

FORGING GRIT

A STORY OF LEADERSHIP PERSEVERANCE

By
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FOG

Fadar Drake's only clear memories about the morning of March 3 revolved around three things: The throbbing pain in his right leg, the high-pitched ringing in his ears, and a cat.

Everything else was baked in a dense, unsliceable fog. But the pain, the ringing, and the cat, those were real. Indeed, they provided the first indications that he wasn't dreaming. Or dead.

Strange how pain and fear can do that. They let you know you're alive, sort of the way failure helps you appreciate success, the way sorrow gives a greater appreciation for joy, or the way a dense gray fog, when it finally lifts, can provide new perspectives and fresh insights.

He didn't know it at the time, but Fadar would experience all of those contrasts in the days and weeks to come. On the morning of March 3, however, only one thing mattered: He was alive.

When he awoke that day, or more accurately, when he came to, Fadar's vision was blurred. He was so disoriented that he had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten there. He only knew that his leg throbbed with pain and that the ringing buzz in his head was suffocating. He reached for his leg with one hand and rubbed his temples with the other. That's when he heard a growl in the distance.

Or was it nearby? He had no idea. There was no way to know.

Like the pain, however, he knew it was definitely real. He felt the realness of it. The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention. A wave of anxiety flooded through his body. Yes, it was real. And terrifying.

He did all he could to focus his attention on the origin of the sound. He batted his eyes and lifted his head, tried to clear the haze from his mind, but the fog held tight. He felt the warmth of a fire. Or was it fires? It seemed to surround him. He smelled something pungent. Pancake syrup, only stronger. Much stronger. Oil? Fuel? Yes, that was it, airplane fuel. He saw glimpses of smoke. And, then...there ...stepping around a tree, appearing in the mist and smoke, he saw the cat. Not the fuzzy little pet sort of cat that climbs in your lap after you've both enjoyed a nice dinner, but a big cat. A *very, very* big cat.

A snow leopard, he would later learn.

She moved slowly, gracefully around the trunk of the tree, and Fadar found himself mesmerized by her combination of strength and beauty. She was stocky with long, thick fur; smoky gray with black spots, small ones on her face and larger rosettes on her body and legs. Her paws were wide, her tail long and strangely thick, and her ears small. She moved quietly, then came to a stop and stared him down with her pale green eyes.

It was, unquestionably, the most surreal moment of Fadar's 31 years of life. Him laying barely conscious and confused as a large feline predator looked him over like a starving teenager eyeing a fried turkey leg at the state fair. Fadar grew up in rural Georgia, so he knew all about fried turkey legs and state fairs. Knew them and loved them, in fact. He didn't know much about snow leopards.

Fadar looked at the majestic lady. Amazed. Scared. Frozen in the moment.

The majestic lady looked back at Fadar. Bold. Unafraid. Plotting her next move.

A breeze passed over Fadar, and he suddenly became aware of the cold. His body shivered. His leg ached. The ringing in his head was evolving into a monumental headache.

The snow leopard growled again, low and menacing, and Fadar, the young, strong, adventure-seeker from St. Louis, blinked his eyes and passed out.