

MAFDET'S CLAWS

FELINE NATION - BOOK TWO

N. D. Jones



Baltimore, Maryland

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Dedication

Breonna Taylor (1993 – 2020)

Rest in Power



#SayHerName

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Mafdet's Claws Mandala Coloring Book

Mafdet's Claws Mandala Coloring Book is a gift for readers of *Mafdet's Claws*. The book includes an original character art of Mafdet Rastaff created in a mandala design. The coloring book also includes two cheetah coloring pages, two quotes from the novel, four small heart mandalas, and a colored version of a cheetah's head.

To access the book, go to this URL. <https://BookHip.com/FRZLKK>

MAFDET'S CLAWS

MANDALA COLORING BOOK



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
N.D. JONES

List of Felidae Cheetah Names with Meaning

Adiwa

One who is Loved

Chatunga

Fighter

Chido

Wish

Dananai

Love Each Other

Gambu

Warrior

Hondo

War

Kundai

Overcome

Mafdet

She Who Runs Swiftly

Majaya

Last Born

Mufaro

Happiness

Nhoro

Antelope

Onayi

What we Have

Rugare

Peace

Ruva

Flower

Tanaka

We are Good

Tinashe

We are with God

Zendaya

Give Thanks

List of Swiftborne Five



Mafdet Rastaff of Ambermaw:
Great Cat

Adiwa Kachingwe of Bronzehollow:
The Runner

Chidu Mabuwa of Starpoint:
Lady of the House of Life

Kundai Tongoyo of Mightmere:
Swift One

Majaya Garanganga of Nightfall:
Slayer of Serpents

Nhoro Hatendi of Ambermaw:
Slayer of Serpents

Nations of Zafeo and Their Languages



Cheetahs: Nation of Swiftborne; Tafara

Cougars: Nation of Dimrock; Uzath

Humans: Republic of Vumaris; Sorsat

Jaguars and Leopards: Nation of EarthBorough; Okeon

Lions: Kingdom of Shona; Ebox

Tigers: Nation of AutumnRun; Voband

Chapter 1: Takawira (We Have Fallen)

September 15, 1801

My dearest Sarah,

You know I have never been a man much for writing, and even less a man prone to spilling his guts. But, on the eve of my departure for lands south of SaltCross Mountains, I find the urge to pen you a message too great to ignore. I know, no matter how legible my penmanship or how sincere my words, that I will never send you this letter. Perhaps it is the coward in me, despite my new rank of Private Soldier for the Vumarian Army.

I know you disagree with my decision to join the military. But General Benjamin Wilson assures us that we'll be home before the spring. If I am to make an honest woman of you, I need money and land. The Felidae signed the peace treaty in good faith. The Fatherland Party paid them well for their land. Five million, I heard. That's more than someone like me would see in twenty lifetimes. But it's been two years since the treaty's signing and they have yet to yield land that now rightfully belongs to The Republic of Vumaris. They brought this upon themselves. Chief Fernsby had no choice but to sign the Felidae Removal Act.

It will all be for the best. Once they are settled in their new territory, everyone will be happy and at peace. There will be no more battles with those troublesome Felidae tigers and cougars. Thankfully, I wasn't assigned to their removal. I promised you I would be safe. I'm only an interpreter. I've always had good relations with the Felidae cheetahs. They've made reliable trading partners. But too many humans don't want to do business with someone who makes his living working with people they think of as uncivilized. They aren't barbarians but they also aren't our equals. It's best we stay separate. They can have their Felidae Territory in the West and we'll have our country free of people who can transmutate into predatory cats. That would be best for us all.

You said you would wait for me. For that, I am grateful. I love you.

With devotion,

Bill



October 29, 1801

My dearest Sarah,

I've written to you once a week since my departure. If that makes me sound like a smitten schoolboy, I assure you that is not the case. No, no, of course I'm smitten, but even the love of a good woman won't have a man up at night, using the glow of the moon to scribble words into a roughened journal I keep hidden in my overcoat pocket. A month into this journey, and I already regret my decision to join. You were right. I don't belong here, but not for the reasons you gave with the hope of swaying my mind.

The Felidae weren't expecting us. They weren't packed and ready for the journey, as I'd been led to believe. There were also more soldiers than I thought there would be. The Nation of Swiftborne is one of the smaller Felidae tribes. But General Wilson has 5,000 regular soldiers and 4,000 volunteers under his command. We swarmed their acres of land on horseback and in wagons. We were all armed. Even as an interpreter I was given a rifle. But I had little opportunity to do my job before the first shot sounded; it was followed by growls, spotted bodies, and then more gunfire.

So much gunfire and blood. Like a coward, I froze on my horse, watching, slack-jawed, as Felidae were pulled from their homes and out of the fields at gunpoint. Children cried and screamed for their parents, who had died after taking to their cheetah forms, instinctively trying to protect their young. I watched as pregnant women were shoved to the ground, their wide, watery eyes taking in their burning homes.

Then General Wilson called for me, and I had no choice but to obey. I dismounted and walked with a steadiness that was as false as the smile the general gave the woman he stood in front of. I had never met the Felidae female, but I knew who she was from the way her braided hair ended in a scorpion tail. One of the Swiftborne Five—the nation's sworn protectors. I addressed her accordingly, in the language of her people. Despite my queasy stomach, my words were sure and steady. My fluency in Tafara impressed General Wilson so much he shook my hand afterward.

He shook with the same hand he'd used to draw his revolver and shoot the poor woman in the head after she'd refused to accept the removal order. It had been my voice that had delivered the ultimatum: Surrender or die. She'd died but her sacrifice made no difference. Her people were rounded up and put in stockades until it was time to depart. When the cavalcade finally set off for SaltCross Mountain, dozens of Felidae had been hurt; even more had been shot and killed.

The prayers I heard coming from both those crammed into wagons, and those forced to make the journey on foot, told me the children who had been away from home at the time of the attack had been left behind. I'm still unsure if that is a blessing or a curse. So, I've taken to writing letters I'll never send because I fear sharing my thoughts with anyone, even with you. I'm afraid of being labeled a Felidae lover and dismissed from the Army, my pockets no thicker and my future no brighter for the brutalities I've witnessed. I fear, my dear, Sarah, that this is only the beginning.

With devotion,

Bill



March 12, 1802

My dearest Sarah,

It seems as if I've been away from home, and you, for years instead of months. Winter was terrible, worse than I've experienced in a long while. Freezing temperatures and snowstorms were relentless, but I had my overcoat, boots, blanket, and campfires to help stave off the worst of what the nights brought. But the Felidae had none of those protections. General Wilson is an unconscionable bastard. I concluded that the moment I saw him kill one of the Swiftborne Five. I've come to learn that woman's name was Ruva, which means "flower" in the Tafara language. She was seventy, which is much younger to the Felidae than it is to us. The woman looked half that age. Her black irises stared at General Wilson with such loathing; her hatred alone should've set the man ablaze.

I wish she'd had the power to kill him. Maybe then, the soldiers would have withdrawn. But even as I write that, I know it to be false. They would've slaughtered them all. For as fierce as Felidae may be, in the end, they are still people who can be hurt, who bleed, who die. And so many of them perished this winter because General Wilson hasn't an ounce of blood flowing through his veins. I question whether he even has a heart.

My God, he wouldn't even permit the children to shift. That was his first order. He'd made me tell them that transmutation would be forbidden until they reached their new home. We brought nearly seven hundred wagons, but that wasn't enough to transport an entire nation of people, so most of them walked. Many barefoot, and with little to protect them from the harsh elements as winter set in.

He should've at least permitted the children old enough to transmutate to make the shift. In their cat form, more of them would've survived. But we were told no exceptions would be allowed. I awoke too many cold mornings to a wailing parent whose child had died in the night. The elderly fared little better. Even Felidae, when pushed to exhaustion, cold and starving, will succumb to pneumonia.

They were forced to leave loved ones in shallow graves along the path—a death trail. I wish I could forget, but I know my conscience will never allow the luxury. I hate to write this of Chief Fernsby, but I wonder if she told General Wilson and the other generals to make the trek to the West as harsh as possible for the Felidae? I can't think of any other reason why a man like General Wilson would be so careless as to bring too few rations, and so bold as to enact rules that would certainly guarantee the death of so many Felidae under his care and command.

You know I am a man of God. But I fear my afterlife will be filled with fire and guilt, for I did nothing to assuage the suffering of the Felidae. I didn't even offer a shivering, hungry child the overcoat off my back because my comfort took precedence. Surely, God will punish me for such inhumanity. Or maybe one of the Felidae gods of retribution will come for me in my sleep. Perhaps Sekhmet, the goddess of war and destruction. More likely, though, it will be Mafdet, the cheetah-headed goddess of capital punishment. Either way, my fate was sealed the moment I decided land and money were more important than morality and justice.

As I've proven these past few months, I'm a weak man. Except for General Wilson, no single man could have altered the Felidae cheetahs' fate. But a man of high moral character could've gone without food and water, at least once, so a Felidae mother and child could eat more than scraps. In this journal, I can admit to being ashamed. Ashamed to be a Vumarian.

I'll have my plot of land though, and will be able to afford an engagement ring you deserve. I'll live the life denied to the Felidae—

a happy, free life with my spouse and children. But if I shall die before I am an old man, Goddess Mafdet my judge and executioner, I will go willingly. My heart and life hers to claim. Until that time, I will seek redemption. I don't yet know how, but it is as much my vow as the one I will make to you on our wedding day.

With devotion,

Private William Kirby

Chapter 2: Ruwadzano

(Togetherness)

1886

Felidae Territory
The Nation of Swiftborne
Town of Ambermaw

“I have faith in you.”

Conjuring a smile, Mafdet turned to her husband. Hondo held their little girl in long, wiry arms perfect for hugging and climbing. At four, Zendaya still preferred human skin contact to the feel of cheetah fur. She also favored her father’s touch to that of Mafdet’s. She smiled through that truthful pain, making sure to convey nothing but calm confidence.

It wouldn’t do for my family to know how frightened I am of disappointing them. Or worse, how little interest I have in becoming one of the Swiftborne Five.

“Thank you for your support.”

Hondo shook his head and hugged Mafdet with his free arm, drawing her into his body and next to a sleepy Zendaya whose frown revealed her displeasure at having to share her father’s chest. “So formal.”

“You are samhuri.”

“A title and role given because I’m the only king cheetah of our generation.” Tilting her chin upward, he grazed his lips across hers. “I see you, even when you seek to hide from me. Let me put our daughter to bed then we’ll speak of what troubles your mind and weighs on your heart.”

Instead of waiting for Hondo in the living room of their cabin home, Mafdet took refuge in their bedroom. She stripped off her pantaloons and blouse, tossing both on a rocking chair by the bedroom’s single window, leaving her naked. She would need neither for the shadein competition.

Mafdet smiled again; this one genuine. “He’s telling Zen her favorite cheetah story. More like Hondo’s favorite story, but what Felidae cheetah hadn’t grown up hearing tales of Goddess Mafdet’s foot race against Goddess Sekhmet?”

She flopped onto her bed, groaning at a lifetime of expectations that would culminate in tonight’s sacred event.

"You are under no obligation to compete in the shadein." Hondo pushed their bedroom door nearly closed, leaving enough space for Zendaya to enter if she awoke and came in search of them. "If I didn't know you well, I would take so much flesh as an invitation." The foot of the bed dipped. "But I do know you, and sex ranks a distant third when you're in one of your brooding moods."

Less graceful in his human form, Hondo made his way up the bed and beside Mafdet, grinning at her with dark brown eyes and white teeth that sparkled. She adored the way he took her in because he did indeed see her. It had taken years of friendship for the vulnerability of being known by him to shift first into comfort then into love.

Mafdet rolled onto her side, lifting her hand to his firm, unyielding cheek. *So different from his personality. Gentle, patient, understanding, no wonder Zen is drawn more to him than she is to me. Or maybe she senses the truth that not even Hondo has divined.* She kissed him, not with lust but with a wife's undying devotion.

"Everyone expects it of me, especially my parents."

"You're thirty and have a child of your own. You no longer need to submit to your parents' wishes."

Mafdet stared at Hondo who, after several seconds, realized his unintended hypocrisy.

"We haven't had a king cheetah born since we were driven from the East. The elders viewed my birth as a sign." He returned her kiss, but with considerably more tongue play than hers. "They've never said what kind of sign. Now, however, with them insisting on holding a competition only the oldest of us has ever seen, I worry the sign they saw was of an evil omen."

"Slayer of Serpents Ruva. She was the last of the Swiftborne Five from life before the Felidae Removal Act. My parents could have named me Ruva, which would've been marginally better than being named after a goddess. What evil omen?"

"I don't know. I'm not prophetic."

Neither were the elders, but Hondo was correct. She was in a brooding mood and the elders didn't deserve her doubts and disrespect.

"Yes, I'm thirty, which only means my parents have waited three decades for an event to justify their naming choice. No one," —she leaned up on an elbow— "and I mean no one, is audacious enough to name their child after one of the gods. But my parents were. So, here we are, married. The first king cheetah born in decades and me named after a cheetah goddess. Of course I must compete in the shadein. Worse, I must rank in the top five. Anything less will shame our families."

Hondo pulled her onto his chest. One hand settled on her warm back, the other in hair she'd braided for the competition. If she became one of the Swiftborne Five, she would have to wear her hair in a scorpion tail braid—the style worn by the nation's sworn protectors.

I dislike scorpions but I despise snakes. Ruva must've been one skilled warrior if she was bestowed with the title of Slayer of Serpents.

"Shame is too strong of a word. But your concern is well-founded. We place too much weight on traditions."

"Our culture is all we have. Culture and each other. Without both, we are little more than empty vessels who don't realize they are dead."

Hondo tipped up her chin. "Tell me again why I married such a gloomy woman." With a swat to her backside and then a playful pinch, he smiled down at her. "Ah, yes, now I remember. I do love the way this moves when you walk and the way it feels when we make love. I guess I'll keep you."

"You'll keep me?" She couldn't help it, she grinned against his chest. His shirt carried his rich, fresh scent. A smell she would recognize no matter their form.

"Don't let the unknown steal your joy and laughter."

"What about the known?"

"Especially the known, my love. We may not have asked to be here. This so-called Felidae Territory, no matter how we've divided among the feline nations, isn't our original land. But our elders have created a

home for us. You're right, our culture sustained us. It kept us rooted to a time when we were free to roam this entire continent, knowing no boundaries but those imposed by will."

"What is our will now? Mere survival?"

"There is nothing insignificant about survival. It is why we exist."

"But so many died. Even after we arrived here, more perished. I hate what was done to us. I hate . . ." Muscles clenched, and she felt the shivering that preceded her transmutation spasm.

Hondo drew arms around her, holding her close like a boa constrictor but without the crushing pain of an attack. If he didn't, she would transmutate in their bed. Mafdet in human form could be soothed and contained, but Mafdet as a cheetah was a wild cat who ran to exhaustion and hunted without mercy.

She sank into his embrace, permitting him to push back the darkness she kept locked inside. A darkness, she feared, her daughter sensed with a child's innocent perception. Her hand traveled under his shirt and over his beating heart. The sure pulse brought reassurance, although not clarity.

Why can I feel so much but see so little? My blindness frightens me; but not as much as my one clear vision. Claws and blood.

Lifting to her knees, Mafdet removed Hondo's clothing with a quickness that verged on desperation. But he eased her impatient hand off his hardening shaft and her lips into a slow, gentle kiss.

Slow. Slow.

"Zen is asleep, and you have three hours before the competition begins. Which means I have two hours to make love to you. No need to rush." Thick, soft lips nibbled her jaw. She sighed. "No matter your morbid thoughts, know that I am right here. Your family is here. We are together, as the gods intended."

Hondo saw into her soul.

But not all of it, neither the devouring future nor the corrosive past. Bleakness by any other name. And that name is Mafdet.

She shoved him onto his back, straddling his hips before he could stop her. She quieted his protest with a deep kiss but a slow slide onto his erection.

His hands flew to her waist, and she thought he would flip her over. But he did no such thing. What he did do was confirm how well he knew her needs, just as she understood his. He led when she preferred to remain in the background. He laughed loudly and often, directing attention to himself and away from her.

He stroked inside her with such force she nearly forgot her cursed name.

Because Mafdet is a god of capital punishment. And what is capital punishment without first a commission of a crime?

Big, strong hands tightened around her slim waist, slamming her over and again onto him. His mouth sought nipples and sucked.

She groaned, her heart raced, and skin perspired. *Yes, he knows me well, but I know exactly what he needs too.*

"I love you," she whispered in his ear. "Win or lose, after this business with the shadein competition is over, let's talk about expanding our family."

"Are you sure?" He asked with such restrained hopefulness that Mafdet felt guilty about her previous insistence on not bringing more children into the world. A world that denied the Felidae their basic rights.

No law, beyond the 1799 SaltCross Mountain Treaty, protected them. Even that treaty was entered into by the leaders of the tiger and cougar nations without the consent of their own people, as well as the other Felidae nations.

No wonder, after arriving here, Unica Waddi and Hubrax Chula were murdered.

"I'm positive. I know you want more children." Hands on his shoulders, she encouraged him to lie on his back. Mafdet rewarded Hondo's acquiescence to her gentle persuasion with an unrushed kiss. "You're very good with Zen. You're also right about her having siblings. Perhaps, she'll open up more with other children in the house. More children also mean more people for you to love and spoil."

Hondo frowned. "What about you? Is there nothing about having more children that appeals to you?"
Much did. *Too much*. "This decision includes my wish as well. I love Zen, and I will love and protect every child of our union."

"That is very close to the pledge made by a Swiftborne Five."

"I am aware, thanks to my parents and the Council of Elders." She kissed him again, clenching his thickness inside her, wanting him to feel the depth of her sincerity. "I'll speak to the healer about stopping the herbal tea and how long it will be until I'm fertile again."

"You're really serious."

"Aren't I always?"

He chuckled softly, a concession to their sleeping child next door and an answer to her rhetorical question.

She laughed too, because now that she'd spoken the words aloud, the thought of having more children thrilled her more than it terrified.

Hondo smacked her backside again. She didn't need his playful, "Get moving, Mafdet," to take his meaning.

She got moving, not that a pregnancy would result. But making love to her husband, feeling his body inside hers, hearing him moan her name, Mafdet knew she would never regret this leap of faith.

Until she did. Until everyone she loved, every vow of protection she made, turned to rotting flesh picked over by vultures. It would begin that very night. The night of the shadein competition. If Mafdet had known helping a defenseless child would doom what was left of the Felidae nations, she would have let the boy die.



"Why don't you have clothes on, Amai?" Zendaya rubbed sleepy eyes, frowned at Mafdet, and then shrugged off her covers and climbed into her lap. "Going running as a cheetah?"

Sitting on the side of Zendaya's bed, she held her little girl and breathed in her scent.

"You always do that. Do I smell like my evening meal?"

"Yes, you smell like food and I'm going to gobble you up." Mafdet roared and then went in for the "kill."

"No, no tickling, Amai." Laughing, Zendaya scrambled off Mafdet's lap and onto the floor. "Cheetahs can't roar."

Mafdet jumped to her feet. "This cheetah can, and I'm going to make you my next meal."

Screaming as if truly frightened, Zendaya took off out of her bedroom.

Mafdet loped after her, roaring and baring teeth. Her four-year-old ran as fast as legs that hadn't yet experienced their first transmutation could move. When that milestone arrived, between the ninth and eleventh years, two years behind that of larger Felidae like lions and tigers, Zendaya's human form would adjust accordingly. She would become faster and stronger. Her senses would heighten and Mafdet and Hondo would take her on her first run and hunt.

Mafdet pounced, and Zendaya released a blood curdling scream that would've brought the neighbors running, if they hadn't known how mother and daughter played. One of these days, Mafdet supposed she should cease treating her daughter like prey, and encourage her to play with the rocking horse, drum, or, Gods help her, the half dozen dolls Mafdet's mother had made for Zendaya. By mutual, silent agreement, they had placed each gifted doll under Zendaya's bed, never to be pulled out or spoken of again.

Mafdet bit what was left of Zendaya's stomach baby fat, while trying not to laugh as her daughter screamed for Hondo to "save me from Amai cheetah."

"If I didn't know you have more stamina than this entire nation combined, I would chide you for wasting it before the competition."

The second Mafdet peered up at her husband from where she crouched over their daughter on the floor, Zendaya scooted backward and away like a crab avoiding the beak of an octopus. Her right hand flew out, caught her daughter by surprise, and reeled her back in by her leg, not yet finished with her meal.

If possible, Zendaya yelled louder for her father to help her. She went as far as conjuring pity tears and imitating the quivering lower lip of a child in great peril.

"Oh, no you don't. You know I was not taking in the scent of the food you ate for evening meal when I sniffed your hair."

"I'm not sure," she said, tears gone. But a shadow of a smile appeared right before she lunged at her.

Mafdet obliged and fell backward. *Oomph*. Zendaya landed on Mafdet's stomach; all forty pounds of her.

"Got you. See, Baba, I got her." Head craned back, Zendaya released a roar more adorable than menacing.

Mafdet tried not to chuckle but failed. "Come here, my fierce cheetah. Give your Amai a hug." To her delight and surprise, the child didn't squirm or complain when she held her longer than she normally allowed.

The tender moment ended far too soon for her liking. An intrusive knock to their front door had Zendaya pushing away from Mafdet; curiosity about the late-night visitor was more important than extending a goodbye embrace from her mother.

Mafdet accepted Hondo's hand as he helped her to her feet.

"Have fun?"

"Always."

"Good, because I would love three or four more just like her."

"Ambitious, king cheetah."

"Three or four what?" Zendaya asked. Her hand was reaching for the door, but stilled at Hondo's head shake.

The knock came again. Then the sound of retreating footsteps.

Hondo embraced her. Despite having washed afterward, the smell of their love making still lingered. Mafdet didn't relish the others knowing her personal affairs, but she would covet the scent of him on her flesh for as long as it remained.

"I have faith in you. I know you'll do your best. You always do, even if grudgingly."

As with Zendaya, Mafdet held Hondo longer than necessary. She did not fear the competition, or her friends turned competitors, but rather all the unknown ways her life could change if she became one of the Swiftborne Five.

"Run fast, Amai." Zendaya joined the family embrace. She did her best to wrap her arms around Mafdet's and Hondo's waist.

Hondo picked Zendaya up, permitting her to give Mafdet a proper hug.

"Run fast and win." Zendaya threw her arms around Mafdet's neck again and, for a blindingly terrifying moment, she saw her child as an adult. Instead of the trust and love she had just seen in her eyes, the adult Zendaya glared at Mafdet with such contempt the harsh image nearly buckled her knees.

Then they were gone. The odd sensation and the confusing vision both.

She kissed her daughter's cheek, set her on her feet and watched as Zendaya then proceeded to bounce with too much energy for the lateness of the hour. Mafdet didn't envy what it would take for Hondo to settle her down. The way her husband looked between his wife and daughter, he not only shared her thoughts, but blamed her for his next couple of sleepless hours.

Mouthing, "I'm sorry and I love you," Mafdet left her family behind, but took her daughter's words with her. "*Run fast and win.*"