

Migratory Birds
Chapter 21

MEMORIES



by kodayu



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Her leg had started to hurt so much in the last few days, that she was hardly able to control herself anymore. The pauses during the night had not been enough to undo the damage done during the day and she had felt it with every step she had made. She had lost her speech along the way. At the beginning she had still tried to mumble to herself, but the longer she had suffered from the pain and the longer she had walked on, the more insurmountable the pain had become, until it had almost entirely dominate her. Whenever she had heard an unexpected rustle in the underwood of the forests she travelled through, or smelt the presence of an animal she had been ready to attack. It was her instincts that kept driving her on.

Her hand had gripped her staff more tightly until the knuckles had shown among her fur. The staff had been something which had kept her from loosing it entirely. Despite her mind being clouded by pain and the undeniable call of her instincts she had enough reason left to know that she could not loose the staff which kept her in an upright position and focused on the way ahead. Her undernourishment and the mere effort of walking on - which showed in sweat drenching her fur despite the cool temperatures - had added to her state. She knew that she had been wrong when she had expected that she could cover two thirds of the distance a normal wanderer could cover. There was no way denying that, but she had no choice. There was no settlement, no people, absolutely nothing but the surrounding wilderness and the over-grown old path she followed and somewhere far ahead was supposed to be some settlement that she had to reach before the cold behind her caught up with her.

It was already getting very cold during the nights. She had noticed it despite her fur having gotten much denser, but in the morning her legs and her hands had been so cold and stiff that it had hurt to move them again. The cold had slightly eased the feverish pain of her leg though. During those days, her entire fur had been wet with molten hoarfrost which had dripped down from every strand of her hair when she had risen from the small spots beneath boulders and between large gnarled roots she had chosen as a resting place for the night. She had raised her face, pushed her wet hair out of it and had watched the dim light of a rising sun above the trees.

Despite her feline nature she had not wanted to travel during the night, the terrain was unknown to her, she had no guide except the path ahead of her and she did not want to get lost as this would have meant to walk even longer with the injured leg.

Her supplies had been few from the start and she had known that there would be no

chance to get more of those. So from the beginning of her journey on the path to a town called New Ceema, she had started to search for additional food. She could not afford to hunt, it would have taken too much time and she would not have been very easy with her leg either. Sometimes she had lain in ambush and had caught some stupid, slow bird that way, but besides that she had been forced to eat crawlers¹ from the start and their bitter, squishy meat almost made her retch every time she bit into one of them. There were still a few berries and fruit to be found here and there, but most of them had already gone to waste in the cold of the nights. Her stomach was constantly empty and her hunger added to her condition, fuelled her restless nature and many times her hand had reached out for the silver pendant around her neck which she had grabbed firmly in order to hold on to something as if it could save her mind from slipping into the crevices of pain, hunger and exhaustion.

With narrowed slanted eyes, sweat dripping from her forehead despite the cold of the day, her hand firmly locked around the staff she used to push herself off the ground, her teeth gritted, she had climbed yet another one of those hills when the trees had suddenly given way to a pasture: The top of the hill was devoid of trees, instead it was dominated by a huge formation of rocks which rose into the sky like a crown sitting on top of a head. The stone was rounded by rain and wind and the stones rose from the ground like giant menhirs, many, many times her own height. Even the small house in front of it looked small in the shadow of those rocks. But the house faced the south so that it did not stand in the shadow of the giant stones; instead the afternoon sun shone down on it and dyed it in a warm, mellow light.

Jiddy stopped for a moment and looked at the house. She narrowed her feline eyes as they were much more comfortable with the dim light of the wood she had emerged from. She did not see much of the house, but despite the distance, now that she had focused her eyes on it, she had to realize that she had been tricked by the light a moment before: What looked like a house from afar was not a house anymore. It was a ruin.

The lynx inhaled deeply and slowly started to walk through the meadow, the high grass rustling all around her while she walked through it. The path she had been following lost itself in the grass, it was obvious that it must have led to the house a long time ago, but now it was entirely overgrown.

¹ Crawlers are small, land-living crustaceans. They are minor pests and usually edible, but hardly so.

Jiddy did not look up. She had a hard time walking anyway and thus she focused on the way ahead of her. She winced as her leg hurt with every step.

When she had finally reached the front side of the house she raised her eyes again and realized that it once had been more than a house: There had been a small farmyard or something resembling that. There had been a wall surrounding an inner yard, but the wall had crumbled and was overgrown as well, so that the house stood almost by itself by now. There were still some troughs left, indicating what that yard must have been used for. It was obviously an old, abandoned inn. The house must once have had two storeys at least, but the upper part had collapsed almost entirely on top of the first floor. As close as she was now she could see that the first floor did not exist anymore either as the remains of the house's upper part had filled the entire first one. No matter how intact the ruin might have looked from the distance, it was hardly more than a heap of rubble.

Supporting herself on her staff Jiddy eyed the building while she tried to catch her breath.

Slowly her mind was clearing a little bit as the sharp pain in her leg subsided and transformed into a numb, throbbing ache which was spreading through her veins with every heartbeat.

The most peculiar thing was not the ruin by itself; it was the two wooden columns erected in what must have been the yard of the inn. They still very much resembled two tree trunks, except that they had been cut down and willfully erected in this place. They were both about the same height, but the right one seemed to have lost its footing and was now leaning against the other one. The spots where the boughs had been cut off were still visible and even some remains of the original whitish bark hang down here and there. There seemed to have been some carving, but it was hard to recognize that anymore. From the top of those two columns hang down many cords of old, beaten cloth which were frazzled at their end so that the strings the cords were made of moved in the wind.

Jiddy remembered having seen something like that before and she remembered that those two columns were not complete anymore: A long time ago, colored straps of paper must have hung from every cord which would have fluttered in the wind. They were ceremonial columns which were meant to the attention of something or other... It had been a long time since Jiddy had seen those. She looked at them and tried to remember what they were supposed to be good for.

She had a hard time focussing, but while she stood there she sniveled and turned around. Her nose had started to prickle and when she looked behind herself she could see heavy clouds getting closer, dark shadows above the red, yellow and orange colored foliage of the trees.

Her eyes flicked. She had been lucky as there had not been any real rain in the last few days, but she had felt that the moisture in the air had increased with every day and now she could see these dark, heavy clouds which billowed over each other, covering almost the entire sky, except for very small spots where rays of light still shone through and illuminated the leaves of the trees, dying them in a subsiding golden light. But those rays narrowed little by little as the clouds gathered.

The lynx turned around and looked at the remains of the house. She inhaled deeply and grabbed her staff more firmly and started to climb over the remains of the wall.



She had found an entrance before the rain started.

Actually the rain did not start until late at night, yet she was happy that she had found a shelter long before that as she had craved to sit down and rest her aching leg.

She had been obliged to search the ruin for some time: Most of it was nothing but a heap of stones where plants were already growing upon: Moss, fern, a few blades of grass, but even small trees were trying to make a living upon it. There were also a few rotten beams poking out of this mess and these were what she focused on.

Jiddy found a few holes underneath them, but none of them were big enough for her. She even crawled into two of them in order to make sure that there was no bigger cavity hidden there.

It was among the remains of the second floor where she made a find: It looked like nothing but a small space underneath a series of beams which had collapsed as a whole, but inside there was far more space than she would have expected herself. It went much deeper as there seemed to be no remains of the first floor in this particular spot, so that the remains of the second floor formed a roof on top of a bigger hollow space. From the outside it had looked like nothing but once she had crawled inside, she had found a small passage to her left which led even deeper into the remains. The opening itself was high enough for her to sit upright and wide enough to lie down as well. Additionally it offered a good view of her surroundings as well, so that she knew instantly that she would stay in this place, despite the droppings of some animal which must have used this place in the past.

It did not look as if this denizen would return anytime soon, but due to her condition she was rather willing to fight it than search for a different spot. Maybe a return of this inhabitant was even a good thing as it would certainly provide her with some sort of a meal. Jiddy grinned grimly to herself thinking about this.

Quickly she cleared out the feces left in the cavity, sniffing strongly as the powerful scent was unpleasant to her sensible nose. Yet she knew that she would get used to the scent in a short time. It was nothing which mattered to her on this day.

Finally she chose a spot opposite the opening where she could look outside and which the previous denizen had furnished with dry leaves and moss, so that it was not too uncomfortable sitting down there, even though she was surrounded by the stones of the ruin.

She groaned strongly when she sat down, finally relieving her leg of her body's weight.

For a moment she watched the movement of the clouds in the dark sky, but before she noticed herself, she dozed off, giving in to the exhaustion of her days of wandering. Though her instincts woke her a few times when sounds alarmed her (such as the start of the rain), these minor disturbances nor her empty stomach could disrupt her sleep.

The small passage which had led deeper into the remains of the house had caught Jiddy's attention from the beginning. Her feline curiosity nagged at her and as she could not do anything else, she had to resist the temptation to go in there right away. Her leg was still in a bad shape and she did not want to risk hurting it again. Throbbing pain was still haunting her.

Around noon, when she could see a dim shine among the clouds which could only be a weak sun, Jiddy gave in to her desire to investigate. Crawling into the passage was better than sitting around, succumbing to the pain in her leg which was not that strong, but whose consistence tested her willpower anyway. Watching the rain was not making it any better.

She went down to all fours from the beginning, taking weight of her injured leg by doing so, while her paws found a good grip upon the rubble.

The passage's entry was marked by a beam which had come down as a whole. The opening underneath it looked like the gap between two spread fingers. It was beneath the level of the rubble she rested on most of the time, a small hollow among the stones leading towards the dark gap.

Jiddy lowered herself and peeped into the darkness beneath the wooden beam: It was obvious that the beam marked the edge of a whole structure which was mostly intact, probably an entire floor which had crashed down, the other remains of house above it resting as rubble upon it while the passage was all that was left of the room beneath.

Even though there was not much she could see, it was enough to discern that the passage was not that small and Jiddy lowered herself even further and started to crawl into the opening.

Her claws dug into the uneven ground and her healthy leg pushed her forward as her feline shape bent to adapt to the shape of the hollow.

She could feel her ribs in this moment which had not properly healed either, but Jiddy was already too occupied by trying to fit into the narrow gap in order to pay any attention to the pain.

Fitting into the small space was quite a task as she had found she was almost too large for it already. Old, dirty cobwebs stuck to her fur as she bent and turned over. Her claws dug deep into stones she could not see, as her own body was blocking out the light now and she pulled herself forwards. All of her body scratched over the stones and she could feel their edges pushing into her tightened muscles. For a moment her shoulders seemed to be too large to fit into the small space. She had to bend even more (her ribs protested) and inch forward with her shoulder, but then she had made it past the old beam and fully entered the passage.

When she was inside, there was light coming in through the opening again and her feline eyes allowed her to see a few things: It was mostly more rubble, but as she had suspected, the small opening led into a rather wide space which had formed between the rubble and the intact floor above it. It was very narrow and in a few places there was no way through. There were cobwebs shimmering in the dim light and Jiddy saw a particularly large spider occupying one of those right in front of her face.

Without thinking Jiddy grabbed the spider and stuffed it into her mouth. She pulled a face. The taste was awful.

Then she started to crawl on, choosing whatever direction looked promising.

It was difficult to move at all, but after having progressed just a little bit Jiddy was already being rewarded as she could make out the edge of a kettle in between the stones. It was very deformed and half-way buried, but when she got closer she raised her paw and felt up the cool metal for a moment.

Then she moved on. She had to crawl around a few stones which blocked her way. There was something stuck beneath one of the stones which looked like a pressing iron, but it was impossible to reach.

As she went on, things were getting much darker and despite her ability of nocturnal sight she had a hard time as there was very little light reaching that far.

The next thing she discovered were the remains of a cupboard or wardrobe which

stuck out of the stones and blocked her way. Besides the splintered wood there was nothing special about it.

Her chest started to hurt some more as crawling around was straining her ribs, thus she felt a little pain whenever she inhaled and Jiddy understood that she could not go on for much longer.

But for the moment she was not willing to give up yet and she crawled in, squeezing herself through a narrow opening to the broken cupboard's right. She struggled to get through this space and when she had finally managed to do so, she found herself in a bigger cavity, where she could almost sit up.

There was no light reaching this spot and even Jiddy could not see anything anymore. With her paws she started to finger her new surroundings, trying to discern some of it.

Her heart almost skipped a beat when she had felt the familiar touch of a clay pottery. She could feel the glaze upon the surface of many large shards. There was nothing intact anymore, but the amount of shards was promising and thus Jiddy's hands eagerly went on.

She could smell that there had to be more to this place: Of course, there lots of mold, dust, cobwebs, rotten wood and that particular scent of old stonework, but beyond that were other smells, faint but perceptible.

Readjusting her position within the narrow space, she started to rummage around in the rubble. With her hands she tried to discern what it was that she found. It was intriguing and within moments she had almost forgotten about her chest pain. There were pieces of wood, something that felt like glass, something that ribbed apart when she tried to crab it, probably some kind of cloth. There was nothing made of metal, something which could have been valuable considering her situation.

When her hands did not hit anything but stones and wood anymore, she moved on. She knew that there was more. Moving she could feel the pain again and a frustrated growl escaped her. It was hard to resist her curiosity, yet in the confinement of the hollow, the urgency of her chest pains easily overcame the curiosity and slowly she started to crawl towards the exit again. Faint grayish light shone in there like a partly opened door to a new room.

Twice she had returned to the hole, before she had concluded that there was nothing useful to find there. Twice she had not encountered anything more substantial than shattered pottery and broken furniture. During her second visit to the hollow she had felt a tiny jar in her paws, but she had accidentally dropped again and had failed to find it again. It had not been very useful anyway. Yet when she had returned outside, she had noticed that her paws had suddenly turned dark by some kind of fluid.

It had smelled like ink, but she wondered how ink could have had stayed fluid for such a long time, even though it might have been in that tiny jar.

The ink had stained her arms' fur as if her bare hands had gutted some kind of animal with black blood.

Yet somehow the ink had convinced her that there was more to find down there, but her third venture had been a frustrating one: She had not been able to find anything that she had not found before. Having gotten something of a sense of place, her sense of adventure had been tasked by the fact that she had failed to recognize anything beyond a certain limit. It was as if the farther end of the hollow had shifted since her last visit. Her own inability to recognize the features of the place had been frustrating for Jiddy and after she had crawled around for quite some time and had been convinced that she had been holding the same edge of some kind of cabinet or something in her paws yet again, she had given up and had crawled towards the exit.

It was in this moment, passing by a spot which she had been convinced to have well explored, her hand had suddenly touched something leathery, At first she had been convinced that it was some piece of clothing and the thought had overjoyed her, but when she had torn at it, she had heard the sound of paper being torn apart and instantly she had known that it had to be a book.

Carefully she had retrieved it and carried it outside.

When she had been busy cleaning herself up again, removing all the cobwebs and dust from her fur, she had felt a mix of disappointment and grim satisfaction: She had known that something had been down there and yet this find was hardly useful at all. It was far from the tools she had hoped for, she had concluded while she had glared at it from the corner of her eyes.

She had looked inside, seen hand-written letters and she had almost instantly thrown it away. Everything that she felt, all the emotions and the instincts which had guided her to

this place, had made it possible for her to reach it, were averse to everything that any kind of letters stood for: Most of all, the hardship of reading.

She had stared at that bug for hours. She did not know what kind of bug it was, even though it reminded her of a stag beetle, but lacking the large mandibles.

Her hand had shot forward in an attempt to grab it, her hunger taking control of her limbs as the bug started to look more appetizing with every moment, but there was a moment of hesitation when her hand lingered in mid-air above the insect and she refrained from grabbing it, suddenly feeling repulsed by its sight and her own impulse.

Jiddy pressed her mouth tightly shut, forcing herself to endure the hunger, trying to overcome her instincts, but she kept on looking at the insect and she noticed how it was struggling: The bug seemed to try to move forward, climbing a dead leaf which had curled up, its upper part forming a rugged, almost vertical slope. Whenever the bug reached a part of the leaf with a certain angle the bug fell down on its back, struggling to get up again. After some time it managed to do so and made another futile attempt to climb the leaf which was doomed to end like the one before: The bug on its back, its tiny little feet helplessly wiggling around.

The lynx girl watched it for some time, carefully eyeing the movements of the insects, studying it until she was almost convinced to feel her own muscles ready to imitate the six limbs of the bug. But she also noticed how the insect's movements got weaker, how it needed more and more time to get back on its feet and despite this, it seemed to have set its mind on climbing that leaf for no apparent reason at all, even though it could have just gone elsewhere. Yet, its feet did not cling to the leaf's dried surface anymore as they had done during the summer. Winter was coming, its time was over.

Jiddy's hand shot forward and an instant later she had stuffed it into her mouth, a terrible bitter taste spreading on her tongue. She growled and gulped the mess in her mouth down anyway, spitting out of what stuck to her tongue.

A low growl let her small body tremble as she regretted that her hunger had gotten the better of her. For a moment the beetle had looked really tasty to her and it definitely had not been tasty at all. If she kept going she would make more mistakes like this one, she had to keep a clear mind until she got to a safe place before it was too late.

Jiddy turned her head towards the opening in the ruin and looked outside.

Now there was no doubt that winter was coming along rather quickly: The signs were all there and she knew that she had to be so far to the north that her own expectations, her knowledge of weather, climate and seasons did not match her surroundings anymore.

Autumn would be short and merciless: Most leaves had withered and died. It was mere dead foliage clinging to the trees, more and more of them being torn off by the increasing winds. She could almost see the difference every single day made. Temperatures would be dropping as well, yet she did not feel that much of it as her fur was getting thicker as well, its growth fuelling her need for food, her instincts urging her to eat as much as possible before snow would fall.

There was still something of a golden autumn, the fat time of harvest, in the air, but fallen fruit was already rotting away beneath the trees and during her sparse tours through the woods surrounding the ruin, she was finding less and less edible fruit, except for some late berries which were still hanging on the bushes, sour and acerb. Of course, she ate them anyway, instantly stuffing them into her mouth the moment she had found them. They were far better than any bug.

Just thinking about it made her stomach grumble (the beetle was certainly nothing but an appetizer).

She looked around, trying to find any kind of distraction and noticed the book again. Without thinking about it, her hand reached out for the book and pulled it closer. Before she even knew it she had given in to her curiosity, something that had kept growing for constantly. Anything that could take her mind off her empty stomach was welcome now.

Her eyes fell down on the stained leather cover and she rubbed her nose as its smell made it tickle.

She opened it and her fingers brushed over the brittle paper, until she found a page whose distribution of symbols looked familiar to her.

Her eyes narrowed, her index finger came down beneath one of the letters and her mouth slowly started to form the according sound.

“It turned out differently than I have expected, but Mom said it is good. I don’t think so because I really need better colors. These don’t look right at all. I guess I have to redo it one day but maybe it is good enough. It has to be!”

“Damn them. Damn them all. I hate them, I hate them, I hate them all. Pa said that I had to play along but Mom intervened and freed me of my duties until they’re gone. I left the kitchen while they started arguing. Mom was really angry at him because she said that he had to protect us and not filthy costumers. He asked why she cared. Mum did not respond but she said that she’d do anything to protect me if necessary. And that’s when they sent me outside. Soyo teased me about it but I ignored him. What does he know after all? I went out and took a ride with Sheezee. At the spring I met some more guests who had been heading for our house: Two foxes and a vixen. I guided them. They seemed to be OK. At least they did not bother me.”

“The boar and his friends have finally left. Even before I woke up. That’s the good news. The bad news: I have to return to my duties. But I talked with the vixen this morning. They were very nice. They are on their way to Ceema the Old and told me a lot about their way up from the south. They even crossed the Camburrow Mountains where they were caught in a storm and lost a nalavaa². The vixen wore a very beautiful dress and when I asked her about it she told me that they were selling this cloth. Later I was able to convince Mom to buy some of it and she promised me to give me some for a new dress. At noon the vixen and their husbands left and one of her husbands even offered me a small piece of brocade. I am so happy! Although it’s a little bit small for a dress. But Mom said that it’d probably be big enough for a shirt. Tesha was really jealous!”

² Nalavaas are strong, large reptiles, usually used as mounts and pack animals.

She had looked up the tree: Smooth bark and swaying branches above her. She had felt the wind in her hair.

For a moment she had considered her options and then out of an impulse, she had crouched and jumped.

When she had been up in the tree, her foot had started to hurt again and she did not try to suppress the pain. She could feel how her heartbeat had started to accelerate, how her fur bristled, her muscles tensed. The pain had not been enough to trigger her instincts to their fullest extent. She had still been sane enough to know what she had been doing, but still when her claws had dug into the bark of the large branch she had settled on, she had let go a growl. Her eyes had narrowed and with a wagging tail she had started to wait patiently, her heartbeat slowing down considerably until it was strong and steady.

Almost perfectly motionless the lynx sat in the tree and waited.

There were not many options how she could hunt: With her foot being as it was, she could not run fast enough to catch anything. Even weapons were no option because there were far too many chances that she would only be able to hurt her prey and since she would be unable to pursue it, she was not willing to waste her chances. That left her where she was: Hiding in a tree and waiting for something to ambush.

She had chosen the spot carefully: Having found a few hairs in a shrub, she had tracked it until she had found a deer crossing. It ran somewhat parallel to the old road she had taken herself when she had first come to this place and had found the ruin. It was possibly leading towards a spring or something. It smelled like that.

Now the only question remained how many animals were still using it. Knowing that many animals would retreat to the valley during winter, she knew that there was a good chance that her attempts at hunting would be futile. Or at least she was in for a long wait.

Ironically Jiddy would have been happy if the pain in her foot lasted longer, but it subsided again after she had sat in the tree for some time. Her mind cleared again, the single-minded purposefulness that had driven her for some moments was overridden by the stream of her thoughts.

It did not take long until they returned to the journal she had read during the day before. It had been hard to read the book at all: Even though it was written in My'an, an alphabet she knew, the girl who had written the book could not have been very experienced. The flowing letters of the My'an alphabet were badly proportioned, neither

were they in a straight line and of course, there were many mistakes.

Technically Jiddy knew how to read and write, but her own writing was hardly more than an erratic scribble with only a distant resemblance to actual words. It was good enough for Jiddy to remember what she had wanted to write down though. Reading somebody else's text was difficult though, especially if it weren't the clear letters of a printing press she tried to decipher. Reading the letters out loud, Jiddy had a hard time to understand what the girl had meant, especially when there were mistakes. The guesswork did not make it easier for Jiddy to read and reading was hard enough all by itself.

Yet it kept her mind busy, prevented it from being dragged down by the pain in her foot, the hunger and the bare necessities her life was reduced to. That made it worth the effort.

She could have done without the content though. Sitting on the tree, she recalled reading a good story a lake she had crossed a long time ago. She had liked that one, she did not care about the family in the journal and their daily lives though. It annoyed and bored her at the same time.

A cold gust of wind made her crouch even more. Her fur and her hair fluttered around her while she pulled a face and hid her face behind her arms. She was convinced to smell snow that came down in the higher mountains.

Her ears flicked when the wind calmed a little bit again and carefully she focused on the sounds in her surroundings again: The rustling of the leaves when the wind brushed through them, the low creaking of wood, the rustling of grass and fern, drops of water falling down from soaked moss and she inhaled the scents of the forest, the wood, rotting leaves, fern, foul mushrooms...

Softly she let go a sigh which rumbled in her chest and with half-opened eyes she studied her surroundings, waiting patiently for prey.

“No guests last night. So Pa finally set up the sign. He praised me for it and it really DID look good by the wayside down there. Soyo moaned but he shut up when Suru and Tesha couldn’t stop laughing about it. They said it would not help anyway and that the inscription was really silly but when Pa glared at them they shut up too. I think it’s funny and maybe it’s inviting too. And I am sure there are going to be many more guests from now on.

Later there was already a really large group coming in. I am sure that it is because of the sign. I told Soyo that it might really be magic. The men are 12 salesmen from a place called the Blue Ridge. Hell broke almost loose, Tesha had to help me with the meals while Suru helped Mom in the kitchen. Even Soyo got his share of work. But it turned out to be pretty much fun later when they invited all of us to join them. A very nice rabbit showed me runesticks³ tricks. I lost the whole time but I did not stop until Pa sent me to bed. I hope I can teach it to Soyo. It’s really fun.”

“Mom woke me up early. I had to help when the group from the Blue Ridge left. They still wanted to get some breakfast and Mom needed help because Tesha was obliged to get some water from the spring because the pump was not working again. I worked the whole morning until every one of them had finally gotten his meal. Pa released me for the rest of the day and I was able to convince Soyo to chase owls with me. We even caught one but Soyo mucked it up because he was unable to hold it. He started to cry because it scratched him and Mom argued with me later. I think that’s unfair. He is old enough to look out for himself.”

“Later when I mended the scarf mom had handed me I saw her and Anador in the garden. I had not known he had arrived. He was helping her. They looked very exhausted, both of them, but they looked happy to be able to talk. But then something happened and Anador just dropped his spade and walked away. When he came past me, I asked him if we could go catching owls in the wood. But he looked at me with a very weird expression and then went into the house without saying anything. I asked mom what was wrong with him but she just said that he needed a little time. Then I had to help mom with the carrots because Anador chickened.”

³ Runesticks is a very common parlor game which is equally based on luck, as well as tactics. The sticks themselves, which are used to play, are also used to perform sleight-of-hands.

She shook her head. Reading was making her tired, especially now as daylight was receding.

Her paws were still bloody, her fur had soaked it up and even though she had tried to wash it off at the small pool of water which she had discovered behind the ruin (it might have been some kind of a watering place a long time ago), there was still blood all over her forearms to remind her of her kill.

It had taken a long time. She had sat on the tree for most of the day and most of the night until the cold and the wind had nearly frozen her stiff. Even her thick winter coat was not enough to protect her when she was that exposed to the elements and her arms and legs had started to hurt.

In the early morning her instincts had been alarmed by faint noises: The shuffling of paws, the snorting of large nostrils. Even despite the faint traces of dawn which could make it through the clouds and despite her feline eyes, she had hardly been able to make out the three-eyed badger⁴ which had foraged in the dark beneath her.

She had waited patiently for it to come closer and when it had been in reach, she had pounced the much smaller three-eyes⁴. Its struggle had been short when claws grabbed it, tore it off his feet and an instant later sharp teeth were buried into its neck. The badger struggled while its blood had spilled all over the lynx girl.

The short outburst of violence, the scent and taste of fresh blood had risen to her head, had made her dizzy and had made her forget about the ordeal of the night on the tree. Her head had been reeling while she swallowed down the blood that gathered in her mouth. The warmth of the blood had felt so good.

When the badger had finally been dead, her teeth and claws had dug into the body and she had devoured the raw meat that she tore off between bones and skin.

It had not been until she had almost eaten half of it, before she had finally calmed down again. It was then that she realized how much her foot had suffered from her attack. It hurt very much again and the pain added to her frenzy.

Still she had still felt giddy, excited and exhilarated by the success of her hunt, but with the few thoughts that she had been able to form rationally she had reminded herself that she had be careful and she had dragged the carcass to her shelter in the ruin. After

⁴ Except for the reptiles and birds, all animals have three eyes: Two on the sides, one on the front. The term "three-eyes" is just to distinguish them from sentient Furs.

finding a safe spot for her left-overs and cleaning up herself, she had wanted to pick up the journal again, but her desire to sleep, to catch up on the sleep she had missed during the night and to sleep off her feast, had been overwhelmingly strong.

Jiddy had curled up and closed her eyes.

She had slept and dozed for almost all of the following day and night, only woken by the pain in her foot.

The morning after her head had been so numb and drained that she had picked up the book almost in the moment she had woken. She needed something to bring her back to her senses.

Yet this time the descriptions of the girl's life bored her even more than before. Maybe it was her state of mind, maybe it was the aching foot. She felt the urge to tear out some of the pages when she realized that what she had read was yet another list of meaningless everyday occurrences.

Impatiently she browsed through the pages.

Then she stopped cold.

For the first time she noticed that some pages at the end of the book had been written in a different style: These were the clear, measured letters of an adult, following a straight invisible line, the ink equally distributed on the page.

Jiddy inhaled. Why had she not noticed before?

Quickly she skimmed through the pages again: There was not that much. It was only the last pages which were written like that. Everything beyond that passage was blank.

For a moment the lynx girl hesitated.

Outside the world had gone blank in fog which was drifting in and out, everything disappearing in the mists.

She felt a chill, her fur bristled and she felt the urge to curl up again and fighting this impulse she quickly searched for the beginning of the adult writing and when she had found it, her finger came down on the first line.

Her lips began to move as she whispered: "I can hardly believe..."

"I can hardly believe that he really did it. But he has. He put everything in order, moved everything in the loft and even asked me what I would need. After he had finished three days ago, he just took the kids and left the house⁵ with them. I would not have noticed if I may hadn't cried so loud. That's why I was able to say goodbye to them. I may asked me when I would join them and not even in this moment I had been strong enough to tell her the truth. But perhaps it was best this way. After all she did not cry anymore. I was able to hold back my tears while they were still there but when they walked down the hill I could no longer restrain myself. But the kids won't remember me this way.

He did not even tell me where he intended to go although I doubt that he'd go anywhere else but Ceema the Old. He has always been so predictable. But what good is it to me now? I've lost them, maybe forever.

With Suru and Tesha having left with the first quarter of the golden moon, the house really feels like being mine now.⁵

I rummaged around in the loft and accidently found this diary of I may among her toys. I wonder why she did not take it with her. But I am really happy about having found it. It reminds me of her, every word, every sentence is so much like her. It's almost painful. I have decided to write down some stuff of my own. It will help me remember these days."

"Today I was woken by knocks on the main door. (I slept in the loft.) Instantly I was on my feet and ran down, the first half of me expected Anador; the other half of me was ready to welcome the kids again. But then it turned out to be guests, a group of roamers. They had walked throughout the night and had expected to get some warm breakfast and a warm bed. I was so sorry to turn them down; at least I was able to offer them a dry place to rest for the day and maybe the night"

"The roamers are gone. They were really nice: They even offered me to accompany me to the next town but I refused. I have to wait for Anador.

⁵ By traditional law, women are the actual owners of the family home. This is usually either the oldest woman in the family or the family mother. Men are traditionally owners of the household items and workshops.

In the early morning they left, not without regretting that this inn was closed. Afterwards I went hunting but I had to realize that I am not really in the habit of doing it anymore. The rest of the day I spent with making myself a bow. I really don't know when I did that for the last time. Certainly I had still been a kid myself. Now I'm sitting on my mattress in the loft, the oil lamp flickers and I realize that I should turn it off. I should save it for emergencies."

"Two rabbits and some bird. Rather good for the first time after so many years. But it was really hard to finish off the poor animals. I'm not used to that anymore."

"I had more guests, a nice vulpine couple from the west. I could hardly understand them because of their strange accent. They were really surprised and a little bit confused that there was no way of getting through the Fhein chasm after last year's flood. I had to explain them several times that the river had transformed the whole area into a swamp. They did not believe it (they even forced me to take a look at their map) until I pointed out that this was the very reason why this inn was supposed to be closed.

Now that they are gone the house seems so empty again. I hope Anador doesn't keep me waiting for too long. Without the kids it is too vast, almost lifeless. I miss the kids so much."

At first she tried to fight off the memories which came back to her. She did not want to be reminded of her mother and she tried to keep herself occupied with different things. She did not want to read the book, as it had been the one thing which had triggered her memories, but there were few other things she could do.

The rain was pouring down from the gray sky without ever stopping or even getting weaker. She watched it while it transformed the surroundings of the ruin into fields of mud. The edge of the forest was nothing but a dark shade and everything beyond that was completely invisible, nothing but a gray haze of mist and raindrops.

Restlessly she had tried to work on her staff. She found a stone with a sharp edge in the ruin and tried to carve the staff with it, but she was frustrated quickly as the hard wood hardly gave in to the stone at all. In frustration Jiddy hammered the stones against the wood. It took a moment before she realized what she was doing and that she was about to lose control. With a powerful movement she threw the stone away. She did not want to damage the staff. It was too important.

While her rage of frustration slowly faded away, the memories came back and she shivered as if they carried cold along.

Everything she could remember of her mother was nothing but disconnected random pieces which seemed to make little sense at all. No matter how hard she tried to recall more details, she had little success, except that her head started to ache and she hit her fist against the cold stones beneath her in order to replace the ache in her head with the physical pain in her paw.

Darkness was one of things which accompanied all of her memories: The darkness of a tiny room full of things of daily life, the darkness between dirty rugs and the darkness of a sky which overlooked black walls while grayish snow fell down all around, swirling through the thick smoke and already black from the soot before it reached a tiny paw which tried to catch it.

"Jiddy, don't eat that!"

And she had spun around and looked at the shape of her mother, but in her memories there was nothing there anymore. She could not remember anything but a smile which had looked down on her, while every other detail of the woman was gone. The smile had been warm and caring, despite traces of incredible tiredness, despite the hardship. (What hardship? She could not remember, but it had been there.) Even though she had

expected a scolding for trying to eat the black snow, there had been none, nothing but this smile and suddenly it had come closer as her mother had kneeled down in front of her, her hand rising towards her head and tousling her felted hair while she had leaned forward and the face had come into the light which had shown through the windowless hole in the wall.

Two light brown eyes had glistened up, shimmering with life.

Jiddy twitched as the memory came back to her and with her paw she grabbed her own muzzle as she held on to the mental picture of her mother's eyes which had suddenly come back to her.

It was completely unexpected; she had never tried to remember that day before or this specific occasion. Why was it still there inside her head? She knew no answer, but suddenly she shook herself, trying to fend off doubt. These had been her mother's eyes. She remembered her mother's eyes now, they were detached from every other detail, they did not even seem to go with the smile she had reminded herself of before, but the memory was precious anyway.

Jiddy inhaled and watched the mist in front of her muzzle which floated around for a moment and reminded her of the cold. She stretched out her paw and caught a few drops of rain. Feeling the coldness upon her furless pads she wondered why the rain had not transformed to snow yet and she raised her face towards the sky which hid in uniform grayness.

She lowered her head again and tried to remind herself of more details about her mother, but there were none she could think of. Everything seemed to be hidden in the hazy darkness of a room. She could not even remember if it was the room where they had lived. It was the only room she could remember in that city besides the gang's huge vault which she would get to know much later.

A vertical furrow showed between her brows as she thought back to the feline gang and instead of trying to remember anything else, she grabbed the old journal which had kept under a stone and opened it, leafed through the pages until she had reached the one with the dry leaf she had used as a bookmark.

Jiddy leaned towards the book, screwed up her eyes as she studied the letters and even though it was getting easier, she had to scrutinize every one of them before, before she was able to decipher the words. Her lips moved slowly as she pronounced the

letters, speaking the words to herself.

“Searching for supplies, I took a long walk around the house. It did a lot of good to me. I even climbed on the roof and waited for the dusk. It was cold, but wonderful. I do not want to leave my house after all. Maybe I will be able to convince Anador to stay here with me. I am not sure I will be able to live in a town again, I am not used to that anymore. However I guess it’s futile to puzzle about that. What should we live from as long as the Fhein chasm is impassable and nobody will chose this route anymore? Still sundown was so beautiful when it had disappeared behind the horizon and had dyed everything in shades of red and purple.”

“It rained today. I stayed inside and darned some clothes of mine. Now I hope I won’t get any problems with the water pump again. During the last days there were merely some drops coming out when I had pumped as strong as I could.”

“The water pump is not alright. I have no idea why it doesn’t work, after all the pipes don’t seem to be blocked. Maybe Anador can fix it when he gets here. But as long as it doesn’t get fixed I got a small problem with watering the plots.”

“I had to wash myself at the spring, just to get clean again. Without the pump I can only rely on the spring. I started gathering fire wood. One cannot get it too soon I said to myself.

Among the books in the loft I even discovered some old novels of mine. I had not realized Harab had kept them all the time. I had been almost certain that he had gotten rid of them a long time ago. Now I hold them in my paws and I was really amused: How foolish and naive must I have been to have read books like ‘The princess’ thief’, ‘To the horizon and beyond’, ‘Buck and Mare’ and many more. I even found the old tome of ‘The white slopes of the mountain’ which Harab and me had read to one another in our wild days. But it is still intriguing as ever and just as embarrassing as well.”

“I was so excited when I heard a powerful knock about noon today. I expected Anador, but it was just one more guest, a travelling merchant with his nalavaas. After I had informed him that he could not get any further from here because of Fhein chasm, he

did not stay any longer and turned around. But I traded some supplies (mostly meat) and got some oil, a little bit of a beautiful red cloth and a new spade for the garden. He wanted to sell me a bow too, but I could not afford it. Instead I got some more seeds.”

“I wished Anador was here. I really wish he would come by now.

I guess I sprained my ankle. It hurts like hell and is swollen as well. I fell when I had gathered some water from the spring for the plots.”

“Oh Goddess, it got worse. I cannot even stand up, it hurts so much. During the night it got worse and I did not sleep and now I cannot even get down the ladder. But somehow I have too. I got to get something to eat.

Please, Anador, get here quickly. I really need you now more than ever.”

“Merciful Goddess! It was not laziness that kept me from writing. I did not write because I did not get up here. It is the first time since almost a week that I dared to climb up the ladder. My ankle was so bad. It still hurts whenever I try to walk but at least I can do it again. It was so terrible. The last days were unusually warm, I should have watered the plots but I was not able too. I lay in the kitchen and had to see like they dried. It was so terrible. Every instance I wished Anador would be here but there was no one coming. Today I was finally able to get down to the spring. I cried the whole time because of the pain but I did it. I just hope it helps anything, the salad, the turnips, the Germash and especially the potatoes looked awful. Please, Goddess, do have mercy on me.”

“The salad is lost. It was too warm. I hope the turnips get well again, they still look awful but at least they’re living. My ankle gets better, just very, very slowly. I wished I could write more, but I am too tired today. My usual schedule wears me out like nothing else. Things I barely noticed doing are still so painfully difficult to me that I want to cry. But it will get well, I am certain about that. At the latest when Anador gets here.”

“It moved! It moved inside me! When I felt it I had to sit down and cry with joy. It felt so wonderful to feel the first sign of life of my cub. I sat down for the rest of the day and

stroked my belly. I love it, my cub. And Anador's, of course. I wished he had been here with me, I guess he would have liked to be there too. All my sorrows are gone now. I know everything will be alright soon."

"I made a trip into the forest to get some berries and roots, I also intended to hunt but I could not do it, because I really do not feel like killing any animal right now. I am so happy. I wish I could tell anyone. I cannot write it down, I just don't know how I could express it. It is so unique. I even cannot remember being so happy when I had been pregnant with Imaya or Soyo. I just can just recall the pain and all the difficulties. This is so different.

I do not want to say that I do love Imaya or Soyo less because of that. It's just... I cannot explain it."

"I guess I have to get used to it now. It is so lively. I can barely believe it but whenever it moves I feel so indescribable happy that I forget everything else. For instance my ankle still hurts but I do not even noticed it anymore. I go on just like nothing had happened and I am really up to it now. Nevertheless I am still worn out every night and pass off to sleep before I have even lain down. Maybe the pregnancy is so strenuous. But I would do everything for my cub so why do I complain?

It is just a little bit sad that I am rarely able to attend the wonderful sunsets which happen these days. The entire sky turns purple when the red sun sets behind the forest. I cannot help myself but I always get a little bit nostalgic and remember when Harab had been next to me and we had watched it until it got too cold outside. But Anador will soon be here, then I will share it with him."

"Yesterday there was a knock at the door and I ran to the door in happy anticipation. Instead it turned out to be a wandering wolf pack who wanted to stay. Because of the empty house I am quite well able to accommodate all of them. But I have to confess that I was scared at first because they were heavily armed and appeared rather hostile to me. But then what would I have gained I had tried to turn them away? It turned out that my worries were really absolutely inappropriate. Most of them were very kind and so I offered them the first floor for the night. They had not heard about the flood either so

they had come the wrong way too. But to me it was rather a lucky coincidence because when I mentioned the broken water pump one of them volunteered to take a look at it and until dusk he had really fixed it. I don't know what he did but the water pump is working again.

Late in the morning they left me. Just before they left one of the women approached me and mentioned my pregnancy. She was certain that a single woman should not go on like this all by herself. I assured her that I was actually anticipating the child's father and it seemed to comfort her. They even paid me off with some supplies of theirs (Dried meat! I don't know why but I am sick of meat actually) and then they wished me farewell. I have to admit that their visit was a very pleasant interruption of my daily routine."

"I am actually writing in the darkness of the night. I have lit the oil lamp. There is a terrible thunderstorm going on outside and sometimes the thunder gets so close that I fear that the house will be struck by lightning. May the Spirits spare me! I cannot sleep. Wish Anador was here with me."

"My back aches terribly, now that I am no longer able to lie on my stomach. It gets worse with every night I have to spend that way and I don't know what I can do. I do a little bit of stretching whenever possible but it doesn't help very much.

I made a tour through the surroundings, searching for fruit and nut trees. They are quite a lot of them so I will certainly have no problem with finding supplies when the time is right. Nevertheless I do worry a little about how I am going to get them. In my current condition I am not able to climb a tree. But there will surely be a way to get enough of them. Now that Anador needs so much time I should be prepared for what is going to come. One never knows."

"I am tired of these old books. I never knew that I actually had read most of them. Instead of reading I do often sit on the veranda and simply watch the sky and feel my cub moving. It is enough."

“Anador, forgive me! When I tried to get up a tree I fell down and burst out in rage. Thank the Goddess I did not really hurt myself this time and my cub seems to be well too. Except that I allow myself to get angry at Anador. I slept exceptionally poorly tonight, accidentally hit my feet with the spade and smashed one of the few glasses which are left to me. When I fell down I was so frustrated that I cursed Anador although he is not to be blamed for anything. I guess it is just my nerves.

For sure I will not climb a tree anymore. Falling down once was enough for me.”

“I wonder why there are no more guests. This time of the year was always the busiest one as far as I can remember. Maybe they do all know about the Fhein chasm by now and tried to avoid it. That is the only explanation I can think of.”

“I feel like a barrel now. Standing up is already so troublesome that I sometimes doubt that I will go on like I did. I try not to lie down anymore (if possible).

I started harvesting. The turnips are quite grown by now and the potatoes are well too. The Germash still needs some more time. In the woods I started collecting apples, pears, savage grapes and mirabelles. I added some roots and it really seemed well to me. Though bending over is really uncomfortable now.”

“Today I collected grains from the meadows in the evening when suddenly the whole sky turned into a profound purple. I raised my head and I saw like the clouds chased all over the sky with an unimaginable speed although there were just slight gusts of wind. The red and yellow rays of the sun shone onto the gray clouds and dyed them in the most pleasant of shades. The light seemed to swirl around like the sun was dancing behind the horizon and thus the colors changed every moment, once dying the clouds in yellow and orange and then dying it in red. Meanwhile the sky darkened so that the clouds were so clearly visible that i almost hurt my eyes. For a very long time I was unable to take my eyes of this wonderful spectacle. It must have been cloud Spirits at play.

I think it is a good omen.”

“I harvested the Germash and collected as many fruit as I found in the woods. There were also a lot of nuts I took with me. All in all I had to go into the forest four times in order to get all of my booty. Now with this belly of mine it gets more and more difficult for me to work. But at least the work in the garden is mostly done and with the nuts I found something to cheer me up.”

“Last night when I was going off to sleep I somehow realized that I still might not have enough firewood. I had planned to gather as much as possible today but when I woke up in the morning there was such strong rain that I did not even dare to leave the house.

The rain just seems to get worse. I just hope the fruits will prevail. I try to distract myself with small works in the house, sometimes I do rummage around in the loft but I get tired so quickly that I sometimes don't know what to do at all except sitting in my stool and listening to the sound of the water on the roof.”

“It's still raining. I don't know what to do. I think I can't risk going out as long as this weather goes on like that. I miss Anador and the kids and sometimes I even miss Harab.”

“Rain, gray rain. I am sick of it. My unborn cub is my only companion. Anador, where are you?”

“This afternoon the rain did stop for a short period and I quickly went out to gather as much fruit, nuts and firewood I would be able to gather. As I had expected there wasn't much left of the fruit at all. Most of it was smashed and rotten. Nevertheless I took with me what seemed to be still edible. At least there was a considerable amount of nuts dragged down by the rain and thus I filled my baskets with them. There was no wood I would have been able to carry at that moment. I have to come back. And I returned just in time because the rain started anew and even now it pours down with the same never-ending strength.

Accidentally I just read a passage of what I may have written down about me and Harab. It comforts me to know that we were really able to keep the kids out of that. Thank the

Goddess.”

“Armed with an axe I returned to the wood and this time I really was able to gather several sheaves of wood which is still slick because of the rain but I do have to gather it now. The days are already getting shorter.

When I carried two heavy sheaves up the hill and the weight of my cub in my belly, I wondered why I did all this although Anador should arrive every day now. But who knows how long we do have to stay here?”

“More firewood. One cannot get enough of it. I just hope that my back will bear all this. It aches almost constantly now.”

“I had to make a pause and rested the whole day. My back was too bad. I started knitting. I want to surprise Anador with a sweater or so. What is keeping him? He promised to be back as fast as possible and now I am already waiting for such a long time. I hope he is alright.”

“The days get longer and I watch the moons every night until they have risen up to the sky. It is getting colder and I had to get out my winter stuff which was a small problem because it was in a cupboard behind many other stuff. Under these conditions it took quite some time to get everything I need.

I got some more firewood and some nuts. I hope I have enough fruit and grains. Maybe I should get some roots in addition but how could I possibly kneel down?”

“I heard reptiles during the night. I have to admit that I am frightened. I will not go out unarmed anymore.”

“At the foot of the hill I was able to dig up a certain amount of roots with the spade. This will add up my supplies. I still doubt that it will be sufficient for two. But perhaps it will be best when we leave as early as possible. The winter might be harsh.

While is working there I realized that most animals I have seen during these days seem to have already disappeared. My last friends who had accompanied me throughout the summer have finally left me too.”

“First I was so happy when I heard the hammering at the door last night. But now everything is so horrible. Please, Anador, come to me. I need your protection. Please, gods, let him come to me.”

“They left, not without having stolen a lot of my supplies. How could I have stopped them? At least they did not hurt me. I thank you, Goddess, for this small mercy. I prayed when they held me but they did not seem to be interested due to my condition. I tried to frighten them with Anador’s coming but they just said that I would see what they would do with him. So I am grateful he did not come. At least they did not find the loft. I need new clothes.”

“I worked the whole day to get back what was taken from me. It gets more and more difficult, but I am happy that I am unhurt and my cub is well. The fog is terrible. I can barely see the house when I am climbing the hill and thus I cannot walk too far. I just hope that the roots I got will be sufficient. Now Anador and I will have to leave the house for sure. I just hope the road to Ceema or Vallenger will be free.”

“The contractions started. They caught me by surprise while I was on the first floor. For what seemed to me to be a very long time I lay on the floor and tried to control my breath. The birth is getting closer and I just don’t know what to do as long as I am alone. What about all the preparations, what about the precautions I have to take? How can I manage all this? I will not be able to get warm water and what should I do about the umbilical cord? I try not to worry about it but when I am lying in the bed at night and feel my cub move I am close to panic now because I don’t know what to do without any help. Where’s Anador? How can he miss the birth?”

“A quiet day today. I tried to calm down after I had contractions once again. But once

again nothing happened and thus I did my best to calm myself. This time it would have happened in my bed and that wouldn't have been the worst of possibilities. But now I am a little bit relieved that it was false alarm once again.

I can hardly move anymore and thus I am now sitting on the veranda and let the cool wind carry along my thoughts. I have wrapped a rug around myself and observe like the thick clouds move on in the sky. It is very silent, no bird chirps anymore. I am alone more than ever and I cannot resist asking myself what I am still doing here. What do I do without Anador? What if he does not come? I should not loose my faith but I feel so desperate right now. But up to now I do really have everything I need and maybe I will even get through the winter but what about my cub? I need Anador. His cub needs its father. And I need him. I need him terribly and he already left me waiting for so long. But I will not loose my faith in him. It is the last thing I still have now."

"I have taken some precautions and gathered some stuff for an eventual birth at my bed. I am terrified about what might happen and I prayed to the Goddess. I am lying in the bed most of the time. I try to take a walk once in a while but I always do return quickly because I fear that it could happen to me while I am too far away from my bed. There's food for several days, water, blankets, gauze, the cradle, the oil lamp, some herbs I was able to find in the woods, an ointment I prepared for my cub and many more. Truth is every minute I am thinking about what I might have forgotten so that I might get it next time I take a walk. I try to stay as calm as possible but I do not really succeed.

I found an old lucky charm among my old stuff. I do remember that Harab gave it to me shortly before our wedding. I hold it in my paw every moment. Maybe it will help."

"Nothing has happened yet and I am still laying here and try to calm down. I cannot sleep anymore. First I am much too excited and whenever I fall asleep the movements of my cub let me wake up again. It is a good sign that it is so lively."

"Still waiting."

“Was I too nervous? I think it is about time but there were no new contractions yet. But I think it is better for me to stay here where I got everything. It is the only safety I got left now. Why did Anador not come? Why does he not come?”

“It is terrible. It is so terrible. I do not remember that it hurt so much but it did.

Kobu was born three days ago. At least I think it is been three days ago because I completely lost any sense for time. Every one of my fingers is still shaking because of my weakness and I do force myself to write a little bit because it is the least I can do.

Kobu is sleeping most of the time and I am so grateful that he does. Sometimes he does just yawn a little bit when he gets hungry but most of the time he sleeps in the cradle I prepared for him. He is as healthy as he can be. He is a wonderful little shrew, just like his father.

There is still so much blood all over the floor and my bed but up to now I was not able to wash it off.

However I thank the Goddess for her blessing thus far.”

She woke up to the sound of pouring rain.

With a groan she raised her head which felt heavy. She shook it several times and while she rose to all fours she could already feel the unpleasant dampness in her fur. With an expression of disgust she looked outside of her shelter and saw nothing but gray: Heavy gray clouds which seemed to be almost at arms reach; gray stones, gray meadows, gray trees which disappeared behind gray curtains of rain, rain and rain.

Jiddy sat up. She was still dry and safe, her leg wasn't aching, but she could feel a certain dullness which haunted it, something that hinted towards the fact that it was better, but far from being okay again. Thus she felt no inclination towards moving it anymore than absolutely necessary.

There was a sense of hunger at the edge of her mind, but she pushed it back. It was not strong enough to wake her instincts yet.

When she moved a little bit, her hand touched leather and she looked down on that thing, realizing that it was the journal she had been reading all of the time.

Jiddy sniffed. Instantly it pulled her thoughts back into the issues in the books. The notions were like the bad aftertaste of a rotten fruit in her mouth; the sweetness of the original taste being taken over by foulness and mealy moldiness.

She had to admit to herself that none of the memories of her family were intact. Despite the pictures which had floated to the surface of her mind, it was still a dark place, a ruin very much like the place where she found herself in right in that moment. But unlike the house in the rain, the house in her head was not dismal gray, but completely dark; a place where she could only stumble through, hoping to hit something by accident, something that she might recognize. Most often she did not.

There was this one strong feeling that she had: It seemed to be a picture of a bed or something very similar. It felt like she had been lying upon it, staring at the sheets. There was some soft light coming in from somewhere, giving a blurry shape to things she could not recognize, but seemed to be furniture of some kind. But much stronger than any visual memory was the way how she could feel dread, a creeping sense of anxiety hanging in the air around her. It mixed with a pain which rose from her stomach. She trembled when she felt how her mouth opened for a cry.

And with this feeling she was back in her shelter again, staring at the rubble around her.

With a sigh she rubbed her eyes. There was no way for her to make any sense of it, she did not know how old she had been and where this had happened. She suspected it to be their home, but there was no way for her to verify, nobody to ask, nobody to share it with.

<i>“Don’t cry. I will be back, I will be back real quick.”</i>

Jiddy froze and a cold shiver ran up her spine. It was her mother’s voice.

And she had turned around and she had looked into those two deep set, blood-shot eyes. Angular, straight features with a small mouth whose lips were tightly pressed together and yet tried to force a smile which was supposed to comfort her. Bangs kept the hair out of the face which was longer at the sides and held by a ponytail on the back of the head and the ponytail whipped up and down when the lynx woman turned around, her pointed ears lying down against her head. Her tail wagged in anxiety when she walked away.

Jiddy covered her eyes with her paws, clinging to the picture in her head. Too much of it was still vague, blurry, hard to recall... But there were a few things she had never remembered so clearly before.

Something flashed up and suddenly there was another detail: A silver pendant around her mother’s neck.

Her hand grabbed the Silver Arc around her own neck and her fingers cramped around it. Her mother’s pendant had been different, but in this moment it felt so familiar, so very much like her own that the memory was as painful as the silver cutting into her fingers which could not let go.

The flow of memories her reading had triggered hit her at random times but it seemed to be unstoppable and she had no defense against it. She had thought that she would not care about the family in the journal, but they were the entry point. She had to read about them to access some part of her own past which seemed to have been buried under heaps of black sludge. The darkness was so thick that the blackened snow was as if the darkness itself had condensed. Yet it was what she remembered of her home town and it was there where she found her mother again and again.

It repelled her to think about the town. Everything she remembered about it was vile.

Her fur bristled in this moment and she realized that she had been watching at her own hand, claws flexing. She closed her fist and turned away, looked outside into the rain.

Everything was still as gray as before and even though she had no love for these surroundings and the current conditions, she almost felt something life relief when she inhaled the cool air. Its intense purity was so different from where she had been coming from.

Yet among all these foul shards of a memory, she could find the pictures of her mother. There was no picture of her mother without stain, without anything that could have washed away the dirt like the cold rain outside her shelter could. Yet Jiddy was convinced to feel a strong desire to do the right thing in her mother. There was something she wanted to do. Something she had to do...

Suddenly Jiddy jumped up and with a scream she ran outside. The rain ricocheted off her thick winter coat and gathered in her eyes, her foot hurt. And after a short dash she stopped again. Her arms hanging down from her slender frame, her eyes directed towards a distant, invisible horizon while the rain gathered in her face and run down her cheeks as if its drops were tears.

The mother in the journal had lost her children. Her son and daughter had left with their father...

For a moment everything Jiddy could think of was the pain the young girl must have felt when she had to realize that she would not see her mother again.

Her lynx tail flicked and she pressed her ears against her head as they were not protected by her fur like the rest of her body. The cold rain drained them of their warmth.

For a moment she stared into the rain: There was little to no visibility. The trees of the surrounding forest were still mostly visible, but beyond them there was nothing.

Something floated past her face and she raised her hand.

It was not snowflakes that gathered in her furless pad. It was rather a sludgy little blob of mixed water and ice crystals. Sleet.

Jiddy looked up. There was not much time left. No matter how much if her foot might still hurt, she would have to leave soon.

She turned around and even though she still felt hunger, she slowly walked towards the house again. She had a journal to read.

“Today I stood up for the very first time and although I am still very weak I can do a little bit for myself and Kobu at least. First I cleaned my bed and the floor. While I washed it off I was overwhelmed by the memory and started crying. Kobu’s whimpering brought me back because I had to feed him once again. Somehow I really cannot grasp that I did it all on my own and whenever I lost consciousness I came back to my sense with that feeling of absolute terror that something might happen to my child. But I thank the Goddess and all of her children that they helped me during this birth. If there had been any complications I would not have known what to do. Somehow I was lucky.”

“The first snow fell down today. I did not last very long and quickly melted in the sunlight at noon but winter is here now and I am stuck in my house with Kobu. I am still not able to walk very far, maybe I have lost more blood than I expected. But at least I did not get an infection, so the herbs did me good after all. I am confident that I have enough supplies to get over the winter but I do not want to take such a high risk and threaten Kobu in any way. But the pass must be blocked by now and the way down to Ceema is much too long, especially in my condition. When I will be able to travel that far there will be so much snow that I will not even find the road anymore. After all I have always helped those starving voyagers who had lost themselves in the forest until they found the house after they had almost frozen to death. So I do not have much choice, do I?

Actually I am standing at the window in Imaya’s old room on the second floor. It would be a perfect room for Kobu who is asleep in his cradle right now. Whenever I take him in my arms or feed him I am so happy that I could cry.”

“Now there’s no escape anymore. When I woke up this morning it was snowing so strongly that I could not even see the forest anymore and even now it goes on just like that. There is too much snow on the outside now and I have to fire the stove as powerful as possible just to keep up the temperature here in the loft. Kobu gets more any livelier every day and now I can no longer sleep the whole night through because he cries so often. He does not really cry, it is rather something in between a whimpering and a squeak, just the sound one would expect from a shrew like him.”

“If Kobu wasn’t here I would certainly die of boredom. I try to occupy myself with sewing and sometimes I do pick up some of Suru’s and Tesha’s books although I do have to admit that I hardly understand anything that is written down there. I never expected them to be so much into technology, maybe I underestimated them all these years.”

“Today I tried to get out, just for fun. When I stood in the snow, tightly wrapped in my thick winter clothes, inhaled the cold, I felt relieved. I do not know why but I did really feel like there was nothing to worry about although I was painfully aware of all the risks. But in this moment I did not care and I ran down the hill, threw myself into the snow like I had done as a child and I was so happy that I wished Kobu could share my joy with me but I do not intend to take him out. I could not handle an illness of his.

I just reread what I have written down days, weeks and months ago and I realized that I do no longer constantly think about Anador. Since the birth I gave him up almost completely and it does not even hurt me anymore. I do have a bad conscience towards him, but on the other hand he let me down and I do not believe that I will ever see him again. I wish I would not have given up so much for him. Most of all I miss the kids. And I can hardly fathom how much they might be missing me. I try not to think about it.”

“It stopped snowing today. After so much time of constant snowing it is finally over and somehow I miss it and at the same time I am a little bit relieved. When I woke up today there was sunlight coming through the skylights and shone on me so that I woke up because it was so bright and while I still lay in bed I could hear Kobu’s gentle breathing and once again I can hardly imagine anything more wonderful although I know what I am missing and how dangerous all this can be. But in this moment when I was almost blinded by the sunlight I did not care about that anymore.”

“I went out today and I did not have imagined how cold it could be. I went back inside after some minutes because I really feared to freeze. All this came so fast that I do hardly believe it.

When I got home I cooked myself something and even though it was nothing but a simple turnip soup I felt so good to eat something warm after having been out in the cold and after so much time of being unable to cook. It is the very first time since Kobu’s

birth that I cooked again and although this is quite a long time I never really felt a necessity to do it. But now it was even some kind of a joy to me.”

“Kobu cried terribly last night and I did not know why. I held him in my arms almost the whole night long and tried to comfort him but it was no use. He kept on crying the whole time and even refused to be fed. During the night I made an herbal tea for him and I forced him to drink a little bit of it. Finally he calmed down and I rocked him as carefully as possible so that he really did fall asleep. Nevertheless I was unable to sleep because I worried so much for him until just before dawn when I simply could not resist anymore and fell asleep too.

I still very tired and sleepy but at least Kobu seems to be fine, he did not cry and he even drank a little bit by himself.

I am a little bit confused and frightened because even though I already brought up two cubs I still do not know what had happened to Kobu. But thankfully it does not seem to have been very serious.”

“Today I went out once again and almost immediately came back because the cold hurt so much in my lungs. I do need very much firewood to keep up the warmth inside and I fear that I do have to get some more if the weather goes on like that.”

“Today I did a little party all for myself and Kobu. I felt like it. I got myself some dried meat, some potatoes and a turnip and prepared a nice stew. I had finally put the last finishing touches to Kobu’s dress and for the very first time I put it on to him. He looked very good but he is not used to clothes so he started crying after some time and I quickly undressed him.”

“Is it not strange that I do not mention Anador anymore? It confuses me whenever I realize that he does not matter to me anymore. Maybe these last few months were too challenging for our love or maybe I have just lost any faith at all. But how could I have maintained any faith in him at all?”

“Because the sun shone brightly today I decided to go out and get some more firewood. It is still freezing outside and I wrapped myself as tightly as I could, but despite all my clothes I felt awfully cold. But I have to take advantage of this weather because it could change and then how would I possibly get the firewood? But after I had gathered a small pile I went home as fast as I could.

When I returned Kobu cried. Maybe he noticed my absence and was frightened by his solitude. Because after I had taken him in my arms he calmed down quickly.”

“Once again going to the woods and once again suffering from the terrible cold outside. I was startled that Kobu cried again when I returned. He really must be feel when his mother is gone and now I try not to leave him alone anymore. I expect the firewood to be sufficient for the next time.”

“I started coughing last night and I try to keep away from Kobu. I don’t want him to catch my cold too. The herbs I got are hardly any help at all but up to now it is not so bad. Maybe it was no good to go out.

I just realized that Kobu is a little bit frightened by my coughing because I fed him when I had to and then he instantly started crying. But it was not his usual crying but rather some kind of pitiful whimpering. I try to cough as silently as possible now.”

Jiddy almost hurled the book out of her hands. She was shivering and she tried to calm down, before she put the book down.

When it slipped out of her fingers it felt as if they had been burned by holding it.

The lynx girl looked out of the opening of the ruin she had chosen as her shelter. Her breath was condensing in the cold of the air and it rose as a whitish cloud from her muzzle.

She had read almost without stopping in the last few days. The weather had calmed and up to now there was only a very persistent, bright fog left. She still was not very comfortable about it, as it hindered her orientation and she certainly was not familiar enough with her surroundings.

Thus she had endured the cold and stayed where she was. Her leg had gotten better and she was certain that she could dare journeying again as soon as the weather improved.

The hair of her summer coat was dispersed all over her fur which had grown much thicker as her winter coat was finally about to come through. With feline tidiness she started to groom her fur, still trying to calm down.

She did not know why she had been so troubled about what she had read in the book, but she had been overcome by an overwhelming feeling of dread, which had grown with every sentence, every word, every letter she had read, until she had been unable to go on anymore. She could not explain it herself.

Her own memories had been stirred by the descriptions within the book. There had been so many times when she had felt just like the nameless mother in the book: Helpless and abandoned. Yet every time she had found herself in a similar situation her instincts and her will to survive had pulled her out. She had never given up, neither in Black Pit, nor in Seerye's captivity, nor in the kingdom, nor in Dyamaar, nor in Causion or any other place. Now these memories were swirling through her head, clawing at the walls of her skull, trying to make her remember, crashing in on her with bits and pieces of pictures, sounds, scents...

Her fist hit her head hard and Jiddy shook herself. A hoarse scream escaped her.

For a moment she had sat trembling, trying to focus on the darkness behind her eyelids, trying to think of nothing, to empty her mind. Her breathing was fast, her tail

twitched erratically.

When Jiddy opened her eyes again, she glared at the journal. Then she snapped it up again and almost tore it apart, when she opened it, flipped through the pages, put her finger down on the letters and her mouth started to move again.

Dead words formed on her lips: “My cold...”

“My cold gets worse, I do have a little bit of fever and whenever I cough I can feel a painful stitch in my chest. I tried to keep away from Kobu whenever possible but he needs so much of my attention that I am hardly able to leave the room. I wrapped some clothes around his cradle and light a candle every night and up to now he seems as healthy as he can be and I am very grateful that he is. He has already grown so much in this short time that I can barely believe it and whenever I tease him with my little finger he grabs it and holds it so strongly that I am as proud of him as a mother can be. But I have to avoid him a little bit now.”

“I hardly slept last night because I could not stop coughing. I do not feel so well either, the fever dulls my mind and I get dizzy whenever I try to stand up. I must get well soon.”

“What hurts me most is that I can hardly care about Kobu. My aching lungs are almost bearable but I miss my cub. I just do what is necessary and then retire to the opposite end of the loft and try not to get too close to him and I hardly could because of my weakness.”

“I have to get out of this soon. I just have to.”

“Since this morning I am frightened, I am so frightened that I can hardly express it. Before noon I still tried to ignore it but as it gets stronger instead of weakening I can no longer ignore it. After all my lungs do hurt far too much by now so that the rustle should not bother me more than anything else. The fever seems to have gone away, at least I do no longer feel feverish anymore. But maybe I am mistaken.”

“I hardly slept but even though my mind is crystal clear and everything seems so bright and shiny to me that I do no longer believe my eyes. Sometimes I am doing something and do not realize it until I have finished and nevertheless everything I do is right. I am terrified and I try not to worry too much about it whenever the pain leaves me a moment a rest. My throat aches so much as well that I can hardly gulp.”

“Kobu cried the whole night and I had wanted to appease him but I was hardly able to stand up and on the other hand I should not approach him. I think he knows and I do also have to admit that my situation is desperate. I don’t know what to do, I just don’t know. I have taken all the herbs that I have and pray but I doubt the Goddess hears my hoarse whispering.”

“I worry about Kobu. What about Kobu?”

“There is a very little amelioration as I can stand up again but even the smallest walk tires me so much that I start coughing so badly that I almost suffocate.

Kobu cries whenever I try to feed him and when I had laid him back into the cradle I collapsed and cried as well. My chest hurts so much and I am completely unable to do anything. Please, please!

But I should not loose my mind, there is hope left. There is.”

“Kobu is crying and I could hardly stand up. My chest hurts so much, so much...”

“Oh gods... I cannot. I just cannot...”

“What about Kobu? What am I supposed to do with my child? Please, please! I do not mind what happens to me but please I cannot leave my cub like that. “

“PLEASE!

I beg you, Holy Mother, spare my child. There must be a way for me. Not for me, but for him, there has to be. Even if I am supposed to die I have to save my child. “

“Whenever I am coughing now there is new blood on my paw. “

“If anybody reads... NO! NO! I cannot. I cannot!

He is so young, he is innocent. These are my mistakes, he is not to be blamed for the sins of his mother. Why does he have to suffer so much? Is it all my fault? He is too young. He is so frightened.

I am crying at his cradle and stroke him with my bloody paw and I do not know what to do. I do not have much time anymore. Please, Holy Mother, help me!”

“I just passed out and I do know how close I am... I cannot leave him like that, I am just not able to. “

NO! I don't want to! I cannot do it! There is so much to see for him, there is so much to come for him. But what will happen to him without me? “

“Whenever I think of him I cannot stop crying even though I loose a little bit more of my strength.

This is our home. He never got anywhere else and I am his mother and his fate. I cannot! Please I cannot do it... “

“I will not allow this. I cannot! I am his mother!

I cannot do it. I cannot do it. “

“Kobu, forgive me!

*Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me!
Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me!
Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Forgive me...”*

There was wind. It carried away the hoar frost and the ice crystals felt like snow as they danced through the air, were hurled upwards and swirled around and flew over the forest's edge, passed by the trees' crowns and then were carried away towards the valley which lay gray and brown beneath the mountains which surrounded it, sporting snow as well as clouds which clung to the bare frozen rock.

Her hair swirled around her face as well, obscuring her features. The tears on her cheeks had dried and yet the skin underneath still felt cold and touchy as she raised her face towards the two wooden pillars in the ruins' courtyard.

Jiddy had almost forgotten about them as she had not seen them from her shelter.

The cords which hang down from them were moving in the wind.

One of the pillars was still leaning against the other.

Jiddy's fists closed and she inhaled the cold air deeply into her lungs.

She stepped forward and her hands came to rest on the fallen pillar. Beneath her fingers she could feel the frosty surface of the old wood.

Her feet dug into the ground.

With a hoarse scream she thrust herself against the wood, using the little weight of her body, but all its strength when she pushed the pillar. Curves of muscles emerged, her fur bristled as the muscles beneath her skin tensed, transforming the lynx girl who pressed her teeth together, growling.

Despite the cold sweat gathered beneath her fur.

The pillar had not moved yet.

Her mouth opened and she growled. Her eyes narrowed to mere slits. A hiss shot through her gritted teeth as her feet pushed harder against the ground, her hands harder against the wood. Her claws emerged, cut into the wood. Her tail was as stiff as it could possibly be. Her ears lay against her head.

The lynx seemed to be incomparably small against the size of the wooden column.

She screamed when she could feel beneath her fingers how it moved.

With a crunching noise it came to a halt in an upright position and the lynx dropped to the ground.

Exhaustion and pain shot through her small body and she needed a moment to come to her senses again. When she could remember what she intended to do, she looked up from below strands of hair which had gathered the sweat. She faced the column again.

She rose and stumbled towards the ruin.

With arms full of stones she returned and heaped them up at the pillar's base. Kneeling on the cold ground she rammed some slim ones into the gap between the pillar and its footing.

Several times she went back and forth, not stopping until a considerable heap of stones stabilized the column. The two of them now standing tall at each other's side.

Yet Jiddy was not finished.

Her eyes had narrowed as she had looked upwards.

She made a few steps backwards. Slowly she turned around, eyed the column for a moment, then she crouched.

Hoar frost shot upwards when she dashed off. Her feline feet shot over the ground. Claws emerged during her dash and in the last possible moment she jumped, flew through the air, hit the pillar hard and instantly her claws dug into the slick wood and she shot upwards until her momentum faded away.

Her arms and hands hug the top of the column with all of her power and she pulled herself upwards now that gravity had full control over her again.

A moment later she sat on the narrow top of the pillar.

She did not have a look for her surroundings: In the distance whitish clouds drifted along the mountains, carrying snow and cold, slowly turning downwards, grazing cliffs and the tree line until the wind dispersed them, transformed them into mist that drifted towards the forests in the valley.

Jiddy had reached out for two of the cords which hang down from each column. The rope was partly wet, partly frozen, partly rotten and slick between her fingers, but it was the only thing she could work with and she did the best she could: Carefully she tied the two loose ends of the cords together again.

She let herself drop down from the column, made a few steps and turned around.

The two columns stood side by side again, rising towards the cold sky above, a cord

connecting the two of them, banded them together forever.

Jiddy had remembered somebody telling her what they were good for. It had not been her mother. They were called lueono, guidance markers, attracting the attention of the ancestors so that they might find the place where their kind has died and allow them to join them.

Now there was only one thing left to do for her.

Jiddy turned around and walked towards the ruin again. There, on one of the larger stones, lay the journal she had read during the days she had spent there.

With her claws she ripped the binding of the book apart, until she held a bundle of paper in her hand that she rose above her head. She opened her hand.

The wind caught the pages and tore them out of the lynx' paw, quickly let them fly as it propelled them like it carried the frost, carried them over the trees. They fluttered in the wind, white shades against the mountains and the valley down below. A gust pushed them down, they shot over the treetops until they encountered an upcurrent and they rose, swirled around each other, rose far above the valley and then settled among the airflow and slowly flew on like a swarm of late migratory birds.

End of Migratory Birds - Chapter 21
Thanks for reading!