

Day 38
Evening

The ritual was a success, though so many days later I still feel the effects of pushing myself too far. I made a novice mistake and now I'm paying for it. It was worth it, though: Sulla's bodily aberrations are restored and now he looks, I imagine, like any other wolf. He looks like the wolf that Sulaya showed me, in face and body and proportions.

Peculiar note: not all of his wounds have been healed: he still bears a few scars, most noticeably his missing ear and then the one across his throat. This second one, I believe, has led to his complete muteness, though he still seems to understand me just fine, and responds in his own ways with familiar gestures and expressions.

Since he woke up we have each been keeping an eye on the other, as I am still far from recovered as well. I write this now just before sleep, and my paw and fingers are cramping and straining with the action – though I can tell they're stronger than they were earlier in the day, and yesterday. It's just one step at a time.

The thought presents itself: am I done here? I went into the woods, found the source of the rumors and tales, tracked it down, took care of it... and performed a feat of Spirit and of magic as a whole that has likely never before been achieved. I can return to Maldeth, now.

I suppose I could. But, again, one step a time. I must make sure I can walk further than just down to the river to bathe, and I need to ensure Sulla finds and reunites with his tribe and his family. And then I must spend some more time with my father, as I've only seen him a handful of times since returning. I wouldn't want this stag to go to waste, either, as one cat is hardly making a dent in it – and in his previous form, the wild Sulla much preferred fresh meat to salted and dry-preserved.

There still remain things to do. I could go back, but I am not ready yet.

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The bed could barely fit the two of them. Lannon climbed in first, slow and careful on his aching muscles, with Sulla's larger paws guiding him forward and down; that done the wolf stood there for a second, awkward and unsure, ears slightly splayed and tail hanging down. Lannon could feel how unsure he was, not for his own sake but for whether Lannon would accept him climbing in with him, now that both were awake and active.

He could feel the want in him, too, the want to be close to him and wrap around the smaller feline, the want to share the same space and warmth and comfort just as they had before, when Sulla was still locked in that other monstrous body. All of this lay in the flicker in Sulla's green eyes as he stood there, and the position of his shoulders, and how he reached across his body to scratch at his other elbow – but there was something deeper to it, too, something *else*.

Lannon smiled a little bit and half-tilted his head, his nighttime robe starting to slip from his shoulders. "Hey," he said, his exhaustion evident in his voice.

After Sulla had come to terms with being back in his body, Lannon had led him on a short walk around the woods near the hut, to try to get him used to moving around again while doing the same for himself. By the time that had finished he felt himself aching for a meal and a nap, with Sulla sitting outside looking up at the sky through the trees both when he fell asleep and when he woke up some time later. Then it had been time for another visit to the river, though Lannon's legs gave out from under him once there so the big wolf had had to carry him back, worry in his eyes even though he still smiled at the lynx's theatrics and squirming on the way there.

"You don't really think I'll let you sleep outside again, do you?"

The lupine's ears, the one and a half that remained, perked up. He licked his lips and swallowed.

Lannon scooted over a bit further. "Come on. Come here."

While Sulla carefully slid into place beside him, he busied himself with slipping his robe the rest of the way off – and despite himself and everything that had passed between them, he still felt a familiar wave of embarrassment and shyness push over him. It felt like his first years in college all over again, with late nights spent studying alongside his then-friends, thoughts tumbling back and forth over *them* more than the schoolwork. The little, breathless touches, the suspense of wondering whether that brush of a paw against his side was intentional, about whether that smile carried a hint of something else beneath it, about whether the other felt this same tingling electricity in the closeness as they climbed into the bed to share their warmth – as the winter nights down south in desert could be quite cruel, and a single blanket did little to stave off that chill.

Up here in the northern woods, caught on the line between spring and summer where the air tasted of rain and the cicadas served to awaken him every morning, there was no chill – save for the one when Sulla's fur, thicker and coarser than the lynx's, brushed up against him and then pulled away, sending a little shiver through his body. The wolf scooted in just enough for himself, careful not to squeeze the smaller male too tightly against the other wall. This had been the same blanket he had used in his room at the academy, and so much time away from the desert along with these four weeks out in the forest had almost entirely stripped it of its familiar scents, even the stronger aromas of the two mustelids.

Why am I nervous? he thought, wriggling around to toss his robe to the side over the bed. This put his own fully naked body right there against Sulla's, the wolf constantly radiating a deep, intoxicating heat, so close to him. *We've made this contact before. We've been there. It was an important part of the ritual, the closeness, the intimacy. And yet I'm shy to touch him, like the first time Emnis stripped his shirt off when we napped together, and I-*

His thoughts hit a brick wall as soon as he rolled over onto his other side, one arm half-raised between the two of them to provide a sort of barrier – though all it did was press into the bare fur of the wolf's chest, soil-brown and stormcloud-grey puffing and settling around his spread fingers. Lannon blinked, swallowed, and looked up to see those two green eyes looking right back down at him, bright and sparkling even in the darkness of the deepening evening.

His nostrils flared as he took in another breath, slow and steady through his nose, more for the scents carried on the air than the air itself. There was the mixed heat of two bodies, pleasant and slightly humid, combined with the natural woody essence of the bed and mattress themselves; if he focused, if he concentrated, if he imagined, he might be able to pretend that Sariya and Emnis had been here – but,

no, they were gone. It was just himself, so much of himself, and then this bright, new, borderline feral aroma, this spice and musk and bite, and...

And Sulla's arm came to slide up underneath his arm, then drew his paw down along the lynx's back. Lannon arched forward and shivered with the touch, the sharp, untended claws leaving little fiery streaks along his skin as they went, the sensation then fizzling away in a few seconds. Down that paw went, along the backs of his ribs and the small of his back towards his waist, his tail, his rump, where the fingers came in and squeezed, tugging him forward and closing the distance between the two of them.

It was more an intimate touch than a hungry one, though there was no denying that some of *that* hung between them as well. Lannon chirped with the touch, the grasp, the pull, and looked up to Sulla again – though the wolf took the opportunity to slide his other arm beneath his shoulder and pull him close there too, immediately wrapping him in his grasp and presence again.

Lannon felt as if he wanted to say something, held tight in Sulla's embrace with one arm caught between them, the other resting haphazardly across the wolf's bare hip. Thick fur, warm skin and flesh, stiff bone underneath... he tilted his paw down and back a bit, finding the base of his tail and moving up from there, pads pushing against the grain of his pelt. There to the side a bit, up above the waist but below the ribs, with soft fur and flesh beneath, he felt Sulla's heartbeat, slow and steady with only a slight shaky kick to it, and the smooth, even rhythm of his breathing, in, pause, and out, in, pause, and out.

Such a wonderful creature, Lannon thought, bringing his muzzle in to rest between Sulla's shoulder and his neck. He breathed deeply of the wolf's scent, similar to what he had grown accustomed to before, different in its own distinct ways. *Such a beautiful conglomeration of life, and light, and strength, and wonder, and...* Slowly Sulla adjusted, lowering his muzzle down – Lannon's whiskers twitched at a sighing exhalation of breath down across his face – and then touched his forehead to the lynx's, turning his head to a slight angle to rest his longer muzzle alongside the feline's much shorter one.

Green eyes looked into his own, flicking gently back and forth to follow the little movements in Lannon's own, exploring the colors and the patterns. He had never really spent too much time before a mirror, but knew that his own were warm sky-blue, just like his mother's. A lot of himself he had inherited from her, his father told him. *"That is why I can't help but grin when I look upon you."* The thought put a smile on Lannon's muzzle, and he slid his arm up to rest his paw behind Sulla's neck. The blanket shifted and rolled over their shoulders, settling slowly into place.

Sulla licked his lips and swallowed – Lannon got a brief puff of wolf breath – and then tilted his head a little further, this time bumping the side of his muzzle to Lannon's. He blinked, as did the cat, and then did so again; at the edge of his vision Lannon noticed Sulla's cheeks quirk in the telltale twitch of another smile, and then those green eyes disappeared behind closed lids. Another slow inhalation, held for a moment and then let out through the nose, across the lynx's neck and shoulder. It tickled as it went, the little currents and threads of air trickling along his sensitive fur and skin.

Everything Sulla felt he could *feel* right now, could sense in the small space between them within this blanket, and in each other's arms. Lannon closed his eyes too and let himself sink into that mix of emotions – warmth and appreciation, affection and gratefulness, a sliver of the same shy nervousness that had thrummed in his own heart a moment ago. There was that hunger again, deep beneath everything else and wrapped in its own little bubble of embarrassment, twitching and throbbing just a

little bit – Lannon could smell *that* on the warm air, too, and it certainly ignited a similar response in himself, though he knew his body would not be able to keep up with the desire.

All of this, and then some distant hesitation of Sulla letting himself relax so much in Lannon's presence, and... deep beneath everything else, buried and shoved aside yet still undeniably there, lurking and cementing its presence, was that same regret from before. Regret and sorrow and thick, dripping grief, their low flames kept burning by a steady feed of hideous rage.

For a moment all of those ugly things came to the forefront, startling the lynx and sending an unsteady shock through his body. Sulla's paw tightened on his waist and he felt the wolf's lips and muzzle curl back in a silent snarl, though the rumbling breath still came out and across his whiskers again. A little bit frightened, Lannon swallowed again and opened his eyes, then turned his head and rubbed his muzzle alongside Sulla's again.

Everything poured out of the wolf and into the lynx for a second, as though exchanged in a static shock. Lannon felt everything vibrate inside of him, the rage and frustration tightening his fists in Sulla's fur and grinding his jaw together, the anxiety and nervousness making his tail lash beneath the covers and ears flatten, the grief and constant pain pressing at his eyes and making them hot even though he kept them closed.

Lannon held Sulla tight and tried to will all of that away, pushing his own awareness and presence out into the wolf to calm both of them. Slowly, he felt it start to root and take effect: with one paw gently stroking the lupine's back, fingers spread along his spine and trailing from shoulders to tail, before too much longer Sulla slumped and settled in his embrace, and the breathing over his shoulder became slow and steady.

This left Lannon on his own, eyes open again looking out over the hut among the darkness of the night. *I've done so much already*, he thought. Sulla shifted in his sleep and squeezed around the little lynx a bit tighter. *And I want to help him further. I'm going to. But will I really be able to handle it, all on my own? If I'm still recovering from the ritual, and I can't use my magic, what am I going to do if – if...*

There in the darkness the lynx frowned, an odd thought pushing its way into his head. He swallowed, tilted his head, and tried to focus on it a little bit more, bringing it to the forefront of his awareness and pushing everything else away for it. It came with a little wave of comfort and warmth, warmth with a slight touch of an edge to it. It felt... bittersweet.

He could see the interior of a building, or a structure, or... a tent, it looked like, suspended along thick, straight lengths of smoothed wood, tall yet cozy. As the wind blew it rustled through the walls, smooth and sewn animal hides etched with careful patterns and designs. Inside the vision he lifted his paw and ran his fingers over the designs: here was an image of a wild wolf chasing a stag; here was the river where it flowed over the rocks, smooth and steady, towards the waterfall that dipped down into the lake; here was the ridge to the east, the peak of the hill past that, the lightning-struck oak at the foot. Long, strong fingers stretched out over the hide, calloused fingerpads still able to pick up the familiar patterns, as he had been the one to carve these so many years ago. He had tried to use these claws of his, sharp and curved, but had been guided to use the tools instead, special little metal implements acquired from one of the border villages near the grasslands.

Lounging back, he stretched his arm out and reached up and over his head towards the continuation of the design. Here was his mother, bright-eyed and sharp-eared, that characteristic confident smirk on her face and strength to her posture, the image of a bow held in one paw with an arrow readied in her other, and her little knife hanging by her side. Her companion walked beside her, the powerful, imposing Stike, the two of them together a symbol of what it meant to be a wolf.

Half-sitting, half-lying like that, body stretched back and head tilted out, he smirked. He had grown up with her as his mother, and now she stood as the tribe's chieftess – so he had to listen to what she said even more than usual. It wasn't so bad, though: she was understanding and level-headed, and knew both her own strengths as well as those of all the other hunters here. She could be a fierce leader as well as a gentle caretaker, both of which he had experience since he was a pup.

He straightened up, stretched his arms over his head, gave voice to a cavernous yawn, then sat the rest of the way up and rolled his head on his shoulders. The huge, warm lump under his side that he had used as a pillow throughout the night stirred and moved as well, and when he had wiped the sleep from his eyes, another pair of warm golden gems glittered up at him from their place in the feral's sleek yet broad muzzle.

Colors of stone and ice throughout her pelt, all tinted to a more even ash-grey in the shade of the tent, she also yawned, shifted to stretch her forelegs out, then stood up beside him to do the same for her back legs. With him sitting and her standing, he had to straighten up a bit to be able to rest his arms over her back; compared to Stike she was a runt, but next to a natural feral wolf, she came about average. He sighed, licked his lips, and pushed his nose into the fur of her shoulder, inhaling her warm, comfortable scent.

The warmth that constantly bubbled inside of him from their link then took in that scent and familiarity and ignited in a burst of affection and awareness. That was the way it worked: he could know and feel what she thought and felt at all times, and she did the same for him. He nuzzled up along her neck towards her ears, lifting himself up onto his knees as he went so that he could wrap his arms down around his companion's chest and hold her to him – and she tilted her head to bump her muzzle against his, tail swaying against his waist.

Without words, without clear and distinct thoughts, they could exchange impressions and feelings, and as he sent his love and comfort through the bond, she reflected her own back at him. They stayed like this for a moment wrapped in each other's presence, the rest of the tent and the world outside falling away just as it happened every morning, every evening, every time they got a chance to themselves. Eyes closed, mouth partially open, sensitive lupine nostrils flared, he drew her scent in again and again, slow steady breaths filling his body and awareness...

...and gradually Lannon became aware of the wet warmth of tears trickling down through his fur, arms tight around Sulla before him. Still the wolf slept, his shoulders or leg or tail giving a little twitch every now and then from his dream. The lynx swallowed, sputtered a little bit, tried to wipe at his nose and eyes, then gave up and wiped his face off along Sulla's chestfur instead.

The emptiness still remained there inside of him. Lannon knew this; he had seen it immediately after the ritual. Sulaya recognized it. Sulla still walked as only half of what he used to be, and without that other half and the support it granted, he would fall apart. And here Lannon was, just a lynx, hardly able to keep himself upright for the time being.

He had thought and hoped that all of this would fade once he had finished – and succeeded at – the ritual, though at first he assumed he had failed. Sulaya had sharply reminded him that he was not perfect, and that he could not do everything himself. Hopefully, though, this would be one more thing that he could.

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“We need to get you some clothes,” Lannon had said the next morning, after both had awoken. What had done it for *him* was firm heat and strong scent pressing against the side of the base of his tail from behind, one of Sulla’s arms wrapped tight around his chest and the wolf’s muzzle settled into his shoulder, and the lynx had squirmed and grinded and pressed himself back a few times only for another twinge and muscle cramp to let him know that he still wasn’t ready for something like, despite how much he *actually* wanted it. So after a bit of a struggle and some work he had managed to extricate himself from the still-sleeping wolf’s grasp and get dressed.

At least his body had responded more readily than the day before: he only needed to stop for a break once while getting things on, and then sat fairly comfortably at the table penning down his notes and thoughts into his journal while waiting for Sulla to awaken. Then when he did, Lannon didn’t notice at first until those heavy arms draped around his shoulders from behind, and the wolf’s muzzle came down to rest along his head between his ears.

“Hey there, beautiful,” the lynx had said, warmth spreading through his body. What had he been worried about last night? *“Sleep okay?”* And then he had turned, him sitting in his chair with Sulla standing up straight behind him, and... coming face to face with that *again* had been what led him to the clothing realization.

Even now on his way through the woods, the bright, open fields of the grasslands coming steadily more visible in the spaces between the trunks, he couldn’t help but think and daydream about that. *What if I had rested my paw on his hip and leaned in, instead of blushed and turned away? What if I had nuzzled n along his sheath – God, I could smell him; I still can – and reached in to... what if I had... what if he hadn’t perked and jumped as though surprised and turned away, and had gripped my head between my ears so he could...*

The feeling was mutual, naturally. All of it: from the interest and desire to the sudden and intense arousal, to the burst of nervousness, shyness, and uncertainty all in one, combined with a rolling doubt and frustration at that uncertainty immediately afterwards. Lannon wanted to, and Sulla wanted to as well – but both found themselves stuck behind that invisible wall, the lynx sitting in his chair and Sulla standing before him, plump sheath and heavy sack *right* on level with his nose and eyes, whiskers twitching with the warm, intoxicating scent. He had looked forward straight there, at the dark fur and the little lip of slightly-slick flesh, blinked, swallowed, felt his mind empty – then glanced up at the wolf’s muzzle, met his eyes, blushed, and then they both looked away, Sulla half-turning and reaching to cover himself.

The lynx stumbled over a half-buried root knot in the earth, at once yanking him out of his thoughts and musings and forcing him to grip more fully onto the length of maple he had brought with him. One more hill and then another, and then the village should come into view; it was good that he had left fairly early in the morning, normally around the time he would have taken his daily bath. That was another

thing in the back of his head: he had made this trek so far with relatively few interruptions and mishaps. The aches and pains had certainly begun and started to dig into his muscles, but he prided himself on pushing through and carrying on. This, at least, wasn't anything he was unused to, and besides – where yesterday he could barely carry himself and nothing else to the river, today he had made the considerably longer journey with a half-full bag slung over his back.

He would need to rest for a while once he got there, certainly. The hills, though shallow, still each provided a challenge and he needed to stop for a rest atop each one, but before the sun had made its way much further across the sky he had come down among the first of the buildings and was on the path towards his childhood home. A thin finger of smoke trailed its way into the sky from the chimney, built from warm reddish-brown blocks of stone hewn from a dry river valley nearby.

That put a smile on his face. Lannon bunched his cloak around himself a little more tightly, shifted his bag on his shoulder, and started up the path to the front door, thought stopped once he reached it. Between the sound of the wind through the distant trees, and the noise of the village behind and below him, something else so familiar tickled at his sensitive ears, through the jingling of his earrings. Something from out behind the house, likely in the covered and partitioned workshop area. The smile on his face grew and spread; paw still raised to knock the door, he leaned over and then started back around the house.

The sound became louder the closer he got, verifying his thoughts. *Shhf... chak. Shhf... chak*, slow and steady, with the occasional grunt of effort and rhythmic rattle of the shuttle between the threads. His father used a slightly modified version of a sitting loom, designed and tweaked to accommodate his one remaining arm; a second, standard loom sat in the other corner of the workshop now, covered with a discolored cloth. That would be the one that Lannon's mother had used, and the one that he himself had as well.

When he turned the corner and came into view of the workshop another sound came to him, this one just as familiar, if not more so, than the rhythmic swish and click of the loom as his father worked. The sound of his voice, singing softly between the work:

*“Another time, another place – like a dream, I can just recall your face;
the morning's dew – ah – it reminds me of you.
Oo-roo, oo-roo, ah, the dew...
Autumn rolls to winter, winter slips to spring –
I wish, I wish, once more to hear you sing.
Oo-roo, oo-roo, with me, to sing...”*

Lannon stumbled where he walked, his makeshift cane thumping briefly against one of the workshop's exterior support posts before he managed to catch himself. His father perked up, paused in his work, and glanced over his shoulder, then got right back to it.

“Welcome,” the older lynx said, voice strong and steady as always. “Let me finish what I'm doing here and then I'll be right with you. Travelling from out of town?”

Lannon paused, then realized what was happening. The cloak covering his body, the hood drawn over his face, the walking stick protruding up over his shoulder, his tight, painful posture... he coughed into a fist and tried to play with his voice a bit.

“Ah, yes,” he said, putting a bit of gravel into his words. His father’s ears flicked and he paused again. “I need – to pick up some, ah... attire. Workman’s things. For a wolf, male, about – this tall, broad build, and...”

His father’s chair squeaked against the floor as he pushed it back, and then next thing Lannon knew the older cat stood before him, paw on his waist, staring down at him. He chuckled and turned his head to the side, the piercings in his ear poking up through the hole in the hood rattling and jingling. His father reached forward to flip the hood back; Lannon leaned back and nearly lost his balance, only for the older cat to grab his arm and hoist him back upright again.

“Lannon!” His familiar face split in a wide grin. “I didn’t recognize you at first. Gods, you look terrible. Are you alright? Did something happen? Also – you know that clothesmaking is a completely separate discipline. It’s not been long enough that you’ve forgotten that, has it?”

“No, no. Of course I remember.” Lannon leaned in for a hug as best he could, the waist-high divider separating the workshop from the exterior pressing against his thighs. “I wanted to see you anyway, and I remember that that’s what travelers always asked of us when they came by. May I come in?”

“May I know why you suddenly look like you’ve got the body of someone my age instead of yours?”

On the way into the house Lannon looked back over towards the border of the woods, just visible from this family’s house here. The tight-knit canopy up at the top swayed and moved in a slow, steady wave with the breeze. Some part of him couldn’t help but wonder and worry if Sulla would be alright on his own: before he left he had done his best to let him know, *I’m running to town to get some things for you, I’ll be back, please stay here and stay safe, I’ll be back before the sun goes down...* and while he knew that the wolf could understand him, the lack of a verbal response still made him a bit nervous.

Then even *more* so when Sulla had perked, blinked, and mimed a few things, which Lannon put together to be aiming and shooting a bow, and using a knife. The lynx had almost turned him down until Sulla went and pointed at the hanging stag, and the discoloration and oily sheen that had begun on some parts of it. So he reassured himself by saying, *well, he is a hunter...*

Inside the hut felt, of course, exactly like it had last time, though now Lannon carried with him a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment, even though he knew that his task was barely halfway over. Or – his prescribed task, to find and solve the issue of the monster, had come to completion. But there was still more to do.

“Where to start...” the younger lynx mused, shifting his cloak off his shoulders. At least he showed no actual physical signs of strain.

His father took his walking stick from him and looked over it with a judgmental eye. “You got here earlier, so you could start with getting some tea going. Can you make it over there?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m still young, Father. Just – sore.”

“You’d have fooled me. What happened?”

Lannon went over it as best he could, though of course left out the parts that still made him blush to think about. The exploration, the studies, the realization that Sulla was the one in the stories and myths, though he left out the wolf's name...

"So you found it?" his father asked, sitting there at the table. Lannon fiddled with the heavy iron kettle and the pail of water beside it. "And you didn't kill it?"

"Did you expect me to?"

"No," answered without a pause. "I did not. I'm proud of you. I was worried you might get hurt, and you *did*, but I know you're capable."

Capable. Yeah. Here he was, knowing that his father expected him to have the pot up and bubbling in the blink of an eye, trying to surreptitiously find the firestarter instead. A few attempts during his explanation showed that he still could not grasp the threads of magic like before. A steadier hand and stronger presence of mind, and still they seemed to be coated in a thin oil.

From there he described his growing relationship with Sulla, presenting it to his father more as a nervous, arm's-length situation than the close, intimate, sweaty and drool-soaked arrangement it really was. Then the discovery of the ailment, some technical specifics on the magic, the ritual – with the main portion of it left out, of course; Lannon could feel his ears burn at the thought – and then...

"So," he finished, turning to carry the steaming teapot over. "That's why I need the clothes. None of mine will fit him."

His father's shoulders bounced in a quiet laugh. "Ah. I thought you were joking about that part."

"Nope. I've got about six foot three of tribal male wolf waiting naked at the hut in the woods." One cup for his father, and one for himself. The scent immediately reminded him of Sulaya. "And what little I brought over with me from Solm won't fit him, of course."

"I can get that worked out for you. We can also go have a chat with Madam Kay to get you some salves and mixes for your muscles and such – gods know she'll be happy to see you again."

"I was wondering if she was still around... I remember she was already pretty old when I apprenticed under her, as a kitten."

"She was. She is. Both of those things." His father chuckled over another sip of his tea. "She might have something for your *other* affliction, too, though of course that's out of my realm of knowledge."

A shiver shot down Lannon's back. "Other affliction?"

"Mhmm. The part you left out about your ritual. Lannon, I was married to a magic user for seventeen years. Except under very specific circumstances, you don't do anything without magic that you could do with. And I just watched you light the stove in the same way I do."

There it was. Lannon had found that as he thought about it less, it bothered him less. The worry had started to creep up and grow into a deep, constricting dread.

“Lannon...”

The young lynx rested his head in his paw. Suddenly he felt the exhaustion of the walk over here bear down on his shoulders and hips.

“It’s like a muscle,” he answered after a moment, not looking at his father. “And I’ve just overworked it. Spirit magic is – intense. That’s why I’m so tired like this. I pushed a little too far, and dug a little too deep, and I’m still recovering from it. But I’ll be fine.” Here he forced a smile. “It’s nothing that hasn’t happened before. They – taught us about this at the academy.”

His father appraised him for a moment longer, then took another sip. “If you say so,” he said, cup still held to his mouth. “You do know more about it than I do. How long will it take?”

The scary part: “I don’t know. I’m already feeling a lot better in body, but – as you can see, still not all the way there.”

“It *will* come back, though?”

“It will.” *It has to. It’s the only thing I know.*

“Will I need to escort you back to your hut? I can take the day off to-”

“No, no, that’s fine. I’ll be fine. Besides, I need to get back to work with Sulla, and...”

The expression on his father’s face changed for a moment there, brows raising, pierced ears perking up and then swinging to the sides. “Sulla?”

Lannon paused. “Yes. That’s his...”

“You didn’t mention his name. Sulla...”

“Why? Are you two friends? He seems about your age.” It felt good to laugh. Lannon took another sip as well. “Do you know him?”

Another chuckle from his father, alongside a shrug. Bright eyes glittered at him across the table.

“I might, actually. Do you know his mother’s name?”

“No, I don’t. He’s actually – *ah-*” Lannon doubled over, a sharp yet still fairly slight pain suddenly blooming in the palm of his paw. His father pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, concerned, while the younger lynx unclenched his fingers with effort... and saw nothing there. The pain was fast receding, leaving only a small tingling in its place. Carefully, he worked his fingers, squeezed his palm, turned his paw over and back again.

His father sat back down after a moment. “Was that also part of your ritual?”

“No, that...” How odd. “I don’t know what that was. It’s gone now, though. Um – will you come with me to get everything I need?”

“Of course. You know, there is a silver lining to this, though.”

Each lynx finished his cup of tea, and then Lannon waited for his father to stand up and offer a helping hand down to him. “What’s that?”

A good amount of strength vibrated in that arm of his – there had to be, of course. His father grinned.

“Maybe Sal will finally sell you a loaf of bread now that he doesn’t have to worry about you burning down his stocks again.”