

THE WHITE TIGER
The ‘Tiger Leaving the Mountain’
The year 2010
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A stiffening breeze wafted up from the Indian valleys into the Nepali foothills in the shadow of the Himalayas. The winds carried portents as well as moisture, the countless thoughts of beings and prayers of gods and spirits in the subcontinent, and for the creatures of the forests who were busy with their dreams, the breeze brought them visions of things to be come, solutions to problems and welcome relief from the heat of the summer’s oppression. As the moist currents of air rose skyward along the spines of the rising ridges the moisture formed fog and mists which pervaded the verdure of the Inner Terai, adding to the mystical quality of the day. Still a bit higher, and the mists began to condense on the leaves of the plants, causing sporadic droplets of rain to fall on the inhabitants of the forest floor below. As the gentle rain began to fall, a few drops hit the nose of the slumbering White Tiger, rousing him from his sojourn in the astral worlds where he had been in the company of one of the local resident spirit lords of the sacred places there. Cats are the messengers of the astral worlds, you know, and they report on the affairs of the world to the gods.

The White Tiger was a majestic Royal Bengal, in the prime of his life, revered in local legend and worshipped by the people in the villages of the high forests. They would often leave ritual offerings for him and the odd sacrifice or two. Because of their kindness to him in the past he had stayed within a close distance to the villages but was always careful at the same time to keep his distance. The relationship with the villagers had been a good one over the years but had been somewhat troubled of late, though, because strangers had appeared on the trade routes through the villages and the villagers had been hearing stories from the strangers about the virility tigers could bring when placed in medicinal preparations. A white tiger such as he, they said, would fetch a handsome price for the efforts of the man who could catch him. White tigers are rare and were said to have special properties above and beyond those of the average tiger.

“Average tiger! Humph!” the White Tiger thought. “There is no such thing! We are the kings of the beasts!”

In his astral sojourn that day he had asked the local spirit lord about the strangers and why they were so interested in him. It would seem that the local legends about the White Tiger had spread beyond his hills into lands farther afield. The spirit lord took a particular interest in the White Tiger that day, for the spirit lord could see into the future and he saw the fate that awaited not just the White Tiger, but all the tigers of the area. He thought the White Tiger could perform a great service to all in the area – one that would have benefits far into the future, so he engaged him and began to regale him with tales of the foreigners and tigers in faraway lands.

“Ah! My majestic friend!” said the spirit lord. “You come here seeking to know your fate. You have been a great help over the years and have reported faithfully and well, so it is only correct that I should treat you in kind.”

Thus he began: “Days of darkness are about to befall this beautiful land. People multiply unchecked and their greed and need know no bounds. The foreigners of whom you ask are from lands far to the east of your beloved mountain range. Theirs is a violent land, ruled by warlords and degenerate monarchs. There is little peace and the people live in fear and superstition, save for the few who know and live the Way. There are many tigers in the north of their land and they are viewed with awe by the people of the villages.”

“Rightly so!” interjected the White Tiger, interrupting the spirit lord, which tigers are known to do. The spirit lord smiled benignly at the White Tiger, bemused by his lack of decorum.

“Yes, my friend – rightly so!” said the spirit lord, suddenly erupting into laughter. The White Tiger was taken aback by this unexpected turn by a normally composed spirit lord and decided to take a more composed stance, not knowing what this being would do next.

The spirit lord continued: “As I was saying, tigers are viewed with great awe in that land. However, because they are seen to be so virile and powerful people think they can gain those qualities themselves by killing tigers and putting their parts into medicines. Young men are also sent out alone to hunt them as a test of their manhood and courage. A tiger’s skin and head is a prized trophy to such a young man and he is seen to have the potential thus to be a great warrior. It is indeed a very sad state of affairs. If people could only realize that their efforts at attaining any of a tiger’s greatness by eating them are futile at best, then they would cease their hunting. But, alas, tigers fetch a high price with the pharmacists because of people’s superstitions. The great beasts there, your brothers, have been forced into secluded areas and are reduced to hunting at night.”

A shiver went through the White Tiger and he grew very anxious and quiet, realizing suddenly why people had been trying to draw him closer into the villages. He knew his relationship to the villagers would be very different from then on.

“Still,” the spirit lord continued: “it has not always been thus with the people of that land. In centuries before when there was more reverence for life and not nearly so much need or greed, the tiger was seen as one of the great sovereign animals and he was relegated to the heavens. The great Tiger of the Heavens was, like you, white and he could be seen with the Pleiades. He was the Lord of the West, the region of departed spirits and was the administrator of justice – greatly revered, as are you, my noble friend.”

“It would appear that I am not so revered any longer” bemoaned the White Tiger, the thought of his being viewed as a mere trophy deeply unsettling him, although he was most pleased to have his place in the heavens. “Is there anything to be done about this terrible injustice being forced upon my brothers in that distant land? Surely there is something I could do.”

A knowing smile creased the face of the spirit lord. “Actually, my friend, there is something you can do, but it will require every bit of your stealth, patience and skill at working behind the scenes. We have a task for you. You have proved yourself worthy over the years and we know you will execute your task well. It will serve no useful purpose at all for your head to be mounted on a pole and your skin to be worn as a warrior’s garment. No, you can help to save your brothers for centuries into the future. We want you to leave this mountain and go out into the jungles and valleys beyond and to the southwest. The villagers here have lost their faith and have forgotten the healing powers of their forest. They seek now to follow the advice of the travelers and to gain your majesty through eating you, rather than by emulating you. In the valleys below it will still be difficult, but at least the people there still have the respect of nature and practice compassion for all living things. Over the years, even centuries, your example will inspire people to save tigers, rather than to kill and use them for their own advancement. The only caution we have is that you not harm any human. Some of your brothers there eat villagers and have grown to like the meat. Perhaps they want to become human?” The spirit lord cast a knowing smile. “You are to stand as an example, to the people and to your brothers there. We need for you to be aloof from the humans. Then they will respect you. People have a curious way of trying to emulate that which is difficult of attainment.”

The White Tiger was deeply saddened by this news, but he knew within himself that the spirit lord had spoken true and was correct. On several recent occasions some of the villagers had gone out with nets and spears and had almost cornered him, but he knew the forest too well and always managed to elude them. They would leave sacrifices close to the villages in open spaces in an effort to draw him out, but the other animals always warned him, for which he was secretly grateful. He knew the people would try to stop him leaving, though, and the spirit lord read his thoughts on that matter very clearly.

“It is vital to face opposition to plans.” said the spirit lord. “I know, too, that many of your brothers here are telling you to stand and fight, but that will only bring your swift demise, as it will mobilize the villagers against you. **There are always those who disagree, but the design is sound and it is time to act decisively.** There is no time to waste. Use the forest as your cover and travel only at night. The forest will guide you there, as will we. You know the richness of the forests and hills. **Valuable resources are put to good use.** Stay away from the paths and roads and travel only in the dense cover of the forest. We will make certain you are fed. When you awake, begin your journey with haste, for some of the travelers are coming for you as we speak.”

As the gentle forest rain began to fall more heavily on the White Tiger he awoke fully from his reverie. In the distance he could hear the barking of dogs and the hairs went up on his back. He knew the spirit lord had spoken in truth. He growled his displeasure at having to leave his beloved domain, but he knew full well what awaited him should he stay. Thankful for the information, but heavy at heart, he arose and sniffed the air, seeking to find his direction and a safe passage out. A lone magpie song gave him the omen he sought, and bidding his goodbye to his brothers and the good people of the villages he set out on his journey to a strange land. What would await him? Who would he meet? Would his life be hard? Still, he knew he was up to the task. He would be the finest example of a tiger there ever was, and with conviction as his guiding star, he set off down the mountain through the mists.