

Prologue

The Curse

The prisoner stood with his hands tied in front of him, tired, beaten, and filthy, but with a proud back befitting his royal Indian heritage. His captor, Lokesh, looked on hautilly from a lavishly carved, gilded throne. Tall, white pillars stood like sentinels around the room. Not a whisper of a jungle breeze moved across the sheer draperies. All the prisoner could hear was the steady clinking of Lokesh's jeweled rings against the side of the golden chair as he looked down, eyes narrowed into contemptuous, triumphant slits.

The prisoner was the prince of an Indian kingdom called Mujulaain. Technically, his current title was Prince and High Protector of the Mujulaain Empire, but he still preferred to think of himself as just his father's son.

The fact that Lokesh, the raja of a small neighboring kingdom called Bhreenam, had managed to kidnap him was not as shocking as who was sitting beside him: Yesubai, Lokesh's daughter and the prisoner's fiancée, and his younger brother, Kishan. The captive studied all three of them but only Lokesh returned his determined gaze. Beneath his shirt, the prince's stone amulet lay cool against his skin, while anger surged through his body.

The prisoner spoke first, struggling to keep the betrayal out of his voice, "Why have you—you, who are almost family—treated me with such...inhospitality?"

Nonchalant, Lokesh affixed a deliberate smile on his face. "My dear prince, you have something I desire."

"Nothing you could want can justify this. Are our kingdoms not to be joined? Everything I have has been at your disposal. You needed only to ask. Why have you done this?"

Lokesh rubbed his jaw and his eyes glittered. "Plans change. It seems that your brother would like to take my daughter for his bride. He has promised me certain remunerations if I help him achieve that goal."

The prince turned his attention to Yesubai, who, with cheeks aflame, assumed a

demure, submissive pose with her head bowed. His arranged marriage to Yesubai was supposed to have ushered in an era of peace between the two kingdoms. He had been away for the last four months overseeing military operations on the far side of the empire and had left his brother to watch over the kingdom.

I guess Kishan was watching a little bit more than just the kingdom.

The prisoner strode fearlessly forward, faced Lokesh, and called out, “You have fooled us all. You are like a coiled cobra that has been hiding in his basket, waiting for the moment to strike.”

He widened his glance to include his brother and his fiancée. “Don’t you see? Your actions have freed the viper, and we are bitten. His poison now runs through our blood, destroying everything.”

Lokesh laughed distainfully and spoke, “If you agree to surrender your piece of the Damon Amulet, I might be persuaded to allow you to live.”

“To live? I thought we were bartering for my bride.”

“I’m afraid your rights as a betrothed husband have been usurped. Perhaps I haven’t been clear. Your brother will have Yesubai.”

The prisoner clenched his jaw, and said simply, “My father’s armies would destroy you if you killed me.”

Lokesh laughed. “He certainly would not destroy Kishan’s new family. We will simply placate your dear father and tell him that you were the victim of an unfortunate accident.”

He stroked his short, stippled beard and then clarified, “Of course, you understand, that even should I allow you live, I will rule both kingdoms.” Lokesh smiled. “If you defy me I will forcibly remove your piece of the amulet.”

Kishan leaned toward Lokesh and protested stiffly, “I thought we had an arrangement. I only brought my brother to you because you swore that you would not kill him! You were to take the amulet. That’s all.”

Lokesh shot out his hand as quickly as a snake and grabbed his wrist. “You should have learned by now that I take whatever I want. If you would prefer the view

from where your brother is standing, I would be happy to accommodate you.”

Kishan shifted in his chair but remained silent.

Lokesh continued. “No? Very well, I have now amended our former arrangement. Your brother will be killed if he does not comply with my wishes, and you will never marry my daughter unless you hand over your piece of the amulet to me as well. This private arrangement of ours can easily be revoked, and I can have Yesubai married to a different man. A man of my choosing. Perhaps an old sultan would cool her blood. If you want to remain close to Yesubai, you will learn to be submissive.”

Lokesh squeezed Kishan’s wrist until it cracked loudly. He didn’t react at all.

Flexing his fingers and slowly rolling his wrist, Kishan sat back, raised a hand to touch the engraved amulet piece hidden underneath his own shirt, and made eye contact with his brother. An unspoken message passed between them.

The brothers would deal with each other later, but Lokesh’s actions meant war, and the needs of the kingdom were a priority for both.

Obsession pumped up Lokesh’s neck, throbbed at his temple, and settled behind his black, serpentine eyes. Those same eyes dissected Ren’s face, probing, assessing for weakness. Angered to the point of action, he jumped to his feet. “So be it!”

Lokesh pulled a shiny knife with a jeweled hilt from his robe and roughly yanked up the sleeve of the prisoner’s, now filthy, white Jodhpuri coat. The ropes twisted on his wrists and he grunted in pain as Lokesh drew the knife across his arm. The cut was deep enough that blood welled up, spilled over the edge, and dripped onto the tiled floor.

Lokesh tore a wooden talisman from around his neck and placed it beneath the prisoner’s arm. Blood dripped from the knife onto the charm, and the engraved symbol glowed red before pulsing an unnatural white light.

The light shot toward the prince with groping fingers that pierced his chest and clawed its way through his body. Though strong, he wasn’t prepared for the pain. The captive screamed as his body suddenly became inflamed with a prickly heat.

He reached out with his hands to brace himself, but he managed only to scratch feebly on the cold, white tile of the floor. He watched helplessly as both Yesubai and his

brother attacked Lokesh, who shoved them both back viciously. Yesubai fell to the ground, hitting her head hard on the dais. He was aware that his brother was near, overtaken by grief as the life drained from her limp body. Then he was aware of nothing except the pain.