TIGER HEART II

ENGLISH TRANSLATION SAMPLE

By Destinies1

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CHAPTER ONE

The Serpent Descends into the Water

"Just a little farther, Khun Phet."

Buatong had said it so often that the words might have sounded soothing to anyone listening. She meant them as encouragement, certainly, but there was an unmistakable urgency beneath her gentle voice. She was trying to keep the woman beside her moving.

Phetlada's skin had turned as cold as a corpse's. Even in the darkness beneath the forest canopy, Buatong knew that every trace of color must have drained from her face. The taller woman's right knee buckled. She pressed a large hand against the terrible wound in her abdomen and struggled for breath. Only Buatong's supporting arm kept her from falling outright.

"I'm cold," Phetlada whispered.

"Can you keep going?"

Phetlada nodded through clenched teeth. Just a little farther. The stream was so close now that she could hear water rushing over the stones.

The earth grew damp underfoot. Ferns crowded the path, flourishing near the mountain watercourse. Somewhere above them, the stream descended from the heights and wound its way through the heart of the forest.

Water had saved Phetlada once before.

When she was a little girl, she had tripped and struck her chin against a stone. Her mother, Thapthim, had taught her to wash any serious wound with clean water before seeking an adult's help. But little Phetlada, desperate to stop the bleeding before Grandmother Lek could scold her, had chosen what she believed to be the cleanest water nearby: the fishpond outside her grandmother's house.

The blood had stopped almost immediately.

She had never forgotten it.

Now she gently freed herself from Buatong's arm and crawled toward the stream. Her beautiful face was flushed with pain; her breath came in broken gasps. The instant her fingertips touched the surface, something extraordinary happened.

The blood she had lost began to return.

At least, that was what it looked like to Buatong. Water climbed Phetlada's fingers and coiled around her arms as though it were alive. It spread across her shoulders, hair, and face, soaking her clothes. Then, as it flowed over the gaping wound, the clear current took on the red of blood and seemed to sink directly into her body.

Color returned to Phetlada's cheeks. The torn flesh pulled together, stitched by threads of liquid too fine to see until the wound vanished entirely. The skin was smooth, unmarked, as though nothing had happened.

Buatong could only stare.

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Even P'Rak, with all her knowledge of sacred incantations, needed time to heal a serious injury. This water seemed to work without a single word being spoken.

Then Phetlada collapsed forward.

"Khun Phet!"

Buatong lunged to catch her. But before her outstretched hand could reach the woman's wrist, Phetlada's arms pressed against her sides. Her legs fused together. Across her tan skin, glossy black scales began to appear, each one catching the moonlight.

Her body lengthened.

And lengthened.

A massive serpent unfurled beside the stream.

Buatong stumbled backward into a stand of bird's-nest ferns. The fronds broke beneath her as she landed hard on the wet ground. Her feet scrabbled desperately to push her away from the creature now sliding toward her.

"K-Khun Phet..."

The enormous head lowered until it was almost level with hers.

Buatong screamed.

She had never liked snakes. Growing up as the daughter of a forest hunter had not cured that dislike; if anything, gathering herbs in the mountains had taught her to avoid every creeping thing she encountered. The creature before her was far more terrifying than any ordinary snake. Its red eyes shone with an unnatural light. Black scales covered its immense coils, and a great dark crest rose from its head.

She turned her face away, shivering at the sight of it.

The serpent merely watched.

"I'm healed now. Thank you, little one."

Phetlada's familiar voice sounded almost cheerful.

In the next moment, the serpent was gone. The tall woman stood where it had been, stretching her arms and glancing down at the ruined front of her shirt.

She sighed. Grandmother Lek had bought that blouse for her birthday. There would be a great deal of explaining to do when she returned home.

"Come," she said, already moving toward the trees. "We have to help Hunter Rueang."

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Elsewhere in the forest, the hunter stood face-to-face with a tiger spirit.

Bunrueang remembered his father's warning: never stare a tiger in the eyes unless you were prepared to challenge it. Predators understood the meaning of a direct gaze. To them, it was defiance.

Tonight, Bunrueang had no intention of looking away.

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The wind stirred the trees. A cold current swept through the undergrowth, and for the first time in years he felt that the forest itself stood at his side. He had felt such a presence once before—on the night his wife Saengdao had died, the night the stars had seemed to vanish from the sky.

The beast bared its fangs.

It could sense the danger in the old hunter's hands, but it was not afraid. It remembered the taste of blood. It remembered the cries of the helpless, the scent of terror mingling with rain-soaked grass. It would tear this man apart just as it had torn apart its earlier victims.

"Come on, then!" Bunrueang shouted.

The tiger sprang.

Its claws flashed through the dark. Bunrueang turned sharply to his right, evading the strike by the smallest possible margin. He had spent his life reading the movement of dangerous animals; the instant the creature passed him, he cast a loop of old rope around its neck.

The rope tightened.

What had looked like a worn hunter's snare began to move like a living snake. It slid across the tiger's shoulders, wrapped around its striped body, and squeezed.

The beast roared and thrashed. Its four paws clawed uselessly at the ground. Every effort to rise ended with another violent collapse. Dust and dead leaves flew around it as the enchanted rope closed tighter.

Bunrueang laughed—a hard, bitter sound that Buatong would barely have recognized.

"Come on. Show me how mighty you are now!"

He crouched beside the trapped spirit, hatred blazing in his eyes. It was suffering, yes. But could anything it endured compare with Saengdao's final moments?

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Take off that tiger's body and show yourself!"

He nudged the creature's face with his foot. Then he struck it, his anger surging beyond control.

"I said, show me!"

The memory of his wife's mutilated body would never leave him. Every year since her death he had carried the same promise: he would find the creature responsible, and he would put a blade through its heart.

"Hunter! What are you doing? Why haven't you killed it?"

Phetlada's commanding voice cut across the clearing.

Bunrueang stepped back. Tears had gathered in his eyes.

"I want to know who it is," he said, his voice breaking.

Believing the creature to be helpless, he reached for the rope and lifted the restraint away. The snare loosened and shrank, its black serpentine form curling in upon itself until it became a narrow ring of cord in his palm.

"I told you to kill it," Phetlada said.

The tiger sprang to its feet.

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Before Bunrueang could react, the creature launched itself at his chest, claws extended toward the place where his heart beat.

"I told you to kill it!"

Phetlada's body changed before the attack landed. Black scales covered her skin, and her gigantic serpentine coils swept around Bunrueang and his daughter, shielding them from the tiger's strike. Her head rose as high as the surrounding trees.

Bunrueang stared upward, stunned.

The creature protecting them was no ordinary snake. An immense crest and long whisker-like appendages framed its head. This was a naga—a great serpent being from the old stories, something he had never imagined witnessing with his own eyes.

Phetlada loosened her protective coils and turned on the tiger.

She could have reduced it to ashes. Only the prohibitions laid down by Grandmother Yai, together with an ancient vow made before Phaya Muchalinda, restrained her from taking a human life herself.

Instead, she pinned the tiger to the ground, pressing her scaled body around it so tightly that escape was impossible.

She inclined her great head toward the hunter.

"Father!" Buatong cried. "A tiger spirit can only be killed through the heart!"

Her wife had taught her that lesson well. The heart, deep in the center of the chest, was a tiger spirit's vulnerable point. How to reach it was a task for the hunter himself.

Bunrueang drew the short ritual dagger at his waist.

His grip tightened. The darkness no longer hindered his sight; he had spent too many nights in the forest to be defeated by a lack of moonlight. He approached the pinned beast and drove the blade into its chest.

The body went still.

"Enough, Hunter," Phetlada said.

She had returned to human form. Before them, the striped fur began to recede, revealing human skin. The creature's limbs shortened and changed. Dark human hair covered its head.

"Who are you?" Bunrueang demanded again.

He seized the dying man's hair and turned his face toward the light.

The hunter had imagined discovering the identity of the murderer countless times. Perhaps he would finally see the face of the stepmother they had suspected. Perhaps he would learn that some stranger had taken Saengdao's life.

Buatong stood motionless beside him, her fingers clenched in the fabric of her nightclothes. She knew P'Rak had understood the truth for some time. Her wife had kept silent to protect her from a discovery that could only cause pain.

Bunrueang pulled the man's head back.

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"Saengla!"

The name burst from his lips.

The dying man laughed weakly through bloodstained teeth.

Saengla had grown up beside Buatong. He had watched her for years, wanting the place in her heart that she had never offered him. Even now, through the blur of pain, he could see the hatred in the eyes of the girl he had loved—and in her father's.

The worst part was that Buatong was finally looking directly at him.

Only now, when he was dying, had he become impossible for her to ignore.

Her heart had belonged to that woman from the forest, to P'Rak, from their very first encounter. Saengla had known it. He had shaped his borrowed human appearance around the image hidden deep in Buatong's affections: a tall, beautiful woman with dark hair and a radiant smile.

None of it had won her.

His final breath left him while the two people before him stared in grief and loathing.

"We have to go," Phetlada said quietly. "Once I've taken you safely into Chiang Rai, I must return to help Grandmother Yai."

There were allies waiting beyond the forest, relatives who could protect the travelers and a larger, well-guarded logging compound where they would find shelter.

Buatong began to follow. Then she stopped.

"P'Rak's dagger."

She hurried back to the body of the boy who had once been her friend. Whatever she felt—rage, betrayal, pity—the sight of him lying in his own blood was unbearable.

She knelt and gently closed his staring eyes.

They had once been children together. For that alone, he deserved one final act of human compassion.

"Hurry, sweetheart," Bunrueang murmured, urging her onward.

He looked back only once.

Years earlier, he had promised Saengdao that he would find her killer and drive a blade into the murderer's heart. Tonight he had fulfilled that vow.

For the first time, the fire of revenge inside him began, slowly, to fade.

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4:30 A.M.

Three powerful Harley-Davidsons thundered along an old cart track through the northern forest. The route was longer than a direct crossing, but it remained the quickest passable road for heavy motorcycles at this hour.

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The lead rider raised a fist above his head, then pointed forward.

The signal was clear.

They were approaching their destination. They would break through without hesitation.

The motorcycles accelerated toward the clearing. Five armed men scrambled out of their path, taking cover as the riders abandoned their machines and landed on the forest floor.

The oldest of the three was a broad-shouldered man named Akkhara. His eldest son and daughter followed close behind.

"Watch out!"

A shot rang out.

Akkhara flung both arms wide, pushing his children clear of a magically guided bullet that passed within inches of their faces.

"Split up," he ordered. "Deal with those men. Pakorn, take that side. Prang, get to Mae Khru."

Nuanprang nodded, reaching for the quiver on her back. Her arrows were made of ordinary-looking bamboo, but the polished metal heads contained sacred iron. Their shape was unlike conventional arrowheads, almost round and sharply tapered.

"Be careful," Akkhara warned. "Don't let them see you coming."

"Yes, Father," Pakorn replied.

The siblings exchanged a glance. They were twins, separated in age by only five minutes, and needed few words to understand one another.

"Protect each other," Nuanprang said.

They turned back-to-back, each guarding the other's blind side.

Pakorn brought a fist close to his lips and recited an invocation to the Triple Gem three times. Then he whispered the incantation taught by his master and blew over the sacred markings on his knuckles.

He struck.

His fist landed squarely in an attacker's solar plexus, folding the man over with a cry of pain. Pakorn followed with an upward punch that caught him beneath the chin.

"One down," Nuanprang said. "Two apiece now."

She drew her bow, chanted over the shaft, and sent an arrow into the darkness.

It did not fly in a straight line. The enchanted arrow followed the direction of her gaze, changing course as she looked from one enemy to the next. It pierced one man's temple and swept toward another.

"You've got magic too?"

An attacker caught Nuanprang by the throat and hauled her in front of him as a shield. Her arrow stopped in midair and fell harmlessly to the ground.

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But his advantage lasted only a moment. He recoiled with a cry, releasing his grip after being bitten, and she seized the chance to draw again.

"Go help Mae Khru!" Pakorn shouted.

Nuanprang ran toward the huge bullet-wood tree at the center of the clearing. She could see her father struggling against two more men. Without slowing, she swept her gaze across them, redirecting her arrows to weaken their attack.

"Hurry, Prang!" Akkhara called.

She ran as fast as she could, praying that the woman who had trained and cared for her was still alive.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Four Forbidden Arts

BANG!

Another enchanted bullet struck the final branch of the great bullet-wood tree.

For almost half an hour, the tree had shielded the forest's guardian from the attacks directed at her. Each collision had stripped away another bough. Broken branches lay scattered across the ground, and now scarcely anything remained to protect her.

Dawn was approaching. The air smelled of crushed green leaves and damp wood. Light was beginning to find its way through the canopy, and the change favored her enemy.

The great tiger snarled as the sorcerer Kham-in advanced.

He carried a gun in his right hand and a flaming torch in his left, waving the fire before him as he searched for an opening. Even a supernatural tiger retained some of the fears of its natural kin. Fire—hot enough to burn a living creature alive—was one of them.

"I thought you were supposed to be powerful!" Kham-in sneered.

He raised his gun and aimed.

Phoprak was fighting an enemy more dangerous than the man in front of her. Her tiger spirit was growing stronger, pushing deeper into her mind with every moment. To wield all the power available to her meant surrendering a little more of what made her human.

Then a memory pierced the gathering darkness.

Khun Rak... you're cruel.

She saw Buatong crying. Heard the hurt in her voice.

Phoprak's eyes widened. She could bear almost any accusation, but not the thought that her own actions might make the woman she loved afraid of her. Buatong's tears were dearer than any precious stone.

The tiger shook its massive head, as though trying to cast out the spirit overtaking it.

Its orange fur began to shrink. Human skin emerged. The great animal's body reshaped itself into a tall woman, though the eyes that opened beneath her lashes remained those of a predator.

"And what makes you think I'm not powerful, you bastard?"

Her voice reverberated through the clearing.

A tremendous force burst outward and hurled Kham-in several yards backward. His torch and weapons flew from his hands. It was the full force of the forest guardian's authority, unleashed with a violence she rarely permitted herself.

BANG!

Kham-in recovered his special gun and fired again.

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A small silver projectile flew into the trees, circling endlessly like a hunting creature that could not be shaken. A Garuda-marked charm amplified its power. With daylight growing stronger and the dying torch still illuminating the ground, the sorcerer could see his target clearly.

Phoprak advanced barefoot, apparently unafraid.

"Mae Khru, look out!"

Nuanprang leaped into the bullet's path, desperate to shield her teacher. Phoprak caught her around the waist and dragged her into the safety of her arms.

Something else moved through the clearing.

A magnificent stag rushed toward the silver projectile. It struck the animal instead of its mistress. The deer stumbled, collapsed, and lay still as blood darkened the ground.

A furious chorus rose from the surrounding trees.

Low growls. Hooves. The stamping of heavy feet. Dozens of eyes caught the firelight and shone between the trunks.

The forest creatures were gathering.

Their guardian was under attack, and they were willing to die defending her.

"Prang! Why are you here?" Phoprak demanded. "What if I hadn't caught you just now?"

Nuanprang only smiled up at her.

"You're safe, Mae Khru. That's what matters."

The younger woman tightened her arms around Phoprak's waist.

"Go back. Now."

Nuanprang shook her head.

"You've become even more stubborn as you've grown," Phoprak muttered.

"I'll go when you go."

There was no time to argue. Phoprak guided her to one side, where she could at least remain in sight.

Then the older woman suddenly seized her again, pulling her hard against her chest. A silver bullet passed so close to Nuanprang's cheek that she felt its wake. It circled and came back for another attack.

"Mae Khru, it's—"

"Leave while you can. You cannot fight these things."

On the far side of the clearing stood another threat: a gigantic black buffalo, breathing hard and scraping the ground with its hooves. It was no ordinary animal but a conjured weapon, a *khwai thanu*, made for violence through black magic.

Phoprak still had strength. The buffalo was not what troubled her most. It was the guided bullet, swift and merciless, almost impossible to catch. Once the sun rose fully, the balance would turn further against her.

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"Father and Pakorn are on their way," Nuanprang insisted.

Phoprak frowned. More allies did not always mean greater safety. Every person who entered the fight became one more life she had to protect.

While the women argued, Kham-in seized his chance.

He sent the buffalo charging.

Its huge horns were almost upon them when a figure hurtled in from the side.

"Om..." A powerful incantation rang out.

Pakorn's magically strengthened fist struck the buffalo in its flank. The creature staggered and bellowed, thrown off course just before its horns could tear into Phoprak and Nuanprang.

"Just in time, Mae Khru!" Pakorn said with an irrepressible grin.

He turned and lifted his fists into a boxer's defensive stance.

Behind him came Akkhara, whom Phoprak had not seen in some time. The older man bowed respectfully and offered her a large ritual knife, as long as his forearm.

"Thank you, Akkhara."

"Forgive me for arriving so late, Mae Khru. The work kept me longer than I intended. As soon as Rosarin contacted me, I tried to settle everything and come straight here."

"Enough. No one is blaming you."

Her eyes had already moved past him to the sorcerer.

Kham-in was chanting again, preparing the enchanted objects that hung from his hands. More figures began to emerge, unnatural warriors molded and animated through occult practice.

"Hun phayon," Phoprak said under her breath.

These conjured servants could be destroyed in only a few ways. One was to kill their maker. Another was to invoke a mighty celestial being to crush them. That second option would demand a price Phoprak could not afford.

The clearing had become a battlefield of writhing magic: the black buffalo, the artificial warriors, and the sorcerer's tireless silver bullet.

Kham-in had prepared far better than she had expected.

Phoprak held a ritual knife and little else.

"What have you brought in your bag, Akkhara?"

"The essentials, Mae Khru. Rice, ash, sand, incense, candles."

He knelt and opened the bag.

Phoprak's thoughts turned toward the four forbidden arts, techniques so dangerous that even their practitioners were warned to use them only under the gravest circumstances.

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The first was the magically directed bullet Kham-in had unleashed. Its power was dreadful enough that an ordinary person could barely comprehend it.

The second...

"Give me the ash."

"Yes, Mae Khru."

The Fire of the Last Cataclysm.

Ancient verse spoke of a flame capable of consuming even the heavens, leaving nothing but drifting ash. It was a power that no ordinary source of water could extinguish.

Akkhara handed her a palmful of ash collected from incense offered before the Triple Gem.

Phoprak stepped toward the enchanted figures.

"Do not touch the fire," she warned.

"Yes, Mae Khru," the others answered.

Then she turned to Akkhara.

"There are few ways to kill a practitioner like that. We must draw the magic out of him. I will say the incantation once. Remember it. To use it, seize his face and press your forehead against his."

Akkhara swallowed. The rite sounded far more formidable than its brief instructions suggested. He knew it would require formidable concentration and courage. He was no longer young, and the prospect of approaching the sorcerer so closely filled him with dread.

"Mae Khru... may Pakorn do it instead?"

"If you believe he is ready, then so be it."

"Thank you."

"Listen closely, Pakorn."

The young man nodded, watching his teacher's lips. She instructed him first to steady the elements within his body, just as he had been taught, then to recite the great invocation that draws poison and harmful magic out of its bearer.

She spoke the old words slowly, making him listen to every syllable. The chant called on the force of the spell to draw out venom, the poison of sorcery, and the deadly power held within the body. It ended with the command that the magic be as fierce as the hottest season's fire and as forceful as lightning.

"Repeat the protective verses three times afterward," she said. "Otherwise the power may turn back upon you."

Pakorn said nothing. His heart was beating so hard he felt faint. The task was dangerous, and failure could cost him his life.

"Prepare yourselves."

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Akkhara moved to Phoprak's right, ritual knife in hand. Nuanprang took the left, her bow raised and its arrow already blessed. Pakorn gathered himself for the charge.

Phoprak closed her fist around the ash.

She chanted over it repeatedly, then held the narrow opening between thumb and forefinger close to her lips.

She blew.

No cloud of ordinary dust emerged.

A surge of blood-red flame erupted from her palm, rolling outward like the breath of an enraged dragon.

Everything in its path caught fire: the bodies of animals already fallen in battle, branches from the tree that had protected her, and Kham-in's enchanted creations.

A sea of fire roared through the clearing.

"You!" Kham-in screamed.

His hand shook as he pointed at her. Once again, the tiger spirit had exceeded him. Years ago or now, whatever he attempted, she remained a step beyond his reach.

The silver bullet was the last weapon he could still control.

He set it circling through the clearing, choosing his moment to strike. But the creatures of the forest leaped into its path again and again, giving their lives for their guardian.

"Mae Khru!"

"Go!" Phoprak coughed and sank to one knee. "The animals will do everything they can to protect you."

Every creature that fell drained a little more of her strength. The forest was not merely the land under her protection. It was part of her life and the source of her power.

The cataclysmic flames continued burning. They would not die until the task their caster had set was complete. Heat spread through the trees, fed by the wind.

Everything depended on Pakorn now.

The young man ran straight toward Kham-in. He forced his fear aside and began silently preparing the elements of his body.

BANG!

A wild boar threw itself into the bullet's path. It collapsed on the blood-soaked earth, its breath rattling out of it. Even then, the creature did not appear to regret its sacrifice.

"Kham-in!"

Pakorn sprang forward and drove a knee into the sorcerer's chest. Kham-in fell backward. Pakorn followed, seized a fistful of the older man's graying hair, and dragged his face upward.

For a moment he felt pity.

Then he struck the sorcerer across the mouth, remembering what had been done to his teacher.

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He pressed his forehead against Kham-in's and began the invocation.

The sacred markings on the sorcerer's body stirred. Lines and characters moved across his skin, then flowed toward Pakorn as though the spell were drawing the very magic out of him.

Kham-in struggled desperately, but the young man held fast.

"If I die," the sorcerer snarled through bloody teeth, "you die with me!"

He spat and began another chant.

His eyes shifted from Pakorn toward the tall woman beyond the fire. He might be defeated by a boy, but he would not go to his death without taking the hated tiger with him.

The silver bullet arced behind Phoprak.

It pierced her chest.

Before anyone could reach her, it turned again and drove through her abdomen.

"Mae Khru!" Akkhara shouted.

He rushed forward, only to recoil as the same projectile turned toward him.

"Prang!"

Nuanprang had already drawn her bow.

She released the arrow with all the force of her panic. Its sacred iron point struck Kham-in at the temple, piercing through his head. The sorcerer collapsed, his eyes wide, and moved no more.

But the death of the enemy did not end the danger.

Phoprak's body changed.

Orange fur spread across her skin. Dark stripes followed. Her limbs shortened and thickened until four padded paws struck the earth.

The forest guardian was a tiger once more.

Blood ran from wounds in her chest and belly. She roared in agony, staggering as the pain overwhelmed her. She bared her teeth at anyone who approached, as if she could no longer distinguish ally from enemy.

"Prang, get away from her!" Akkhara cried.

Nuanprang did not listen.

"Mae Khru? It's me. It's Prang."

She took one careful step forward, then another. Her smile was gentle even as fear made her hands tremble.

She reached out and touched the coarse striped fur.

The tiger struck.

Nuanprang threw herself backward, landing hard on the earth. Sharp claws swept through the place where she had stood a moment earlier. She escaped death by inches.

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The creature that faced her no longer possessed the judgment of the woman who had raised and instructed her.

Pain had driven away the last of Phoprak's human restraint.

The tiger crouched low. Its tail curled tightly against its body, and its eyes flashed with fear and hostility. It growled at everyone indiscriminately.

"Pakorn, don't!" Akkhara seized his son's collar before the young man could rush to Nuanprang's defense.

There was nothing they could do by force. They would have to let the creature go where it wished.

And perhaps the curse their teacher carried—the curse that forbade her death—would prove a blessing now, of all times.

Akkhara prayed that it was true.

"Let her go," he said.

The tiger turned and fled into the depths of the forest, disappearing among the trees before anyone could follow.

Akkhara did not pursue her. He remained composed for his children's sake, though he understood the terrible truth.

At this moment, the forest's guardian was more dangerous than any of the enemies they had fought.

END OF SAMPLE

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