow and arrows out of the backpack and handed each to Kishan, who deposited them on the table. Every time his fingers brushed against mine, Kishan smiled. I smiled back, but my happy expression wavered when I saw Ren quickly look away with disappointment.

Phet studied each intently before handing it to the person Durga had originally given it to.

"How did you know?" I asked incredulously. "How did you know the bow and arrows were mine and the *gada*, Ren's?"

"Snake make clear to me."

As if in response, Fanindra uncoiled, stuck her head in the air, hood open, and stared into Phet's eyes. He began singing and moving his head. She started rocking back and forth as if under the spell of a snake charmer. When he stopped singing, she lowered her head and rested again.

"Ah, Fanindra declare be partial you, Kahl-see. You good woman and show consideration for her."

He picked up Fanindra and handed her gently back to me. I pulled a round pillow over and set her in the middle of it. *Hub. I like round pillows. I wonder which man the round pillow represents.*

Phet announced it was time to look into Ren's eyes. He pulled two chairs away from the table and set them across from each other. Ren sat in one; Phet, in the other. Kishan joined me on the bed and reached out to hold my hand. Ren's eyes darted over to us.

Phet slapped his hand. "Glimpse my eye, Tiger!"

Ren growled softly as he turned to face the old monk. Phet peered into Ren's eyes and clucked his tongue while turning Ren's head to several different angles as if Phet was adjusting the rearview mirror in a car. Finally, he was satisfied, and the two men froze in place for several minutes while Phet just stared. I bit my lip nervously as I watched.

After an uncomfortably long silence, Phet jumped up out of his chair.

"Can't patch up."

I stood. "What do you mean?"

"Tiger vastly stubborn. Block me."

"Block you?" I turned to Ren. "Why would you block him?"

"I don't know."

"Phet," I asked, "can you please tell us what you know?"

Phet sighed. "Fix it the hurting of knife and cage. Evil black at this time gone. But remembrance is jam, have trigger, only white tiger be acquainted with it."

"Okay, to clarify, you were able to fix the PTSD, the pains, and memories of the torture? All the trauma of Lokesh is gone now? Can he still remember it?"

"Yes. I still remember it. I'm right here, you know," Ren grumbled.

"Okay, but Phet says he took the blackness away. Do you feel differently about it?"

He concentrated. "I don't know. I guess we'll see."

I looked at Phet again. "But his memory is still blocked? What do you mean there's a trigger?"

"Means tiger hinder himself. No from criminal one, evil one. From tiger mind. Only he be capable of fix."

"Are you saying he's deliberately doing this to himself? He's blocking his memories of me on purpose?"

Phet nodded.

I gaped at Ren, stunned. He looked at Phet dumbfounded; then knit his brows together in confusion and stared at his hands. Tears filled my eyes.

In a tiny voice, I choked out, "Why? Why would you do this to me?"

He worked the muscles of his jaw and looked up at me. His blue eyes were bright with emotion. He opened his mouth to say something . . . then closed it. I backed toward the door and pushed it open.

Ren stood. "Kelsey? Wait."

I shook my head.

"Please don't run," he softly pleaded.

"Don't follow me." I shook my head, tears dripping down my cheeks as I ran off into the jungle.



prophecy

I sat in the jungle with my back against a tree. I was tired of running away from emotional turmoil. The reasonable part of my brain told me that Ren most likely had a perfectly legitimate reason for purposefully forgetting me. However, there was another side that doubted him, and that voice screamed louder. It hurt. If someone had asked me before he was taken if I trusted Ren, I would have said yes. I trusted him absolutely, 100 percent. There was no question in my mind that he was sincere.

But. A negative voice picked away at me, telling me I wasn't really right for him anyway and that I should have expected this. It said that I never deserved him in the first place and that it was only a matter of time before I lost him. I'd always considered him too good to be true. I never wanted to be right, but there it was.

That he took himself out of the picture made it worse. Much worse. *How could I have been so wrong about him?* I'd been naive. I wasn't the first girl to have her heart broken, and I wouldn't be the last. I'd trusted him. I believed his professions of love.

Before the visit with Phet, I could tell myself that Lokesh had done this. That it wasn't Ren's fault. That somewhere deep inside, he still loved me. Now I knew that he deliberately wanted to forget me. He wanted to cast me aside and had somehow found a very convenient way to do it.

How nice it must be to just erase your mistake. Pick the wrong girl? That's okay. Just highlight and delete. Those pesky memories won't bother you anymore. You could sell that pill and become a billionaire. So many people have done things and been with people they'd like to wipe out of their memory. To forget completely. Expunge your memory! Buy one, get one free! Limited time offer!

After an hour of feeling sorry for myself, I returned slowly to the hut. When I walked through the door, all talking ceased. Both brothers watched me while Phet started busily grinding spices.

Ren stood and took a step toward me. I looked at him dully, and he stopped in his tracks.

"There's nothing else you can do for us, then?" I asked Phet.

Phet turned to me and tilted his head. Soberly he said, "Phet regretful. No can help this."

"Okay." I turned to Kishan. "I'd like to leave now."

He nodded and began filling the backpacks.

"Kelsey," Ren stretched out a hand and then pulled it back when I stared at it like it was a foreign object, "we need to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about." I shook my head and took Phet's hand. "Thank you for your hospitality and for everything you've done for us."

Phet stood and hugged me. "You no worries, Kahl-see. Don't fail to remember water and earth is contented all together."

"I remember, but I think this time I'm like the moon. No water for me."

Phet pressed his hands on my shoulders. "Is water for Kahl-see. Moon maybe, but moon pull tide anyway."

"Okay." I said softly. "Thanks for the optimism. I'm sure I'll be fine. Don't worry about me," I assured him as I hugged him back. "Good-bye."

Phet said, "Future time pay a visit you happier, Kahl-see."

"I hope so. I'll miss you. Sorry to leave so abruptly, but I'm suddenly anxious to get this curse over and done." I grabbed my backpack and headed out the door.

Kishan gathered his things quickly and caught up to me.

"Kells," he started.

"Can we just walk for a while? I don't feel like talking."

His golden eyes perused my face until quietly he said, "Okay."

Before I'd taken many steps the white tiger was walking next to me, butting his head against my hand. I refused to look at him, clutched the straps of the backpack, and purposefully moved to Kishan's other side. Kishan looked at my tight expression and then at the white tiger, who fell back and walked behind us. Soon he was far back enough that I couldn't see him anymore.

I relaxed my stance and hiked without speaking and without stopping for food or rest until I couldn't walk another step. Creating a small tent with the Scarf, I fell on top of my sleeping bag, skipped dinner, and let the brothers fend for themselves. They left me alone, for which I was both grateful and disappointed, and I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke when the sky was still dark and checked my phone for the first time in days. No calls from Mr. Kadam. It was four in the morning. I didn't feel like sleeping anymore so I popped my head out of the tent and saw the weak flames of a dying fire. Neither Ren nor Kishan were around. Placing a couple more logs onto the fire, I built it up until it was crackling again and wished up a hot chocolate. I sipped my drink slowly as I stared into the flames.

"Have a nightmare?"

I whirled around. Ren was leaning against a tree. I made out his white shirt but his face was in the shadows.

"No." I stared into the flames again. "I just slept enough, that's all."

He stepped into the firelight and sat on a log across from me. The flickering flames made his golden-bronze skin glow warmly. I tried not to notice. *Why does he have to be so good-looking?* His blue eyes studied me intently.

I blew on my cocoa and looked everywhere but at him. "Where's Kishan?"

"Out on a hunt. He doesn't get to do it very often anymore, and he enjoys it."

I grunted. "Well, I hope he doesn't expect me to pick out the porcupine quills. If he gets those, he's on his own." I took another sip. "Why didn't you go with him?"

"Because I'm watching over you."

"You really don't need to. I'm a big girl. Go hunt if you want. In fact, you probably should. You're still too skinny."

"Nice to know you've been looking. I was worried you'd forgotten all about me."

I raised my eyes to his and sputtered with anger. "Forgotten all about you? *Me?* Forget about *you?* I . . . you know what? You're really starting to annoy me!"

"Good. You need to get it all out."

I set down my mug and stood. "Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd love to have me profess my undying love for you while you laugh in my face and mock me!"

He stood too. "I'm not mocking you, Kelsey."

I threw my hands into the air. "Well, why not? You might as well. You took away everything in the world that was important to me! You plucked out my heart, squeezed it in your hands, and gave it to the monkeys to play with. I shouldn't have trusted you! What an idiot I was to believe that you actually had feelings for me. That you cared about me. That we belonged together. You're just a . . . just a square pillow. And I've recently discovered that I like round ones!"

He laughed, which irritated me even more.

"I'm a square pillow? What does that mean?"

"It means we aren't meant to be together, that's all. I should have known that you'd trounce all over my heart. All those things you said, all those poems you wrote—they meant nothing to you. When we get home, I fully intend to give back every one of your poems."

He stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, they don't matter anymore. They might as well be thrown into the fire because that's the only warmth they'll ever offer me."

"I don't believe you'd do it."

"*Watch* me."

I retreated to the tent, grabbed my journal, and quickly leafed through the pages until I found the "Pearl without Price" poem. Running to the fire, I ripped the page from my book and stared at it.

"*Kelsey*." My brown eyes met his blue ones. "Don't."

"What difference does it make? The man who wrote this is dead at best, a pretender at worst."

"You're wrong. Just because I don't remember you now doesn't mean that what I felt for you before was a lie. I don't know why or how I did this to myself or why I forgot you. It doesn't make sense. But I can assure you that I'm not dead. I'm alive and standing right here."

I shook my head. Denying his words, I said, "You're dead to *me*," and dropped the page. I stared at it as it spun in the air. A tear coursed down my cheek as I watched the corner of the page catch on fire.

Faster than lightning, Ren grabbed the page out of the fire and crumpled the burning edge in his fist to put out the flame. He was breathing heavily, obviously upset. His hand quickly healed from the burn while I stared mutely at the charred edge of the precious poem.

"Were you always such a stubborn, blind, obtuse girl?"

"Are you calling me stupid?"

"Yes, but in a more poetic way!"



“Well, here’s a poem for you. Get lost!”

“I’m already lost! That much should be obvious! Why can’t you see what’s right in front of you?”

“What am I supposed to see? A tiger who happens to be a prince? A man who happens to hate me so much that he purposefully erased me from his brain with a magic spell? A man who can’t tolerate being in the same room with me for more than a few minutes? A man who can’t stand touching me? Is that what I’m supposed to see? Because if so, then I’ve got a pretty good view!”

“No, you *hotheaded* girl! What you’re not seeing is this!”

He grabbed me, yanked me up against his body, and kissed me. It was fiery and passionate. His lips were hot as they melded against mine. I didn’t even have time to react before it was over. He backed away and bent over, clutching the trunk of a tree. He breathed heavily, and his hands shook.

I folded my arms as I watched him recover. “What exactly were you trying to prove by doing that?”

“If you have to ask, then obviously I failed in my effort.”

“Okay, so you kissed me. So what? It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It *means* everything.”

“How do you figure?”

He took a big gulp of air and leaned against the tree. “It means that I’m starting to develop feelings for you, and if I feel them now, the likelihood of me feeling them before is pretty strong.”

“If that’s true, then remove the block.”

“I *can’t*. I don’t know what it is or how it got there or what this trigger might be. I was kind of hoping kissing you would do the trick. Apparently, that’s not it.”

“So . . . *what*? You thought you could kiss the female frog and turn her into your fairy princess? Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but what you see is what you get!”



“What on earth would make you think I wouldn’t be interested in what I see?”

“I really don’t want to hash that out with you again. We’ve been over it before even though you can’t remember. However, in the short-term memory that you *do* possess, you might remember saying that Nilima was beautiful.”

“Yes. I remember saying that. *So what?* How does saying that she is beautiful mean you’re not?”

“It’s all in the way you said it. *‘Too bad I wasn’t in love with Nilima . . . she’s beautiful.’* Which implies I’m not. Don’t you know anything about women? Never call one woman beautiful in front of another.”

“I didn’t. You were eavesdropping.”

“The point is still valid.”

“Fine! Then I’ll tell you what I think, and may I go without another meal if I’m lying! *You are beautiful.*”

“That train has already zoomed on by, buster, and you didn’t have a ticket.”

He combed his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Is there anything I can say to fix this?”

“Probably not.” I put my hands on my hips. “I just can’t understand why you would *do* this. If you really loved me, then why would you choose this? The most logical conclusion is that you didn’t really love me. I knew you were too good to be true.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself to Kishan. You couldn’t imagine loving someone like me. See? Even you knew we didn’t fit together. You’re Mr. Perfection and I’m Miss Average. Anyone can see that, and those *were* your true feelings right after we rescued you.”

He laughed bitterly. “Believe me, I am far from perfect, Kelsey, and you are no more *average* than Durga is. I barely knew you when I said those things, and you’re misinterpreting my words anyway!”

“How so?”

“I . . . what I meant was . . . what I said was . . . look! You’re not the same person I thought you were then.”

“I’m exactly the same person!”

“No. I was avoiding you. I wasn’t getting to know you. I was—”

I ripped out another page.

“*Kelsey!*” Ren ran over and yanked the journal from my hands, groaning with the effort of being so close to me. “Cut it out! Don’t even *think* about burning another page!”

I grabbed the journal and tugged. “They’re mine to do with as I please.”

He yanked back. “You need to stop judging me based on things I said right after I got back! I was still traumatized, and I wasn’t thinking coherently. I’ve had time to get to know you, and . . . I like you!” he yelled. “I like you enough that I think I even understand why I loved you, despite how frustrating you are!”

I pulled on my book. “You like me . . . *enough*? Enough! Well, *enough’s* not good enough for me.”

He wrenched the journal again. “*Kelsey*, what else do you *want* from me?”

I tugged again. “I *want* my old Ren back!”

He stiffened and growled, “Well, I don’t know what to tell you. The old Ren may be gone forever. And . . . this new Ren doesn’t want to lose you.” He glowered at me sullenly, moved his hand up to my wrist, and tugged me closer this time instead of the book. Then he said, “Besides, *you* said we could start over.”

“I don’t think that’s really possible.” I gave a final tug as he let go and moved away a few steps.

Ren dropped his hands to his sides and clenched his fists. In a dangerously low voice he said, “Then *make* it possible.”

“You expect too much.”

“No. *You* expect too much.” He took a step closer. “You’re *not* being reasonable. You need to give me *time*, Kelsey.”

I looked up, and we locked eyes. “I would have given you all the time in the world until Phet said you did this to yourself.”

“How poor are they that have not patience! What wound did ever heal but by degrees?”

“Shakespeare isn’t going to save you this time, Superman. Your time’s run out.”

He scowled. “Perhaps I should have been studying *The Taming of the Shrew!*”

“Okay, then here’s your first lesson: ‘My tongue will tell the anger of my heart. The door is open, sir; there lies your way.’”

“I don’t need a lesson. I already know how it ends. The guy wins. ‘Think you a little din can daunt mine ears?’” He crooked his finger and beckoned me closer. “In fact, come on over here and kiss me, Kate.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You botched the line, and you’ll find I’m not as easily won over as Katherine.”

Ren’s face tightened, and he threw up his hands in disgust. “Fine. You win. If you insist on giving back all my poetry then do it. But *don’t* burn it.”

“Fine! I’ll agree not to burn it, if you agree to leave me alone for the rest of this trip.”

“*Fine!* And incidentally, I don’t understand how I could have believed you were a warm, affectionate, and tenderhearted person! You’re obviously as prickly as a porcupine. Any man who comes close to you will end up with a face full of quills!”

“That’s right! A girl needs to have *some* defenses from the men who want to devour her for lunch. Especially when those men are wild tigers on the prowl looking for trouble.”

He narrowed his eyes, grabbed my hand, and nipped the inside of my wrist lightly before kissing it, though I could tell it caused him pain.

"You haven't seen just how wild I can be, *subhaga jadugarni*."

I rubbed his kiss off dramatically. "What does that mean?"

"It means . . . 'lovely witch.'"

"Flattery gets you nowhere, and a backhanded compliment gets you less than nowhere. I'm well versed in your verbal tricks."

He smiled mischievously, snickered, and dropped his gaze deliberately to my lips. "They must get me *somewhere*, or you wouldn't have a journal full of poems."

"Don't you have something to chase?"

"Sure. I'll give you a head start."

I glared at him. "Not in this lifetime, pal."

He folded his arms across his chest and grinned at me.

"Don't do that. It just makes me angrier."

I'd lied. Ren's smile didn't make me angrier. In fact, it was the opposite. It made me miss him. I felt sadness creep in around the edges, cooling my wrath down to a simmer.

"You never called me that one before."

"What? *Subhaga*? Did I have other nicknames for you?"

I paused and answered slowly, "Yes."

"What did I call you?" He tilted his head and appraised me in a mocking way. "I *probably* called you stubborn, close-minded, irritable, impatient—"

The unquenchable rage returned in a mighty blaze and burned so hot it bubbled over. I wanted to hurt him. "That's it!" I pressed my hands against his chest and shoved as hard as I could but he was immovable and just laughed at my puny efforts, so I gave him a little zap.

"Ow! Alright, kitten, you show me your claws, and I'll show you mine." He pressed both of my hands against my hips, trapping them. I

was mashed up against his chest, and his arms moved to become iron bands around my body. He kissed my neck and murmured softly, “I *knew* you couldn’t wait to get your hands on me.”

I gasped in outrage. “You . . . you . . . deserter!”

“If by deserter, you’re asking if I’ll have you for dessert, I’d consider it. Of course, I’d have to sweeten you up a bit first.” He laughed as he kissed my neck again.

I pushed myself away from him, quivering with frustration—at least, I think it was frustration. I was seriously considering shooting enough voltage through his body to make his hair stand on end and wipe the infuriatingly smug smile off his face when Kishan crashed through the trees.

“What’s all the yelling about?” Kishan asked.

“Would you please tell your sorry excuse for a brother that I’m not talking to him anymore?”

Kishan grinned. “No problem. She’s not talking to you anymore.” He laughed. “I’d been worried you two were getting along *too* well. I should have known better.”

Ren’s smile faltered. He frowned at his brother and narrowed his eyes at me. “Not talking to you is fine because at least that means I won’t have to listen.” With a sarcastic bow he added, “And with nothing else to say, I’ll gladly accept your terms of surrender.”

“I’m not surrendering *anything*, oh, Prince of the Battle of the Five Horses. And it’s *fine* with me, because I don’t expect you to listen to me anyway!”

“That was *Champion* at the Battle of the *Hundred* Horses!”

“Fine! Then why don’t you gallop on back to the Jeep, *Champion*?”

“*Fine!* Then I will!”

I spat with barely controlled rage. “Good! And don’t let the jungle hit you on the way out!”

He stared into my eyes as he stalked past me. He was breathless with anger and frustration, and, heaven help me, all I could think of was grabbing him and kissing him.

He spoke softly as I glared back at him. "I pity poor Kishan, who has to walk the rest of the way back with you."

"I'm sure he'll survive," I replied acerbically.

He glanced at Kishan, and looked his brother up and down coldly. "No *doubt*. I'll meet you back at the Jeep."

Kishan nodded, and Ren hesitated.

I folded my arms. "Well? What are you waiting for? A good-bye kiss?"

His eyes darted to my lips. "Careful what you wish for, *mohini stri*."

For a brief second, I panicked thinking he'd accept that challenge, but he tilted his head, smiled an infuriatingly knowing smile, leapt over the fire, and was gone.

Kishan stared at the hole in the forest where Ren had disappeared. Then he turned to me and put his hands on my shoulders.

"I've never seen you so angry before."

"What can I say? He brings out the best in me."

Kishan frowned. "It would appear he does."

"What did those words mean?"

"*Mohini stri*? They mean 'siren,' or 'fascinating woman.'"

I grunted. "Figures he'd take the opportunity to mock me further."

Kishan gave me a puzzled look. "I don't think he's mocking you."

"Of *course* he is. And I'm warning you right now: I'm not in the mood to start another tiger fight, so if you want to take off after him, then by all means feel free."

"Kelsey, I have no intention of leaving you alone. And I don't want to fight with you."

"Well, at least one of you is a gentleman," I muttered as I started gathering my things to leave. I picked up the crumpled poem and



smoothed the paper regretfully as I slipped my abused journal carefully into the backpack.

“Kelsey, despite what you think, Ren wouldn’t have left you alone either. If I wasn’t here, he would have stayed.”

“Yeah. Right. I could walk off the side of a cliff for all he cares. Why are you defending him anyway? I thought you wanted him out of the picture!”

“That’s not . . . exactly true.”

“Oh! I see. So *Kelsey* is the one at fault. *Kelsey* misunderstands everyone’s intentions. Then let me make sure I understand *your* motives. Do you still want to be with me, or don’t you?”

He scowled. “You know the answer to that.”

“Fine. Then now’s your chance! Kiss me.”

Kishan studied my face carefully and shook his head. “No.”

“No? Don’t you want to?”

“Yes, but I promised that I wouldn’t kiss you until I knew you and Ren were over. And I don’t think you are.”

“Ha! Oh, I think we *are*.”

“No. In fact, your little tirade proves that you’re not.”

I stood up on my toes as high as I could, getting as close to being nose to nose with Kishan as was possible. “*Fine*. Then neither one of you needs to walk me back.”

I grabbed my backpack and left him standing in shock. I stomped through the jungle, letting my anger guide me for several moments before I slipped my phone out of my pocket and searched for Ren’s dot on the map. I could see Kishan’s dot following me at a distance. He was far enough back that I couldn’t see or hear him, but he was near enough to close the distance if I needed him.

Walking through the jungle relatively alone was good for me. It gave me time to cool down. I was still angry and muttered to myself the entire

way, but at least my blood pressure normalized, so I didn't have to worry about having a stroke. And when I realized that I had possession of the Golden Fruit and the Scarf, I grinned wickedly thinking about the two of them starving or having to hunt. In fact, I made myself a big ice cream cone and soothed my temper with chocolate brownie and mudslide as I walked.

Several hours later, I found Ren leaning against the Jeep, which was parked in the shade of a tree. He watched me as I tromped through the undergrowth. He'd probably heard me coming for the last ten minutes. He looked behind me, surprised that I was alone, then glared, changed into the white tiger, and walked between some bushes so he wasn't in view anymore.

I studiously ignored him, sank down to the dirt with my back against the Jeep, and took a long drink of sugar-free lemonade from my canteen. I would have preferred water, but we'd run out and the Golden Fruit couldn't make plain old H₂O.

Kishan emerged from the jungle and briefly stared at me with a fathomless expression before unlocking and opening the Jeep doors. Ren emerged from the bushes and silently leapt into the backseat. I wasn't about to cozy up next to Ren so I chose the passenger seat, cranked up the air conditioning, made a pillow, and leaned my chair back. It was a very quiet ride home.

The second the Jeep stopped in front of the house, I leapt out of the car, slammed the door, and stomped inside.

"We're home, Mr. Kadam! I'm taking a shower!" I yelled and disappeared into my room.

Finally feeling refreshed and almost human again a few hours later, I whipped up a bowl of mixed fruit and a chicken salad sandwich and looked for Mr. Kadam in the peacock room.

"Mr. Kadam? I can't tell you how much I missed being around a

gentlema—" I said, stopping abruptly when I saw he was with a freshly showered Ren.

"Miss Kelsey, come in," Mr. Kadam beckoned, approaching me with open arms.

I took an awkward step forward, hugged Mr. Kadam, and glared at Ren. His hair was wet and slicked back, and he was wearing a fitted V-neck shirt in dragonfly blue over a pair of straight-legged gray herringbone designer pants. He was barefoot, and he was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen. He folded his arms across his chest, which made his arm muscles bulge. I scowled at him.

"I'll leave you two alone," Ren said with a mocking flourish and left, deliberately brushing his arm against mine as he passed.

"I hope that hurt," I muttered quietly and heard his soft laugh as he went into the kitchen.

Mr. Kadam seemed completely oblivious of our exchange. "Miss Kelsey! Come and sit with me. I have something to show you!"

"What is it?"

"I've finally finished decoding the third prophecy, and I'd like to hear what you think," Mr. Kadam said and slid his translation across his desk.

The words were written in beautiful calligraphy. I read:

*Lustrous gems of blazon black
Once graced her satin'd skin.
A ruthless knave her neck ransack'd;
The strand sank deep within.
Now heads hide buried in the sea;
A brave one brings them out.
Deadly monsters bite and sting—*

Too horrible to rout.
But trident wield, Lamandal imbibe,
And the lady who weaves the silk
Will guide and guarantee you lay
The wreath on sea of milk.
Seek dragon kings of oceans five
From cardinal compass as you dive:
Red Dragon's stars move in astral time;
Blue Dragon's range points the way;
Green Dragon helps see through the clime;
Gold Dragon's town lies 'neath the waves;
White Dragon unlocks the door to icy lights.
Take her arms and wield them well
Her unblemish'd prize to win.
Capture the string with fluid power;
Head homeward once again.
Cool India's lands with precious dew;
River, stream, the rain will fill.
The dry land and the heart renew,
Else healing pow'r is latent still.

I let the page fall gently to my lap and looked at Mr. Kadam with a newfound horror. "Dragons?" was all I could mutter.