



Always Wild

By Dean Harrison

The black leopard, referred to by some as a black panther, came straight at me. I was cornered with no place to maneuver, run, or hide. He was full size, about 160 pounds and very black. The look in his eyes was unmistakable — he was going to attack. We had been friends for three and a half years, but Eclipse was single then. Now, he had just returned from his first honeymoon and even yesterday was extremely affectionate, rubbing against me, walking beside me and licking my arm, which was unusual for him.

Suddenly I could see he was coming for me and it was anything but friendly. He leaped toward my throat. I blocked with my left arm and stepped to the right. But he extended his neck to my left as he went by, and I felt his canines start to enter my neck. But I had moved just far enough out of reach, so he only grazed me.

I stepped away from him quickly and attempted to put some distance between us. He turned and came for me again. I knew that I could not survive this encounter if I took the defensive position and he took the offensive position. So I moved toward him. He seemed surprised and his confidence fell. I strategically moved around him until he stopped moving. I touched him on either side of his neck with first my right foot, then my left. This maneuver is a sign of respect in their world. It indicates an adversary could inflict injury but chooses not to do harm. Then I backed away, giving him ample space, so my presence would not cause him to feel intimidated.

I saw a large blur rush by me to my left. It was Sahara, a lioness and Eclipse's best friend. She pounced on him, pinning him to the ground. This was easy for her since she weighed about 300 pounds. I heard the air go out of Eclipse and I decided it was a good time to depart. In about 10 seconds or so, Sahara stepped off her friend who was unharmed but defeated.

Ever since that day, Eclipse and I have been friendly and adversarial. The problem stems from an instinct we have come to know as "Marriage and family relations." Like any of the four primal instincts, it contains both an offensive and defensive side. The offensive part is the pleasant area which includes searching for a mate, courting, and mating. The defensive part consists of defending a spouse and offspring against intruders.

Saja, a yellow spotted leopard who is Eclipse's wife, continues to flirt with me — a male, though human, intruder. Eclipse's instinct drives him to protect her against me, even though we have been friends for over seven years now. His behavior requires no thought per se, but rather a stimulus/response reaction. When I appear, he becomes defensive and a state of uneasiness erupts. Both of us are aware of the threat posed by the other. Mine, of course, is not intentional, but my

presence is enough to set off his chain reaction. Our relationship has continued this way for the last four years and is directly tied to the heat cycle of his polyestrous wife.

No amount of friendliness or other affections on my part have persuaded Eclipse to return to our original relationship. He often allows me to visit and to pet him, something he loves. Yet he still remains –Always Wild.