

In the morning Lannon could still feel the beast's presence clinging to him, through the sticky matting of dried drool around his muzzle, neck, and shoulders as well as in the faint exhaustion vibrating through his muscles, the lingering remnants of burst adrenaline. He rose with the sun and made his way down to the river for his usual bath after spending some time with the stag, this time embracing the slight chill of the water and letting it shock through his fur and skin to pull him more fully into the waking world.

Naturally, though, he couldn't help but keep an eye on the opposite riverbank, scanning back and forth in the spaces between the tall trees for any misshapen shadows or glowing gemstone eyes – or *eye*, rather. Nothing came this morning, and never once did the sounds of the forest die down as he had come to expect at almost any moment. Now he had an identifiable target, and something of a method for reaching that target: it expressed at least as much an interest in him as he had in it.

It was the look in its single yellow eye that had stuck with the lynx throughout the night and in his dreams, and even now he imagined he could see that pinprick burst of tainted light peering out from the shadows. Animalistic and feral, liquid gold iris cracked and fracture with veins of both lighter and darker color, flecks of green, bits of brown, but the *way* he looked at Lannon, and how the lynx could see his own reflection in that eye... without realizing it he sighed, bar of soap nearly slipping from his fingers.

Having heard the rumors of some terrible beast back home from all the way down at the Solm academy, Lannon had proposed a research project to the archmage to investigate. He had come out here with the intent of separating truth from superstition, and distilling both of these down into their base roots in magic and knowledge. He had found his target and developed his theories, but now it had found *him* as well, and it sought to understand him just the same.

That was the look that single bright eye while it flicked back and forth across his face. The beast had recognized him as a person, as an individual; he had looked from one eye to the other, over his nose and mouth, up his jaw to his ears. He had looked at each individual piercing in his ear, every one of them signifying some step in Lannon's life. And while he had looked over him, the animalistic snarl in his throat had receded into a passive rumble, as though other thoughts and ideas had forced their way in front of the base feral instincts.

There was someone there, trapped inside the shape of a monster. Lannon felt his tall ears perk when the realization hit him, and then a second later also felt the shock of cold water brushing against his bare upper thigh. As he made his way out of the river towards his clothing neatly folded on the bank, the thoughts and theories stirred around in his head just like the water on his ankles. There was so much misinformation about the tribe of forest wolves that he could neither accept nor deny that this beast was somehow linked to them, but at the same time, there was just so much still unknown about the world as a whole.

There's giant man-eating squid-sharks in the trenches off the western coast of Mora. An ancient warrior queen of Dorian transferred her life essence from herself to her daughter, and to her daughter afterwards, never dying yet constantly shifting form. Odd magical artifacts are constantly being found and rediscovered, swords that harness the power of the sun to maintain a searing hot blade, adorned silver rods that allow transference of thought across interminable distance, arcane batteries that draw in magical threads of a type and magnify and store them for later use... while drying off his head and shoulders he reached up, a fingerpad tracing along the vertical bar piercing encasing part of his ear.

All of this, he thought, so why not something between man and animal? I've got to investigate more before I can draw any links or conclusions, though. It's just a matter of finding him.

As the sun rose so too did the temperature, coaxing out and then banishing the lingering chill of the river in his still-damp fur. Lannon trudged through the low brush and thick foliage of the forest as he done every day since his arrival, cloak bound tight around his body and knife at his side. It was a constant investigation for him, a never-ending search for anything and everything his curious mind could affix itself to. The pulse of Earth and Spirit to scout out his surroundings became more of a reflex than anything else, near constant every minute or so, mapping out the landscape in his mind as it did the shifting tapestry of life all around him.

The peaceful vibrancy of the forest, the warm colors and warmer breezes, the soft yet rich scent of damp foliage and cool soil... the hovering awareness once the sun rose to its full height that he was being followed again. Lannon wondered if the hunters, too, could feel his magic as the beast could: he sharpened and honed his awareness whenever he felt them nearby, always in pairs, hunter and companion. They trailed him at a distance or scouted around in front of him, always watching him and always invisible, one with the forest that guarded them and which they guarded.

When I return home tonight, he resolved, I'll have to double up on my studies in the Old Tongue. So far they kept their distance, never again approaching or attacking him. Their presence always reignited the distant nervousness in the lynx's chest, but so long as he kept them in his mind, that nervousness became something expected, almost comfortable.

Lannon found himself anticipating meeting the beast again, and almost desiring it. His heart thrummed at the thought of meeting him again, even though he knew the sight of heaving shoulders, lumbering form, and slaving jaws would again instill that same primal fear in him as it had every other time. The lynx lingered out after the sun had dropped below the horizon and enshrouded the forest in the pleasantly warm cloak of night, but once the other hunters departed he was left alone among the trees and cicadas.

Once he returned to his hut he checked on the stag again, laboriously skinned and hung to drain from the rafters behind. That had occupied most of his morning prior to his bath and had left him with a different kind of cloying stickiness in his fur, warm reddish-brown swirling down the river water along with the drool from the creature the previous night. Before his original expedition into the forest he had made sure to purchase a sack of salt from the village though had already used all of it in his attempted preservation of the flesh.

It had been years since he had last had to do something like that, and his father had always been there to help as much as he could with his single arm. Looking at the stag hanging there now, illuminated in the flickering light of the magical lantern suspended behind his shoulder, Lannon again figured that there was no way he would be able to properly use or preserve all of it, or even a majority. He sighed, unsheathed his knife, and reached up to trim off a portion roughly the size of his upper thigh, then carried that in the crook of his arm around the hut to the front.

If I can't use it, he thought, I know of someone who can. He bounced the meat in his palm, heavy and wet with the distinct weight of past life, and then gave it an underhand toss out into the trees. At the best it would achieve his goal, while at the worst, a wild mountain lion or a bear or something. In short,

nothing he hadn't dealt with before. The lynx spent some extra time out in front of the hut, leaning back against one of the support columns with his journal resting against his legs.

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Day 11
Evening

Lots of ideas today. The beast – I still don't have a name for him – was at one point, or still somehow is, a man. I don't understand the way he interacts with magic and the Weft, and nor do I know if he is at all related to the tribe out here. Lots of things to investigate.

Mainly: find a way to attract his attention in a safe, controlled environment. My poor little heart can't handle getting pinned by a slavering beast every other day. I think part of it might just take more time out here. I know he's watching me, and I know he can find me more easily than I can him. The hunters have no trouble finding me. I wonder if they know about him, too.

Also: need more salt, probably a triple portion. This stag should last me a while, assuming I can preserve it properly, and assuming whatever comes to fetch the chunk I tossed out tonight doesn't poke its head into the back. Maybe I should move it indoors.

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Day 13
Morning

The meat was gone when I woke up, with no trace of what took it. Stag is still there. No dreams tonight. I forgot about that wolfess from my dream the other night. Strange things going on in the forest. Have some extra work to do fixing some of the panels on the western exterior of the hut, and then off to my morning bath.

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Evening

Nothing much happened today. Hoping he didn't move on to somewhere else. Will start poking around outside my comfortable radius tomorrow to see if I can find more. Constantly worried about stumbling on the tribe's camp, if such a thing exists, but I suppose I'll cross that bridge when I find it.

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Day 14
Midday

Saw something out in the woods past the river. I think it was him. I sat on the bank, watching and waiting, and thought I could feel his eyes on me. I want him to know that I don't want to hurt him, and I'm just curious in what he is. Part of me thinks he feels the same way about me. When I thought he had

left I scanned the area with the usual spell and found nothing. I took my time in coming back to the hut and waited outside, but I was alone.

Hacked off another chunk of the stag and set it out in the clearing out front. Heading back into the woods to explore some more. Note: the little brown mushrooms with white dots on top are delicious, and only make me slightly dizzy afterwards. Will try to dig some up and see if I can culture the spores.

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*Day 15
Morning*

The meat was gone again. I heard a crunching out in the shadows behind the trees, the sun not quite past dawn yet.

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When he first stepped out into the embrace of early morning Lannon didn't notice anything unusual. The trees overhead stirred in a soft breeze and the world had quieted down in the sleepy minutes just before dawn, the owls returning to their dens and the cicadas taking a breather to let the natural music of the woods take over, if only for a while. He yawned, stretched his arms over his head, wiped at his eyes, shook his head, smiled again at the faint musical jingling of his piercings in his ear, reached down to touch his toes...

...and paused there, tall ears perking, the one of them hanging down a little limp beneath the weight. Slowly he rose back to his full height, attention focused at the spot just past the trees where he heard a rustling, a crunching, and the inimitable sound of an animal's breath. Suddenly awake, Lannon felt his heart fire up into his throat and ears; he adjusted his stance, rested a paw on his knife though he knew it was useless, and then half-raised his other paw in preparation. Technically the hand movements were no longer necessary for his skill in the magic, but it still helped with the concentration and execution.

He swallowed, pulled in a shaky breath, let it back out, swallowed again, inhaled again. "Hey," he called out to the woods. The noise stopped. Then, a thought: he paused, rolled his limited knowledge of Old Tongue around in his head, pursed his lips... "Nu io ia?" *Do you hear me?*

Silence again, then a rustling that might have been the wind in the trees, and then a low rumble. Then the crunching of leaves and branches beneath heavy footsteps, the creak of a low branch pushed to the side... and the first thing to materialize from the shade glowed bright yellow, a light all of its own directly opposite clouded pale white. Then it rose in height and came closer, plodding heavily between the shadows as though the darkness tried to physically hold it back between the trees. A huge paw unfolded and rested upon the trunk of one of the trees, with a second spreading along the opposite; then a vaguely lupine muzzle emerged from the shadows, twisted lip, scarred face, fogged eye, slit throat. His lips and the fur of his face were matted and dripping with whatever juices remained in the meat Lannon had tossed out – it was a long process, and took its time – and with the beast standing out there some fifteen paces away, teeth bared and heavy with gore, yet again Lannon felt the shock of fear pound through him.

He swallowed and almost immediately regretted his prior conviction. The beast tilted his head and peered more closely at the tiny lynx across the clearing, broad pink tongue flicking out to lap the mess

off of his black-fleshed lips glistening with the slickness of the blood. His throat pulsed in a swallow, his lips peeled back again to show those yellowing fangs, he leaned in a little closer and took another step, and another, and another.

Each step yanked Lannon's eyes back down to the creature's legs, wide of stance and bent over on themselves to lower his height even further. The massive footpaws, each still easily about the same size as the lynx's torso by his reckoning, pressed into the soft loam and crushed the leaves and twigs between thick toes and broad claws. Still, though, the earth sprang back whenever he stepped forward and left only a vague imprint of what had just passed.

Lannon stepped back and then did so again, two of his full strides amounting to hardly half of one of the beast's. He approached the lynx slowly and deliberately, yellow eye constantly flicking back and forth from his waist to his shoulders to his face to his feet and back to his face; meanwhile Lannon could see nothing but that hideous muzzle, each and every detail searing into his mind as, again, he accepted that this might be the last thing he would ever see.

The torn and tattered ears and the single glowing gold eye across from the other, fogged and clouded with just a shadow of the pupil behind a thick cataract; the fur, earthy brown and stone grey, tainted and matted deep wine-red from the flesh, stringy and wiry; the black-fleshed lips glistening with saliva and unsatisfied hunger both, curled back in a quiet growl; and then the throat, broad and thick, pulsing and vibrating with that growl as it came, the odd disfiguring scar crossing from one side to the other shining through the brown fur and light skin.

His paw hovered near his knife yet Lannon knew it was useless. He half-raised his other paw in front of him, aware that he had little left to retreat and that every step backwards still brought the beast closer to him. The beast hunched down over him, bent at ankle and knee and waist and shoulder, and still towered over the smaller feline. The wolf tilted his head again, lapped at his lips, swallowed audibly – Lannon saw the throat bulge, tighten, and then release, so close to his muzzle – but then, oddly, the growl receded.

The heat of his breath still washed down over Lannon, cowering against the support structure of the hut with his paws in front of his face, but no longer could he hear that growl. Such thick, heavy exhalations that he couldn't tell whether it was sticky drool or just the hot breath that dripped down his arms and muzzle... after a moment he opened his eyes and peered through his fingers, and saw that single yellow eye investigating him, watching him, waiting for him. The beast jerked slightly back at his gaze but then leaned in again, lips still pulled partially back and teeth showing yet not precisely bared.

More in... caution, Lannon realized, than a warning. Slowly he lowered his paws, though still his nub tail tried to lash and smack against the wooden beam behind him. He swallowed again, gritted his teeth, and straightened up as far as he could, then felt a little rush of pride at seeing the beast lean back away from him to allow him the space.

And then the two stood there in the damp warmth of early dawn, each watching the other, each breathing nervously with their ears flicking and tails swishing. Lannon looked from the beast's dead eye to his glowing one, then up to the tattered ears, then down to the cut throat, then the broad shoulders and mangled, splotchy fur, then down along the bulging chest, slim stomach, angular waist, and back up. When his eyes returned to the wolf's muzzle it took another half-second for him to focus on the lynx's again, yellow eye flicking back up from investigating the way his cloak folded over his shoulder.

Lannon tilted his head to the side. He was still nervous – his heart pumped in his chest and he felt his instincts screaming at him to turn tail and run away, to put as much distance between himself, the prey, and this beast, the predator, as quickly as possible – but he took the time to manually regulate his breathing, using the same techniques as he had been taught at the academy.

A simple exercise. Clear your mind, focus on your goal. The basis of magic is rooted in intent and will. You must envision your goal and seize it, and hold it tight – and then you must take the steps to advance towards that goal, and ensure it does not escape your grasp. Inhale, hold that breath; exhale, relax; inhale, hold that breath...

His paw shook when he raised it. Lannon tightened his fingers, sighed, drew in another breath, and then continued raising it up. The wolf's eye affixed on his stretched fingers and he reared back, lips pulling back in another silent snarl, but this time he neither snapped nor fled. Caution became wariness but held there, just as it did in Lannon as well. He set his jaw, made sure the wolf's eye met his own, and then-

Warmth. That was what Lannon first and foremost felt. The heat of another living, breathing creature beneath his palm and fingers, the messy and matted fur turning to a softer cushion along the undercoat, with skin not particularly healthy yet still intact underneath. He could feel the curling of the lip and snout beneath his palm, but as Lannon spread his fingers and settled them softly along the wolf's muzzle those muscles began to relax. He felt the grain and contour of the fur, found where it gave way to skin along the lips, felt the base of each short, sharp whisker, found the sleek texture of another hidden scar atop the wolf's nose.

A breath he hadn't known he'd been holding shivered out between Lannon's barely parted lips. He swallowed again, biting back the slime and bile of the cresting nervousness that remained high yet no longer grew. He slid his paw slowly, carefully back up the wolf's snout, fingerpads trailing along the lines of fur and feeling the little bits of dirt and leaf and twig that had gotten caught there. Bright yellow flicked to his muzzle, the wolf blinked, and then for a second he closed his eyes.

His shoulders relaxed. His heavy arms hung down at his sides. His growl turned into a long, low sigh, hot breath washing down over the lynx's face and shoulders and making him briefly draw back for a moment. The beast – if that was truly what he *was* – relaxed here in front of him, beneath the much smaller lynx's gentle touch. The shoulder raised again and then dropped in a second sigh, another rumble vibrating beneath the exhalation.

Lannon wet his lips and peered closer. The yellow eye opened just enough to peer into Lannon's, and for those few seconds the two just watched each other. Just as he had thought: hot liquid gold threaded with bronze and brighter yellow, tinting to sunset orange near the pupil and then an almost mossy green at the rim. The sclera itself was dark in color, nearly black yet not quite from what he could see around the iris, itself occupying most of the eye. The pupil, partially dilated in the darkness, rested on Lannon's own.

"Hey..." the lynx breathed, his word making the wolf's whiskers twitch against his paw. "You're no monster, are you?"

Slowly the wolf began to move again. Lannon cursed himself for his immediate reflex to yank his paw away: the beast flicked his lips over his chops and then sat back, his massive legs going out from underneath him and one of his paws bracing against the ground in some posture halfway between man and animal. As though he were a wild feral trying to imitate a person, or rather... the body plan, Lannon realized, more closely resembled that of the man than the animal. Even with him sitting his muzzle still came roughly level with Lannon's own.

Lannon took another deliberate breath and then reached forward again, this time with both paws. The one resumed its place along the wolf's snout while the other came up and behind his head, fingers pushing through matted, knotted fur and rubbing at the base of the torn ear, again feeling the vibrant warmth of life beneath.

"What *are* you?"

Again his words brought the attention of the wolf to focus on him again, yellow eye peering down through half-lids. The wolf blinked again, slowly, and licked at his lips. They had come fully forward again, fangs no longer showing, short whiskers hanging down a bit. The thoughts and theories shot through Lannon's head the more he looked at this creature, and the more he *felt* him. Here was where the cartilage of the ear met the skull; here was where the skull had fused together early in development; here was one, two, three vertebrae...

The wolf closed his eyes again, then lifted his head and arched his back forward. Lannon pressed his fingers a little more firmly into that spot, having to lift up onto his tiptoes and brace his other paw against the beast's shoulder to reach. Warm breath rumbled out against his shoulder, and from here he could see his tail sway across the ground.

At times more man than beast, at others the opposite... Lannon drew back and wrapped his paws together, then watched the way the wolf opened his eyes again and tilted his head in questioning. Was this really the same beast that he had encountered in the woods these past few nights? The same slavering, hungry predator, with sharp claw and sharper tooth? The same...

The same terrified, desperate victim.

This close, with this sudden connection between them, Lannon could still feel the innate terror and wariness that the beast's presence instilled him. With shaky paws he ran his fingers up his snout again, thumbs coming in to graze over the wet velvet leather of his nose, fingerpads tapping in along the lips that just a moment ago were peeled back in a feral snarl. He could feel the thick, smooth curves of deadly fangs inside, and the wet heat of the slavering maw.

"What happened to you?" Lannon breathed. He noticed that the wolf's ears perked as much as they could, and that that eye focused on him again. "Can you tell me?"

In that moment, for just a fraction of a second, something that looked like thought and concentration passed over the wolf's muzzle. The brow lowered, the lips shifted, the throat pulsed – but then his attention was drawn swiftly away to something out to the side of the clearing, the suddenness of the movement startling Lannon to draw his paws back again. The wolf straightened up and braced his other paw along the ground, then from there lifted himself back up to his hunched height. His lips curled back again, his ears flattened, his hackles bristled – and then, claws ready, he jerked forward in another

powerful bark, loud enough to shock the lynx again even though he was expecting it. Something out in the trees rustled.

Then that yellow eye looked down at him again. The beast licked his lips, looked across Lannon's muzzle, then turned and bounded back out between the trees. He listened until the crunching of branches and foliage faded back into the hum of night; then a moment later came the morning song of the birds and cicadas rushing back to fill in the gap.

Slowly Lannon straightened up as well. He rubbed his paws together, still able to feel the remnant warmth of this strange beast. Then he looked over towards what had caught his attention and spooked him, though of course saw nothing there. The lynx waited a moment longer, lost in thought, then turned to head back into his hut to prepare for the day.

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Evening

Massive steps today. He's terrified of something. Definitely used to be a person at some point – one of the hunters from the tribe out here? What happened? Ideas: A ritual gone wrong. Some kind of god given flesh. Some strange wild magic unique to them that "we" have never seen before. I can't quite figure it out yet.

Everything else in the forest shuns him. Wildlife goes silent when he approaches, and the world seems to slow down to near stillness. But he breathes, he bleeds, he feels, just like I do.

He's all alone. I shouldn't be so sympathetic so early on – we've barely even seen each other, much less touched – but I just can't help but feel there's something terribly wrong here.

Officially altering my described task out here. The original goal of discovering the source still remains, however. To do: see if I can perform some magical investigations on him to learn more. My first instinct is that it's linked to Spirit magic, since if it is indeed magical in origin, I just don't know what else it could be.

The strangest part? I can't wait to see him again.