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MAKHA,

A HISTORY OF THE LIFE OF A LITTLE WEASEL

It was dry and gloomy inside a deep, spacious hollow. A soft springy litter of long strands of lichen covered the bottom of the hollow.

Four weasel pups, still blind and covered with short infant fur, lay tangled together and snuffled nonchalantly. From time to time one of the pups, sleepily and barely holding his large head, stretched and, pushing the others unceremoniously, eagerly poked his muzzle into the nipple swollen with milk. The rest, as if on command, started fussing all together and followed his example.

Having fed the sillies, the mother weasel cautiously got up and slipped outside. Having replenished her strength with the first game she could get and having lapped icy spring water, she immediately returned to the hollow. The insatiable brood snuffled excitedly and reached out for their mother while squeaking and finally settled down, blissfully smacking their lips.

The little weasels grew quickly. Their delicate coats thickened every day. Triangular ears bristled comically on their heads. Little black eyes soon erupted and the sillies increasingly curiously glanced at the dimly lit hole at the top. Through it, unfamiliar disturbing smells broke in and indistinct sound of the taiga¹ wafted through.

The smallest yet most agile little weasel – Makha – tried to reach the edge of the crawl hole several times to look out the mysteriously rustling window; however, every time the vigilant mother angrily pulled her curious daughter back down.

The hollow was getting overcrowded. Finally as dawn broke, the mother weasel took her pups outside to see a huge, multicolored, polyphonic world, encouraging the courageous with her voice and pushing the timid ones with her paw. Frantically clinging to the ribbed bark with their weak claws, squinting against the glare of the sun, the pups slowly descended to

¹ The taiga forests of eastern Siberia are the largest tract of unbroken forest

the ground. They looked around with interest and surrounded their mother, who was tearing apart a crested hazel grouse she had caught.

The mother weasel gnawed off the cockerel's head and gently pushed it to her pups. Crushing each other, they recoiled in horror, but when the involuntary fright had passed, Makha, timidly, stepping and stretching her neck, was the first one to approach the delicious smelling lump. Having gone around it, the little pup gently touched it first, and then hooked the cockerel's head with her paw. It rolled from the hillock into the grass, and together the little weasels rushed after the "runaway" prey.

Carefree days of games and relaxing sleep under the supervision of their mother flashed one after another. Descending to the ground covered with a thick layer of pine needles, the little imps imitated hunters for hours.

While chasing each other, they swiftly climbed up the trees, baring sharp teeth, offensively hissing at the "enemy" and, having flopped down, hid in the grass. Then, wandering over the ground, they tracked down "game" and instantly attacked it, overturning it on its back with their front paws. They furiously bit at each other, however, without causing pain.

Makha did not feel weakness in her paws anymore. She acquired the agility and precision of movement. Despite an elegant and seemingly frail

physique, she was the ringleader of all amusing brawls and could gracefully defend herself from her larger brothers.

Running in the heat of the game farther and farther, the little weasels explored their surroundings. They soon realized that small yet vociferous little birdies, nimble chipmunks, gullible hazel grouses, and wriggly mice were not dangerous. Their mother often caught these living creatures and brought them to her growing kids for their hunting games.

Fidgety Makha, who was the first to visit the outskirts of the spacious, bright forest, could not wait to find out what was hiding in the impenetrable thickets of bird cherry, but she did not dare to leave their area.

One time, at the end of a warm, quiet day, when their mother went hunting, Makha finally got the courage to step into the mysterious thicket.

There, deep in the shadowy realm, the little weasel heard a dull noise. A resilient stream falling from a two-meter ledge flashed through the branches. The water seething in a stony cauldron created steep surfs and deep moving whirlpools. The sunlight was split by this white foam into thousands of sunlit spots.

The current subsided downstream, grew wide, and calmly streamed past the picturesque backwaters. Circles created by fattening fish appeared on the unruffled surface, arrowhead leaves swayed regally, ducks swam,

water skaters swiftly slipped between the flakes of the fluffy foam. Shoals of young fish shuttlecocked in the warm water of sandbanks. Long-nosed sandpipers moved hurriedly from place to place along the opposite bank. The little traveler looked at the newly discovered world with fascination, when suddenly an unfamiliar feeling warned her of danger. Turning around, she saw evil prickly eyes of an unknown beast.

It was a mink. Before taking her children out for a walk, the mink had climbed out of her underground shelter to investigate the surroundings. Looking straight at Makha, the mink, with warlike chirping, rushed at her. The poor little weasel backed away, looked around in despair – where do I go? There is water behind and an enemy in front baring its teeth. Having sharply pushed away from a pebble, Makha jumped over the head of the petrified mink in an unimaginable leap and disappeared into the safety of the thicket...

One morning the inhabitants of the pine forest, immersed in a fine mist, were awakened not by songs of birds but by loud, gruff voices. The concerned mother weasel looked outside: two-legged creatures with knapsacks behind their backs and bunches of belts and ropes on their shoulders were approaching their home. The procession was led by a lop-

eared dog.

Bashkirian wild-honey farmers, and there was no doubt it was they, were marching to a pine tree, which they had decided long ago to turn into a beehive for a new swarm of wild bees. Having approached the tree, one of them began skillfully to climb up the thick trunk, adroitly throwing up the leather belt embracing the golden-red column in a rigid semicircle. The people every now and then talked to each other and laughed.

The mother weasel, sensing trouble, pressed herself to the litter. Being so alert she felt pain in her ears, she listened attentively to the growing noise. The nervousness of the mother passed on to her children. They kept quiet and huddled.

Climbing up the tree, the wild-honey farmer now and then hit the trunk with the axe head. Strong booming sounds forced the animals to shrink in fear. Ocherous wood dust was coming off the walls of the hollow and was tickling their gentle nostrils intolerably.

Then the climber suddenly discovered the hollow. He stuck his hand into it and, touching the soft fur, involuntarily pulled his hand back, but it was too late. No matter how great the weasel's fear of a man is, the great maternal instinct is stronger. As part of a lightning attack, she sank two pairs of sharp awl-like fangs into the enemy's protruding finger.

The man screamed in pain and surprise, pulled his hand out along with the clinging weasel, shook it off with a sharp, energetic hand wave. She flew down, straight into the clutches of the dog hopping around.

The broad-chested hound pinned her to the ground, placed his jaws across her body, and before his master's belated shout reached his ears, bit through the back of her head.

The wild-honey farmer took the soft animal's body away from the dog. Blowing on the still thin summer coat, he regrettably examined the forest beauty killed for no good reason, groaned in vexation, and hid the accidental trophy in his knapsack.

Meanwhile, his partner pulled closer to the tree trunk, wrapped his blood-stained finger with a handkerchief, broke off a branch, and began poking it into the bottom of the hollow. The little weasels made high-pitched squealing noises while weakly fighting off the painful pokes. Encouraged, the wild-honey farmer put a beat-up hat on his arm and using it as a claw, fished out three helplessly wallowing pups from the nest one by one and put them in a bag.

The soft canvas sack had a strange effect on the captives: they grew quiet and calmed down.

Excitedly discussing the unexpected hunting, the wild-honey farmers left a tamga-sign in the form of a double angle on the tree trunk and went away, pleased that they had managed to make a bee-tree so quickly (usually it takes the entire day to make one) and at the same time relieved to have removed the future dangerous looters, as all weasels adore honey and never miss a chance to indulge themselves with it.

On the advice of a huntsman, they handed the young weasels to the employees of a nearby fur farm.

The wild-honey farmers did not even suspect that they had left Makha in the hollow. When her mother left the nest in such an unusual manner, Makha had squeezed deeply into a dent between the edges of the hollow and sat there stock-still until sunset.

Nobody bothered her the entire day. Makha grew bolder and, listening attentively to the monotonous hum of the forest, decided to look out. The sky was still clear and spacious, but the taiga was already immersed in twilight. Having looked around and not noticing anything suspicious, Makha cautiously descended to the ground.

A swarm of insects flew over the grass. Mosquitoes buzzed evilly. A bat squeaked and quietly disappeared into the darkness. A fanged moon arose

from behind the crest of the blackened mountains – everything in the forest went on as usual.

Makha's wet nose smelled a familiar scent not far from the pine. The little weasel started to rush about excitedly and, finding scraps of maternal wool, got even more anxious. Persistently prowling between the tangles of exposed roots, she could not find any other traces. Unbearable anguish and despair embraced the little orphaned creature.

Suddenly Makha was struck by an air wave and searing pain shot through her side. An owl, missing its prey, soared silently, like a ghost, to the coal-black tops of the pines. The little weasel dashed aside belatedly and raced recklessly down the hillside, away from the terrible place. The hijacker, exasperated by failure, hooted sinisterly behind her.

Jumping over logs, branches, ruts, and grassy mounds, she tumbled head over heels down the steep slopes. Wet and lashed with tree branches, Makha was dead beat. Utterly exhausted, she climbed under the roots of a fallen tree. After recovering her breath, she licked the burning wound, stretched exhaustedly, and fell asleep.

Rolling out into the blue sky, the blazing disc of the Sun filled the taiga with life-giving rays. The beams of light, filtered through treetops, ignited

the dewy grass and created iridescent sparks in the water beads strung on thin threads of spiderwebs.

A robin, awakened from sleep, played Reveille on a loud flute. It received responses from all sides in the form of sounds and whistles, and soon a consolidated forest orchestra began to sound in full force. Makha, lying prone, was awakened by a sound rustling nearby: a female hedgehog with a string of children was noisily wading through long-legged blades of grass.

An unfriendly spider was glancing at Makha from a dark corner of the roots of the fallen tree. A stag beetle with gleaming matte armor was tossing and turning heavily among the roots. However, all of that did not bother orphaned Makha. With aching longing, she was recalling her mother and her cheerful, cocky little brothers. Where are they now? What has happened to them? So many different odors boiled around, but they were all strange and unfamiliar.

Even after resting Makha had a miserable appearance from the shock she had experienced and the back-breaking run she had endured. Her muscles were still twitching, the blood on her side was clotting, her fur was sticking together.

Looking outside of her hiding place at the sun glints shifting from one place to another across the bottom of the murmuring spring, Makha was

thinking of food and water. Her thirst was quenched easily, but she couldn't find anything edible. Finally, after a long search, Makha noticed an awl-headed mouse mincing towards a burrow. The little weasel instantly transformed. Her expressive black eyes glistened greedily, and an electric current ran across her fur coat; her muscles tensed, resuffusing with force.

Makha remembered how her mother in such cases would hide near an entrance and waited stock-still for appearance of a burrow's owner. Now, the little weasel herself lurked in a similar manner in the grass, anxiously waiting for the prey. And when the unsuspecting mouse climbed out of its burrow, Makha pinned it to the ground.

Lacking experience, the hunter began vigorously and energetically to shake the victim until it finally died. The little weasel, intoxicated with blood, repeatedly jumped high in delight over her first prey. Oh, she wished her mother had seen her victory!

That day, childhood ended, and the independent life of Makha began.

After satisfying her hunger, the little weasel, inspired by successful hunting, climbed up a rocky terrace. She needed to look around and decide whether to stay there or to start searching for a more suitable dwelling place.

An intermountain basin, surrounded by slanting ridges to the west and a toothed chain of mountains to the east, stretched away before her eyes.

Slide-rocks in the form of light gray tongues streamed down from their broken faces, coated with curly pine trees and peaked spruces. The wide bottom of the depression was covered by deciduous forest divided into two jagged chunks by a shiny winding thread of a water stream.

Having encountered marks left by other weasels on the way down from the terrace, inexperienced Makha decided that she could settle down here too and stopped to rest in the hollow of an old knotty spruce.

Feeling refreshed after sleep, the little weasel looked outside and saw a red squirrel-acrobat in the last rays of the sun. The squirrel swung back and forth on a branch of a nearby tree, grasping it with one paw, and then, after performing a somersault in mid-air, ran up the trunk. Enviously, following the squirrel with her eyes, Makha noticed a neatly woven cup nest on a nearby standing birch tree and jumped closer to it. She found pale blue eggs in the nest. A finch, having flown up to the nest, started to rush about and flutter around screaming, but was unable to stop the robber. Having bitten through a shell, Makha, squinting in pleasure, drank the contents of the egg. Since that day, she never missed an opportunity to feast on eggs and sometimes chicks.

But her raids did not always remain unpunished. One time Makha noticed a nest of a turtle-dove. After making sure that the owners were absent,

Makha jumped down to the nest that was sloppily constructed of dry twigs. Two squeaky puffbirds with wide open beaks insistently demanded food. The little weasel did not even have time to extend a paw armed with claws when a winged storm attacked her. Violent, painful beak strikes on the head instantly cooled Makha's hunting ardor. Fleeing from new attacks, she hastened to take refuge in a dense bush.

2

Time went by. Mature Makha learned all the favorite feeding locations of grouses, where they flew to rest at night, which pile of brushwood was replete with mice, which spruce was inhabited by squirrels, and under which stumps chipmunks dug their burrows. She learned the habits of her prey and mastered the skill of catching and killing it quickly. Her movements were characterized by relaxed ease and grace; her character, self-mastery and self-control.

Makha could now chase squirrels for long periods of time, competing with them in speed and agility. However, she did not dare to attack them yet.

One time she noticed a well-trodden path that led her to a small valley overgrown with deciduous forest. Having passed through a marshland,

Makha climbed up a dry hurst, covered with freshly-made pits, weathered droppings, debris of bitten twigs, and gnawed-on bones. A little further on, big-headed wolf cubs were frolicking between polished bases of tree trunks.

Makha felt that a meeting with them would not lead to anything good and immediately turned away from the wolves' lair. Intuition prompted her not to take the path. Having climbed up an alder split by wind, the weasel began to jump from one treetop to another. That way she managed to avoid a full-grown wolf rushing with prey to his voracious family.

Makha less and less frequently descended to the ground where she could encounter danger every step of her way. Only up in the crowns of the trees, among green foliage, did she feel safe and confident, though the birds and squirrels that dwelled there raised an alarming uproar upon noticing her and scattered in panic, fleeing in all directions.

Makha grew bigger and became taller and stronger. The fur coat that covered her slim, muscular body turned a pleasant shade of beige, her neck and her chest were adorned with a yellow-cream spot, the wound on her side had healed and was covered with soft new fur. Her feelings of loneliness and helplessness had passed away. Makha became the sovereign mistress of the upper tier of the forest.

During the heat of the day, she preferred to nap in a cool hollow. But as soon as the birds calmed down, Makha, ignoring the unpleasant cries of an owl, went hunting.

Descending along the spring to a sloping bank of the river on one such evening, the weasel heard a crackling sound and the dense noise of a falling tree. Makha roused herself and, having flown up a huge elm, craned her neck in a goose-like manner, attempting to see the place where the noise had come from. However, thick foliage was hiding the low coast from her.

Jumping in a sweeping manner from one branch to another, Makha moved closer. A weak breeze was gently rustling the leaves, concealing the noises of her jumps.

At the edge of a narrow coastal crest completely overgrown with purple willow, black silhouettes hunched over a fallen tree – two sizable beavers focused on eating juicy young aspen bark. A twig snapped under someone's careless paw in the depths of the forest. The timid animals instantly froze. They looked around warily, and relying more on hearing than on vision, plunged into a creek, warning other members of the colony of the danger with powerful and lashing shot-like strikes of their scaly tails. Splashes shot up high into the air, and the reflected face of the moon shattered into yellow pieces.

The forest responded with even bigger commotion. Some taiga giant hidden in the impenetrable darkness grunted concernedly and, ramming the dense forest with a deafening crash, rushed away. The noise quickly spread outwards, but, moving deep into the thicket, gradually died down. Someone big and mighty, however, started fidgeting in the backwaters.

Dawn was approaching. The river became dressed in creamy-white garments. The spruces on the opposite bank gradually disappeared into a wavy haze as if melting, and soon only the tops of the highest ones protruded from the mist like young Christmas trees in a snowy field. Dank rawness wafted from the water. Flinching from the cold, Makha started running down the slope towards a dry drafty hill, when a grouse uselessly slapped its wings in the depth of the crown of a nearby standing birch.

The weasel dexterously climbed up the smooth tree trunk covered with black marks to find the sleeping brood. She snatched the first chick she could grab, but being unable to hold on to the branch, clumsily plopped down onto the ground with her prey. The hard collision made her unclasp her claws and release the prey. The grouse should have immediately flown up and disappeared into the forest. But no! The stupid little thing squeaked thinly and, getting tangled in the grass, frantically trotted away. Makha caught it again instantly.

Having replenished her strength after her fall, the little weasel crossed the brook using a fallen tree as a bridge, and instinctively turned around: a couple of weasels were running in her direction. Makha had previously come across their tracks, but she had instinctively avoided meeting the neighbors.

Having noticed the intruder, the weasels started rattling indignantly. Makha would be in trouble if she did not flee. The infuriated inhabitants pursued her persistently until she was expelled from the limits of their ancestral lands.

Having jumped onto a runway strewn with large pebbles, Makha sprinted as fast as she could up the dry riverbed surrounded by steep hills.

Driven by panic, she was going further and further. She had left a number of river bends and rocky impressions behind when she heard a powerful roar. Makha had to run for a long time before she saw a deep rift-well, where the river disappeared without a trace, flowing over the blocks of stones and steaming with flying drizzle.

Moving over a pile of stony scree to a wooded cliff, Makha noticed through the gaps of the forest a small furry animal in a gray velvet coat gliding down to the base of a fluffy larch. It was a harmless flying squirrel. The weasel rushed to the stem base of the tree, attempting to intercept the

squirrel at its landing place. At the last moment, the squirrel made an intricate turn and landed on the trunk about six meters away. However, before it could climb up to the middle of the trunk, the crafty squirrel was caught by the fangs of the agile bandit.

Exploring newly owned lands, Makha came across a lake lost in the mountains and immediately, in the thickets of sedges, she picked up a fresh trail of a fattening white hare. The doe-hare, attempting to divert impending disaster from its offspring, made three giant leaps aside and forcefully started drumming its front paws against the ground. But it was too late as Makha had already found the lurking kids. She caught one playfully and ate it. Once sated, she became generous and did not attempt to search for the others that had fled in confusion...

Summer flew by imperceptibly. The first frost came, announcing the imminent withering of nature, bleaching grasses, and igniting multi-colored fires on hill slopes. Birches and aspens blazed in yellow flames on an emerald coniferous field strewn with dense resinous cones. Bunches of rowan berries and rosehips glittered like bright brush strokes. Bird cherry bunches succulently appeared black. Cranberries shone red between pines. Horned bouquets of hazel nodded coquettishly in an invitational manner. Agaric honey colonies completely covered stumps and dead fallen trees.

All inhabitants of the forest fattened on nutrient-dense foods in preparation for the long winter. Makha frequently visited the bend of the river overgrown entirely with bird cherry, and one day, when she got into the depths of ripe bunches and started to consume with pleasure the sweet and astringent berries, someone began to sniff noisily nearby. Makha turned around instantly. Branches were swaying on an old overgrown bird cherry. One of branches bent and, having made a steep arc, froze between tree trunks, where a bear was sitting on a “throne” made of branches. Smacking its lips funnily and humming with pleasure, he sent bird cherry bunches one by one into his huge mouth. The bear did not bother making unnecessary movements and broke off the most fruitful branches.

Having pricked up her ears and occasionally glancing at the shaggy giant, Makha hastily stuffed her stomach and, without lingering, returned to the hills...

It was getting colder and colder every day. Gusty wind ruthlessly tore off faded leaves. Overtaking disheveled clouds, variegated flocks of birds began to migrate south to warmer climes. Makha now led a free and untrammelled life in the thinning crowns of the trees. The fall in temperature brought a pleasant change – pesky bloodsuckers finally disappeared. Taking squirrel nests at night, Makha less and less frequently descended to the ground.

By nightfall, the taiga resounded with a blaring roar. Stentorian, bass notes, gaining power and strength, played together aggressively. Heating up with primordial passion, the roar increased in magnitude to flutteringly vibrating modulations and, unable to withstand the tension, broke off, choking with a loud, husky groan. The taiga and the heavens froze for a moment and responded with a hundred-voiced echo. Red deer-marals from the distant Altai challenged opponents to fair fights. Makha was not troubled by this mighty roar, but when it approached her too closely, her innate curiosity drove her to the place where on the forest edge, bleached with moonlight, a handsome stag was roaring, haughtily throwing back his branched antlers. White, sharp ends of the antlers menacingly gleamed like pikes. Three does were grazing peacefully nearby. Having broken off the challenge on a low long-drawn-out groan, the maral, overtaken by emotions, thrust his horns through a thicket of hazel and began to twist them, entangling branches into knots and then immediately tearing them apart.

At that time, a growing crackling noise emerged from the hill. Makha quickly climbed to the top of a pine tree and saw another young stag breaking out of the woods into an open glade.

His bloodshot eyes were glowing like burning embers, his nostrils were quivering, the fur on his neck was standing on end. Having noticed the

master of the harem, the stag responded to the challenge by roaring, aimed his sharp horns at the opponent and, overtaken by rage, forcefully started to beat his hooves against the ground. The threat had no effect, and the alien hurled himself into the attack, hoping to put the owner to flight and to seize his does. Speeding up, the challenger attempted to butt the unprotected side of the harem's master with his sharp pikes, but the experienced fighter jumped aside and responded with an accurate blow. The bachelor could not withstand the blow and fell, but quickly jumped up again furiously and rushed towards the enemy. A deafening crackling noise emerging from the horns startled Makha. The deer, wheezing and snorting chokingly, ran apart from time to time to collide with each other again and again, and, having crashed their antlers, kept circling each other.

Shriveled grass at the site of the battle got trampled to the ground by the hooves. Steam was rising from the overheated, sweat-blackened bodies. Bloody foam flew from their lips in flakes. The handsome alien was extremely eager and attacked non-stop, but it grew obvious that, despite his youth, he was becoming exhausted. The attacks became less furious and violent. The young stag barely managed to dodge the retaliations. His sweating sides were trembling. A pink tongue fell out of his mouth; a deep wound on his chest was bleeding.

Hardened in tournament battles, the master of the harem fought back cold-bloodedly and, using the moment when his opponent decided to catch his breath, suddenly pushed the enemy into the bushes with a powerful blow and, making an abrupt movement with his strong neck, threw the opponent to the ground. Then, he stood up on its hind legs... another second – and he would trample and cut the young buck all over with sharp hooves, but senseless cruelty is not held in honor among the animals.

Leaving the disgraced daredevil behind, he returned to the company of the does that had grown quiet, and filled the neighborhood with a jubilant victory cry. The defeated stag got up slowly and, without looking back, went to an old oxbow to lick his wounds and to restore his strength by consuming fleshy underwater shoots.

3

The days were getting shorter and the nights were getting longer and colder. In the areas where the stream slowed down, the banks were already covered with figured ice. Sharp winds burned bare black branches. Winter was knocking at the door of a lifeless, drafty forest.

Sticking her head out of the hollow one time, Makha did not recognize her surroundings. So much of something white and unfamiliar had piled up so quickly that the taiga had been completely transformed. The ground looked as though it rose slightly and the trees had descended and become shorter. Branches, bushes, and fallen trees, covered with white fat, had become fatter. Lower paws of spruces, having bent under the weight of the cover, formed sloping tents – comfortable refuge for the inhabitants of the forest.

Makha first sniffed and then licked the iridescent spangles. She stepped carefully into the unpacked down that covered a thick branch like a horse cloth. It was rumpling compliantly, crunching slightly, and pleasantly cooling her paws.

Kuhta, snow that falls from tree branches, began to sift down from above onto her back like silver. The weasel shuddered out of habit and shook herself disgustedly. An elastic wave swept across her luxurious fur coat, which was now completely unrecognizable. A lighter winter fur had reached full splendor. Glossy guard hair flowed, gently flickering with amber sparks. Her dense underfur was designed to reliably protect from frost and chilly winds.

Realizing that it was now more convenient to move over the ground, Makha jumped onto the white wavy cover and plunged deep into the feathery bed. Climbing out, she looked with amazement at the hollowed trail, and, adapting to the looseness of the snow, went towards the spruce forest where she had often hunted grouses successfully.

While running through the wind-fallen trees, she met an unfamiliar bright ochreous animal in a black “mask.” Both animals froze and tensed up like tightly wound springs. An unblinking prolonged stare enabled them to study each other, while diligently straining through the frosty air with their noses.

The red Siberian weasel was an extremely angry and aggressive creature. It behaved provocatively, but yielding to Makha in force, did not dare to attack first. Seeing the hesitancy of its distant “relative,” it aggressively arched its back, bared its teeth, and, making a sharp and loud hissing sound, nevertheless attempted some frightening attacks. Discontent with the result, it squirted the weasel with a nasty-smelling jet and only then dived into the snow, where it felt like a duck on water.

Free from the red weasel and running around the spruce forest, where flocks of birds usually hid, Makha was surprised to find that the forest hens that had typically rested at night under the cover of fir paws were nowhere to be found. With no time to reflect on where her favorite prey could have

gone, she suddenly saw the snow in front of her explode in white sheaves: splashing the weasel with sparkling dust, grouses fluttered out from under her paws. Alarmed by suspicious crunching sounds, the hens landed on the nearby trees to watch their eternal “shepherd” attentively. They flew deep into the forest as soon as Makha attempted to get closer. Leathery claws on the paws of the grouses had hardened for the winter, and the birds could easily sit even on ice-coated branches.

Makha quickly learned that with the advent of snow grouses, having stuffed their craws full of birch buds over the day, dived straight from trees into puffy snowdrifts in the evening and sat there all night until the rising Sun weakened the frost. It was warm and safe under the snow: not a single track led to the shelter – hard to find! Only an experienced eye can distinguish a hole left by a forest hen from a dent left by a snowball falling down from a tree branch. Even after learning to recognize the grouses’ “bedrooms,” Makha nevertheless managed to indulge herself with their tender white meat only a few times over the winter: cautious birds made lateral moves under the snow, and she often jumped onto empty holes.

If Makha was unsuccessful at hunting grouses or squirrels, she switched to mice. Approaching a pile of brushwood or wind-fallen trees, Makha tried to determine where the squeaking sound was coming from, where the mouse

brethren were fussing, and, having determined the location, she disappeared into the snow to appear soon with her prey. Several mice were enough to satisfy her hunger.

At times, when severe chills visited the forest, when frozen tree trunks cracked loudly, Makha became inactive and, if hunting had been successful, did not emerge from her den for days.

After one such forced hiatus, the hungry weasel noticed an unusually large hole, and, switching to smaller steps, crept up to it. The delicious smell of a huge brown bird, which Makha had already seen on the pines eating long pine needles, was coming from under the snow. It was the smell of a wood grouse.

The weasel stood with raised paw for a long time sniffing the tantalizing aroma with excitement. An intoxicating hunter's passion swept over her body in waves. The proximity of the prey enticed her. And yet, in spite of the hunger, Makha was afraid, as she suspected that incredible power harbored in the feathered giant. Finally, her memories of how wood grouses had anxiously flown away at the sight of her gave the weasel some determination. Stopping every three or four steps, she crept up to the "bedroom," and, after hesitating for a second, plunged into the snow.

Caught off guard, the cock, vigorously flapping its tight wings, flew out of the snowdrift and, entwined in Makha's snake-like long body, rushed over the virgin snow. It detached with difficulty from the ground and, being barely able to dodge the branches, flew through the forest, slowly gaining altitude. Meanwhile, two pairs of long fangs pierced its skin and began to drive deeper and deeper into its neck.

In an attempt to push out the feathers that were stuffed into her mouth with her tongue, Makha loosened her grip. At that moment the wood grouse shot upwards and turned a somersault in mid-air. The claws of the huntress began to slip treacherously along the dense plumage. In an attempt to escape, the cock began to perform such steep turns and spirals that the weasel could barely hold on to it: she almost fell off, but at the last moment, she managed to pierce the long tail feathers with her teeth and dig her hooked claws into its rump.

Bleeding from the wounds on its neck, constrained by a tail that had grown heavy, the bird was flying unsteadily over the treetops. The weasel, however, started to lose her strength; the incredible stress she was experiencing resulted in painful muscle cramps.

At that time, the wood grouse hit the top of a pine with its wing and was pulled sharply to one side. This time, the exhausted weasel could not hold

on to the grouse and fell into the snow. Freed from its burden, the wood grouse straightened up and glided down to the mouth of a gully. Life, however, had already started to leave the handsome dweller of the taiga, along with a hot trickle of blood.

Makha climbed out of the snowdrift and with unexpected agility ran towards the noise created by the agonized bird. The weasel, enjoying her victorious power after a fierce battle, started tearing the already dead wood grouse apart. Feathers flew in all directions like flakes of soot.

Her hunger, satisfied, the lucky hunter managed to drag the remains of her victim under a snow-covered wind-fallen tree. She heaped up dry grass and leaves to make a litter and spent the next few carefree days in this secret hideout. For the first time that winter, fat started to accumulate on her shoulders and stomach.

At the end of the fourth day, her well-fed rest was disturbed by ringing barking. The sharp, springy jumps of a squirrel pursued by a dog made fine snow fall quietly from the fir paws and hang between the tree trunks like clouds. The exhausted fugitive finally hid. A clear shot followed, and the hunter, approaching on his skis, pulled the slain animal out of a snowdrift. The barking slowly faded away, moving to the other side of the gully. The dog, animal hunter, was quickly sliding behind.

When dusk descended upon the forest, Makha, anxiously looking around, climbed out of her shelter. A pungent smell of smoke was carried by the wind from the stream. A fire – the eternal companion of men – flashed like an evil eye between black tree trunks. Its appearance in the forest did not bode anything good. The weasel, however, having grown lazy because of food and rest, suppressed her unpleasant forebodings and, having run about a little, slipped into a deep tree hollow. She unconcernedly rolled herself up into a ball and, covering herself with her fluffy tail as a blanket, fell asleep.

When a cold dim sun emerged from the east, the hunter, who had gone just a bit too far away from the village and had been forced to spend the night in the woods, quickly gathered together all his belongings and, driven by frost, hurried home. However, a neat line of fresh tracks crossing his old ski tracks immediately attracted his attention.

‘A weasel! What luck! The season has just begun, but I’ve already managed to run into such a rich catch,’ the hunter said happily and, noticing how closely the and his dog had passed by the weasel’s asylum the day before, pounced on the dog: ‘You are such a muddle-head, Aktaban! Where were you looking? A weasel was right under our noses and you missed it! That’s all right, brother; nothing will escape us!’

They were fortunate that Mahka, having put on weight, moved mostly over the ground rather than from tree to tree, and the dog, picking up the exit trail, quickly found her new shelter. Eagerly barking and whining, Aktaban began to scratch painstakingly at the bark of the pine covered with hoarfrost with its claws. Right away the master noticed a black hollow at a height of about five to six meters.

Quieting his dog's excitement, he took off his knapsack, leaned his rifle against the, and then slammed the flat, knotless bronze column of the several times with an ax head. Fearful snowflakes shrouded the pine and covered the dark figure of the man with silvery dust.

Makha hid and grew quiet all of a sudden, attempting at all costs to conceal her presence. This tactic, however, failed to mislead the hunter. He cut down a young spruce, shortened the spreading branches, and, h leaning this ladder against the trunk, climbed to the hollow.

Putting a canvas cover over his glove, he stuck his hand into the hollow, first up to the elbow, and then, after taking off his quilted jacket, up to the shoulder. Yet he failed to reach the bottom. So he plugged the hole with his hat, and tapped the trunk with an ax to determine the lower boundary of the cavity. He then cut out a hole and fumbled in the lower portion of the

hollow, hoping to find something, but Makha ducked silently and climbed to the top using a spongy tube.

The man was still not deterred. Climbing down to the ground, the man took a meshed “cuff,” staples, and a few curls of birch bark from his knapsack. He cut off a twig, making it a little longer than the “cuff,” sharpened it at one end, and split it at the other. He attached the open end of the trap to the upper hole with staples and pulled back the dead end with a fork perpendicular to the tree trunk. He then shoved burning bark through the hole cut out at the bottom and waited patiently. The dog, ready to assist, hovered at the foot of the pine, squealing with excitement. The dry dust of rotten wood on the walls began to smolder, filling the hollow with suffocating fumes. A trickle of blue smoke, mixed with black, emerged from the upper hole.

It grew viscous and bitter inside Makha’s mouth. The minutes of her life seemed numbered. Panting, she pressed her nose into the porous pieces of rotten wood and clenched her jaw. Breathing became easier.

Dead silence shook the confidence of the hunter.

‘What the hell? Is there no weasel in the hollow? It is probably sitting somewhere in the branches and mocking me. Or it might have left via the

ridges. It couldn't, though – Aktaban wouldn't miss it. But he did screw up badly yesterday.' The utterly confused hunter started to doubt himself.

Tired of standing on a wobbly ladder, the hunter climbed down to take a break. He gathered some brushwood, started a small fire for himself, made h a strong aromatic tea, and, taking tiny sips, every now and then cast glances at the sun. He did not want to spend another night by what hunters call the nodiya, a special fire for spending nights during winter, started with 2-3 dry coniferous trunks stacked one above the other. He had gone to the taiga for the sole purpose of reconnaissance in order to determine where the squirrels were hiding, and he had intended to return to the village in the evening. But Aktaban, barking at every squirrel they had encountered, had led the master over the pass, and then the weasel had changed all his plans...

'Why stay in the freezing cold for no good reason? I will block the lower hole. If a weasel is in the hollow, the cuff will not let it get away – it will swaddle it tightly. I will spend the night in a warm place, and then I will come back here tomorrow by dinnertime with a tent, a stove, and enough food for a couple of weeks to hunt squirrels,' the hunter tried to convince himself, inconspicuously gathering his belongings.

Meanwhile, the husky was watching her master with a puzzled look, refusing to follow him. The finally was forced to return to the pine and put a leash on Aktaban who refused to leave.

The man and his dog managed to cover only one third of the way home, when they were hit with heavy wind that drowned everything in snowy mist. By nightfall the storm was out in full force. The taiga swayed and moaned. Lashing and energetic gusts of wind tore well-packed snow clumps from the trees. One of them landed onto the cuff by accident and shifted the wooden ring.

The clever prisoner squeezed into the created gap and left rhe besieged fortress.

Cold air and a snowy whirlwind quickly woke her up. Makha soon found a blade with wind-fallen trees and wallowed in the snow in the calm, refreshing her coat, which had been soiled with soot, and shaking off the adhered dust. Instinct, along with bitter experience she had gained, prompted her to remember that it was dangerous to remain in the forest.

Consuming random food on her way, climbing up rocks again and again and diving into glens, the fugitive reached tall, powerful ridges and plunged into the silent gloom created by overripe fir branches.

In an intermountain hole replete with squirrels and wood grouses, Makha explored the site and, having made sure that it was free, staked out the place with her odor markers...

Cold days flashed by monotonously. At times, it seemed that the taiga had died out completely. Only the unpleasant chirping noise of a jay, the echoing tapping of a hard-working woodpecker, and sharp, shot-like sounds created by trees bursting from severe cold occasionally disturbed the frozen silence of the taiga.

Frozen roots extended their tops covered with hoarfrost, into the celestial heights, close to the sun. They failed, however, to capture its warmth.

The depth of the snow cover enabled the weasel to spend nights in hollows under snowdrifts: it was warmer over there and in case of emergency, she could always escape from pursuers through snow tunnels.

Running over the fluffy feather bed was tiresome for the little predator and one time, when she was patrolling her territory, Makha made use of a passing trail left by moose. At times, the trail split up and the footprints were scattered widely – these were the places where the moose gnawed on tree bark, nibbled at the tips of rarely encountered aspen branches, ate up strands of lichen, and rested right on the snow under fir branches, leaving behind

oval bedding with walls slightly covered with ice containing frozen brown strands of wool. The moose footprints then re-merged into a single trail leading to the head of a short ravine, where, despite the severe cold, a red trickle of water, framed by red clay with white deposits of salt mixed by dozens of hooves, emerged as a steaming fontanel. Ocher slime struggled through the bottoms of the depressions licked out by moose, dully hissing and boiling up from time to time with bubbly circles. Licking the salty scale, Makha ate some astringent rowan and went to the mouth of the ravine where reckless jays were darting about excitedly. The crests of the surrounding snowdrifts turned out to be covered all over with marks left by hooves. The air was saturated with an exhilarating smell of blood. The little weasel began to wander in the forest and stumbled upon a female moose torn to pieces by a pack of wolves in the trampled d arrowwood bush.

Makha walked around the half-eaten carcass and, furtively looking around, eagerly pounced on the meat touched with frost. Finished feasting, she lay down nearby, hoping that her worries about food would be gone for a long time, but the pack of wolves, quietly returning at night, ruined her plans. By morning, the female moose had turned into gnawed bones, and those bones remaining were only the largest and most durable ones, unfit for a weasel's meals.

The winter lasted too long, but eventually it had to end. The spring, as if apologizing for its tardiness, quickly and irreversibly “came into force.” The sun, blazing with hot fire, filled the frozen bottom of the taiga with life-giving waves of warmth.

The forest began to transform rapidly under the pressure of the awakened life juices. The branches swelled and the trees grew thicker. The first pans started rusting on the southern slopes. Shrunken snowdrifts were melting and becoming saturated with moisture. However, at night, the crystals that had grown heavy re-soldered under the action of the frost, forming a solid ice crust.

It was the most difficult period for the hoofed mammals and the birds. Deer fell through the ice crust and the sharp edges cut their shins. Upland birds, especially hazel grouses, which hid under the snow, struggled greatly to get through the icy roof in the morning.

However, wolves and lynxes flourished. For them, it was a time of long-awaited feasts. Gray bandits that had been starving over the winter were the most ferocious of all. In a fit of unbridled greed, they slaughtered roe deer

and pregnant female moose without restraint. Fortunately, this terrible period did not last too long.

The streams were rattling louder and louder. Porous snowdrifts were melting fast, covered with forest debris accumulated over the winter. Extensive thawed patches emerged, coated with a rough scab consisting of leaves, grass, and pine needles compacted over the winter. In some places they were speckled with lumpy strings of burrows left by moles, and fresh mounds of fat spread of soil.

At dawn, Makha was teased with gurgling sounds of black grouse songs. Red-browed cockerels, proudly throwing out their raven-black chests and with their fluffed out lyre-shaped tails, demonstrated their strength and prowess in dried out glades. The most bellicose ones, flapping their wings, pounced on their opponents. However, despite the ecstasy of the tournament and the desire to draw the attention of female black grouses, the cockerels were sufficiently vigilant and did not let Makha get close.

The only birch grove found nearby was the place where woodpeckers flocked together during the day. They drank sweet juice from special holes punched in the bark. Makha also came to like the taste of this sap, and she willingly clung to the source of the trickling moisture to quench her thirst and recover her strength.

Every corner of the forest was being filled with life. Sticky leaves on the trees started rustling. Fragrant grass covered the slopes with a velvety emerald carpet. Bird cherry was blossoming, and behind it, rowan and arrow-wood. The spring turned into summer imperceptibly.

The courtship songs of birds gradually subsided. The warbling of a chaffinch burdened with family cares grew silent. Almost every afternoon, dark purple clouds matured over the taiga between the two ridges. The life in the hole died down before the storm; an agonizing tension grew; the stuffiness thickened and became unbearable. Some sort of paralyzing, invisible field permeated all living things. A tight, blinding shaft of light finally broke through the impenetrable black clouds, reaching the ground and illuminating the silent valley for a second with white radiance. Then the gloom reigned once again. A deafening, crackling sound split the space and rolled over the mountains, shaking stony spurs. The wind resting behind the mighty back of a mountain ridge awakened and furiously burst into the valley. This was followed by yet another lavish downpour of rain falling from the suddenly worn out skies onto the ground that had not had enough time to dry.

In the morning, the ground, caressed by the sun, was steaming with wet vapor. A fresh smell of leaves and needles filled the forest; fat grasses,

sprung up all over the forest, made running difficult. Makha, wet with dew, every now and then shook herself in disgust and hurried to move into the trees' overstory where the wind blew. There, sprawling on the warm bark of a thick bough, Makha dozed lightly until the next downpour, which she avoided by taking refuge in a hollow or under a multi-layered crown layer of a fir tent of her choice. It was always dry inside, and every now and then she even managed to catch a bird sheltering from the rain. If hunting in the overstory was unsuccessful, the weasel descended to the ground and, perched a snag or a stump, patiently withstanding the bites of midges that persistently tried to get inside her nose and ears, watched out for short-toed moles that climbed out from under the ground to get earthworms. Her persistence was rewarded consistently with delicious lunch.

At times, Makha descended along a swollen brook down to the river, where she caught frogs captivated by marketplace chatter. The weasel often encountered moose near shallow creeks with their awkward, ridiculous calves on stilt-like legs. They grazed on the abundant motley grass, giving preference to willow weed.

Adult moose gladly entered the backwater up to their bellies and wandered around. Pinching off some algae, they tossed their heads back and

snorted loudly with delight, trying to get rid of the water trickling down their hook-nosed snouts while crunching the succulent stems.

One time, after unsuccessfully chasing a squirrel in the trees and being annoyed with a fall from the wet branches, Makha was resting on a narrow terrace located above the flood plain. She suddenly seemed to hear a light rustling noise. Pricking up her mobile ears, the weasel, taking small steps, crossed a trunk that had almost been reduced to dust and gently jumped down onto a moss-grown boulder.

Ahead, there was a narrow, gaping hole under a rocky outcrop. A chill emanated from it, and a tiny brook trickled between the rocks. Gliding down the steep sides of round flat stones, Makha wet her paws and entered the gloomy, stony pocket covered with slimy black deposits. The boomy echo of the water dripping from an unseen roof broke the oppressive silence.

Emanating with keen interest the wet gleaming walls, mysterious niches, and crevices, the weasel went further. Stairs led upwards from the bottom of the grotto. Soon a high limestone ridge blocked the road. Covered at the top with an icy peak, a half-melted carcass of a brown bear protruded from the ridge. Cold drops falling on Makha from above made her coat damp, and the weasel hurried outside to warm up and dry off...

Another year passed by, and another summer came, the third one in the life of the forest hunter. All that time, Makha continued to dwell in her favorite intermountain hole, where she had explored every bush. She still wandered around alone, keeping away from other weasels. Makha remembered quite well how once, a couple of congeners had nearly bitten her to death, driving her out of their territory.

But one day, on a warm moonlit night, Makha noticed a male weasel following her trail. She became frightened at first and soared to the top of a tree, climbing up its trunk faster than a bullet. The male weasel followed her. But the time when Makha had felt like a defenseless creature had passed. This mature female weasel was not planning to give up her territory without a fight. In an attempt to scare her pursuer, she fiercely bared her teeth, wrinkled her nose, and even began to hiss offensively.

The discouraged male, having quite different intentions with respect to the charming female weasel, did not expect such a reception and obediently jumped down. Reaching the grass, he stretched expectantly at some distance. Makha, meanwhile, using the fog appearing around her to disguise

herself, ran off deep into the taiga, jumping from one tree branch to another. Yet the persistent stranger managed to find her again and, respectfully observing the distance, followed her everywhere.

Meanwhile, the female weasel grew hungry. Noticing hare leverets fussing around between trees, Makha, crouching on the ground, quietly crept up to them. The leverets, unaware of the danger lurking behind the bush of juniper, were blithely playing while the ambush approached.

Unable to hold back any longer, Makha attempted to reach one of them by making a premature leap. Throwing their behinds up high, the hares scattered in different directions, and one of them landed straight into the paws of Makha's persistent admirer. The unfortunate victim made a short and shrill squealing sound, then suddenly became quiet. Licking his blood-stained snout, the male assumed a dignified air and, curling in an enticing manner, invited the captivating female weasel to join his feast. Finally appreciating the gentleman's goodwill, Makha, with deliberate slowness, approached him. They sniffed each other, and an engagement took place.

Following the joint feast, the female generously allowed the male to accompany her. The encouraged male weasel, happily wagging his tail, tenderly pressed to her side, or, snuggling up, rubbed his head against her breast. Such unusual treatment excited Makha. She froze with pleasure from

tickling touches and screwed up her eyes. Playfully, only for appearances' sake, she avoided the male weasel and snarled, but, being seized with inexpressible longing, froze up again and again. The time for mating had come.

When she grew tired of fun and games and the gentle boyfriend became a burden to Makha, she unceremoniously forced him away from her territory and returned to her usual solitary life.

Having settled in a nearby gully, the male initially visited her regularly, but Makha showed none of the sympathy for him that she had demonstrated earlier. She was unfriendly towards him, and if he inadvertently prolonged the visit, she firmly drove him away...

6

The autumn turned out to be unusually rainy and cold that year. The taiga, which that had stayed wet all summer, was drowned in damp. There was no single hollow on the ground's surface that did not contain glistening water. Mist stretched out across the river and the lowlands like spilled milk. The forest was rustling in a boring, dreary manner. Leaden clouds stretched

endlessly across the sky like shaggy herds. Gusty wind mercilessly pulled and ripped leaves. Grasses, scorched with the first frost, withered.

Neither nuts nor acorns or berries were ripened. Even mushrooms were nowhere to be found. Bunches of squirrels had retreated to the west over the pass, fleeing from starvation. Nutcrackers, jays, cuckoos, and crossbills followed them. Migratory caravans had gone south. All living creatures were leaving, avoiding the barren lands. But Makha, accustomed to the new location, did not dare follow the squirrels into the woods, where she had once been driven away. On top of it all, a thaw accompanied by a heavy rainfall set in at night at the beginning of winter after heavy snowfalls. By the morning, the north wind brought such a sharp cold snap that the water generously poured onto the snow turned into an ice crust walling up most of the upland birds in their snowy bedrooms.

It was a difficult time for Makha. She was rarely able to catch even a vole, and small prey only intensified her appetite.

In search of food, she climbed up a smooth-bore aspen and noticed a hole high above the ground that had an unusual rectangular shape. Makha looked inside. The ferocious landlord – a black woodpecker – did not approve of the curiosity of the female weasel and struck her on the head with its beak.

Stunned, Makha descended to the ground and after eating several hips that by chance remained intact and undamaged, remembered the cave located under the high steep slope where she had seen the ice-bound bear. How could she forget about that warehouse full of meat?! There had been so much of it that it would have been enough to support her for a year!

Eagerly descending onto the memorable terrace, the female weasel froze in astonishment. In the place where the high steep slope had previously been located, a deep gap was darkening in the form of an inverted cone. The trees that had grown high above sometime ago had completely disappeared in the gap, and only those that closed up at the center were barely peeking out of the crater. Unwilling to put up with the threat of death, they supported each other with their branches and used their roots in an attempt to keep together the separated soil layers.

Meticulously exploring the gap's slopes with irregular steps leading downward but unable to find a single suitable loophole to penetrate the depths, Makha grew melancholy. She began to feel that there was nothing else in her life, except for troubles and misfortunes.

Constantly searching for food, the female weasel became emaciated. Her fur became pale and threadbare, and in certain places the hairs were sticking together because from resin of the trees. Makha changed her habits and

increasingly scoured the deserted forest wilderness in the afternoon. Even food that she had previously abhorred became desirable.

One time, when things had become absolutely unbearable, the huntress was lucky enough to find a chipmunk's burrow under a rotten stump. Pulling out the moss plug blocking the entrance and expanding the narrow passage with her claws and teeth, Makha reached a neat, dry storage room with a small stock of nuts, seeds, and berries, carefully placed into separate piles.

The striped owner, awakened by the echoing fuss, dashed around the bedroom, indignantly squealing and trying to jump outside, but Makha blocked the passage with her body. The chipmunk, with the desperate courage of fear, rushed towards the robber. The female weasel, leaving the nuts for dessert, awarded the braveheart with a deadly blow and ate it right away.

The long forgotten satiety resulted in drowsy languor spreading across Mahka's body. She slept for over a day and after waking up, finished the scant stock found in the pantry. Soon, however, a hunger swamped her with renewed vigor and once again drove Makha to the steaming source of the stream, where ducks were still swimming, surrounded by shrubs sparkling with hedgehog-like thick hoarfrost.

This visit was no different from previous ones. The birds sitting on the sugar rims made of ice were on guard. They managed to make it to the middle of the steam bath belching swirls of white smoke and blatantly mocked the weasel's awkwardness. Makha snorted annoyance and ran away empty-handed.

At times, larvae of bark, buprestid, and capricorn beetles served as her food. Makha managed to extract them from under the rotten bark of spruce trees. After one such meager breakfast, driven by hunger, she crossed the saddle and went to the opposite side of the mountain, which was covered with long-boled forest.

Descending along the side, Makha first heard and then saw fighting animals from under overhanging fir paws: a strong long-legged moose was fighting to the death with a wakened bear. They were circling each other. The bear roared eerily. Steam expelled noisily from its widely expanded nostrils.

The bony bear kept trying to approach from the side, but the moose, realizing the threat, immediately turned to face its opponent, trying, in turn, to strike it with its hoof. The bear deftly dodged the blows and made strokes with its broad paw, attempting to rip the moose's taut belly with its long

claws. Both became exhausted from the endless attacks, and yet neither of them was successful.

Suddenly the bear changed its tactics: it staggered back and sat wearily on its hind legs. Hiding its sophisticated plan, it leaned against a tree like a shaggy lump of meat and started panting deeply. Yielding to the trick, the moose turned around to run, but at that moment, the crafty bear caught it in a single leap. The moose reared up and tossed, but the bear had already managed to bite through its neck, deciding the outcome of the fight in its favor.

Once the moose was dead, the disheveled winner did not immediately approach its prey: the bear made several prolonged sighing sounds, moving its sides and cooling down from the excitement.

After resting the bear ate avidly, taking its time and paying no attention to what was happening around. Having stuffed its stomach, the bear dragged the remains of the prey under a fallen tree and lay down nearby.

Makha made several visits to this place, hoping to make good at the expense of the bear. However, the bear did not leave until it had eaten the entire carcass, leaving nothing behind and scattering around only sharp cloven hooves and bare white jaws.

Dreadfully miserable from hunger, the female weasel felt constantly cold, unable to warm up even inside apartments abandoned by squirrels. She sometimes became dizzy from continuous malnutrition, her gut wrenching painfully. One time, Makha, fallen into a short sleep, vividly dreamed of a spacious pine forest full of vibrant, joyful life. It was the pine forest where Makha had been born, where she had never known hunger and cold, and where the murmuring stream contained the tastiest water in the whole wide world. Makha was haunted by this vision day and night.

When ever Makha dozed off, she again and again saw her native forest teeming with hazel grouses and squirrels. She imagined catching them and eating them non-stop but nonetheless being unable to satisfy her hunger. Her confusion grew, and finally the moment came when some force outside of her control irrepressibly drove Makha to her native hole.

Climbing up a hillock, the female weasel turned south and headed towards her target. In the early morning hours, she almost ran into a lynx that floated like a ghost in the white frost ignited by the rising sun. Mahka moved backwards and silently disappeared into the bushes, but the wiry cat noticed her and ran in pursuit. Makha immediately soared to the top of a spruce along its rough trunk and, jumping from one branch to another, safely escaped her pursuer.

The female weasel had to overcome many bristly steep slopes, hilly icefalls covering the sides of mountains, and impassable thickets along the way until she finally saw from a high spur familiar outlines of hills. Joy filled the heart of the wanderer. She was becoming more and more confident and joyful as she ran through the snow-covered taiga. Reaching the last dividing ridge, the weasel climbed up a lonely dry spruce that spread its branches like bony hands. She froze in astonishment.

A sooty streak of forest road following the curves of the stream showed black far below in front of her. A barren land with golden, sawn off stumps covered a gentle slope, where the beloved forest reserve stretched away.

Descending the mountain slope to the stream and quickly running across the road permeated with the smell of diesel fuel, Makha, feeling hopeful, went right through the glade towards the dark forest looming far ahead.

With every jump, the pine forest was approaching as an impenetrable wall; it was increasing in size, no longer as tiny as it had appeared to Makha from the top of the spruce. And when a fervent whistling sound of a hazel grouse emerged from it with a short warble at the end, Makha's spirits rose greatly.

Her joy, however, was short-lived. The habitual silence of the winter taiga was being disturbed by a sonorous crackling sound emerging from the

motor of a power saw. The regular rattling sound quickened and turned into annoying hornet buzzing. The shaggy crown of the outmost pine soon swung, and a century-old tree collapsed with dense noise, raising clouds of snow dust with its longhaired branches.

An earsplitting roar emerged from the side where the stream was located. It was a powerful timber truck crawling after new whips, tree trunks stripped of their branches. Loggers were the new owners calling the shots in Makha's native land.

Makha had gone half-round the mountain. Now the female weasel moved to the western slope. Here, the snow cover sparkled in pristine whiteness and enticed with an abundance of squirrel feeding trails as well as holes left by hazel grouses that had spent nights under the snow. The crunchy bedsheet near wind-fallen aspens was rammed with hare legs and strewn with brown, nut-like litter.

Walking over the fresh squirrel tracks stretching out over the hillside, Makha soon saw a squirrel preoccupied with excavation of old stocks. The squirrel started anxiously clattering, but did not even have time to start climbing up a tree before Makha was upon it.

For the first time in many days, the female weasel satisfied her hunger and was full to the scuppers. Her heart melted and her desperation went

away. The consumed squirrel substantially replenished the strengths of the wanderer, and now she easily ran over her ancestral lands.

Everywhere, Makha came across stinky forest roads that stretched their tentacles all over the place, almost reaching crossover ranges; the roar of the engines came from everywhere. The taiga, retreating under the onslaught of the power saws and mighty tractors, appeared like a chessboard from the height of the dividing ridge: dark forest islands alternated with white glades pitted with freshly cut tree stumps.

Only at the site where the Grand Ridge was located, where Makha had come from, was the forest was bristling stubbornly with virgin indigenous forest stand. But the female weasel did not want to return to those deserted areas affected by food shortage.

She came to terms with the proximity of rumbling cars and people, and she settled at the source of the stream, near rocks adorned with florid, crustose lichens. Makha made a good choice – that place was a nature reserve.

The female weasel unwittingly became accustomed to the noisy neighbors. The people did not bother her at night, during her long walks, and she rested in secret shelters in the afternoons.

Running once through the woods in the middle of winter, Makha saw a line of footprints left by a fox. At first she did not attach much importance to them. She noticed only that the pathway, usually straight and neat, was wobbling in a strange manner. However, encountering the second consecutive bedding in approximately twenty meters, she put herself on guard. After carefully examining the footprints, the female weasel determined that the fox was having difficulty moving.

Makha trotted along the trail and almost immediately saw a fox-moth burning like a torch. Using a wind-fallen tree as a cover, the female weasel cautiously approached the animal that was lying face down in the snow and froze, looking right at the fox without breaking off her appraising stare. The female weasel made an abrupt sound, but still the fox did not move. Its dull, half-open eyes expressed nothing. Even the lush fur could not hide its weakness.

Makha realized that the fox was so weak that it could not even stand. Makha's eyes lit up: like any hungry predator, she could not miss the opportunity to have a hearty snack. Trembling with excitement, and

marveling at her own audacity, the female weasel jumped onto the fox, and dug her fangs into its throat. The fox groaned piteously. Languidly defending itself, it attempted to stand up, but its legs buckled treacherously. Makha captured the unexpected and rich prey almost without struggle. It ensured her a long-term supply of meat, and the female weasel ate to her heart's content, gaining strength. A desire to travel woke up inside of her, bringing our traveler to a creek in a valley, clinging to a rocky ridge rugged with narrow crevices.

An island of mighty pines was miraculously preserved at the foot of the ridge, on an old plot of land among the bushes. Some sort of marks, half-bloated with resin, were cut out near the roots of the copper pillars.

Examining every tree one by one, Makha determined that many tree tops were tightly tied to bark stripped from trees. This fact was of interest to her, and when she climbed up, it seemed that a flavor that renders any weasel restless was oozing from under the bark.

Makha began to gnaw at the bark without hesitation, removing layer by layer. The work progressed slowly, but by next morning a hole had emerged smelling of thick honey flavor. At that point, the female weasel did not have any doubts that the most delicious treat in the whole wide world was awaiting her in the hollow. She screwed up her eyes with pleasure.

Constantly swallowing her saliva, the inspired creature expanded the hole, removed an insulating pad made of birch twigs from the channel, and greedily pounced on the scented cells of a honeycomb.

The honey was thick and transparent. Makha was tearing iridescent toffees off and swallowing them with pleasure along with torpid bees. Having consumed enough to feel sick, the female weasel did not want to leave the sweet bee-tree for fear that someone else would take advantage of the treasure that she had found. She quenched her thirst with the snow lying nearby on the tree branches, heaped up birch leaves from twigs, and, inhaling the intoxicating aroma, fell asleep.

And it had to happen that at that specific point in time, the owner of this place was patrolling his forest apiary. Discovering pieces of bark under the pine tree and leaves scattered by wind, he immediately realized that his bee-tree had been robbed. Regretfully lamenting, he walked around the tree trunk and determined by looking at the footsteps that the apiary had been robbed by a weasel. In order to preserve his “farm” from being completely ruined, the beekeeper decided to catch the thief.

Awakened by scratching sounds emerging from skis, Makha heard a man moving around the tree. This was somewhat a concern for her, but soon the

man moved away, and the female weasel, already accustomed to the company of people, decided to continue sleeping on her fragrant bed.

The frustrated beekeeper, after making sure that the rest of the bee-trees had not been touched, went back to the village and returned with a bunch of traps in the morning. He cut down a long pole and fastened a cocked trap to it with wire. He then leaned the pole with the trap against the trunk so that the trap plate was located exactly opposite the gaping hole. Considering this to be insufficient, he heaped up a snowy “hut” at the bottom, put a generous piece of meat into it, and placed the second trap near the entrance. Just to be sure, he scattered crumbles of goose giblets around the “hut.” Crossing the ridge, he descended down to the road and went back home, catching a passing timber truck.

Makha heard that the man had approached her shelter again, and this time he had hung around the tree much longer than before. She became extremely agitated as she realized that he must have started coming so often for a reason. Avoiding leaning out of the hollow, the female weasel warily listened to every sound, and when the exit got covered with a vague shadow covered her exit, she shrank in horror. After a while she heard a creaking sound emerging from the skis and everything grew quiet all of a sudden. Makha recovered her breath. Once she calmed down completely, she

attempted to get out after a couple of hours. But what was there? A black nasty circle, smelling of iron and humans, was blocking the exit from the bee-tree.

For a long time Makha did not dare to touch the suspicious object smelling of death. She sniffed it again and again. She strained herself until she felt pain listening to every slightest rustle, but her mobile ears caught only a vague whisper of the wind blowing through the dense canopy of the pine.

The sweet honey had made Makha thirsty, and the seductive proximity of the snow forced her to overcome her fear eventually. Still hesitating, the female weasel intended to push aside the circle gently in order to increase the gap and get out. Unfortunately, as soon as she touched the insidious plate, the jaws of the trap slammed shut, and sharp pain shot through her paw and spread across her body like fire.

Makha attempted to recoil, but steel jaws held her in a stranglehold. Pain overtook her body, and she started to rush about as hard as she could, to no avail.

The female weasel then threw herself on the “enemy.” Violently tearing it apart, she gnawed the trap with her fangs, but the enamel on her teeth just crumbled against the unyielding steel. The jaws held her tightly, and the

plate and the catch, wobbling from side to side, simply clattered dispassionately.

She spent several hours attempting to free herself. The sun set behind the crest of the ridge. The frost increased in intensity. Her compressed paws grew stiff, and the pain unnoticeably subsided. Her skin and tendons became frayed as a result of her incessant jerking and twitching. Makha bit through the necrotized, frayed tissues with the remnants of her fangs and finally freed herself from the odious piece of iron.

Ignoring the wound, she began to rake the leaves and gnaw through the branches to get to the bottom of the bee-tree and, when she had reached it, she started hurriedly gnawing at the patch that was blocking the path to freedom. She was working tirelessly, as if realizing that the time allotted to her was running out. If by the next morning she hadn't left the trap, something irreparable would happen.

Crimson dawn started to break out in the east, and the first rays of the sun reached the Earth.

With no less haste, the beekeeper was walking towards the pine dreaming of not only protecting his bees-breadwinners from robbery but also of obtaining a valuable pelt.

Approaching the location, he saw from far away that his efforts had not been in vain – the trap had worked! His heart brimmed over with pride and delight. He was already dreaming of the glowing fur of wondrous beauty waiting for him in the dark hole. However, after approaching and taking a closer look, he was puzzled with the appearance of the second hole near the lower edge of the patch. This discovery stung the beekeeper with obscure and painful conjecture.

Still hopeful, he ran around the pine and discovered footprints paired with scarlet specks of blood in the snow. His sweet moments of anticipation at his rich prey were replaced with bitter disappointment.

Over the winter, the beekeeper, patrolling the bee-trees scattered in the surrounding woods, visited the robbed pine several times hoping to find traces of the thief, but to no avail. The female weasel never came back there again.

8

Makha, scared to death and lame in her damaged leg, ran for a long time, crossing large and small rivers. She climbed mountains along steep gullies and descended to snow-covered valleys. Avoiding roads, sled roads, and ski tracks, she travelled farther and farther away from the ill-fated place. The denser and more impassable the taiga became, and the higher the snow-

covered mountains rose, the freer and more confident the female weasel was felt.

Finally, she reached the edge of the forests spreading over the steep spurs of the Far ridge. White sides of its peaks brightened up the gloomy, moss-grown softwood thicket. Wilds inaccessible to people securely sheltered Makha.

Silence, air infused with the smell of needles, untouched, pristine forest – it was so joyful to experience all that after the hostile world of dirty, smelly roads, iron monsters sneezing out smoke, and ever-present people.

Here, far away from human habitation, inside the dense crown of a pine crumpled by time, Makha found an abandoned squirrel's drey and settled permanently in the round, warm box room – she was preparing to become a mother.

How will the surrounding world meet her children?

Ufa city