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The Tiger Thief

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Chapter One
JINNI

Emira paced backwards and forwards in her wooden cage. Each time she turned, her tail flicked in irritation against the bars. Behind her, a tatty orange circus tent rose up into the evening sky, silver limelight shining through cracks in the canvas. The air was hot and still, and hungry bats flitted overhead, feeding on the insects that flew up from the parched earth.

Sharat pulled on a pair of white trousers. He was naked from the waist up and a dark braid hung down his back.

He paused to look across the river. For days they'd been trudging through the heat and dust of the southern plains towards the City of Jewels. Now they were here, but instead of the glittering streets he'd been expecting, the land lay cracked and bare, and ragged slums clung

like a scab to the outskirts of the city. The only sign that this was the capital of the richest empire in the world was the fortress that rose up at the centre of the old town, its forbidding, stone walls dominating the streets below.

Sharat shivered in excitement. Shergarh. Tomorrow they would be performing there for the Emperor himself.

Emira made an impatient noise at the back of her throat.

Sharat glanced back at her. "I'm coming!" he said. Stepping towards the cage, he fished around behind one of the wheels and pulled out a key.

The tiger watched him with unblinking blue-green eyes as he unlocked the door. Her tail twitched. She had been restless all day.

"Don't blame me," grumbled Sharat. "The cage wasn't *my* idea."

Emira growled as she lifted one of her great paws and pushed the door open, jumping down to land silently next to him. Her fur shone with an unearthly glow in the twilight, pure white with tracings of ebony.

Sharat put out a hand to stroke her, but instead of stopping to purr as she usually did, she slid straight past him and padded towards the circus tent.

"Hey!"

Frowning, Sharat dropped the key back in its hiding place as he hurried to follow her. Together they slipped through a gap in the canvas to wait in the shadows.

This was the circus's first night in the city and it was a full house. The air was heavy with the smell of incense that was burning to keep the mosquitoes away, and

the audience sat on cushions and blankets on the floor. Farmers rubbed shoulders with shopkeepers and their wives, while their children jostled for space at the front. Many of the women kept their faces covered, but a few shimmered like exotic birds in brilliant silk saris as they whispered to each other. By the door, a group of soldiers stood watching, silently, their swords glinting by their sides.

Sharat glanced up. Overhead, his cousin Risa glittered in her silver costume as she twisted her body around a rope that was hanging from the roof. With perfect control, she slid down until she was suspended by one of her ankles. For a moment she struck a pose, arms outstretched. Then, slowly, she began to swing.

Sharat had seen the show a thousand times. He knew Risa was getting ready to fly towards the trapeze.

"Ready?" he said, glancing at the tiger as he pulled on a pair of leather gloves.

Emira's tail quivered as she watched the acrobat. A low growl played in her throat.

Sharat bent down to pick up his long leather whip. "Calm down!" he muttered. "It's only Risa."

Instead of giving him her usual friendly meow, Emira snarled and lurched forward.

Sharat stumbled as she pushed past him.

"What *is* it?" he snapped.

Emira's eyes darted across the ceiling. This time her growl was more insistent.

Puzzled, Sharat looked up as Risa passed overhead in

a graceful arc.

Then suddenly he saw it! There was something up there, something small and dark crouching in the rigging. Squinting, he craned his head, but before he could make out what it was, it scurried towards the trapeze and began to fiddle with the knots.

Catching his breath, Sharat ran forward.

"Risa!" he cried. "Don't let go!"

It was too late. With a flick of her foot the acrobat unwound the loop around her ankle. She was already flying through the air when one side of the crossbar fell.

There was a gasp from the crowd. Risa's outstretched hands were reaching into empty space.

Without thinking, Sharat threw himself into the ring. Cracking his whip, the leather cord caught the wooden bar just in time to swing it towards the acrobat's flying body.

"Catch!" he shouted.

By some miracle, Risa managed to grab the pole with one hand as the whip clattered to the floor. She looked terrified.

Jabbering with excitement, the audience surged to their feet and pushed forward to get a better look, but Lemo, the ringmaster, got there first.

"Loosen the ropes!" he boomed, sprinting into the ring. "Bring her down!"

Lemo was Sharat's father. His naked torso rippled with muscles and his dark eyes flashed with authority as he called out his orders.

Risa's own father and brother had already appeared out of the shadows. Quickly, they lowered Risa to the ground and carried her away.

Sharat's heart was pounding as he scanned the ceiling. What was up there? A monkey? A bird? He caught a glimpse of shining eyes, but before he could get a proper look there was a shiver of wings, and the creature disappeared through a hole in the canvas.

Emira had seen it too. She leapt forward, her teeth bared in a terrible growl. With a gasp, mothers snatched their children and the audience swerved back in terror. All at once the soldiers drew their swords and began to advance. Lemo didn't miss a beat. With a crack of his whip he cut Emira off from the crowd. Then he spun to face all sides, his arms outstretched.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried. "Please show your appreciation for our final act: Tiger Boy and Emira, the White Princess!"

Before Sharat could object, someone pressed a flaming hoop into his gloved hand and pushed him into the ring. Right on cue, Emira let out a terrible roar and lunged towards him, eyes blazing and claws outstretched. This time, the children in the front row shrieked with pleasure.

Sharat had no choice. Snatching his whip from the floor, he slipped into his routine. Dodging Emira, he proceeded to put her through her paces. To the audience it seemed that the tiger would surely rip him to shreds, but somehow he always managed to bring her under control until, at last, it was time for the grand finale.

With a flick of his wrist, Sharat threw the hoop of fire into the air. Then, as Emira leapt through the flames, he flipped backwards, landing just in time to snatch the spinning hoop from the sky.

The audience rose to their feet with a roar of applause.

Emira snarled menacingly at the crowd while Sharat took his bows. Then, with a final crack of the whip, they ran out of the ring.

Sharat's heart was hammering with excitement as he led the tiger back to her cage.

"What was that thing in the rigging?" he demanded as he pulled off his gloves.

Emira growled and lashed her tail.

Sharat laughed as he ruffled her fur. He and Emira usually understood each other perfectly, but this time even *she* couldn't tell him what she'd seen. His mind was racing as he remembered the small, dark creature. Was it a monkey? A bird?

"I'll have to ask Risa," he said.

Quickly, he reached for the key and opened the cage door.

The tiger turned to fix him with a disapproving stare.

Sharat sighed; Emira hated being locked up. In the countryside she was allowed to roam free, but it was dangerous in the city.

"Go on," he said. "Lemo's orders."

Emira bared her teeth in scorn as she lifted one of her paws and pressed it against his chest, flexing her claws just slightly to prick his skin.

"Ow!" complained Sharat, brushing away her paw. "I know you can look after yourself," he said. "*I'm* the one who will get into trouble." He gave her a push. "Just get in!"

Emira grumbled, but she climbed in with a swish of her tail.

"We can go out hunting tomorrow," promised Sharat, as he threw her a hunk of mutton.

With a growl the tiger caught the meat, but she turned her back on him to eat.

Sharat went down to the river to wash. The water was brown, and the current sluggish this far south, but it felt good to splash his body clean. Afterwards, he filled a bucket of water up for Emira and put it in her cage.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

Emira flicked her tail in disdain.

The show was over and the crowds were already pouring into the night as Sharat made his way around the circus tent towards the campsite. For as long as he could remember, the ringmaster's caravan had been his home, but now his father's new wife, Mohini, lived there.

Tonight, she was sitting on the brightly painted steps, brushing her long, black hair. When she saw Sharat coming she smiled, her eyes green and knowing.

Sharat scowled. Mohini had been at the circus for less than a month, but she was already acting like she owned the place. Flushing angrily, he hurried past.

His father was standing nearby with the acrobats, Pias and Ram. Pias was Lemo's brother, but his body was wiry

and his face was pinched and narrow. He was holding the crossbar of the trapeze.

"Where do you think you're going?" he snapped as he caught sight of Sharat.

Sharat was surprised by the tone of his voice. He stopped short to catch his breath.

"I'm looking for Risa," he said.

Pias frowned. "What do you want with Risa?"

Sharat hesitated, wondering why his uncle looked so angry. He glanced up at his father.

"I want to talk to her about the accident," he said.

Lemo looked serious. "I think you'd better talk to us first."

Sharat felt a pang of anxiety. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Is Risa all right?"

Pias leaned forward, his small eyes mean with fury. "Risa's fine," he said. "No thanks to *you*."

"What do you mean?" said Sharat. "I just saved Risa's life. Didn't you see?"

"I'll tell you what I saw," said Pias, his voice heavy with threat. "I saw you watching the trapeze before it came down. It was as if you *knew* it was going to fall."

Suddenly Sharat understood. "Surely you don't think *I* loosened the trapeze?" he said in disbelief.

Pias's lip curled. "That's exactly what I think."

Sharat shook his head. "Don't be stupid," he said. "I would never do something like that." He turned to his father.

"There was something up there," he explained.

"Something messing with the rigging."

Ram, Risa's brother, was only a year older than Sharat, but he was already bigger than his father. His broad mouth twisted in disdain.

"What are you talking about, Ratty?" he sneered.

Sharat threw him a dirty look.

"I suppose it must have been a monkey," he said. "I didn't see it that clearly."

Pias snorted. "No monkey could untie one of *my* knots."

"Well, maybe it wasn't a monkey," said Sharat, "but it was small and black." He frowned as he thought of the dark figure he'd seen crouching on the ropes. "I think it may have had wings."

Ram rolled his eyes. "Maybe it was a *jinni*," he suggested sarcastically.

Sharat's heart leapt. "A jinni?"

"That's enough," snapped Lemo, shooting a warning look at his nephew.

There was a sulky expression on Ram's face, but he bit his lip.

Lemo glanced at Sharat. "This is no time for one of your stories," he said.

"It's not a story," protested Sharat. "There *was* something up there. Emira saw it too, that's why she went so wild."

"What nonsense," said Pias. "Emira went wild because you don't know how to control her."

Sharat glared at his uncle. "That's not true!"

Before Pias could answer, Lemo stepped in. Putting his hand on Sharat's shoulder he glanced at his brother.

"Leave him to me," he said quietly. "I'll make sure he gets the punishment he deserves."

Pias looked annoyed, but he didn't dare argue with Lemo. He jerked his head. "Come on," he told Ram, "let's go back and check the rigging. We'll soon be able to tell if it's been tampered with."

Ram followed obediently, but he flashed Sharat a scornful look as he left.

When they were gone, Sharat turned to confront his father. For the first time he noticed that Lemo's face was tired and lined with worry.

"I'm not lying," he said. "I would never loosen the trapeze. Pias blames me for everything."

"Pias is … difficult," Lemo admitted.

Sharat scowled. "He's jealous because I've got Emira."

Lemo sighed. The boy was right. When Emira had first come to the circus, Pias had wanted Ram to have her, but the tiger had never obeyed anyone except Sharat. They had grown up together.

"Leave Pias to me," he said. "But promise me you won't talk about what you saw tonight. I don't want the crew getting nervous."

Sharat shook his head. "They wouldn't believe me anyway," he muttered.

Angrily, he turned away, ignoring Mohini, who was watching silently from the caravan steps. He had been so excited about saving Risa's life. He should have known it

would somehow get him into trouble. But there *had* been something up there. He was sure of it. Emira had seen it too. His heart quickened as he remembered those glinting eyes. Could it really have been a jinni?

Sharat shivered. He'd heard stories about jinnis, but he'd never really paid much attention – it was considered bad luck to even talk about them at the circus.

Quickly, he hurried back towards Emira's cage. As he passed the campfire, he could hear the rest of the circus laughing and joking. He considered joining them, but he knew they would be sure to ask him about the accident. Instead he stuck to the shadows, skirting the circus tent until he was facing the City of Jewels.

The night was still and the moon was not yet risen. All he could see now were cooking fires glowing in the slums. For a moment he stopped to look at the menacing shape of the fortress at the centre of town, a silhouette against the stars.

Just then he heard a growl behind him.

"Emira?"

He glanced over. Then he stiffened. There was a man standing in the darkness next to the tiger's cage.

"Hello?" he called out. "Who's there? Is that you, Pias? Ram?"

As he spoke, Sharat felt something shift in the night air and his skin became clammy despite the heat. Just then he saw that the figure in front of him was dressed from head to foot in black. This wasn't one of the circus crew. This was a stranger.

Trapped in her cage, Emira had drawn herself up to her full height with her ears pulled back. She bared her teeth and snarled. Sharat clenched his fists.

"Who's that?" he called again, ready to fight.

There was no answer, but as the man turned, Sharat saw him more clearly. His hair was swept back in waves from his forehead, he had no beard and his face was deathly white, but even more frightening were his pale eyes, their colour indistinguishable in the starlight.

Sharat felt his stomach contract in fear. He stepped forward.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

The man in black didn't reply. Instead, his mouth opened in a ghastly smile and the gap between his lips became as wide and black as the gates of death. He raised his staff.

A blast of scorching air engulfed Sharat. Wind whipped the hair around his face, and his limbs were pinned to his sides. For a horrible moment he thought he would be lifted off his feet, but just then Emira's terrible roar shattered the whirlwind. In a flash, the man in black disappeared.

Sharat spun around, staring into the darkness. The harsh cry of a bird sounded overhead. For the briefest moment an enormous shadow blacked out the night, but nothing stirred on the ground.

Emira hissed. Her ears were flattened close to her head and the hair along the length of her spine bristled. She was frightened.

Sharat's heart was pounding. This wasn't the first time they'd had trouble. There had been other occasions when gangs of children had come to taunt Emira. Then, he'd been able to see them off with his whip. This stranger was something else.

He reached through the bars to stroke the tiger's flank. "Did he hurt you?" he demanded.

Her growl was low and threatening.

With a quick glance to make sure the coast was clear, Sharat unlocked the cage and Emira jumped out to stand by his side, her tail trembling in fury as he wrapped his arms fiercely around her neck.

Sharat slowly relaxed, but he had no intention of putting Emira back in her cage.

"I don't care what Lemo says," he murmured into her fur. "You're spending the night with me."