

The World of Sebastian

Fire Wolves

A story about an unusual friendship, a dangerous adventure, courage without limit, strong love, new hope, and the fight to save your own life.

Sandra Daum, born 1980, lives with her family in Hessa, Germany. After working as a modelist and stylist, she published her first novel titled "Fire Wolves". The story centers around the extraordinary and deep friendship between 17-year-old Sebastian, a gorilla named Tiger, and a leopard called Iris. Together, they embark on a journey full of adventures that does not only help them to find new friends, but also confronts them with numerous threats and deathly foes.

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For my sons

“I would like to tell you a story. My story. Parts of it, at least.

However, where I shall let this story begin, where does it start? As I had to think of something, I’ve decided on January 6, 25 years ago, as being the right moment. I am eight years old, and it’s the day my best friend is born. It all begins with a dream ...”

Sebastian

ZOO

1

Tian/Sebastian

Wonderfully lush greenery, the air is brisk, but still pleasantly warm. Above my head little translucent creatures are floating; they alight, without the slightest effort, light-footed on their tiny wings, only to soar up into the air the next moment.

Whenever I raise my head, I see the wide blue sky. All around me there is a thriving copse of trees which seem to be reaching up all the way into the sky. How many people would be needed to hold each other by their hands, to stretch out their arms, and to encircle one of these thick and sturdy stems? Five, maybe?

All over the place colorful butterflies are dancing. There’re so beautiful that I don’t ever want to avert my eyes. Brilliant red, saturated violet, resplendent teal green, deep sapphire brown, and bright lemon yellow, those colors being brought forward even more by the dark shades of brown.

The warm rays of the sun give me a feeling of comfort and freedom. I take slow and deep breaths. This clearing is a great place to get some respite, and I know: anytime I could go to wherever I want to be, to laugh as loud as I want, and to do whatever I’m in the mood for. Totally without pressure, without fear, free of all cares in the world.

I recline on the damp moss and grass and look up into the endless splendor of clouds. I’m dozing off. Flickering sunlight seeps through my closed eyelids. It covers me with a warm blanket and tickles my nose.

Suddenly, however, the light grows brighter and glaring, the warmth turns uncomfortably hot, and the air around me becomes humid and stifling.

I open my eyes, but clamp them shut again immediately. The light is really blinding. Even worse, it hurts me! I blink a couple of times and it takes me a moment to get used to the unbearable heat and humidity.

I force myself to keep my eyes open at last, and in the next instance I'm gripped by an overwhelming fear that makes my entire body quiver. Countless glowing pairs of eyes are staring at me, flashing with anger!

In spite of the horrible fear that has gotten hold of me, I inspect them more closely: Devils! Red-hot, fiery red devils. Flames are exploding from their heads. Their powerful jaws are wide open, their gnashing teeth that drip red saliva, are enormous. And they have surrounded me!

I need to get away from here! But when I struggle to get to my feet and run my legs won't obey me. Run! Pull yourself together! Now! Again, I have not moved an inch. I am at their mercy. They'll gang up against me.

I'm screaming for help, but soon realize that nobody will come. But why? Where are my mom and dad? Have these fire devils abducted my parents as well? Is this the reason why they cannot be here with me? And if, what plans do they have with us? I start flailing my arms in panic.

"No! Go away! Get lost," I yell, but the devils keep on inching in.

From far away I suddenly hear a voice calling my name. I quickly recognize it. It belongs to my grandma, Martha. I want to get to her, but it's impossible.

"Granny, please help me," I plead.

The Fire Devils are shaking me by the shoulder and try to drag me away, deep into the dark woods. I break out in tears and start calling for help again.

"Wake up, Sebastian! Come to," my grandmother says.

Finally, the devils let go of me and disappear in the shadows between the trees. Colors and shapes around me gradually start to fade and dissolve. I slowly drift back into reality, feeling incredibly relieved. It was only a bad dream.

I open my eyes. There is the bare charcoal-grey ceiling of our bedroom above me. My grandmother is sitting at the edge of my bed, caressing my arm.

"You've just had a dream, darling. Everything is alright. You're safe", she soothes me. "I shook you over and over again, but you kept on flailing your arms. What is it, you were so afraid of?"

"They were everywhere," I croak in despair.

"Who was there, darling? Whom are you talking about?" she wants to know.

"Devils! They were as red as fire and huge. I was surrounded by flames!" I sputter.

"Calm down. It was nothing but a nightmare. And now it's over," she says. However, there is something in her eyes I can't quite fathom. Recognition maybe ... and sadness.

I have been reliving this dream for a while now. Until some days ago I would have loved to stow it away in a little box, to be able to take it out again anytime I want to replay it over and over. Naturally, I know that this is impossible. The world featured in my dreams does not exist any longer. I only know these vivid images from books, pictures, and the tales, my grandparents told me.

As beautiful as this ever recurring dream from my past might have been, it has come to a terrible end last night. And I can't grasp the reason why.

It actually would be the best idea to get up, but my body refuses to. Once again, exactly like in my

nightmare. A little window right next to my bed allows me to look out. However, I don't see any other color but gray.

I was hot in my sleep and the flames singed my skin, even though it's cold in real life. Very cold! It's winter. I start to freeze and pull my blanket a little higher up to my nose.

My grandmother gently draws the blanket back, kisses my forehead, like she does every morning, and ruffles my blond hair. Her worried face expression has vanished.

"Rise and shine! Maybe today it'll be the day Tilla will have her baby. And you'll be allowed to christen the little one. You would not want to miss that and let someone else do it?" she says with the hint of a smile on her lips. She knows exactly how to get me out of bed. I've been waiting for a sheer eternity for the day the baby will be born. I cannot be late for whatever reason.

I toss my blanket aside and hug my granny with the words "You are the greatest!" Then I rush to get dressed. It doesn't take me long to put on my off-white sweater, my threadbare black pants, and my scuffed brown shoes. After I'm finished in the bathroom, I race down the hall. My father, Will, and my nine-years older twin sisters, Iva and Liah, are already waiting. The two of them are absolutely inseparable. How close they are, becomes especially apparent in their conversations. Then, they sometimes talk so fast that you don't have a chance to get a word in. Apart from the fact, that it sometimes seems to me as if they were speaking a foreign language. They both have greenish blue eyes and blonde hair and are almost impossible to tell apart. Lucky me, I'm able to do so. Archery is their favorite sport. Nobody can beat them at it.

"Good morning, sleepyhead. Have you been lost in your dream world again?" Liah asks with a mischievous smile.

I draw a face. If she only knew! But I'm not in the mood to explain my stupid nightmare again, especially not, as she's making fun of me. Thus, my annoyed answer: "So what? You could have woken me up a little earlier!"

"Someone seems to be in a bad mood here," Iva says and hugs me.

I calm down a bit and embrace my father, Wilhelm. The whole family, and also his friends, call him Will.

"Have you really been waiting that long for me?" I ask, while lacking the patience to wait for their answer. "Will we go to Tilla in the palm house right now? Are mom and Belle already with her?"

"First things first. We have been waiting for you for 45 minutes already and would have woken you, if mom hadn't wanted you to get some proper sleep for once. And now we'll all go to have breakfast together." When I want to protest, Liah puts her foot down. "Don't worry. I have taken a look at Tilla just 30 minutes ago. There's still some time left, and as soon as it starts, mom or Isabelle will notify us. Okay?"

I just let my shoulders sag. Okay? No, that's definitely not the case! Frustration would be more to the point. I'm just not in the mood to go for breakfast! With gorillas childbirth can go very fast, once it has started.

"30 minutes!! That's an eternity. The baby could be already born. I want to go there now!" I protest.

"First he doesn't get out of bed and now he's rushing everyone," Liah replies, shaking her head. I glare at her.

"Sebastian, it won't work like this," my father finally says. "Your mother and Isabelle won't be able to have breakfast with us, if you'll be missing as well it will attract attention. I'm really not in the mood to engage into a useless discussion with our revered mayor. I'm sick and tired of hearing the phrase 'We'll

all have to stick together'. As appealing as it might sound, it starts getting old like any other word that's constantly drummed into your head. When Tilla is ready, we'll go see her at once, that's a promise!" he adds soothingly.

"This simply can't be true! What, if we skipped breakfast with everyone else for one morning," I protest and angrily stamp my feet. "And I'm not hungry anyway," I stubbornly add.

Since I've been able to think all the inhabitants of this village meet in the community center at the edge of town to have breakfast together. We're living in a zoo, where my grandparents ended up as refugees 40 years ago. Taking along their little daughter, my mother, Christin, who was barely two years old back then.

My grandfather has volunteered telling me a few stories from those times, as difficult as it was for him. The survivors had lost everything. Their families, their friends, their possessions, the roofs over their heads, simply life like they knew it before. All of this was swallowed up by the earth, drowned in floods, or burned. Some of them contracted injuries so bad, that they never recovered from them. All of this is just too much for me to imagine. The mere idea to never run, jump, or climb again invests me with fear. However, it also reminds me of how well I'm faring. I have a great family, a home that shelters me from the elements, and enough food to eat.

When I'm thinking food I also think of Marie, our cook. I like her quite a lot, even if she has been serving us the same dishes every day for almost a week.

I know, I'm being unfair, because it isn't her fault. What else is she supposed to do when there are no more supplies than the things she can get hold of? During the winter our chicken hardly lay any eggs, and the fish in the river Far, that's flowing nearby, only to disappear south into the woods, are hiding under a thick layer of ice. It isn't always easy to coax them out of there. Around the zoo compounds we grow grain and vegetables throughout the year, but the harvest is pretty deficient, as the ground mostly consists of debris and sand. The soil, we plant our seeds in, is quite rocky.

We'd have to look for other sources of food, but during the last four decades people have been too busy to survive and to build up new safe lives for themselves. There simply was no time for adventures and exploration. Especially, as nobody knew how the world outside might have changed. The danger of not returning alive was simply too great. And it still is.

The hunters of this village, my father among them, are the only ones who are allowed to leave the zoo's perimeter for a couple of miles. Because we need the meat, not only for ourselves but also for Thera, our female leopard, and Pan, the black panther, who are both living in our zoo. In the spring the hunters have to drag firewood for heating our houses into the village with the help of our three horses, Grey, Lila, and Snow. The heating systems have quit a long time ago, and also the electricity generators don't work any longer.

Fortunately, my father has never met a dangerous accident during the hunt. Still, my mother can't sleep, each time he ventures out again. The memories of an incident of 20 years ago, when a hunter strayed too far from his group, was attacked by a band of wolves, and suffered fatal injuries, is still ingrained in everyone's minds. After this occurrence the inhabitants of the zoo knew one thing for sure: They weren't the only survivors on this earth.

To prevent a drop in population, a set of rules was established after this event. On top of the usual school subjects, children were also taught self defense and martial arts. Since that day children have started to work out once they're twelve years of age, practising shooting with crossbows, archery, and wielding a sword. In order that we'll be able to defend ourselves. That's what we're reminded of over

and over again. Our mayor is especially insistent on the subject. I can't stand his guts. He's smarmy. "It's our duty to protect our kind!" His words are echoing uncomfortably in my head.

My father interrupts my thoughts. "Come on, Sebastian. You won't need to eat much. The earlier we get there, the faster we'll be able to leave again!" He does not enjoy these morning rituals in the community center very much either.

With a groan, I finally nod my head. "If it needs to be."

Meanwhile, also my grandparents have arrived at our doorstep, clad in their jackets and ready to go. We all walk out and hurry along the main road. It's not far to the community center. I'm wondering who else will accompany us to see Tilla. Horst, my grandfather? Probably not. Right after breakfast he'll retire to the old blacksmith's shop where he makes all the tools and weapons the village needs. He's a master blacksmith in the third generation, and nobody can do his work as well as he does. He'd like me to follow in his footsteps one day. But no matter how much I respect his profession, I doubt that I could ever invest as much devotion into it as he does.

Martha, my grandmother, will probably go into the hothouse first, where – apart from the food for Tilla, our female gorilla, and our koalas, she also grows important herbs with potent agents she needs to produce the medicine we need. Eucalyptus, camomile, sage, and ginger, for example.

My grandmother went to medical school and has passed on her expertise to my mother and my sister, Isabelle, whom we call Belle. She takes care of the inhabitants of our village.

A few minutes later we have reached the community center, and I soon sit down for my breakfast, consisting of sheep cheese and bread. For today's lunch, we'll all have a little piece of meat with potatoes, and in the evening it will be sheep cheese and bread again.

Anyhow, suddenly pangs of hunger raise up in my stomach, and I wolf down cheese and bread. Apart from the fact, that I'm in a rush.

"Sebastian, please eat a little more slowly. If you keep on cramming down your food like this, you'll be in bed with a bellyache later," my father warns me.

Being bedridden is last thing I need right now, because then I'll miss out on everything. Therefore, I pull myself together and try eating more slowly.

I haven't finished breakfast yet when Belle comes storming into the community center. I'm often wondering where she's got her black hair from. Neither my mother nor my grandparents have dark hair like this. And then there are these impressive blue eyes. Mine are dark brown like my fathers'. She quickly says hello to the others and then approaches our table.

"It's time. Hurry up!", she exclaims. "Good morning, Tian," she adds, before I have a chance to say anything. The next moment she's on her way out again.

Bella has called me Tian, since I can remember. My name was just too long for her, when she was a little girl. And as I rather liked this nickname, I quickly got used to it. By now, almost everyone calls me that.

Some inhabitants villagers have understood the reason for all this excitement, wish us lots of luck and look forward to meeting this new citizen of our earth soon.

Others, however, can't understand why we're making such a big thing about it. They don't really think much of Tilla, especially of the fact that she's going to have offspring. In their view the gorilla just occupies a building they'd like to claim for themselves.

How would they react, if Thera and Pan, our cats, would have babies as well? Probably with even more resentment than they already displayed toward Tilla. If news like that would make the rounds,

there would be lots of long faces. Imagining how shocked they will be makes me laugh, and for a moment I entirely forget that I'm not alone. Which promptly earns me a nasty look from Conran, the mayor's son. In my view he's the worst self-centered person on earth and anything else but an animal lover. I would never ever want him for a friend, even though he's the only boy of my age in the entire village. Having to sit in class with him is already too much.

He acts up the worst during biology class, when we are taught about lions, wolves, and bears, which have hurt or killed people in the past. Stories like this never miss their goal and spread suspicion, hatred, and resentment. And the worst thing is: they provide ammunition against our animals here in the zoo.

The basic message is that we are supposed to be deterred and reminded of what could happen if we venture out of the village without permission and dare to stray too far. However, I think that's simply unfair toward our animals in the zoo. They never have harmed anyone.

Before I leave, I have to get something out of my system. "No reason to pee in your pants, Coran. When Tilla's baby is born, it'll be too small to eat you. All we need is a little more patience for this to happen." A wide grin spreads across my face. Only some seconds later I start to regret my barb, however, I simply could not hold it back, as little helpful as it might have been. Even though I don't want him for a friend, I don't want him for an enemy either!

Liah casts me a castigating look and points her head toward the door. We quickly turn around, say our hasty good-byes to the community, and walk out. My sister eyes me incredulously.

"What was that supposed to mean? You should not provoke him like this. He belongs to the people who'd love to evict the animals from our village. And, most of all, you shouldn't underestimate him, apart from the fact that he's the mayor's son! Who knows what ideas he'll come up with in the future to get even with us? Please, just keep your mouth shut from now on," she tries to calm me down. "Even though the guy is an absolute jerk!"

Typically Liah. She does not mince her words, but always chooses the right moment. Whereas I just burst out with whatever I want to say, without wasting a thought on it.

My face starts flaming. I'm very embarrassed and probably beet-red by now. "I just couldn't hold back, very sorry. The words just came out. I simply hate his guts," I try to defend myself, while staring at my dirty scuffed shoes. Fortunately, my father and Iva have already started out and haven't heard this exchange. He would have agreed with Liah, and I'd feel even worse right now.

"I didn't want to be so brutal with you, although you might have understood it this way, Tian. I've always admired your courage and commitment, when it comes to protecting our animals. You're only eight years old, and sometimes I wonder if we haven't mixed up your date of birth. Just try to stay clear of Conran."

When I raise my head again, I see that she's smiling at me which makes me smile as well. She walks up to me and hugs me.

"A mistake like this would have never happened to you," I say.

"No, but I'm a couple of years older and smarter than you are," she jokes and pinches my flank.

"Ha, ha, very funny," I retort.

"Nonsense, I make mistakes as well. And even if you weren't thinking straight, Conran's frightened and confused face was a view worth looking at," she scorns. "But now we'll have to hurry if we don't want to miss the baby being born."

The street leading to the palm house, passes the former elephant compound, the ape compound, and the hippodrome, which back then, forty years ago, have all been turned into living quarters, is sandy and

riddled with stones. Soon, my pants and shoes are smeared with dust and dirt and have adapted the gray color of asphalt.

The living quarters fulfill their purpose. We are sheltered and have roofs over our heads. However, the general impression is rather drab and devoid of color. My grandmother always has tears in her eyes when she talks about her old home. She knows that she needs to be grateful, because she and her family have survived. But she can't just erase the pain of losing her old world, even if she wanted to. She has never made her peace with having to live here.

The main road forks at its end into two little side streets. One leads to the former aquariums and the pens for predator cats, the other one to Tilla's home. When we arrive at the palm house, my mother opens the door.

"Hi, darling, please, don't be upset," she says before I can complain about her going to Tilla without me. "I didn't want to wake you, because you've slept so terribly during the last couple of days. Besides, we went to see Tilla very early this morning."

She takes me into her arms and kisses the top of my head.

"Morning, mom. Don't worry about it," I calmly reply. My disappointment and dismay have long settled down. And as I haven't missed anything, I can't be angry at her any longer.

I run over to Tilla and look into her round dark brown beady eyes, which seem diminutive as compared to her body. I don't need to ask our gorilla, if she's in pain, because I can see it straight away. She lets my little hands disappear in her own, smiling and grunting at me.

The birth process doesn't take long, and some minutes later a four-pound little guy is nestling in his mother's arms. Like human babies, new-born gorillas are unable to walk and have to be carried around by their mothers during their first weeks. It takes them some months to start crawling.

"Welcome in our world, little man," my mother says, covering the baby's body with a violet blanket.

With a beatific smile Tilla cuddles her son to her breast. The little one is a miracle. So tiny and cute. I'd love to take him into my arms and caress him.

"Hi, sweetie," I whisper, when he turns his head in my direction. Small round saucer eyes, a fur, dark brown like soil, and a look that expresses curiosity and discomfort at the same time. I take a step closer to touch him. Instead of turning away, he quickly sniffs at my face. He stretches out one hand from under the blanket, reaches for mine, and firmly grasps my index finger. I will never forget this moment, and I know at once that I'd do anything to protect him.

Tilla puts her child over her shoulder, and only then I notice that his fur is not evenly colored like that of his mother. His back, arms, and legs show slight silvery stripes.

I've never seen a picture that shows a color pattern like this with a gorilla. And I immediately have to think of the sun-colored cats with black stripes that have been extinct already when my great-grandparents were still alive.

After a short moment of thought I look up to my family, who has been watching me expectantly for a while already, curiously awaiting what name I will give him.

"Tiger," I say, barely audibly to myself at first, then a bit louder, so that the others can hear me. "I'll call him Tiger."

Many animals lost their lives back then during the natural catastrophe, either dying from thirst or from hunger. Those who survived were set free by people. Elephants, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, zebras, and many more species just ran out into the wilderness. Nobody knows what happened to them.

Tilla's family, that according to my grandfather's tale consisted of six members altogether, was either

afraid or too much adapted to their usual environment, and therefore they just stayed. Ty, Tiger's father, just died two months ago from an unknown disease. The notion that little Tiger will never get to know his father still makes me sad. Now, Tilla and Tiger are the last gorillas in our zoo.

With the ancestors of Thera and Pan nobody dared to open their cage. That's why the big cats have stayed, even though they did not have a choice.

And then we still have Carla and her partner Bear, peaceful and absolutely non-dangerous koalas, who disappear into the trees upon the slightest sign of disturbance. Furthermore we have a little flock of sheep, whose fine wool is turned into clothing, and a rooster with his twenty hens.

After their arrival at the zoo my grandparents volunteered to take care of the animals. And over the years they have grown to them.

Tiger has become a true friend to me. The best I ever could imagine. Since the day he was born I've been to the palm house every day. At every meeting I have to watch out not to get knocked over when he throws himself into my arms. The four-pound baby has quickly grown into a little colossus, which does not stop me from playing with him. Sometimes I feel as if I were a gorilla myself. Our horseplaying has not only taught me how to climb. Tilla sometimes calls him back when he becomes too energetic. But even if I return home black and blue, I wouldn't want to miss out on my time with him. If it isn't too cold I even sleep next to him. I trust him blindly and I feel that he'd never harm me seriously or willfully.

We never leave their compound but always stay in their house or in the bordering garden plot. Sadly. I have asked my parents many times to be allowed to take him out. But all my pleading and begging were in vain. Our conversations always ran along the same lines:

"People here wouldn't understand him and be scared, if a male gorilla were wandering the streets, even if he's just a baby. You need to understand this," my mother said.

"And who worries about Tiger? He'll have to spend the rest of his life in this little house, without ever having seen anything else but a boring compound enclosed by a wire-mesh fence. And all of this only, because people are afraid of him. They don't even know him. He wouldn't harm a fly," I protested in a quite agitated voice. "If I'd demand to take the cats for a walk, I'd understand. But Tiger?" I added with a miserable and pleading expression.

"We all know what you mean, darling, but people just don't see it the way we do. Fear is a bad companion who has made many people do things they have regretted afterwards, but, were irreversible. Our animals would be the ones who suffer. Trust us and our ability to judge things," my father said.

In one point I can be absolutely sure. My parents would decide otherwise, if they'd have the chance. They love Tiger and surely just want to protect him. And it's this realization that makes me feel powerless and upset. I liked the idea to walk around with Tiger, showing him my home, the streets, and the fields around our village. He would have had the chance to explore a world that is absolutely new for him, even if it's a limited one. More and more often I ask myself the question, how it would be to live without fences, barbed wire, and walls. Simply to be free.

Just like Tiger I've been born in a zoo and grew up there. I know my way around here. Here's where my family lives, protecting it and me from the world outside.

Anyhow! There must be more to life than just this village. My craving for freedom is growing with

every day. The world's just waiting for me to discover it.

And there's one thing that became even clearer to me after Tiger's birth: I'm locked up as much as he is.

Eight Years Later

2

During the last years I hardly had a moment's time to catch my breath. I studied like a fiend and actually finished school. I'd have never expected myself to turn into such a bookworm. I burned the midnight oil, poring over volumes about animals and plants. It happened quite often that my head just sank down on the school desk for lack of sleep.

Together with Conran I've finished my training as a hunter. My father, Will, and the other hunters taught us the ropes of the trade, which included countless hours of practising in the adjoining woods. But the greatest event was that I now have a new friend and older brother. His name is Nikolas, and he's six years older than me. My parents have taken him in, after his mother died from pneumonia six years ago. He never met his father, and there are probably no other relatives alive. Some weeks before the world changed forever, his pregnant mother came from North Africa to Europe to visit relatives. She never was able to return home and had her son, Nikolas, in the zoo, while she was on the run.

We often share the same opinions, although he's not as impulsive and hot-headed like me sometimes.

His emotions don't play as openly in his face.

Sometimes I envy him for his calm and his ability to put on a poker face. This skill would make my life a lot easier. Up to the present day I've always been able to rely on Nikolas. Those days in the woods, especially, often were long and scary. He made me feel safe and helped me to overcome my fears.

I remember one of our first nights of sleeping rough and the conversation we had then that helped me a lot.

"I don't think I can do this," I said.

"What is it you can't do?" Nikolas gave back.

"Killing an animal," I replied.

For a while he surveyed the ground and then lit up our camp fire.

"Once you're hungry and in danger of starving to death, you'll quickly forget what you just said. Of course, it's up to you to decide if you want to eat meat or not. That's everybody's choice. But just imagine how your leopards would suffer if you didn't do it. They'd die a horrible death. We hunt neither for fun, out of boredom, or because we don't respect animals," he somberly answered.

After this talk I felt less insecure and was able to deal better with this new situation.

Besides Nikolas and Tiger, who with his 500 pounds and increasingly prominent tiger stripes is on his way to become a formidable gorilla, there is yet another creature that has won a place in my heart: Iris, a young leopard, the daughter of Thera and Pan. She was the only survivor of a litter of three little cats and was born two years ago.

Iris has a unique fur pattern. Her head shows numerous little black circles that are all at an angle, spreading toward the middle of her rump, while becoming wider and brighter in color. The tip of her tail is snowy white.

In the beginning I had to secretly tiptoe into the panther house too see her, as my parents just were too worried about me. Leopards are one of the largest species of predator cats on this earth and anything else but cuddly pets. However, I've known Iris since she was born. She grew up with me and over the time we have developed a special bond. This was because my father finally gave up wanting me to stop playing with her. Once I have set my head on something, I'm hard to hold back, and, as I have to admit, sometimes a bit careless. But even I respect the cats, and although I know Thera very well, I always take Iris to the empty, whenever small, compound outside. They have their bad hair days like we people do, and I wouldn't want to get into a conflict with Iris's mom. As Pan lives in another compound anyhow, I don't have to worry about him.

Our daily welcome ritual consists of me crouching down and offering her my head, to which she reacts by touching my nose. Like today.

"I'll always be there for you, my beauty. That's a promise," I lovingly tell her. She streaks around my legs, purring. When I kneel down and bend over to her, she immediately caresses me with her moist snout.

"What do you feel like doing today, sweetie?" I wait for a short moment. "Run a race? Who's reached the compound's gate first, is the winner!" I hardly have time to utter the words, when she already falls into a run, before I even have a chance to say "one, two, three, let's go", very well knowing that I don't have the ghost of a chance against her. Iris is a bundle of energy and muscles.

Once I have arrived at the gate, she already has found a new occupation. She watches a little blackbird, which has somehow ended up in her cage. Normally, birds avoid the home of the leopards, but this bird is too young to know that it's better to stay away.

Very carefully, she approaches the bird, again and again nimbly flattening herself to the ground, waiting for the right moment to make the kill. When she thinks that this moment has come, she starts for the jump and would have reached her prey within seconds. However, she has not reckoned with me. While she jumped, I have issued a shrill whistle that scared the blackbird away. It manages to escape, before Iris hits the ground.

“Sorry, sweetie,” I say guiltily, because I have ruined her hunt. “I wanted to see this little bird fly away.” She casts me a nasty look and turns her back. She’s angry at me. Hunting instinct is part of her nature. Waiting. Sneaking up. Taking a run. Hunt down your prey. This strategy she hasn’t only learned from her mother, it was put into her cradle. These are her instincts, which will turn her into a hunter, no matter how much we feed her and care for her.

I return Iris to her mother, leave the compound, and lock the door. As I don’t want to go home yet, I stay for a little moment, watching Iris and Thera, who are greeting each other lovingly.

“Beautiful animals. I understand why you love looking at them.” I give a start. When has Nikolas appeared next to me? I haven’t heard him coming.

“You’re as good at sneaking up on people as they are! You gave me quite a scare! Where did you come from?” I ask, but he only grins instead of answering my question. I leave it at that and enjoy the moment. Relaxed and peacefully, we observe the leopards, who are frolicking in the evening sun.

The next day, in the early morning, I go to visit Iris again, letting my eyes wander across the compound as usual. Immediately I realize that there is something wrong with the fence.

When I rush over to the spot, I can see it clearly: The wire-mesh fence has been damaged, leaving a hole, which offers the cats an easy escape route.

I stop to think, wondering what I might have missed yesterday. But I surely must have noticed it. That’s at least what I believe. Or might I have been distracted? Not important, anyhow. But one thing is for sure: Nikolas must have seen the gap, as he doesn’t trust the animals like I do. He’d have raised the alarm at once, and rightly so. Therefore, it must have happened last night after our visit.

Taking my time, I approach the gap in the fence, to inspect the ends of the wire more closely. How could something like that have happened?

“Relatively clean cut edges and borders, no one has pulled or torn at,” I’m telling myself. “Something is definitely wrong here.” This revelation causes a shiver run down my spine. Somebody has tampered with this fence.

Think, Tian, think. Ought I be going for help right now? Even if this would mean to leave the hole in the fence unattended? I could try to block it. There must be something around I could use. I pivot and detect an old green container in a corner. Not the best option, but still better than nothing. I’ll drag it across the gap and then try to get help.

On my way to the container I again and again look over my shoulder at Thera and Iris. Lucky for me, they aren’t paying attention. Iris is playing with her woolen ball, which I recently have given her. Her mother is dozing in the morning sun.

I grab for the container and drag it backwards toward the fence. When I turn around again, my heart almost stops. Iris! She is nowhere to be seen.

I quickly let go of the container and start running as fast as I can to look for her inside the compound.

Maybe she's just walked into the building. I peer around. However, she's not there.

Once I step out of the building again, here she is, sniffing at the green container and hopping onto it without any effort. My heart beats against my ribcage, my pulse must have gone up to 180. How could I've been so stupid not to realize that she must have been watching me to get her chance to escape into freedom. Sneaky little beast.

"Iris, you gave me quite a shock. Come back! Your parents must be missing you," I say, using a deliberately offhand tone, because I don't want to scare her. She quickly raises her head.

"Come over to me, Iris." Nothing has happened yet. She again applies herself to her new toy, without even glancing at me.

Meanwhile, Thera and Pan have appeared at their respective fences, watching us. It is, as if they wanted to tell me: Now see how you're going to get our daughter back.

This will definitely not be easy. Iris must be happy to be outside the little compound she's used to, and she won't give up her freedom without putting up a fight. Her curiosity will prevent it.

With huge strides, but avoiding any haste, I move over to the container, hoping that Thera will not be as adventurous as her daughter, because it would be easy for her to just shove the container aside. Think positive! No panic! Everything will turn out all right.

I call her name a couple of times. No result. How often have I tried to teach her to respond to "Iris"? It feels like a hundred times. The chances that she'll obey today of all days and return to me voluntarily are rather small. Looking at the whole problem more closely, I have to admit that it's pretty useless. She's a cat, and cats are known for having a head of their own. If they don't like something, it's virtually impossible to force them.

Once again, I'm coming closer. She casts me a challenging look, her expression tells me that she'd like to play.

"Iris, I understand you. But we'll need to return to your parents as quickly as possible. Come over to me, sweetie," I'm calling out, with a bit more vigor now. Normally, I'd just ignore her after my strident words to teach her what I think about her behavior. However, I can't risk her running further into the village. The danger of causing a panic is just too large.

When I've almost reached her, she nods her head in my direction and starts fleeing in huge jumps. I'm getting queasy and my stomach is starting up, when I see her speeding along Main Street toward the community center. My heart beats a tattoo in my throat. My only hope is, that most citizens will still be inside their houses this early in the morning.

"Iris, come on now. We're going to get into trouble! Both of us!" I call out loudly. As if I didn't know that she doesn't care about what I'm saying. She wants to have some fun, before she'll have to return to her little world. That's why she always lets me get close enough, only to remove herself again with a huge leap.

I'm starting to run out of breath. I begin to pant, even though I'm in a pretty good shape.

Our daily welcome ritual! That's it! I holler her name. She turns around. She listens, something at least! I kneel down and bow my head, waiting for her to touch me with her nose. But I'm out of luck. She doesn't fall for this trick. Crap. I have to come up with a better idea.

Usually, I can think better when I'm under pressure. However, today it seems to make me even more nervous and clumsier, as it would be called for. Never before in my life I've been caught in such a predicament. By now I'm not only angry at Iris but also at myself. My calling out has drawn people out of their houses. Driven out by curiosity, they fortunately remain in their front gardens, surrounded by

high fences, because they're scared.

And what am I going to do, once I've reached her? Carry her back into her compound? Rather not! Just hope that she'll obediently follow me, once she gets bored, hungry, or tired? Not a good idea either.

The next moment my grandfather emerges from his blacksmith's shop. He, too, has noticed the agitation among the inhabitants, and now he's marching straight up to me.

"What's happened? How, the hell, could Iris escape from her compound?" he asks me, panting.

I'm fighting for air, while searching for an answer: "A hole ... in the fence. No idea, how ... It looks like someone has cut it ... I tried to catch her."

"You won't manage it on your own, especially when you don't have a rope to subdue her. Why didn't you come to me straight away?" he asks accusingly.

Very helpful! That's exactly what I need right now. Why didn't you this, or that? I've reacted the way I considered to be the most logical. In retrospect, everyone knows what they could have done better.

"I thought, I'd be able to manage it on my own," I ruefully reply. "That's what I hoped, at least."

What a spectacle. People must have great fun. This increases my despair and devastation even further. By now the entire village seems to have congregated. My anger slowly raises. Why did Iris, today of all days, have to get her will and make me the laughing-stock in front of everyone?

My mother and sisters come rushing toward us.

"What has happened, and ..." I quickly interrupt my mother and explain to her as fast as possible what has taken place, because I don't want to give her a chance to blame me.

"We'll solve the problem, all right. We'll just surround her and drive her back into the panthers' compound. It'll work out, you'll see. Does anyone have a rope at hand to catch her?" Iva asks.

She could have saved herself the question, as my grandfather returns with a length of rope in his hands. In my excitement I hadn't noticed that he had left. My attention is so poor. Nothing bad will happen, and still I feel an unpleasant prickling in my stomach.

Iva instructs all of us crisply, how Iris, who meanwhile has jumped on top of the village wall, can be surrounded, and directs us all to our positions.

"Come to me, sweetie," I calmly say. But she notices, how nervous I am, and does not move an inch.

We all take our positions. Belle is right across from me. Her eyes, that have suddenly widened incredulously, just stare past me.

"What's your plan? Step back at once," she says in a voice that is angry and scared at the same time.

Whom is she talking to? When I turn around, I'm looking straight into the barrel of a crossbow, wielded by Conran. With an expression of disdain, he just passes me, walking straight toward Iris. Without wasting a thought, I tackle him from behind, bringing him to the ground. He lands with his face in the dust, his crossbow thuds down some yards in front of his feet. Furiously, he picks himself up and spits in the dust in front of me.

I wonder, what he's going to do next, and, most important, what I'm supposed to do now. Other than I would have expected, he does not attack me, but just continues on his way, as if nobody had ever stopped him, grabs for his crossbow and again takes aim at his target. But suddenly he lets his arms drop again.

I'm amazed and incredibly relieved at the same time. What has motivated him to refrain from shooting? Insight? Remorse? Maybe! Even if acting like this would not fit his personality at all.

The next moment I realize the reason for his behavior. Just some feet away from him Thera has

planted herself, giving him a threatening glare. She's on the alert and guesses what Conran is planning to do next. However, he flexes his arms. So, he does not mean to give up. Thera interprets his gesture right and gives forth an ear-splitting roar that makes even me stop in my tracks. Never in my life I've seen her so angry. It's clear to me that she'll protect her threatened child. She'll fight, like almost every mother would, ready to die for her child, if it need be. Without heeding any risk.

Growling, she crouches down for the leap. Conran starts trembling, nevertheless he's still clasping his weapon. He's under pressure and ready to shoot any moment.

"Quiet, Thera, quiet. Everything will be okay. Nobody will harm you or your child. Hush ... just calm down," my grandfather addresses Thera soothingly. If there's someone who'll be able to calm her down, it's him. Then he turns to Conran and hisses at him: "Lower your arms slowly and put your weapon down ... I'm not going to repeat myself!" By talking to the Thera and Conran alternately, he manages to sling the rope around the leopard's neck and make Conran lower his dangerous weapon.

Thera gets out of the attack mode, but still doesn't let the enemy out of her eyes. Only reluctantly she allows herself to be led away. The situation relaxes again. Now, we just have to catch Iris, then the nightmare will be over.

However, meanwhile Conran has ducked behind a fence at the far side, and I barely trust my eyes. He is aiming at his prey once again.

"Run, Iris, run!" I scream, but she only starts pacing the wall in panic, looking for a good spot to jump off. Even she has realized that the game is over.

The next moment a clicking whirr cuts through the tension filled air. Time seems to stop. The arrow shoots toward Iris. However, it's not her who gets hit.

Iris

"Mom," I whisper and carefully touch my nose to hers. When she does not react, I tenderly put my paw to her shoulder. "Please, mom, please get up," I plead, resting my head on her chest. I want to be close to her and listen for her heartbeat, full of hope. But I hear nothing. I'm caught in a bubble, many miles away. I realize, that the people that have grown so close to me within the last couple of years, have tried to pull me away from my mother. I instinctively fight back. I don't want to leave her. I want to stay with her and never, ever leave her alone. All of this must be a bad dream, and I'll will wake up from it very soon, when my mother lovingly nibbles my neck.

However, nothing happens. Tears well up in my eyes.

"Mom, please just get up. I don't know how I'll live without you. Please, get up. Please." My pleading has turned into a pitiful wail.

Her eyes open. It takes her last strength to turn her head in my direction.

"My daughter, my strong girl. Listen to me, as I don't have much time left."

"No, everything will be alright. Tian's mother will help you. You'll be well again!" I sob. She just can't go. I need her so much.

"Please, Iris, I want to tell you something. I love you. I'll always love you forever and ever. Rely on your father and on people, on Tian especially. He likes you a lot and will help you.

Soon, things will change around here. I can feel it. The world, the way we know it, eventually will cease to exist. Something great and powerful will come,” she whispers.

This time, I don't interrupt her but patiently wait for her to continue.

“Tian needs you. Protect him and his family. No matter what happens and where you and I will be, I'll always be at your side. Never forget that, little one.” She emits a painful moan and then her head drops back to the ground. Her eyes are closing.

“No ... mom. You'll make it! Please, mom, hold on! Don't give up now. I need you. Stay with me.”

An eerie silence spreads.

My mother's words, I'll never forget them. She loves me. Even though I'm responsible for her pain. I can just hope that the humans will save her. And then I'll make up for everything and never do anything stupid again. That's a promise!

When I put my head against her ribcage, I feel it raising and sinking very softly.

Still, a terrible feeling rises inside me.

She opens her eyes, gazing at me lovingly.

“Mom, please forgive me ...” These are the last words I'm able to say to my mother, before her heart stops beating forever.