

## A Sneak Peek from Tiger's Dream

### Prologue

### Embers

Her wild heart raced, pounding chaotically like the stream she'd paused at. Her thin limbs trembled and as moonlight cut across her form, I could see her pulse throb and her eyes flick back and forth, alert to danger. I watched her from the shadows of the trees—a black specter intent upon her demise. After sticking her nose in the air one last time, she nervously lowered her head for a drink.

I sprang from my hiding place and tore through grass and brush, eating up the distance like a shooting star. My claws scraped against a gnarled root thrusting up through the ground like the arm of a rising skeleton and she heard the noise.

Bounding swiftly, the deer jerked to the left. I leapt, but my teeth caught only the thick fur of her winter coat. She let out a frightened squeal of alarm. Charging after her, my blood raced and I felt more alive than I had in months.

I pounced again and this time wrapped my claws around her heaving torso in a deadly embrace. She struggled beneath me, bucking as best she could as I bit her neck. Sinking my teeth in, I clamped down on her windpipe. Crushing it would suffocate her and I believed it was a gentler, more humane way to hunt, but, suddenly, I felt as if I was the one slowly asphyxiating.

The exhilaration I felt when I hunted leached away and I was left once again with the emptiness that constantly threatened to consume me. It smothered and choked, killing me unhurriedly in the same manner as I was taking the life of this creature.

I opened my jaws and lifted my head. Sensing a change, the deer lunged into the creek knocking me off her back in the process. As she disappeared into the undergrowth, cold water washed over my thick fur and for a moment I wished I could just breathe it in and let go. Let go of my memories. Let go of my disappointment. Let go of my dreams.

If only I believed death would be so kind.

Gradually, I made my way out of the stream. My paws were as caked with mud as my thoughts. Disheartened, I shook the water out of my fur and was futilely trying to get the mud out from between my claws when I heard a woman's laugh.

I whipped my head up and saw Anamika crouching on the limb of a tree, the golden bow across her shoulder and a quiver of arrows strapped to her back.

“That was the most pathetic hunt I’ve ever seen,” she mocked.

I growled softly but she ignored the warning and continued making comments.

“You chose the weakest creature in the forest and you still couldn’t bring her down. What kind of a tiger are you?”

She nimbly hopped down from the thick branch. Anamika wore her green dress and as she strode towards me I was momentarily distracted by her long legs, but then she opened her mouth again.

She put her hands on her hips and said, “If you’re hungry, I can bring down your meal for you, seeing as you’re too weak to do it yourself.”

Blowing a derisive breath from my nostrils, I turned my back on her and loped off in the other direction but she quickly caught up to me, matching my speed even as I darted through the trees. When I realized there was no shaking her, I halted and switched forms.

As a man I spun to her and bellowed in annoyance, “Why do you insist upon shadowing me, Anamika? Isn’t it enough that I’m stuck here with you day in and day out?”

She narrowed her gaze. “I am as much stuck,” she rolled the word across her tongue since it was fairly new to her, “here with you as you are with me. The difference is that I do not waste my life away yearning for something I shall never have!”

“You know nothing about what I yearn for!”

She raised an eyebrow at this and I knew what she was thinking. In reality she knew *everything* I yearned for. Being the tiger of Durga meant that the two of us shared a bond, a mental connection that linked us every time we assumed the form of Durga and Damon. We tried to give each other space but we both knew much more about one another than we were willing to talk about.

I knew she missed her brother, terribly. She also hated taking on the role of Durga. Power didn’t interest her which actually made her the perfect choice to rule as a goddess. She would never abuse the weapons or use the Damon Amulet for selfish purposes. That was something I admired about her, though I’d never admit it.

There were other things I’d noticed that I’d come to respect in the past six months. Anamika was fair and wise in resolving disputes, always thought of others before herself, and

she wielded weapons better than most men I knew. She deserved a companion who supported her and helped make her burden easier. That was supposed to be my job, but instead I often wallowed in self-pity. I was about to apologize when she started pushing my buttons again.

“Believe it or not, I am not following you around to make your life unpleasant. I am simply assuring that you do not hurt yourself. Your thoughts are continuously distracted which means you put your well being at risk.”

“*Hurt* myself? Hurt myself! I can’t *be* hurt, Anamika!”

“*Hurt* is all you’ve been for the past six months, Damon,” she said more quietly. “I have tried to be patient with you but you continue to display this, this...weakness.”

Angrily, I approached her and jabbed my finger in the air next to her nose, effectively ignoring the barely noticeable yet appealing dusting of freckles across it and the long lashed green eyes a man could lose himself in. “Let’s get a couple of things straight, Anna; first, how I feel is *my* business and second,” I paused then as I heard her suck in a breath. Concerned that I was frightening her, I backed up a step and stopped shouting. “Second, when we’re in public, I am Damon, but when we are alone, *please* call me Kishan.”

I turned my back to her, raised my hand to the trunk of a nearby tree, and let the angry fire she always brought out in me dull back down to dead smoking embers. Concentrating on slowing my breathing, I didn’t notice her approach until I felt her hand on my arm. Anamika’s touch always shot warm tingles through my skin, a part of our cosmic connection.

“I am sorry...Kishan,” she said. “It was not my intention to anger you or bring your volatile emotions to the surface.”

This time her irritating comments didn’t bother me. Instead I laughed dryly. “I’ll try to remember to keep my ‘volatile emotions’ in check. In the meantime, if you quit pestering the tiger he wouldn’t be so quick to show you his teeth.”

She studied me silently for a moment then walked past me, heading back towards our home with a stiff back. The fading sound of her muttering disappeared as she moved through the trees but still I caught the phrase, “I am *not* frightened of his teeth.”

I felt a passing guilt at letting her return home alone but I’d noted that she wore the Damon Amulet and knew there was nothing on this earth that could harm her. When she was gone, I stretched and wondered if I should return to the home we shared, shared being a relative term, or if I should stay the night in the forest. I’d just decided to find a nice piece of grass to

sleep on when my body stilled, sensing the presence of another person. *Who would be here? A hunter? Had Anamika returned?*

Slowly, I circled, making little to no sound and when I'd fully revolved I jumped back, my heart slamming in shock.

A little man stood before me as if he'd appeared out of nowhere, *which he probably had*. Moonlight shone on his bald head and, as he shifted, his sandals crunched the grass. We hadn't seen the monk since that fateful day when I gave over my fiancée, the girl I loved more than life, to my brother. The day I watched my dreams, my hopes, and my future leap through a vortex of flame and disappear, extinguishing like a lamp run out of oil.

I'd been depleted ever since.

"Phet," I said simply. "What brings *you* to my version of hell?"

The man took hold of my shoulder and peered at me with lucid brown eyes.

"Kishan," he said gravely, "Kelsey needs you."