



ALWAYS WILD

The black panther, also known as a black leopard, came straight at me. I was cornered with no place to maneuver, run or hide. He was full size, about one hundred sixty 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. 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.

Now 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 indicated 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 three hundred pounds. I heard the air go out of Eclipse and I decided it was a good time to depart. In about ten 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 against intruders and also offspring.

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 seven and a half years. His behavior requires no thought

as we think of thinking, 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 proposed 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 polyestrus wife.

No amount of friendliness or other affections on my part have persuaded Eclipse to return to our original relationship — even though he often allows me to visit and to pet him, which he loves. He still remains — always wild.