THE LAST OF THE LEOPARDS

The Sihote-Alin mountains were crested with gold as the sun set behind them. I scaled a rocky peak, gripping the cold stone with my claws and holding my prey tightly. It had taken all day to find food, and now I must get it home to my cubs.

The fur along my shoulders ruffled in a sudden breeze. My muscles tightened, and my bared claws gripped the snow. Along the wind came a strange and unsettling scent. It was not unfamiliar to me; man had come to the mountains.

I whipped around, clutching tightly at my prey. My heart hammered, threatening to burst out of my chest. My ear twitched. Was that a crackle in the bushes?

*BANG!*

Something white-hot whizzed across my back. I felt it leave a burn mark. I yowled, but it was out of fear, not pain. I dropped my prey in the snow and ran; it would only slow me down.

I did not know where the shot had come from, but it told me one thing; not only was man here, but they had brought their terrible weapons. The weapons that had killed my family and friends, the weapons that had caused me and my cubs to be some of the last leopards in these mountains.

I dove behind a rocky outcrop and hid there, trembling. Could man smell me, like I could smell them?

I could hear their footsteps crackling nearby. Every muscle in me was taut and ready to flee. It would not be long before they found me. I felt angry.

*Why is man here? What have we done?*

I heard guttural voices, and I listened. The men were nearby.

"The leopard is close," one growled.
“She is a smart one,” said another. “She has evaded all of our traps!”

“She will be a fine prize,” the first man snarled. “Her pelt will earn us thousands.”

“I believe that she has cubs as well,” grunted the second. “When we kill her, we will search for them.”

Cold fear filled me. Whatever happened, I could not let these men near my cubs. I had to lead them away.

*You will be killed*, I told myself, but I knew that I would be willing to die for my cubs. These men should not be here. This was *my* mountain.

In a sudden burst of courage, I emerged and gazed across the land. The men were nowhere in sight. I scanned the undergrowth and the dense groupings of rocks.

But I could not see them; only smell them.

I slunk down the sloping rock and stepped cautiously onto the snow. The wind had shifted; I could not smell the men anymore.

Just as I was about to dash for the trees on the other side of the glittering snow, I heard a crackle behind me. Panicked, I whipped around, eyes wide and ears flat.

And there he was.

I was eye-to-eye with the poacher. I could see every line in his face, every ripple of his hair in the wind. I could see the hatred and triumph staining his eyes, hidden beneath his looming brows.

And he was pointing his long, sticklike weapon right at my heart.

I wanted to run, to fight, but I felt frozen. Invisible ice was creeping through my fur, freezing to me to the spot.

In a split second, I heard a deafening blast of noise and felt a terrible pain strike at my chest.
Then, there was darkness.

My eyes opened. The light around me was strange and silver. I could no longer feel the cold snow on my paw-pads, or hear the wind in my ears.

All around me, there was a bright, thrumming darkness that seemed to stretch on into eternity. When I looked down, I was standing on nothing. I felt scared and fearful. *Where am I?*

I remembered the men, the poacher pointing his stick-weapon at my heart, and I remembered feeling a terrible pain. I looked down. I had no wound, and I felt no ache. My ears flattened.

*What happened?*

Brightness lit up the air behind me. I turned, and gasped.

Four beings were stepping toward me across the darkness. They seemed to be made of the stars themselves. As they got closer, I realized that they were leopards, just like me. But they did not look alive.


“You have died,” said the first leopard calmly. “We are here to take you to the Stars.”

“Died?” devastating horror washed over me. “No...! I can’t be dead! My cubs, they need me!”

The empyrean leopards just watched me sadly.

“You’re... ghosts!” Realization dawned on me. “And...” I glanced down again, and felt shocked as I realized that my body, just like theirs, was wavering and translucent.

“I have to go back,” I said. “My cubs need me! The poachers...they’ll find them!”

“I am sorry,” said the leopard. “But we cannot undo what has been done.”

I shook my head wordlessly.
"Your cubs are our last hope," said the leopard. "Our people are dying. The poachers are killing us. Soon, there will be no more leopards left, and our beautiful mountains will crumble without us there to nurture them."

"These poachers are selfish, and cruel," said another leopard bitterly. "They do not care about us, only themselves."

An idea struck me. I turned to the ghostly leopards. "I know what I must do," I said. "Will you send me back?"

"We cannot undo what has been done," said the first leopard again.

"But can I go back as a spirit?" I asked. "Surely I can!"

"You could," said the leopard. "But it may be difficult to leave again."

"My cubs need me," I said. "Send me back- just for a moment!"

"Very well," said the leopard. I closed my eyes as a strange feeling tingled in my fur. I heard the wind in my ears. My eyes opened. I was back in my mountains. Sadness yawned at me as I realized that I would never hunt again, or feel the brush of falling snow on my face.

I wanted to stay and take in my mountain's beauty, but I could not just stand here. I had to save my cubs.

I rushed across the snow, and felt as though I was gliding. I searched for the poachers under the darkening sky. When I could not find them I stopped and took a deep breath.

Fear filled me.

*I know where they are.*

I turned and began to run up the slopes, weightless and free. The men would be headed for my den, where my cubs were hidden. I had to stop them.
As I crested a familiar ridge, I saw them; up ahead, the men were traipsing across the snow, heading for my cubs. I ran faster, but they were too far ahead. They were already at the den, and I thought that I could hear the cry of cubs.

I saw the poacher that had killed me raise his weapon. He was pointing it into the den. I put on a burst of speed, but even as a spirit, I could not seem to run fast enough.

Just as the man concentrated on firing his weapon, I burst out of the snow and reared in front of him. "NO!"

The man stumbled backwards. His weapon fired into the sky in a deafening blast that shook the nearby cliffs. He fell into the snow with a cry and gazed up at me. I knew that he saw me; I could see my form reflected in his eyes.

"You!" he gasped, recognizing me. "I killed you!"

I loomed over him, hate filling me. "Leave these mountains!" I roared. "Don't ever touch my cubs!"

Still watching me, the man stood shakily. He faced the other poachers, who all looked confused at his fear. "We do not hunt in these mountains anymore," he said.

The others gaped at him. "But, boss..."

"We are leaving, now!" roared the man. As they stumbled away, the man with the weapon glanced back at me. This time, I was victorious. The men would not return.

I had saved my mountain.

I gazed back at the den, where my cubs were mewling. I wanted to visit them, but knew that it would only make them sad. I had to go back to the other ghosts. My time here was done.

My cubs would live and thrive. They would save our people.

"Be strong, cubs," I whispered. "You are our last hope."
I could feel my body fading from sight. The mountains were distorting. As the cries of my cubs softened, I became a memory to them, leaving the silver darkness of the Sihote-Alin mountains behind me.

As of today, the amur leopard is the most endangered species in the world, with only 60 individuals left in the wild. They are hunted and killed by poachers for their beautiful fur.