

Prudence the cook

Prudence was stick and bones, and old, but she was a hard worker. She finished dinner for her mistress, cleaned the kitchen, laid out the dining table, put the food in the microwave, ready to be heated when needed, locked the pantry door, and left for her village on the other side of the mountain. She was happy. She knew mistress would love the mutton biryani.

Night and mist came quickly in the Nilgiris hills of South India, and it was dark and cold when she reached the edge of the jungle. In twenty minutes she would be home, she would light a little fire, cook herself some gruel and greens and get into bed. Mistress wanted her to report pretty early next morning.

Then she saw the dogs emerge from the trees. Village strays that lived off offal and kitchen refuse. One or two of them remembered some kindness from a human being, but not all. They were now a pack, with a large alpha male as leader. He had never known a home. A few dogs ran forward, unthinkingly, towards Prudence. Though she had washed her hands thoroughly the dogs could smell the meat she had cooked.

A red light from a long time away came into the leader's eyes. He was hungry and he growled. Others took it up. Prudence ignored them and walked forward briskly. Suddenly, the leader sprang straight at her. Losing her balance she slipped and fell. The pack sprang at her body. Even as she struggled to get up, slashing teeth gripped her arms and legs, the leader pushed her back with his forelegs, and his dripping jaws sought her throat.

Then there was a high-pitched unearthly squeal and a rough, deep-throated noise that brought fear to Prudence. It was a desperate moment and she could recollect very little afterwards. She had a glimpse of the

lead dog being lifted from her body, the squeal dying in his throat, and then a hairy tail swatted her across the face, and it was gone. The dogs were squealing and running for their lives. She saw a smaller leopard, perhaps a cub, seize a dog and leap into the jungle after its mother.

She lay on the forest footpath for quite a bit. Then she got up, washed the blood off her hands and legs in a little stream below the path, and continued homeward, a little shaken. After a few minutes a small smile lit her face. She was thinking of the look on her mistress's face when she would tell her next morning that she had been saved from dogs by leopards!