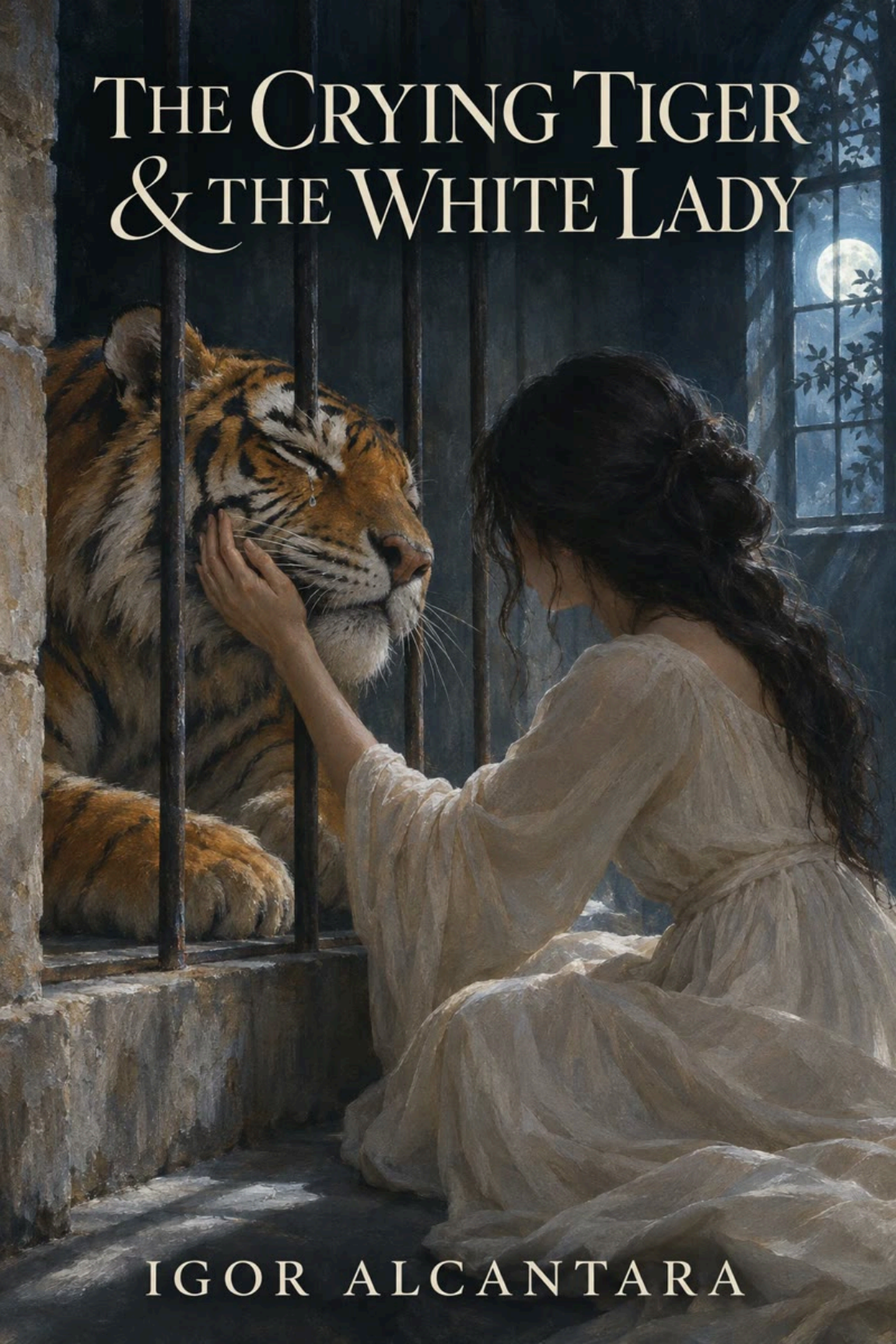

THE CRYING TIGER
& THE WHITE LADY
IGOR ALCANTARA

The Crying Tiger & the White Lady

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I

The Cage

The Tiger woke every morning in the same cage.

It had three walls of pale stone and a floor that was always cold under his paws. The fourth side was iron bars, and behind the bars ran a long stone passage. There was no grass, and no water to swim in. In one corner there was a low shelf where he slept, curled up, with his tail around him and his back to the wall. High in the back wall there was a small square opening, also barred, and through it he could see one tree and the sky behind it changing color.

He was a big animal, and the cage was small. Four steps took him from one wall to the other. So, he walked, four steps and a turn, four steps and a turn, with his shoulders rolling and his head held low.

People came down the passage to look at him. Children liked to put their faces between the shoulders of the grown-ups, where they could disappear quickly if he moved. The Tiger had learned to look at the floor. If you looked back, they stayed longer.

There were other cages along the passage. He could not see them, but at night he heard the animals inside. One laughed; it was possibly a bird. One knocked against its door for hours; maybe a gorilla. One stomped their feet like an elephant would do.

Before the cage, there was the forest. At the edge of the forest, there was the man.

Each year the city lights came on a little nearer the trees. The man came out of those lights at dusk, in a gray coat that smelled faintly of tobacco when the wind was right. He sat on a fallen tree and took his keys out of his pocket. Sometimes he turned them over in his palm. Sometimes he spoke so softly the Tiger could hear his voice without making out a word.

The Tiger learned the sound of his shoes and the hour when they would come. If the man was late, he watched the path.

One evening the man looked up. The Tiger was standing between two trees, close enough to see a burr caught in the wool of his coat. The man put his keys back in his pocket and went home. The next evening he came again.

After that he walked a little farther into the trees each night. On the last night he went straight past the fallen trunk. The Tiger followed him to a clearing where there was just enough light to see the stones.

He remembered the keys ringing on one of those stones. He remembered that even when he sprang, the man did not raise his hands.

The Tiger ate him there. By morning there was only the gray coat, like a skin someone had stepped out of.

The hunters came with dogs. The Tiger ran until a net brought him down. He got a length of rope between his teeth and held on even after they shut him in the box. For a long time afterward, when he cleaned his paws, he could taste the rope.

Sometimes, in the cage, he could still taste the man. Not like meat. Something thinner. Like the taste of a word you have said too many times, until it means nothing.

Sometimes he threw his shoulder against the bars. One keeper would strike the iron with a stick until he went to the back of the cage. Another waited quietly until he lay down and then slid his supper through. He knew them by their steps.

Despite all the violence and the lack of space or hope, he did not hate the keepers. They were afraid of him, and frightened people build cages.

A tiger is not supposed to cry. He knew this the way animals know things, without being told. A tiger's eyes make water to keep the dust out, and for no other reason. And still, at night, on his shelf, his face was wet. In the mornings the keeper saw the dark lines in the fur under his eyes and called the other keeper to come and look. They had never seen a tiger cry. Nobody had. The Tiger did not know where the tears came from. Sometimes he thought it was the man, crying from somewhere inside him, like he ate not only his meat but also his soul.

He lived like that for maybe years. Time went around in the cage. Four steps and a turn.

Then, one night, he saw her.

II

The White Lady

At first, he thought she was moonlight. The beautiful bright light that shines in the dark.

There was a tall window at the far end of the passage. On clear nights the moon laid a white patch on the stones. The woman

stepped out of that patch in a long white gown. She was barefoot. She walked like someone who has walked the same way a thousand times and expects nothing from it.

When she passed his bars, the Tiger lifted his head and followed her with his eyes.

She stopped. She turned, very slowly, and looked at him. She took one step to the left, and his eyes went with her. She took one step to the right, and they went with her again.

“You can see me.”

A sound came up from deep in the Tiger’s chest, low and rough. He had made that sound before, at the faces in front of the bars, and they had always stepped back.

She did not step back. She came closer and tilted her head, the way people do when they hear music from far away.

“You can,” she said. “You are looking right at me.”

The Tiger looked at her for a long moment and reply:

“Of course I can see you”.

“I knew it!”, the white lady replied.

“Can you understand me?” he said.

“Of course I can understand you.”

“Nobody can. I speak, and they hear an animal.”

“I speak,” she said, “and they hear nothing at all.”

She sat down on the stones in front of his cage, close to the bars, closer than anyone had ever come. The moonlight seemed to go a

little way into her, the way light goes into water.

“I am dead, you know,” she said. “I died here a long time ago. I can remember walking afterward. I can’t remember the dying.”

Just then the night keeper came down the passage. His keys rang against his thigh. He looked into the cage and went on without turning his head toward her.

“He never says good evening,” she said. “I still say it sometimes.”

“Why can I see you?”

“My grandmother said animals could see the dead. She used to leave a door ajar when the dog stared at it.” The Lady rested her cheek against her knee. “I’m glad you’re a tiger.”

No one had ever been glad of that before.

She came back the next night. She liked his stripes. She said they looked like writing, and that one day she would learn to read them.

She lifted one finger and followed a stripe in the air, from his shoulder all the way down to his paw.

“What do they say tonight?” he asked.

“They say you are a tiger.”

It became their joke, and their way of saying goodnight.

She remembered a garden where the bare yard was now. There had been roses nobody cut. A bell rang in the evenings, and if the wind was in the right quarter you could hear it even with the windows shut. He told her how the long grass looked after rain

and where the river went shallow enough to cross. He told her that the stones held the heat after sundown.

They sat on two sides of the bars and gave each other places that were gone.

One night he told her about the man. He told her about the coat, the keys, and how little noise the man had made. Then he waited for her to get up and leave. She didn't.

"Did he come every night?" she asked.

"Even in the rain."

She thought about that. "Sometimes I go all the way to the end of the passage just to see if anyone will turn around."

He put his head down near her feet. She stayed until the light moved off the floor.

For a long time they did not touch. The Lady said that when she reached for things her hands went through them. She had stopped trying years ago. When she read his stripes she left a little air between her finger and his fur.

Then one night he cried while she was there. He kept his head down, and one tear hung from the fur below his eye. She slipped her hand between the bars and caught it before it fell.

"It is warm," she said.

She waited a moment and put her palm against his face. Her hand was cold from the passage. He leaned into it until the iron pressed hard against his cheek.

The low sound began again in his chest. She kept her hand where it was.

A tiger and a ghost. He knew how it sounded. A tiger should love the dark between the trees and nothing else. But the forest was gone, and she came every night, and he could not remember anymore what he used to wait for before he waited for her.

III

The Awakening

The White Lady woke with one foot outside the covers. The other was so warm she could feel the seam of the sheet against her toes. She lay still for a while, trying to remember the last time she had been warm.

A woman in pale green came in with a tray.

“Good morning,” the woman said.

The White Lady waited for her to pass. The woman set the tray down and waited, too.

“Good morning,” the White Lady said at last.

The woman almost dropped the tray. Then she smiled, a real smile, and held out a little paper cup with two pills in it.

Understanding came slowly, the way cold water comes up through your shoes in a rainy day. Someone had said good morning to her every day. For all those years, people had fed her and washed her hair and led her by the arm, and spoken to her, and waited for an answer that did not come. She had never been invisible. At some point she had stopped believing that anyone would look at her, and after that she could not see them looking.

There was a name on a card beside the door. She read it once and then again. The second time she heard it in her mother's voice.

She was in a hospital. There was a grille on the window and a lock on the door. In the bathroom the mirror was a piece of polished metal. It gave her back a woman with a crease from the pillow across her cheek and a small scar on her chin. She rubbed the crease until it faded. The scar stayed.

Later the doctor asked her what she remembered. She spoke about the garden and the bell. The doctor said the new treatment seemed to be helping. If the next few weeks went well, they could talk about leaving.

The woman had once known how to buy an orange, how to wait for a bus in the rain. She tried to imagine doing either of those things again. What came to her instead was the weight of the Tiger's head against her palm. If she was not a ghost, then what was him?

She waited for the night. It was the longest day of her life. She waited until the lights were turned low.

The passage was a corridor. There were doors on both sides and a waxed floor that squeaked under the nurse's shoes. He looked up from his book and nodded to her. She remembered that he had nodded on other nights, too. Once he had brought her a pair of slippers. She had gone on walking, and he had left them outside her room.

She found the gray door. The bars were only as wide as her two hands held open. Through them she could see a bed and the square of dark at the window.

A thin man lay on the floor with his head on his arms. There was gray in his hair above his ears. At the sound of her feet, he lifted his head.

“You’re late tonight,” he said.

She knew his voice before he had finished speaking. The voice of the tiger.

He got up and came to the door. He turned his shoulder toward her and waited. The sleeve of his shirt had bunched above his elbow. Below it she could see the fine blue veins of his pale arm.

She had her name back. She could say it to him now. She could tell him about the nurse and the slippers, and he would have to find some other way to understand the nights when she had come to him.

He had never once asked her to prove she was dead.

She put her hand through the opening. Her finger traveled above his arm, from the shoulder down to the wrist.

“What do they say tonight?”

“They say you are a tiger.”

His shoulders went down a little. He leaned against the door.

It was the first lie she had told in years, and it was the truest thing she had ever said to anyone. After that, she learned to pretend.

At her next appointment, the doctor asked if she had given any more thought to leaving. The woman looked at the doctor’s hands, which were small and had a little ink along one thumb.

“I felt myself go thin again last night,” she said. That was her second lie.

The doctor put the cap back on her pen. “We can take a little more time.”

That evening the woman took the slippers from under her bed and put them on. When she reached the tall window, she slipped them off and left them beneath it. She went the rest of the way barefoot. She knew how much he listened for.

Every night she went to his door. Every night she read the stripes she could not see. He looked at her as if she was made of moonlight, and she let him.

IV

The Days of Clarity

The meat changed. There was a new bitterness at the back of his tongue after supper. For several days he ate and walked his four steps and waited for the Lady.

Then he woke one morning and found that his paws were hands.

He opened them and closed them. There was a little dirt under one nail. He scraped at it with the edge of his thumb and wondered how long he had known how to do that.

He sat up. He was on a narrow bed. The tree was still outside his window, and now that he could see the whole of it he saw a broken branch hung up in the other branches. Every time the wind came through, it lifted and fell back into the same place.

A keeper came in with a tray, and she was a nurse. She said good morning. He had heard that sound a hundred times. Today it was two words.

“Good morning,” he said.

The nurse set the tray on the bed beside him. Her eyes filled with water. She had brought him toast. He picked it up and left a thumbprint in the butter.

Later a doctor asked him to tell her one thing he remembered from before he came here. He said there was a radio in his apartment. It took him a moment to understand that he was talking about his own apartment. He remembered keeping the radio on while he ate. Sometimes he let it play all the way through the weather report after supper, though the man reading it had already told him it would rain.

In the elevator he used to say good morning to his neighbors. They watched the numbers change over the door. After a while he learned to watch the numbers, too.

He remembered the gray coat. The keys were his. He had gone to the forest that last evening because he could bear to be alone there. When he got to the fallen tree he kept walking. In the clearing he took off his coat. He could hear the keys strike the stone as plainly as if they had just fallen out of his hand.

Nobody had eaten him. He had put his coat and his keys down in the dark. What stood up in the morning had stripes.

The doctor told him the first days on the new medicine might be uneven. Some mornings he would be sure of what he saw and others he might have to wait a while. She asked him to tell the nurse when that happened.

That afternoon he sat in a room with other people. A man with a radio held against his ear laughed in short bursts. Across from him a girl tapped her knuckles on the wooden arm of her chair. She paused every now and then to rub her hand. He had listened to her through the wall so many nights that he knew, before she did it, when she would begin again.

When the lamps were turned low he went back to his room and waited by the door.

The woman came down the corridor from the tall window. Her gown was the white of sheets that had been washed a hundred times. Her bare feet were pink from the cold. Around her wrist she wore a band with a name on it. He read the name to himself. He had never thought to wonder whether she had one.

The night nurse came by and touched her on the shoulder. “Ten more minutes,” he said.

Her shoulder jumped. For an instant she turned toward him. Then she stopped and let her gaze go past him to the wall.

When the nurse had gone, she lifted her finger to read the stripe. He turned his shoulder as he had on every other night. From where he stood he could see the little red marks the cold had brought out on her knuckles. How many nights had she walked that floor barefoot?

“What do they say tonight?” he asked.

“They say you are a tiger.”

For a moment he nearly said her name. He wanted to know how it would sound when someone said it to her softly. He kept still until her finger reached his wrist.

On the third morning there was a line on the inside of his wrist, faint as pencil. He rubbed at it until the skin around it grew warm.

The next day the doctor used the word discharge. Afterward he sat on the edge of the bed and tried to picture a kitchen with the woman in it. He could picture the steam on the window and the spoon laid out for her by the stove. Whenever he tried to imagine what he would say to her there, he heard himself asking what the stripes said tonight.

Would she love the man as much as she loves the tiger?

V

The Paper Cup

That evening the nurse brought him a paper cup with a single blue pill in it. He could see a little of the white bottom all around it.

“From now on, you can take it yourself,” she said.

She set a glass of water on the table and left the door open. Down the corridor someone laughed, and someone else answered. He sat on the bed until the paper gave a little under his fingers.

All day he had wanted the things a man could have. A key of his own. A window he could open. The rain on his face when there was no reason to go indoors. He thought he could learn to eat supper without the radio on. Sometimes he had turned it up so loud that the man reading the weather seemed to be sitting at the table with him.

He tried once more to picture her in the kitchen. There was a spoon for her beside the stove. He could see the steam on the window. He got as far as saying her name, and there the image stopped. He could hear himself saying it. He could never hear her answer.

The man only had questions, doubt and hope.

The Tiger knew where she would be. He knew which stones would hold the moonlight and how far she would come before she said a word. Four steps were enough to take him anywhere he could go. On the fourth he could put his face against the bars and feel her hand.

At the edge of the forest the man had wanted to be a tiger. He had thought a tiger could live its whole life alone and never miss anyone. Now the tiger wanted to stay, and the man, who had learned to miss someone at last, wanted the door.

He carried the cup to the tall window.

She was sitting there in her slippers. At the sound of his steps she started to pull one foot out. He watched her think better of it and slide it back in. Then she made room beside her on the sill.

He sat down. They had never sat on the same side of anything before.

She saw the cup. After a while she took his free hand and turned it over. He had more than a pill, he had the most important decision of his life. Who will he become? A free man or loved tiger? Loneliness in sanity or happiness in a cage?

She raised one finger to his shoulder, as she always did, and began to read his metaphorical stripes.

“What do they say tonight?” he asked.

She followed the old line down his arm. At his wrist her finger came to rest against his skin.

“They say you are loved.”

Behind the bars, the one who had won that night, the man or the tiger, closed his eyes and cried. She caught the tears as they fell, every one of them, and they were warm as a comforting morning spring.

From the window he could see the light in his room. The glass of water was where the nurse had left it. The woman took her hand away. He held the cup between his palms.

Outside, a wind passed through the tree. The leaves turned their pale sides to the moon and he made the decision.

The end