

Chapter One: Burning, a Tiger

Bagheera dreams of a tiger. Gold and scarlet, black and white, eyes of yellow. A shimmering animal, shifting between colors. Slipping through the dark leaves of the jungle, moving soundlessly toward him. He watches the tiger approach, and he is afraid. In his sleep, he twitches and stirs, but does not wake. He finds himself enthralled, as by the slow, mesmerizing dance of a hunting snake, and he cannot move. He can only watch as the tiger draws nearer, approaching steadily from a distance, stalking him.

How he can see the tiger through the thick layers of foliage? It should be impossible, but every moment of its approach is clear to him. It covers ground at an alarming rate, sweeping through trees and undergrowth as though they were nothing, but they are not nothing. They are the jungle, which is everything.

No beast can move like that. As this thought enters Bagheera's mind, the tiger draws near enough that he sees exactly what kind of creature it is. His hackles rise, a chill spreading down his spine from shoulders to tail. It is a tiger made of that substance that men call *fire*.

He can think the name: *fire*, though he will not speak it aloud. All creatures of the jungle fear the word, for it describes a horror, heat given a body without skin. One who touches fire feels only pain. Fire has no shape. It moves always. It grows. It devours. The creatures of the

jungle call it *the red flower*, for it is red—and gold, and orange, and white, colors the center of a flower with red petals contains. Like a flower, fire has petals. Like a flower, fire blooms, withers, dies.

The burning tiger glides so easily through twined trees, through dense undergrowth, because where it passes, everything blossoms into flame. The jungle is burning, and the tiger cuts a swath through it, implacable and swift, although its motions appear unhurried. Finally, Bagheera makes out its features and finds its eyes fixed upon him. He is not merely in the path of the tiger. No, he is what it is heading towards. He cannot move, his feet affixed to the low branch on which he crouches.

In the same instant Bagheera becomes aware of the tiger's purpose, he recognizes the pattern of its stripes, and the single slight catch in its gait, marking one of its front paws as lame. The tiger is made of flames, but it is also an individual, and one he knows well. It is Shere Khan, and his muzzle is red with fire. His flanks are red with fire, and Bagheera wonders if all of the scarlet is fire, or if some of it is blood.

Shere Khan is close enough now that he could leap up and knock Bagheera from his branch. His pace slows, gaze unwavering on Bagheera, eyes bright and hot as suns. He opens his mouth, and both fire and blood seem to spill from it. "My friend," he says.

"My friend," Bagheera replies, feeling heat on his face. He does not know why he calls Shere Khan friend once more, when for so long they have been enemies.

"What treachery is this, Bagheera?" the tiger asks.

"Treachery? It's you burning down the jungle!"

A curious, low huffing noise comes from the tiger. Bagheera starts in confusion, though his paws remain stuck to the tree branch as the jungle burns and crackles around him. Petals of

flame brush against the roots of the tree holding him up. As everything burns, the tiger continues to release the odd sound from a space deep inside him. What is that noise? Could Shere Khan be—laughing? Laughter is a sound Bagheera never heard the tiger make in life. Bagheera's tree prison catches fire in earnest, flame climbing it like a quick-growing vine. The tree will be burnt to ashes, and Bagheera with it. "You're a fool, Bagheera," growls Shere Khan, the growl putting an end to his laughter. "Look around you. This is the end. Open your eyes!"

At the tiger's last words, Bagheera's eyes snapped open. His sleep was broken, and he looked upon the green waking world. There was no tiger of flame standing before him, calling him a fool with its red mouth, but there was a thick, sharp scent in the air, unmistakable in its harshness. His eyes widened. Part of his dream had been truth. The jungle was burning.

The scent of smoke had worked its way into his dreams to awaken him. Shere Khan had been the addition of his own mind. The tiger's presence, his words, had meant nothing.

That knowledge did not reassure Bagheera. A real fire was more dangerous than a dream. Bagheera rose to his feet and sprang. Awake, he could move as easily as ever. He was a nimble panther yet, for all that he had seen many years and known many sorrows. His motions were quick and light; his green eyes could see in the dark.

The threat was not as immediate as it had been in the dream. He could not see the fire, but there was a great deal of it, his nose told him. Bagheera's heart beat fast. Fire came from lightning or—more often these days—from man. The village was near. Fighting his instinct to flee, Bagheera followed the smoke-scent through the jungle, leaping, almost flying. Vines and branches whipped at his face, but he paid them no heed. Something was wrong, more wrong than mere flames. His fast-beating heart ached with worry. There was a small fire burning in his heart,

and Shere Khan's words came back to him unbidden. *You're a fool.* Few creatures other than Shere Khan would have called Bagheera that.

Bagheera, who was so clever and swift and fierce. If he were a fool, it was because all creatures were fools; because everything in the world, in the very beginning, had been made foolish in some measure. Bagheera was no more foolish than any, though his foolish heart was afire in his foolish chest. Fear had followed him out of the dream into life. "Mowgli," he said as he ran, as the name became the only word in the world. Fear made him unreasoning, and he imagined that the bright tiger from his dream had heard him speak and started to laugh at him again.

Shere Khan: the great, dead tiger, roaring with laughter as blood dripped from his muzzle, and flames leapt from his shoulders and his sides. Shere Khan, his friend.