

Four Years Since the Shipwreck

Crusoe lay on the branch, facing downwards, keeping as quiet as he could.

Somewhere out in the jungle, Friday was doing the same thing. He knew she was somewhere over to his right – the strange bond they had started to develop since the day he had rescued her from her father's pirates had grown stronger the longer they spent together – but he wasn't sure exactly where. All he knew was, she was moving, and she wasn't in any immediate danger.

A tropical storm had moved in above the island a few days before. The sky was heavy with rain clouds, and the air was so laden with humidity that taking in a breath was an effort. Despite the cover of the leaf canopy, fat drops of rain still found their way down to where Crusoe was hiding. They hit his head, trickled down his scalp and his neck, and soaked into the rough shirt he had made for himself from the fibers of the banana leaves on the south side of the island. The rain was uncomfortably warm, and those drops that managed to make it down to the level of the underbrush seemed to evaporate in the heat before they hit the ground, leaving a heavy mist drifting through the bushes.

According to the tally that Crusoe scratched into the rock wall of the cave where he and Friday lived, he had been on the island for four years and she had been there for about a year and a half. They had moved caves several times since they had discovered one another, always because her father's crew had managed to find them and they had to change location, but Crusoe had always kept a running tally in whichever cave they were of how many sunrises he had seen. Now that they had managed to fool the pirates into thinking they were dead by letting them see two wild pig carcasses, dressed in their clothes, fall off a cliff during a particular brutal chase, life was easier for them. They didn't have to run and hide any more. They hadn't seen any of the pirates for several months now, suggesting that Friday's father's ship had left the island, looking for fresh prey. They had even moved back into the first cave Crusoe had lived in – the one he still considered how, knowing that they were safe.

At least, they had been safe, up until the point that the leopard had discovered them.

As he lay there, with water pooling in the small of his back and tickling his scalp, Crusoe realized that their big mistake had been hanging the bodies of the fish, the birds and the pigs they had caught just outside the cave. They had kept them off the ground so that other animals couldn't easily get to them, but it hadn't occurred to them that the smell of the meat might attract something else, something more dangerous, that would regard them as fair game in the same way that they looked at the pigs, the birds and the fish.

A bush moved, down below where Crusoe was waiting. He took shallow breaths, and tried to calm his heart down while still keeping alert and ready for action. The mist made it difficult to see, but he thought he saw a dark shape emerge from between the leaves. It held itself close to the ground, wary of what else was out there. Crusoe thought he heard it sniffing.

The head poked further out, followed by the rest of the body, and he relaxed. It was a wild pig – covered in bristles and with tusks pointing up from its lower jaw. Its little eyes stared around, looking for danger. It seemed to know that there was something nearby, but it didn't know exactly where.

The leopard had found the animal carcasses hanging from the trees and had obviously tried to reach them, but Crusoe and Friday had used thin creepers to hold them, secured to small branches on several trees, and the cat could neither jump high enough to reach them or get far enough along the branches to hook them up without them breaking under its weight. Frustrated, it had turned to the next nearest food it could smell – Crusoe and Friday.

It was the leopard's snarl that had alerted them to danger. It had got into the cave and crept right up to them, and was about to leap on one of them and rip their throat out, when a branch on the fire they had built to keep them warm in the cold nights had cracked in the heat. Surprised, the leopard had jerked its head around and snarled. Waking to find the dark shape standing over them, both Friday and Crusoe had reached for their weapons – Crusoe for a long branch sharpened into a spear and Friday for the knife she had painstakingly chipped from a stone. The next few seconds had been a flurry of activity – them trying to get the cat to withdraw and the cat, in its turn, lashing out at them with its claws. Eventually it withdrew, reluctantly. They both knew it would be back.

Which was why they had decided to set a trap.

There were particular trails through the jungle that the wild pigs and other animals used, and particular pools of water they drank from. They were obvious places for the leopard to hide and ambush a passing animal. The two of them decided to separate – Crusoe above a place where several trails crossed and Friday above the nearest pool of water. They both had weapons, but more importantly they had nets – woven from tough coconut fibers and weighted around the edge with stones. If they dropped the nets onto the leopard when it attacked its prey then the leopard's struggles would just entangle it in the net even further. Once it had tired itself out, they could kill it.

That was the theory, anyway.

Down below, the pig raised its snout and sniffed at the air. There was definitely something around. Was it sensing Crusoe, or the leopard.

It looked up suddenly and fixed Crusoe with its beady-eyed gaze.

No, not Crusoe. Something past Crusoe.

He slowly twisted his head around. There, on a branch above him and about six feet away, the leopard was crouched, ready to spring.

At him.