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opening extract from

The Tiger's Secret (Astral Legacies)

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Chapter 1

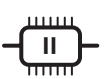
An Ambush of Tigers

Sixteen-year-old Asha Ghosh was exceptional for her age. Despite never going to school, she had learned to read and write, mainly thanks to her late father who, even after an exhausting day pulling his rickshaw around the streets of Kolkata (Calcutta), had always found time to teach her. Asha was also a wonderful cook – although her meagre wages meant that she barely had enough money to buy food, she had a natural flair for using herbs and spices, some of which she haggled for at the local market and others which she grew outside the tumbledown shack in the rural Indian village where she lived with her sick mother and two little brothers, Dabeet and Madhuk. Asha also had a brilliant memory. Tell her something once and she would never forget it. Show her something once and she would be able to do it immediately. Her mother

said she was like an elephant, but that is where the comparison ended. Asha was light and agile … and as thin as a rake!

Asha's village was about three and a half miles from the outskirts of Kolkata. Every morning at sunrise and every evening at sunset, Asha had to make the long trek through the dusty, parched Indian countryside to and from Nazir Kapoor's clothing factory where she had worked since she was five. She sewed sports clothes that were sold in Europe and America for twenty or thirty times what they had cost to make. Not many in the West cared that the smart shirts and fashionable shorts with their all-important brand logos were turned out, hour after hour, in a dirty overcrowded sweatshop by what amounted to slave labour. It was simply the laws of economics, the way of the world.

Once, when she was about twelve, Asha had joined one of the city's many trade unions in the hope of securing a fairer wage for all those hours of mind-numbing toil. It proved to be a big mistake.



Nazir Kapoor, the factory owner, now regarded her as a troublemaker and his cruel supervisor, Dhalia Menokki took every opportunity to bully and torment her. Asha lived a life of constant work and worry. Yet she always remained cheerful and had a kind word for everyone. The bosses may distrust her, but her friends and fellow workers did not. Asha's steadfast cheerfulness, despite her hard life ensured that she was very popular and was loved by everyone.

One night, on her way back to the village after another fourteen-hour shift, Asha startled when she thought she saw a female Bengal tiger slinking through some nearby trees. It appeared to be following her.

'I've been sewing for too long in bad light,' she said to herself. 'My eyes are playing tricks on me.'

But, that night, the sighting was enough to make Asha dream about tigers as she lay in her narrow bed with her mother coughing in her sleep beside her. It was a particularly vivid dream and one that

Asha found totally convincing. In the dream, the tiger approached the shack and began talking to her through some kind of weird mental telepathy. The tiger spoke straight into Asha's mind, telling her an amazing story …

About 50,000 years ago, a race of aliens visited Earth with a view to colonising it. They travelled in a spacecraft powered by the 'Vortex of Light,' a triangular prism created by a hologram and containing seven objects from different parts of the solar system, each one a different colour of the rainbow. The prism generated enough energy to allow the aliens to travel anywhere in the universe at the speed of light.

At first, the aliens were pleased with their choice of colony. Earth was a beautiful, unspoilt place with lots of habitable land, wildlife and natural resources. The only humans were tribes of hunter-gatherers, living in harmony with nature. Tragically, soon after the aliens' arrival in what is now the Arizona Desert in North America, a natural disaster

devastated their peaceful colonisation. A meteor struck Earth right beside them and obliterated their spacecraft. The precious items from the 'Vortex of Light' were sucked up into the atmosphere by the impact debris and carried around the world where they eventually fell to Earth and were lost. The aliens not killed by the strike spent the rest of their lives searching for their missing astral objects and instructing all the animal species they met to do the same. As the survivors died, their bodies instantly evaporated and left no trace of their existence.

Now a new generation of aliens had returned to Earth to reclaim their seven items which, having been left for so long, had now been named The Astral Legacies. On arrival, they were horrified to find how much the planet had changed in such a comparatively short space of time. Humans had spread around the world and their impact on the environment was catastrophic – habitats destroyed, animals extinct, widespread pollution and increasing global warming. Having heard stories from their

ancestors about how idyllic Earth was before, the aliens wanted to reverse this trend by exterminating the whole of the human race, but the wiser heads among them pointed out that such a punishment would be unfair. It was the older generation of human beings that were responsible for these terrible crimes – the young are innocent. So an agreement was reached.

The aliens will leave Earth alone, provided their seven Astral Legacies are returned. Seven young people, chosen at random, will be given the task of finding them within a single calendar year. If they succeed, the human race will be spared in the hope that this new generation can reverse the damage done by their elders. If the young people fail in any respect, humankind will be wiped out in a stroke …

At this point, Asha woke up. She sat bolt upright in bed with a shriek, startling her mother, which set off another bad bout of coughing.

'Oh, my goodness! We've overslept, Treacle,'

spluttered her mother. 'Get up now or you will be late for work.'

(Treacle was Asha's pet name within the family, relating to an incident when she was very little and had eaten a whole tin with a spoon.) But Asha was still transfixed by her dream. Over breakfast, despite her mother's repeated reminders about the time, Asha began to relate her incredible story … only to find Madhuk mimicking her by holding up his old soft-toy tiger and pretending to make it speak while Dabeet rolled on the floor, helpless with laughter.

Chuckling herself at the ridiculous nature of what she was saying, Asha hurried out into the hazy, early morning light to begin her long walk to the factory.

Then, as she was walking through an area of deserted woodland with a narrow path running through it, three big tigers surrounded Asha. To see one tiger so close to a major city was most unusual; to see a group of them together (known as an

'ambush' of tigers) was very rare indeed. In fact, it was so astonishing that Asha forgot to be frightened.

'Greetings, Asha,' said the first tiger, speaking directly into her mind in the same manner as in her dream.

'We will not harm you. We need to talk to you urgently. You are our Chosen One.'

Then a second tiger stepped forwards, a magnificent fully grown male with vivid orange and black stripes and a pure white tummy. He was obviously the leader of the group, the dominant male, who spoke to Asha in a way that made it clear he was used to being obeyed.

'Do you remember the dream you had last night?' he asked.

'Indeed I do,' replied the girl, eagerly. 'It was incredible …'

'Please, Asha,' interrupted the tiger. 'Do not delay us with your idle chatter. It is incredibly dangerous for us to be here like this. We are

hunted by your cruel species to make your ridiculous clothes, your disgusting medicines and for your so-called sport. That means we cannot stay in any one place for very long. But we must speak to you on a matter of the utmost urgency. The story relayed to you in the dream is true. The first Astral Legacy has been found. Now the search begins for the second one. We are the guardians of this precious object. You have been chosen to find it.'

At first, the enormity of these words did not sink in to Asha's confused, racing brain. When they did, she collapsed on the spot like a pack of cards! She was soon back on her feet again, however, after a huge, rough tongue had licked her face and another big wet nose had gently nuzzled her upwards.

'You are right to be overwhelmed with the size and importance of your task,' continued the leader of the tigers. 'The future of humankind rests upon your shoulders. But we are confident you can do this, Asha. Even in your short life, you have shown

yourself to be like us – quick, fearless and strong – and so we have chosen you to find the second Astral Legacy. Do not think of your task as an ordeal, think of it as an honour. Not many girls of your age have the strength of character required to complete the quest.'

At this point, the third tiger (the female that Asha had seen stalking her the day before) gave a low warning growl.

'We must leave now,' said the dominant male tiger, urgently. 'People are coming, they must not see us.'

'Oh, please don't go yet,' begged Asha. 'I don't understand this task. How do I go about finding the second Astral Legacy?'

'Listen carefully and I will tell you,' replied the dominant male tiger, quickly. 'We know where the object is hidden and you must find it in the way decided by our alien masters. Soon, we shall stop talking to you directly. Instead, we will telepathically command your hand to write down

ten sets of GPS coordinates, each one pinpointing a different place in Asia. You must use the coordinates to discover where each place is, write down its name and then visit it in person. When you have visited all ten places, we will advise you how to use the names to discover exactly where the second Astral Legacy is hidden.'

'Why can't you just give me the coordinates of the hiding place and I can go straight there?' asked Asha.

'Because,' purred the tiger, pleased by the girl's quick thinking and no-nonsense logic, 'this is a test! Our masters, the aliens, want to be sure the human race is worth saving. So it is down to you and the other chosen children to show how brave and determined humans can be.'

Pausing only to remind Asha that her task must be completed as quickly as possible and with absolute secrecy, the tigers turned and began to disappear through the trees like silent ghosts. Suddenly, Asha felt a rush of panic as she realised

she did not have the means to undertake her task.

'How do I pay for this trip?' she called. 'I have no money to travel around Asia.'

The third tiger stopped and turned her head.

'An opportunity will be offered to you, Asha,' she explained. 'You must recognise it when it comes and be bold enough to take it. Otherwise, all will be lost.'

With that, the creature departed, leaving Asha feeling wildly excited and completely terrified at the same time.