

TIGRESS

Twigs with whiskers? A tree with a tail? Or is it a tigress, hiding?

She can look exactly like a patch of forest, just by being there.

When she stalks slowly through leaves and shadows, or crouches still in elephant grass, her fiery stripy coat seems to vanish like magic.

Bigger than your fist, her pink nose sniffs the air. Her ears turn to listen for the smallest noise. Bright as torches, her large yellow eyes gleam all around.

She's searching for a new den. Somewhere safe for young cubs.

Smooth as a river she moves; her plate-sized paws press the ground but don't make a sound. When she runs, strong muscles stretch and ripple her body like wind on water. She finds an untidy pile of rocks across the clearing, full of dark cracks and crevices. Perfect hiding for tiny cubs. She will bring them here tonight.

Back at the old den the cubs are snuggled deep in shaded sleep. Their bright white ear spots wink out like magic eyes. With rough, wet licks from her long tongue, the tigress stirs them awake.

Grooming keeps their fur sleek and clean, but the wriggling cubs are eager to feed. Small as sugar bag at birth, baby tigers drink rich mother's milk and fill up fat, furry cushions.

These two are too small to walk far, so the tigress uses tooth-power. The gentle mother carries her dangling cubs, one by one, to safety at the new den.

While the tigress hunts for food, brother and sister stalk, stretch and snarl.

Teeth bared, heads together, this could be a tiger fight.

But their knife/sharp claws are sheathed this time, and don't draw blood.

The cubs are six months old now – when they are older their claws will cut deep into the hardest wood, or the tough hide of their prey.

Sharp grass stems scratch three empty bellies. For days mother and cubs have chewed old skin and crunched cold bones. The tigress needs a big kill, and now the hungry year-old cubs are too big and strong to play-hunt by the den.

A wild pig's big, bristly head bends as his snout shoves and snuffles for grubs.

Fierce eyes burning, noses wrinkling with smell, the three tigers creep closer with soft, slow steps and crouch, still as stone.

The cub's whiskers quiver. Their hearts thump loud as drums. Like fire the roaring tigress leaps and falls in a crush of teeth and muscle, and, mouths open, her snarling cubs rush in.

Now the family will eat its fill.

The sun turns tiger fur oven/hot, so after the big feed and a sleep, the tigress heads for the lake.

While her cubs splash and swim, she floats in cool, green water to soak away the heat.

Three sleek tigers prowl the midnight forest. The tigress taught the two cubs all her tricks. Now, at eighteen months, they must find their own homes without her.

A pattern of gliding stripes slides into the trees and the mother disappears. Brother nuzzles sister for the last time, and walks away.

She watches the forest swallow his tail. Then she turns, silently crosses the moonlit clearing. And, just like her magic mother, the young tigress vanishes.