

THE SUNDARBANS TIGER

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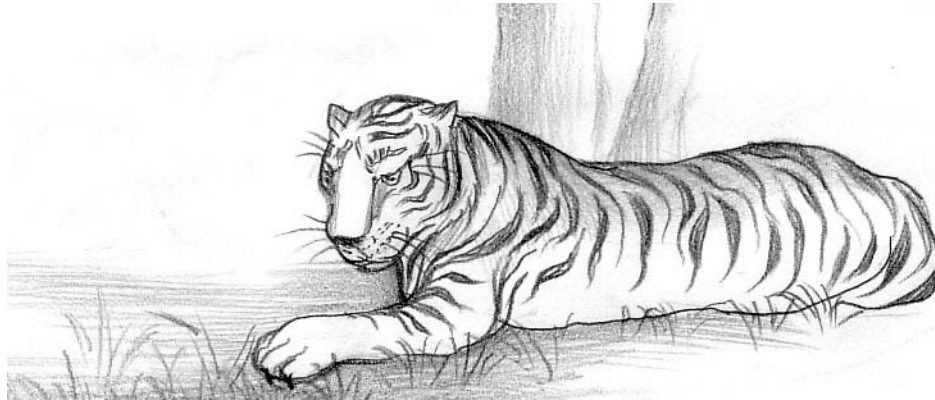
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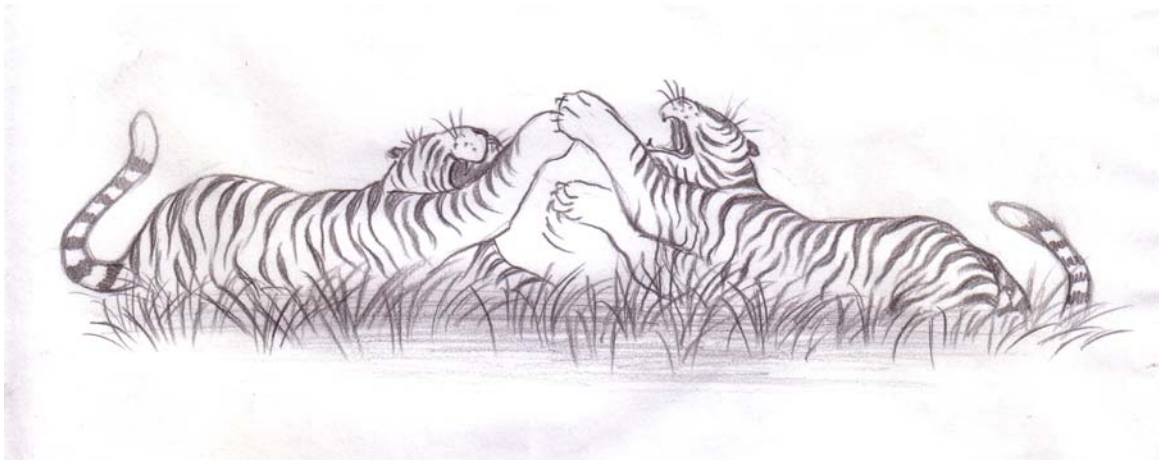


For Bangladesh.
Working to protect wildlife.

John Brooks

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Introduction

Deep in the forest of southern Bangladesh is the largest remaining mangrove forest in the world. Many wild animals, plants, and insects call the Sundarbans home, including the Royal Bengal Tiger. It is a place of great beauty and danger.

The tigers of the Sundarbans are among the most beautiful and feared animals alive. Because of this, and other facts, humans hunt the tigers of the Sundarbans. Where there were once many tigers, now only a few roam the land. Perhaps this is the reason Royal Bengal Tigers hold no great love for humans. Many legends say that the Royal Bengal Tiger's dislike for humans is so strong, they would rather chase a man down than run from him. These tales of danger, however, do not stop those who catch wildlife for money from stalking and killing the king of the swamp for its skin and bones.

The mangrove forest is a secretive place. There are tall trees, but even deeper waters. Many plants and animals thrive here, and many can be found in no other place. Biologists know very little about most of the flora and fauna here. For a few species, such as the tiger, biologists claimed to know a great deal — or so we were lead to believe.

No one knows whether the tigers of the Sundarbans will survive. Their lives and destiny are tied to the life of the great swamp — and to the generosity of humans.

Our story is of one young tiger's struggle to survive the humans and the Sundarbans forest.



Chapter One

Out in the waters of the mangrove forest, a female tiger swims toward the swampy shore. Though the hot sun and humidity surround her, she does not swim for pleasure. She carries a freshly killed boar in her mouth. Not an easy catch, but boar happens to be the tiger's favorite food. She stumbles a bit while trying to find the ground somewhere beneath her legs. The heavy boar is no burden on the strong tiger. She swims up to the shore, dragging the boar onto drier land. Now is not the time to rest because the many crocodiles nearby wait for the chance to drown *any* unsuspecting wader. Next to the tiger, crocodiles hold the respect of many creatures.

Picking the boar back up into her mouth, she continues her journey into the forest, walking several meters to the right and then to the left. She doubles back a time or two. To a passerby, it may not seem that she knows where she wants to go or how to arrive there. This is the way of the tiger; she never lets trouble follow close enough to threaten her. This path is well known to the tiger and she does not like sharing that knowledge with many.

The tiger comes to a matted area between the tall grass and the trees. She gazes intently at a small outcrop of rocks close by. Something is here, but only the skillful eye of a tiger could tell. Dropping the boar from her mouth, she looks all around for any sign of danger and then looks again because a good mother protects her family. She roars softly when she sees no danger nearby and continues homeward. Three very young tiger cubs come out trotting toward their mother and romp around her with excitement. Although the year has been good for gathering ample food to feed a family of four, Mother Tiger's main goal will be to keep her cubs well fed for the months to come.

One by one, the young cubs run up to their mother, fighting for the right to lick at her face and try to claim her catch. Even though the cubs are still too young to eat solid food, they play with the boar and then with each other, pretending they are the rulers of the forest. Mother Tiger rests in the shade, gladly allowing the young ones to play out their fantasies.

Charu, one of the female tiger cubs, says to her younger brother and sister that she will grow up strong to take down animals much larger than the

boar. Since she is the oldest of the three tigers, Charu believes the swamp forest is hers to take and rule. She only needs to grow up to claim what now belongs to their mother.

“I will be the strongest tiger of the swamp,” she boasts. “Everyone will bow down to me.” She looks over at her brother Juba, the smallest and youngest of the three. “If you are nice to me, Juba,” she says to her young brother, “I will teach you how to be as great as I.”

Juba runs over to his mother and jumps on her. He pulls at her hind legs and tail. Being so young and small, he has become somewhat of a mama’s boy, clinging to her side whenever he can. He would rather let Charu take charge of the swamp forest. His only interest at this time is to play a lot, lie back, and let the others do most — if not all — of the work.

The large mother tiger licks her paw, then calmly speaks to Juba. “Your mother is tired, Juba. Go and play with your sisters. Learn the lessons you will need to survive.”

The young tiger answers, “You will teach me all I need to know, Mother. Charu and Nandita are not much older than I am. They can teach me nothing.”

Mother Tiger knows her son's heart and abilities. She knows that he may soon fall behind in the things he must learn to survive the Sundarbans, if he continues to depend upon others to provide for him.

"I may not always be here to protect you, my son," she says, hoping to awaken that tiger spirit inside him. "You may not believe this to be true right now, perhaps, but in time you will learn much from your sisters. They may even save your life one day. The time will come when you will have to be on your own. When that day comes, my son, always remember to beware the humans."

Young Juba looks deeply at his mother, trying to understand the meaning of these words. *Beware the humans*. Not being one for detail, he soon loses interest and tugs once again at his mother's tail. She can only hope that Juba will grow up in time to become a tiger of the Sundarbans.

Many weeks later, Mother Tiger hunts in one of her favorite areas of the Sundarbans where she has taken many beasts to feed her family. The air seems strangely still to her on this day and yet, in the stillness, she somehow picks up the scent of another animal. Perhaps this will be her catch of the day. Slowly, she lowers her large body close to the ground and inches toward the animal's smell. She has not brought food home in days and, therefore, does not want to miss this opportunity to do so. She stops and looks around while sniffing the air and trying to find exactly where this animal may be.

“Strange,” she thinks aloud. “This is not a smell I have tracked in the past.”

She waits a moment or two, then decides to move closer, hoping to catch sight of her target. To her surprise, the animal she seeks is feeding alone and seems unafraid in the tall grass. Even more disturbing to her is the fact that this beast — this solitary animal — is a goat that belongs with humans! She lies down flat within the tall grass and stays well camouflaged while trying to make sense of this event.

Growling beneath her breath now, she says, “Why is it here, so far away from the human village?”

She sniffs the air again. “I do not smell the humans and yet, they must be near.”

Mother Tiger watches the goat and waits a long time as she wonders whether or not she should take this beast or simply go away. Not taking the weaker animal may mean her cubs will go hungry for many days.

Still, she sees no sign of the humans.

Taking the creature could bring trouble from the humans outside the swamp. Mother Tiger lives in the swamp because the humans do not. She

would not care to have them as neighbors, as she is sure they would not wish to have her nearby.

More time passes and Mother Tiger's need to bring food home soon causes her to forget the need to be suspicious of the human's goat. She decides to claim the goat as her own. After all, tigers are the strongest animals of the swamp. Surely the goat could not harm her without its human protectors.

She springs forward and pounces on the animal from behind, bringing it down to the ground. She then moves quickly up to the goat's neck and bites down firmly, which cuts off its ability to breathe. Death will come quickly. Biting down with the force of a sharp carver's knife, she also bites into a collar around the goat's neck. Woven within the collar are capsules filled with white powder. Some of the white powder puffs out of the capsule and into the tiger's mouth. Mother Tiger thinks nothing of this and continues to choke the goat until it moves no more. She feeds a bit, then lifts the goat by its neck to carry it back to her home. After a few meters, however, she stumbles, but not from tripping over a branch or slipping in the mud. And not due to accidentally stepping on the lifeless goat trailing between her legs. These stumbling steps were from a feeling of weakness within her body.

"I am strangely sleepy," she says.

She stops and drops the goat from her mouth, then decides to eat a bit more. All at once, as if a light struck her directly in the eye, she begins to wonder if her worst fears have come true.

Mother Tiger lifts her head up from the goat and stares into the jungle — through the trees and plants, past a watering hole, and far into the distance. She wasn't looking at anything specific — just looking and thinking about what was happening to her. Slowly, she looks down upon the dead goat with her mark on the animal's neck and sees the still-visible white powder on the goat's fur. She roars with anger and wonders how she could have been so careless. This was a trap and she fell right into it as though it were a hole dug into the ground that she had no way of crawling out of.

Looking toward home, she must decide on what now needs to be done. The proud mother tiger looks back toward the path she has just traveled upon and says, "I am being followed; I can feel it."

She leaves and lets the goat lie where it is, then decides to make her way back to her home at a hurried pace — fully aware of her dangerous situation.

As the most feared animal of the Sundarbans arrives at her home, she roars somewhat weakly and overlooks her usual cautions. Her cubs run out to greet her with their usual excitement and joy.

“Well, how are my babies this evening?” she asks.

“Where is your catch, Mother?” Charu asks with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

Not wanting to explain, she simply says to her number one cub, “It got away, Little One. Make sure that nothing you choose to catch gets away from you more than once!”

Charu suggests going back after the animal that has escaped capture.

“Perhaps tomorrow, Charu. I am tired and need to rest. I am very tired, young one.”

The mother tiger slowly, and with much effort, makes her way over to an area of tall grass while all her cubs, except Charu, continue to playfully tug at her. Charu senses that their mother may not have been able to pull down the beast, since she does not appear to be like her typical self. She does not give it much thought, but instead chalks it up to a bad day.

Lying down now, the once proud and mighty Sundarbans tiger looks at her cubs — each one of them so happy to be alive and yet, all truly unaware that Mother Tiger, ruler of the forest swamp, will soon rule no more. Still, she is proud, as only a mother could be. She looks at her young with a sense of hope and pride, as if to say, “I love you all.” She closes her eyes and hopes for the best.