

Four Years Since the Shipwreck

Crusoe's heart seemed to stop as he gazed into the eyes of the leopard. They were wide and green, and they seemed to glow in the shadows of the leaf canopy high above.

He tightened his glance on the woven net he had been holding, ready to throw it on top of the cat as it passed beneath him looking for prey. He had misjudged the animal. It had outsmarted him.

Slowly the leopard drew its lips back in a snarl, exposing a mouth full of sharp teeth. Crusoe could see them glisten with the cat's saliva.

He had stopped breathing, and his entire concentration was focused on the animal that was crouching ready to spring from the branch it was on to the branch he was on. Its claws were dug into the bark, and Crusoe could see the fresh wood beneath where they had caused deep gashes. Those claws would leave gashes like that in his flesh, if he didn't do something soon.

It looked young. That was the strange thought that went through Crusoe's mind as he lay there, head turned, staring into its eyes. He could see its ribs beneath its patterned pelt. It looked young and it looked hungry – no, starved.

His gaze moved across its body, looking for some sign that it was going to leap, and he saw that its left flank, above its back leg, had a long and badly healed gash in it. There was dried blood and ripped flesh. Somehow it had been injured – maybe falling unexpectedly onto something sharp when a branch snapped beneath it or maybe gored by the tusks of a wild pig when it attacked with too much confidence. Crusoe knew that the wild pigs were dangerous as well, but maybe this leopard hadn't learned that lesson.

As he watched, the leopard's haunches tightened. It was going to spring.

Down below, on the ground, the wild pig suddenly bolted into the underbrush. The sudden noise caught the leopard's attention: it flicked its glance downwards, looking for threats.

Crusoe took his chance and rolled off the branch.

As he fell he heard leaves and twigs snapping above him as the leopard spotted his move and leaped for him. He sensed rather than felt a set of claws raking through the space where his back had been less than a second before. He grabbed for a lower branch to break his fall, but his fingers couldn't get a grip. He plummeted past it, knowing that if he hit the ground he would break a bone, and the leopard would be on him straight away.

As he fell past the branch he twisted in mid-air and threw the net away from him, keeping his fingers entwined in one side of it but letting the rest of it unfurl. The holes in the net hooked over the projecting twigs on the branch just as the stones that were tied around its edge to weight it down rattled against the bark. He tightened his grip as the net stretched, the fibres creaking under the strain. They held, and he found himself swinging wildly, ten feet above the ground. He slammed into the side of the tree, knocking the breath from his lungs. For a moment he could only see flashes of bright scarlet against a black background, but within a few seconds he could make out the green canopy of leaves above him, the darker green underbrush below, and the yellow-and-black pelt of the leopard as it plummeted past him, having evidently misjudged its leap.

The leopard hit the ground and seemed to bounce back upwards again despite its wounded haunch, clutching for his feet with its claws. He pulled his feet up and the cat fell back down to the ground. Its eyes were fixed steadily on him as it paced in a circle, growling.

He was still alive, but his situation wasn't a whole lot better than it had been. He tried to call out to Friday but his lungs were still trying to suck in air after he had stunned himself hitting the trunk of the tree. All he could managed was a weak wheeze.

The leopard padded towards the tree and stretched up, gouging its claws into the bark for purchase. It hauled itself upwards, back legs scrabbling for grip. Once they had caught on the back it extended first its right paw, then its left paw, climbing further and further up until its head was on a level with his. It twisted its body around and reached out to claw at his face. He tried to release his grip on the net so he could fall to the ground, but his fingers were caught up in the holes and he couldn't let go.

The leopard snarled again, and prepared to leap sideways from the tree and onto him as he hung there, twisting, the way that the carcasses of the birds, fish and wild pigs that he and Friday had left so carelessly hanging around had twisted.

Something flashed out of the shadows above, unfurling to surround the leopard as it pushed itself off the tree with its strong back legs. It was Friday's net. The stones around its edge pulled it down and around the body of the cat, dragging it off course and down towards the ground. It struggled wildly, but the coconut fibers just tightened around it. Within moments it was a squalling, thrashing ball of fur struggling furiously to escape.

"Do you need a hand?" Friday asked from her perch on a branch high above.

“Yes please,” Crusoe gasped.

Friday began to climb down to his level.

“What are we going to do with it?” Crusoe asked as Friday began to haul him back up to a place of safety.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I think we have bigger problems to worry about.”

“What do you mean?”

Her face was grimmer than he had seen it for a while. “I don’t know whether you noticed, but that leopard was wearing a collar,” she said.

He gazed downwards. She was right. It was difficult to see, because the cat was rolling around so much, but there appeared to be a darker line all the way around its neck.

“It’s someone’s pet?” he asked disbelievingly.

“I think there are pirates on the island again,” she replied. “My father always said that if he didn’t have me he would get himself a leopard and train it to hunt...”