

That night, Sulla had trouble sleeping. Lannon felt it, both in his body and through whatever rudimentary link the two had established: the turning and rolling, the shifting back and forth, the vague restlessness in his limbs and in his mind. When he finally did get to that point, then, he stayed there for quite a while, leaving the lynx to another morning bathing alone – *truly* alone this time, for Sulaya did not deign to visit him.

While there, while feeling at that little nugget in the back of awareness that he had come to consciously recognize as Sulla, the lynx touched and felt at his ear. Not the one bearing the studs and chains and cuff, but rather the other one, the one which he could no longer refer to as *naked*. He felt at it and floated away into his thoughts and considerations, standing there in the river with the chilly water coming up to his waist. He leaned forward and tried to peer into his reflection again, to see the fleck of mossy green in his eyes that hadn't been there before, but the stirring currents and quality prevented him from seeing clearly.

It had always been there, he realized – this little link, whatever it was. The idea had hit him some time ago but he hadn't had enough sense or experience to put a name to it, and besides, his sheer incapability of using magic at this point in time prevented him from investigating it further. It was just *there*, a distant awareness of Sulla's thoughts and feelings – a good portion of his magical education consisted of mental exercises and meditations, training the student to be able to wholly separate themselves from their thoughts, to take a step back and watch everything happen as an observer. That was what it felt like to Lannon, here: he felt it when Sulla stirred awake, watched all of the little hints of thoughts and ideas swirl through his head, and even though he couldn't quite pick them apart, he still instinctively felt and identified a few of those imprints.

Hunger was one of those, of course, alongside *cold*. *Lannon* was there, too – Sulla was looking for and wondering where he was, then realized he was likely down at the river. The way that one stuck made him smile: *Lannon. Lannon. Where is Lannon? I want Lannon. I want him.* The wolf had had some kind of dream, too, but the details were likely too foggy even to him to remember.

After meeting up, nuzzling, and spending a little extra time in the river, the two returned to their daily routine, with Lannon having wholly discarded his need for a cane or walking stick, and his muscles protesting only slightly every now and then. He couldn't help but wonder if Sulla had been able to feel all of the same pains and tensions, as he had in his paw when the wolf had accidentally cut his palm. From that, too, it was hard not to get wrapped up in closeness and affection, with Sulla's paws around his waist and Lannon's muzzle against his chest, each enjoying the other's presence and scent, reveling in the warmth and touch, with all of that appreciation and enjoyment vibrating back and forth through the bond...

Sulla was aware of it, too. Something about Lannon's discovery had sent a signal along the link, and now he could tell that Sulla regarded his view of it with a bit of amusement, as if to say, *took you long enough*. It helped quite a bit, especially with Sulla's lack of verbal communication: now he could pair his expressions and motions with a few small, cherrypicked notions sent through their link, and after a moment Lannon could understand.

*Follow me. Up here. Wait; silent. We're being watched.*

"*Watched?*" Lannon sent back, looking around. The two had made their way away from the hut and river deeper into the woods, further north by his reckoning. "*What?*"

Sulla pantomimed drawing and readying the bow he had slung over his back. *Hunter*. He pointed to himself, an empty spot next to him, and held up three fingers. *And companion. Three pairs.*

“*Why now?*”

The next idea Sulla had no trouble expressing, but it did take the lynx a moment to interpret it. *Always*, he told him. *Always there. Always watching.*

Some time later, though, the scouting group passed on, and the two of them continued on their way. Lannon wasn't sure what it was Sulla sought out here, as he prowled through the verdant trees and thick brush without his bow drawn, with his ears forward and his body low. As though he tracked something, but the concentration and tension thrumming in his part of the link – now that he was *aware* of it, Lannon could hardly believe he had ever dismissed it – showed that he was rather *searching*, for something he knew was here but couldn't find.

And he didn't. As the sky began to darken, the change in the air settling in much more quickly in the depths of the forest, the wolf straightened to his full height, sniffed at the sky, and then turned to face Lannon. Both of them understood, wordlessly, that it was time to return home. Night had wrapped around the land by the time the little hut poked its way through the trunks and shadows, but where Lannon was more than relieved to get off his feet and relax on the bed, Sulla headed right back out and returned some time later.

And, then, he did not sleep – or if he did, it was for only a brief snatch of time during which Lannon had already fallen into the arms of his dreams. The lynx awoke at a few points throughout the night, vaguely aware either of the wolf's presence along the bed beside him, or wrapped around him, or somewhere else completely, but still always in the room. That was something else of which he had been vaguely aware before, the knowledge of Sulla's position relative to him. Now he could feel when he was nearby, and that brought him a sense of safety and comfort, and allowed him to more easily slide back into sleep.

The next day, as the sun came in through the window and the birds took up their song, Sulla told him that he was leaving, and would return in about four days' time. There was the slight concern and panic in the link, the wolf worrying that Lannon would misunderstand and think he was departing *forever*, but – Lannon understood. Sitting there at the edge of the bed, Sulla half-naked before him trying to explain in a complicated series of gestures and mouthed words his plan, his goal, and his reasoning.

Lannon smiled, reached up to take the wolf's wrists in his paws, and tugged him down to kiss his nose.

“I get it,” he said quietly. “There's a lot about you, and your culture, and your... *everything*, that I don't understand. Do what you need to do.” The lynx reached up and tapped the side of his head. “I'll be here, and I know you'll be able to find me.” He would also be able to stay at least somewhat aware of what it was the wolf would do along the way.

Sulla smiled as well, then slid his paws in to wrap around Lannon's from outside – and then the lynx felt a burst of sweet, wonderful warmth through their link, affection and appreciation all mixed together. His ears flicked back and he blushed, that warmth blossomed out in his chest, and next thing he knew he

had straightened up and leaned in to brush and then lock his lips to Sulla's for one, two, three... many seconds more.

When offered the bow, Sulla held up his paws; he could make his own. Some of the arrows he took, however; Lannon would have given more, but felt that a hunter like him would exercise as much care with his weaponry as he could. The knife went with him as well – Lannon had purchased another on his last visit to the village – along with a small wrapped portion of the now better-preserved doe from their recent hunting trip. Another hug, another kiss, another *feeling* exchanged through the bond, and then lynx watched wolf make his way out through the trees and into the forest.

This left him on his own, and suddenly, he felt at a loss as to what to do. Lannon waited there in the warmth of the woods for some moments longer, letting the gentle fingers of the breeze stir around him, tall decorated ears flicking back and forth with the changing sounds and songs. He pulled in a breath to taste the air: on that breath was the faint humidity from the nearby river and the morning dew clinging to the grass and leaves and bushes; there was the bittersweet touch of mold and decay along the low-lying and fallen logs and branches; a distant touch of muskiness, an overtone of floral warmth, and then of course the ever-present hint of Sulla still clinging to his body, his muzzle, his mouth.

Lannon raised his arms and held them out, fingers splayed. He closed his eyes, licked his lips, swallowed, pulled in another breath, let it back out... and then, slowly, he lowered himself down, crossed his legs, and straightened his back. And there he sat, willing the currents of the world to wash over and wrap around him, less trying to seize and grab and tug as he had grown so used to with attempting his magic, and more just letting everything happen.

It was an old novice's exercise first taught to him at the academy, something that he had always disregarded. Lannon had never been particular *good* at meditation: he had grown up using magic, and had been identified as a skilled user of what they called *low magic*. Much quicker and more powerful, yet at the same time volatile and possibly unpredictable. Untrained, unrestricted, unbound. In hardly a blink of an eye, barely a flick of his thoughts, he could grab hold of the threads around him and warp them to his desires, for that formed the basis of magic: the intent behind the action, the willpower driving that intent, and then the actual ability of the user.

That was Lannon's strength at the academy – when he decided to do something, he *would* get it done. The initial entrance exam, with the Archmage watching him across the table as he explained he could, in fact, use Spirit magic; when he had sat down with Sariya, then just a friend he barely knew, to teach her his spell for his magical lantern; when he had gone to the blacksmith to commission the forging of his earring, the vertical cuff, and in exchange used his abilities to power and fuel the furnace –

When he tried to heal Emnis, and he could not.

His first instinct was still to seize that thought tight, to choke it down and shove it away, but he did not. Lannon steadied his breathing and took a mental step back, instead letting that memory and all of its vile, awful associations pass by. Smoke on the wind, that's all it was – smoke on the wind and the distant, sickening scent of charred flesh and burnt hair. His heart tripped and shook with the memory, just as it had when Sulaya had forced him to relive it in the river.

*You are not perfect, it told him. There are things even you cannot do, Lannon Asaros. You hold yourself up to such a high standard. You cannot achieve everything.*

*But I can do this.* Again he swallowed and focused himself, opening himself up to the world around him. Even with his eyes closed he could still see the interweaving threads of magical energy all around him, for it was a different kind of awareness and perception. Still that little nugget that was Sulla lingered in the back of his head, watching at a distance, focusing on his own life and his own things. Lannon set that awareness aside for the moment, and instead looked at the way everything warped and shifted around him.

Before, it came to him like any sort of reflex, barely a thought or conscious recognition attached to it: he needed only to make the movement, to establish the link, so to say, and the fire leapt to his paw and danced there at his will. Now, though, it felt like digging through a thick slop blind to what it was he sought, the threads and cords diving away from his touch, the contacts slippery and hard to grasp. But, today, he persisted. He persisted, he focused, he tried – and though his mind wandered again and again, floating back and forth between his task, Sulla there in the back of his head, thoughts and memories of Sariya and Emnis, and idle thoughts and ideas – and he kept at it. His body was aware of the gradual passage of time, evident in the wind across his fur, the temperature of the air, and the particular noises all around him, as well as the growing hunger in his stomach, but still the lynx sat there and focused.

He grasped onto the strands of magic, the thick, vibrant cords of Fire streaming down from the sun, and held them tight. They slipped and wriggled from his grasp, but still he reached out for them, coaxed them back, and held them there. It took effort and concentration, and he felt like he was trying to reverse the flow of a river or keep a boulder steady over his shoulders – but then an extra brightness and a warmth flashed against his eyes and muzzle, and when he looked, there floated a thin, pale flame before him, twisting and dancing in the gentle breeze.

Here for a second and then gone, sputtered out, the last ember of a dying candle. Lannon let out the breath he had been holding and allowed himself to relax, just for a few moments. That was something. It had been a step. Now that he had returned and pulled away from that intense focus, he came sharply aware of everything happening around him: when he opened his eyes he saw that the sun had crossed about halfway across the sky, and he was hungry and thirsty, and his legs hurt from where he sat, and his back ached.

Part of him wanted to get up and take care of all of that, to go sit down for lunch and take the bath he had missed this morning, and just go on a walk through the woods. What better time would he have to do this than *right now*, though?

*You're afraid of failure*, that other part told him. *You don't want to know. There's a thought in your head, an idea, and you don't want to prove that thought correct, since that would mean you have failed.*

He sighed, closed his eyes, and resumed his position. Sulla's presence in the back of his head gradually faded underneath everything else – it was always *there*, but he could easily forget about it unless he actively, deliberately focused on it. He sat there, thinking and focusing, and time continued to pass.

This time he better managed and wrangled his thoughts and wandering mind, with all of those same things passing by yet leaving him unbothered. Sariya's face and voice, and all of the lovely little things she had said to him floating by; Emnis with his rich laugh and bright eyes. All of his classes, all of his teachers and tutors, some of them shocked at the lynx's swift progress and easy grasp of new concepts and spells, others disappointed and disgruntled with his approach or the way he thought about things.

The dry heat of the desert, touched with only a slight weight of humidity from the city's oasis; the beauty of the massive, living tree which served as the foundation and center of the palace; the huge, jagged pillars of blue-green glass jutting up into the pale sky over the city walls to the northeast, the bases veined and swollen like huge roots thrust into the depths of the sand underneath.

Before that, Lannon's initial trek across the land, north to south, crossing south and east, watching the way forest gave way to prairie, the way prairie gave way to badlands, badlands to desert, desert to oasis. The sole mercenary, the lion with the rough voice and rougher exterior, who had offered an escort from capital Heatherfield, down and around the river Senna and hugging the crystal waters towards Solm.

Then before that, travelling with Feras, the peddler, from his home village to the capital. Before that, talking with his father, his little misadventure in the woods where he had ended up with a lupine arrow pierced through his shoulder – thinking about it, experiencing that thought as it floated across the exterior of his little mental bubble, gave the almost-forgotten wound a little twinge – and before that, as a kitten, exploring and learning and practicing his magic, out and away from the eyes of the village.

His mother, kneeling down before him, blue eyes bright, as she reached forward and rubbed at the young Lannon's ear. He liked the way it felt when she ran the pad of her thumb over his piercing, the single stud there at the base.

*"I've never been good at it," she had told him. Her voice was gone, but the words remained. "But think of it more like scooping a leaf from beneath the surface of a river. Moving to seize it, fast and hard, will force it to swirl and bounce and escape your grasp; reaching carefully, moving with the natural flow, will allow it to settle into your reach, and it will more readily bend to your will. That's how you do it. We don't know where it comes from, but it's there. It's always there, waiting for you. So – reach out, and coax it out.*

*"There you go. Good boy..."*

The flame sputtered, flashed, and died within barely half a second, a thin wisp of smoke curling up into the early-evening air showing the only mark of its life. Frustration and anger began to well up from deep within the lynx, and after attempting to resume his posture for a few moments longer he grumbled, kicked his legs out, moved to stand up, and nearly fell right back over. Sulla was still there in his head, still moving roughly north, still on his way.

The lynx turned in that direction, closed his eyes, and felt the wolf's path and his determination. Then, a faint smile on his muzzle, he turned to hobble into the hut to finally get himself a meal.

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Sulla jerked awake and stirred where he sat. confusion and shock immediately wrapping in around him. The trees here were different, the sky slightly shifted, the taste in the air altered. This was not where he had fallen asleep, and... certainly he hadn't done so with his legs crossed like this. He frowned, licked his lips, felt the sharp needle-like fangs there, felt the weight in his tall ears... felt a distant yet ever-present throbbing in one of his shoulders, and a general ache in his lower back, and a tightness behind his knees.

Then another shock jolted through him – he was being watched, and from a *very* close distance. Here, sitting just halfway across the clearing, was another wolf, another hunter, with his arm draped over his companion. Two pairs of golden eyes appraised him in the darkness of night, or perhaps the gloom that came before dawn; he looked up at the sky again and saw no moon.

“Hello,” said the other hunter, voice like smooth, sweet tree sap. “Are you okay? Can you understand me?”

Sulla frowned and looked down over himself again. Everything seemed... “Yes,” he answered, then swallowed and wet his lips with his rough sandpaper tongue. His throat felt dry. “Yes, I’m – alright.”

The other wolf also looked him over, then shifted his posture and sprawled his legs out underneath him. His companion did not remove his gaze from Sulla, but lowered down as well. “They teach you our tongue, out in the city?”

*City.* That word... Sulla recognized it as exactly the same as it was in Lannon’s Common. A loanword, from a later dialect of the same language. He *could* understand Lannon’s speech, with enough thought and concentration, but the simple bond the two had established helped quite a bit; idly he wondered if the little lynx had recognized that for what it was, yet. He reached out, tugged along the strings binding them to each other, and felt Lannon sleeping peacefully quite a distance away.

To the north. That didn’t seem right.

“No,” Sulla answered. It had been so long since he had tried to speak, and so much longer since he had actually done it successfully: the syllables were familiar, yet felt unknown on his tongue. “I already knew it. I am one of you.”

“One of...” The hunter glanced at his companion. “A hunter?”

“Yes.”

“In *that* body?”

Sulla held his paws out and saw thin, soft fingers, wreathed in fur of pale tan and warm sand, splotched with little patches of fresh dripping shadow. Retractable claws, curved and deadly; slim, lithe legs beneath him, a shorter muzzle, these *ears*, so leadened with jewelry...

“Yes,” he answered, though he felt unsure. What was this?

The pair remained silent for a moment. Sulla watched the two of them, unsure what to say, until the hunter continued.

“You have been here for quite some time,” he went on, in that thick, sweet voice. He seemed young. “Since before the sun crossed halfway over the sky. Unmoving, barely breathing. I wondered if you were dead.”

“Not yet.”

Then the other wolf's muzzle split in a wide grin. "I see that, and I am thankful for it. What is your name?"

"Sulla."

"Sulla. That is one of our names."

"I am one of you."

"Are you a lynx, or a wolf?"

Something thrummed in his bond with Lannon. Sulla frowned again; the answer should have come easily but it stuck there, at the back of his mind and the back of his throat. "Perhaps... a little bit of both. Weren't you told not to approach me?"

"We were told not to approach *him*. Us, and our parents, and our children."

"Who was he?"

The hunter shifted how he sat, crossing his legs underneath him and resting his bow in his lap. Sulla eyed it in the darkness: finely crafted, even more finely strung. The hunter had removed an arrow from his quiver but now rested it in his lap as well. It bore a steel arrowhead; that had been a peculiar phenomenon Sulla had noticed when he was still part of the tribe, considering his people had no grasp of metallurgy. Finally, the other wolf turned his muzzle to the side. Sulla looked as well, and saw nothing there.

"He was a curse," he explained, voice lower. A breeze blew through the trees. Slowly Sulla came to recognize the constant drone of cicadas and crickets and little frogs, all around them. "A memory, and a bad dream. A bad omen. His companion was taken from him, and for the rest of eternity he was cursed to carry and live that pain and agony, and to share it with anything and anyone he encountered."

"But, why?"

Golden eyes flashed his way again. "It's the way the gods work. All we can do is pray and honor them, each in our own ways. The children need a demon to keep them in line, after all."

Sulla looked down at his little feline paws. "The gods don't speak our language," he said. His voice, too, felt unfamiliar. The other hunter fell silent. "What happened to him?"

"Nobody knows. You – Sulla – carry *her* protection." He reached up and tapped at his ear; Sulla did the same, and felt there the same little bone and amber earring that Lannon had begun to bear. "Four others bear that same mark. You carry her protection, and as such, you stepped into *his* presence and banished him. That is what we think; we kept an eye on you, but had to keep our distance. None of the others wanted to even look at him. He was a vile reminder of the vulnerability of our ways, and the danger inherent in our bonds."

*Banished him.* Sulla squeezed his paws together; his claws slid out and poked at his palms. "I banished the evil."

“Did you?”

“I did.” But then, in his head – a tall, broad-shouldered white wolf, blue eyes, sharp teeth, wretched grin. Sword in one paw, arm raised, Common on his tongue, until he leaned in and growled at Sulla, switching to the words they shared... “But still evil remains.”

“As ever.” This time when the hunter adjusted himself, he turned to the side and draped his arms over his companion’s side. The feral wolf huffed and rolled over as well, showing his belly to his hunter’s back. “If she has already marked you, strange little lynx-cat, then it should be obvious, but – you are welcome here, in our woods and our world. You have treated us, and her, with respect and appreciation.”

“Thank you. What is your name?”

There was that grin again. “I wondered when you would ask. Talla.”

“Talla?”

“I am Talla, son of Bala, Kusu, and Ro. This is my companion, Fa. If you are one of us, as you say, do you too have a bloodline?”

Sulla couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Kusu had a child?”

“Two – I have a sister, Shora. You know my father? You look hardly as old as I am.”

“I did, years ago. I am Sulla. Son of Noma, Luca, and Stike.”

Talla’s expression changed a bit, ears flicking back and mouth tightening. Then, though, it was gone, and he relaxed again. “It is good to formally meet you, Sulla. Would you like to accompany me back to the camp?”

The camp... a pang of longing and desire, flaring up and then suppressed. Sulla shook his head.

“No. I am on a journey.”

“That is why you sat here all day?”

“I...”

Talla laughed. “I understand. Again, you bear her mark; when you are ready, she can show you the way.”

“Who is *she*?”

“I think you would know better than any of us, save our chieftess.” Talla shifted to stand up. He used his companion for leverage. “We have seen you in the river with her. She is never far away, though, and always watching; the forest is her domain, and she its spirit and soul. I must return now, Sulla. I imagine we will meet again.”



The fallen leaves and branches barely crunched beneath the young hunter's footpaws as he turned to leave. Sulla watched, still sitting in place, and then let his breath out. So, *so* many things had changed.

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It was a chill morning breeze that stirred Lannon awake, and then immediately ignited a thousand aches throughout his body. He had fallen asleep outside, sitting in this meditative position, and now it certainly *felt* like he had. Throat dry, stomach growling, world spinning around him, the lynx grumbled and flopped out on his back, looking up at the pale sky with the front of the hut just at the edge of his vision. What an odd dream that was, and leading up to it...

He had achieved that first flame, and then the spark some hours later, and then after that, nothing. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing more, yet still the currents of magic twisted and flowed around him, teasing and tantalizing, *infuriating*. Still he could feel and sense them now, constantly there, right at the edge of his awareness and perception.

He was a trained and practiced musician, trying to play with fingers suddenly shattered and twisted. A blacksmith with a forge incapable of reaching a usable temperature. A weaver without a shuttle, without a thread that would not break at the slightest tug.

"Lannon."

The lynx swallowed, sighed, and closed his eyes. "I was wondering when you were going to show up."

"You wanted me."

That much was true. In Sulla's absence, still travelling north, slowing down... Lannon shifted and managed to tug himself upright again, and there she sat straight across from him, legs crossed, paws on her knees. Morning sunlight glittered in her cloud-frost fur, and turned the patterns of brown and tan to a lighter, brighter sand and mud tone.

He ached, in his shoulder and his back and legs and throat. Again and again, even now, he reached for those little magical currents swirling and swaying around him, so close to his reach yet still evading his grasp, even when he moved carefully and consistently. The ache, the pain, began to stir, bubble, *boil* in his chest and in the back of his head; he dug his fingers into his thighs, claws poking out, sliding in, holding tight. Several small pinpoint stings joined the ache.

It was *right there*, so close, yet beyond his reach. Beyond his ability. Finally, slowly, Lannon realized and recognized what he had known since that first day after the ritual, when the spells and magic he had spent all of his life utilizing with little more effort than breathing or thinking, dripped from between his fingers like water.

The doors of magic had closed to him, and locked tight. He had burnt himself out.

*You should have died, doing what you did. Someone else died in your place.*

Sulaya half-tilted her head, a faint, sad smile touching her lovely muzzle. She wet her lips and leaned in to peer at Lannon's face.

*You have forfeited more than you know.*

The frustration, the anger, the *humiliation*, boiled over. Lannon's shoulders shook, and he crumpled forward, and then her arms were around him and his around her, and he turned his muzzle and sobbed into the wolfess's neck. Distantly, vaguely, he felt a flash of shock and concern through his half-bond with Sulla as his own powerful emotions no doubt made their way across, but this realization closed in and washed everything else away.

Everything that he had built his life towards, these past six years of study, all of the connections he had made at the academy, the sole *reason* he had left home and then returned, the very foundation of his expedition and research out here, now swiped out from underneath him and locked away. Suddenly he was lost; he dug his fingers into Sulaya's plush pelt, turned his head to the other side, and squeezed her against him, the huntress's gentle paws running up and down his back, holding him closer to her. She smelled *so much* like Sulla, yet still distinctly different in her own way.

What was left to him? He had always, *always* been Lannon Asaros, skilled Fire mage, unique for his quick understanding of new techniques and abilities, and especially for his slight talent in Spirit. He had done fantastic, amazing things in his time as a student and afterwards, had achieved what had never before been done throughout history, stood as a beacon of strength and perseverance to his peers, his fellows, and his partners, and...

And he had failed. Time and time again, each one worse than the last, until he had finally stripped himself of the very core of his being, leaving behind an empty shell, a ghost of what he had been before.

An empty shell, tied with a few loose, fragile threads to another, leagues away, somewhere north and steadily plodding. Continuing on despite everything that had happened, and all of the roadblocks and obstacles and inhibitions.

The lynx, no longer a mage, reached up around Sulaya's shoulder and wiped at his nose. He felt her turn her head and nuzzle down against him, breath warm along his ear. This time when her tongue flicked out, it grazed across the new earring that hung there, all on its own.

"Is it still worth it?" she murmured, voice barely more than a whisper. The sensation of it sent a shiver down the lynx's back, even as he still shook and shivered with half-suppressed sobs.

Lannon sighed, swallowed, closed his eyes, focused in on that half-formed link... then balled up his want, his affection, his desire to see Sulla and to have him back alongside him, and sent it through. A moment later that same warmth blossomed on Sulla's end of the bond, a moment later it returned. A silent promise, a quiet little recognition and reciprocation. He heard those words bright and clear, though Sulla lacked the voice to tell him.

Sulaya shifted again and rested her muzzle atop Lannon's, pushing the cat's down in her neck and angling it down a bit. He averted his eyes as best he could. "You've been out here quite a while," she went on, throat vibrating and tickling at his nose and forehead. "I came by yesterday but you were deep in your meditation."

“I was trying. *So hard...*”

“I know. I felt it.”

“All of it?”

“All of it, and more. The depth of your desire is intense, little cat. For magic, and for everything else.”

He wanted to go back to the academy, to stop worrying about all of this and instead focus on his studies all over again. He wanted Emnis leaning against him, the otter fiddling with one of the little puzzles that he kept on commissioning from the blacksmith, or reading through one of the required texts; he wanted to lounge back on the bed with Sariya draped over him, Lannon looking up at the ceiling with any number of thoughts drifting idly by, while the marten dozed softly against his chest. He wanted to be squeezed beneath both of them at night, all sharing their valuable body warmth amid the desert night.

Or... *did* he want that? Still shaking, the tears continuing to push themselves anew, he shifted, half-tilted his body, and settled more fully into Sulaya’s grasp, the wolfess angling her arm down a little bit to better hold and caress his body. Ever since he had arrived here at home, and even on the journey before, this weight in his ear, this extra metal from the tall, sleek cuff piercing, felt – *wrong*, almost. It had only felt more so as time passed, as Sulla came nearer to him, as the two went through their own evolutions and changes.

Suddenly, though, Sulaya’s arms tightened briefly around his body, trying to urge him up to his feet. “Come on. Come on, kitten.”

“Huh? What are-”

“You need to lie down. Come on.”

So he tried to rise to his footpaws, tried to shuffle along the warm earth and brush into the hut, but his body refused to work after his long period of meditation and stillness. Sulaya sighed, grunted, and then with only a little bit of difficulty swept him up into her arms, one underneath his back and the other hooked behind his legs. His eyes met hers, and he blushed, swallowed, looked away, and wiped at his eyes, the tears still slowly rolling; she shook her head and carried him towards the door, wholly wrapping him in her scent and warmth.

The memory of desert heat, of smooth-cut sandstone buildings, vaulting instruction halls, and wide-open practice galleries, dripped away. In their places rose up everything that had *been* his life for this past month and a half – these tall trees all around, tightly knotted, thick trunks reaching up to a thicker canopy through which only speckles and spatters of sunlight slid through, on the brightest of days. The constant *noise*, a low cacophony of wind, of rustling, of birds and insects, of other animals and creatures further out in the gloom. The weight of humidity in the air, the growing warmth of spring to summer. The knowledge that, between Sulla and especially Sulaya, Lannon could never *really* be alone, for better or for worse.

The wolfess lowered him down to the mattress – he grunted and shifted, his limbs and joints protesting at the changed position – and then slowly, carefully climbed up and over him to wrap her body around

his. His ear flicked beneath her breathing, slow and gentle, and with that flick all of the chains and metal jingled. Again he became aware of the heft of the cuff.

*True love, given and received and return. True love... "I won't ask details," his father had said, that first day he had returned from Solm, "but I will tell you that most of us put it on and take it off at least three times before it goes up there to stay. No, no, I know – I'm not doubting you. You've grown up so much in these six years. It's just... these things are unpredictable, Lannon. More so than anything else you'll encounter. Now, I don't have the perspective myself, but I'd be willing to say, yes, even if you're a mage."* Then, to his surprise, his father had reached up, scratched at his own ear, and then chuckled. *"...I already said I'm not gonna ask details, but I do have to know. Most assume that that piercing comes with – you know. 'Partnering' with someone. So, did you – I mean, was that..."*

"Does that feel good?"

Despite himself, despite the wetness still gathering at the edges of his eyes and the unsteady breathing working its way through his body, Lannon still shivered at the gentle touch of Sulaya's breath trickling in along his sensitive ear and neck. "Mm?"

"You're smiling." She leaned in and this time ran her nose up along the back of that ear, brushing it across the clasps of the stud piercings in the back, then over the smooth arced surface of the cuff. *Her* piercing hung along his other ear, half-flattened underneath his head.

*You carry her protection*, that wolf in his dream had told him. Or had he told Sulla that? Her mark, her protection, her favor... that much would be obvious to anyone who might see them like this, Lannon on his side, wolfess wrapped around him with her legs against his, her arm around his body, her muzzle on his head, her chest against his back-

"You've lost a lot," she went on, voice barely a murmur. "So much gone, and yet you have gained so much more, Lannon. I knew from the start that the ritual had taken your magic. You did too, didn't you?"

He sighed and swallowed again, then tried to answer but found his throat to close up around the words. So, he nodded instead.

"You didn't want to admit it."

A pause. He shook his head. His ear flicked beneath the tickling of her breath, in and out, across sensitive fur; she made a little noise and then nipped the soft flesh between her lips. Another shiver ran through his body. At least she had gotten him to stop weeping.

"Why?"

He had an answer for that one, but he didn't want to give it. It was the same thing as he had realized on his own, out there in front of the hut. *I expect so much of myself. I must be the best. I am the peak of skill in everything I do. Before I left, the Archmage offered me the position of being the first Spirit instructor in all of the academy's history.* The lynx closed his eyes, sighed, and curled up a little further. Sulaya's paw worked its way in around his chest and wriggled beneath his; she spread her fingers around his, and then squeezed them tight.

"Nobody can do everything on their own," she went on, her muzzle now closer along his neck than his ear. The warmth felt so pleasant, against the chill of the forest night spent sitting outside. "Not even you. Not even *us*. Why do you think we always bond, hunter to companion? Every single one of us."

"Except for you."

"I had a companion. I've told you this." She said it simply, matter of fact, without regret or disdain. "And you have met the others. You know one of them better than most."

The three – no, four, of them. They were... Lannon sighed and searched through his memory again. Stike, Drek, Su, and then Tul. Part of him wondered if he would see them, were he to open his eyes and look around, but he didn't. He shifted where he lay and settled back against the wolfess's body.

*Never alone. Neither me, nor her. Nor Sulla, now that I'm in his head.* Vaguely he felt around for him, and found the wolf still to the north, slowing in his pace. Where was he going?

"As I've told you before," Sulaya went on, "only one path remains open to you. You need it too, now, as much as he does."

"Need?"

"You view yourself as incomplete. Don't you? A mage stripped of his ability... a hunter stripped of his companion. The idea was already in your head. Don't try to hide that." Again she nipped at his ear, this time pulling a little gasp and twitch out of the feline. Sulla had figured out that that was one of the easiest spots to make him squirm, and it seemed Sulaya had just discovered this as well. "I can show you the way, when it comes to that point."

*You bear her mark. When you are ready, she will show you the way.*

"There is some more to be done first, but that is your next step."

Lannon turned his muzzle to the side, until he felt her breath against his whiskers. "Solidifying my bond with Sulla?"

She raised her eyebrows. "So you *have* felt it."

"It's the same thing. I always knew it was there; I was just didn't recognize it."

"As it goes. You learn quickly."

He squeezed her paw. "I know. Other than my sheer skill, it's one of my greatest strengths."

"*And you're prideful.*"

"Look who's talking." That made her laugh, which in turn made his ear flick. Lannon squirmed in her arms and lifted his head more fully up onto the pillow. "I'm... tired."

"I imagine you are. You've done a lot recently."

"Have you been watching Sulla, too?"

She hesitated before she answered, almost imperceptibly. "Yes. He is becoming aware of the need to bond. He has felt it once before, and his was broken; you might start feeling it soon yourself. Though, that *would* be quite interesting; it has never happened to someone other than one of our people..."

"That's me," Lannon drawled, drawing her paw up towards his chin. He *did* enjoy her scent, soft and pleasant yet rich and full. Just like Sulla's. "Always doing new, unexpected things."

"Since you're the best?"

"Since I'm..." He swallowed, again feeling the pangs of his entire world suddenly locked away from him. "I'm the best."

*Almost* his entire world. Sulaya made another little noise and nuzzled in along his neck, arm tightening again around his chest, and then sighed into his fur. He sighed, too, and let his eyes drift shut and his body to relax. Again he let all of those thoughts drift by, half-consciously watching them as though he were some distant audience. Emnis he already knew he would likely never see again, but Sariya...

The way she had bumped her muzzle against his, how she had rested her paws along his chest. She had had to stand up on her tiptoes to kiss his forehead, and halfway lowered down to do the same for his lips. "*I've watched you grow so much,*" she told him in that quiet voice, "*since that first day you stepped into class. It was Fundamentals, remember? For Fire. You far exceeded all of us. You've never stopped amazing me, Lannon.*" And then – "*I'll be here when you return, okay?*"

*When. Not if.* Without magic, he would never be able to return.

"I love you."

~ ~ ~

Sulla knelt before the altar, as he had done once before so, so many years ago. Just like that time, he was not on his own – but today, warm sun high overhead, trees swaying around the sacred grove, another of his kind stood before him instead of a feral, Huntress instead of companion.

*You look so much like your mother,* he thought, even now with his head bowed and paws clasped before him. *I miss her. I'm sorry I never knew you, but still, I've missed you as well.*

Her paws brushed down along his face and tilted his muzzle up, the touch making him jump. He felt the scar across his throat tug and pull against the movement, tight and tough. Golden eyes bright like the sun flicked across his face.

"There's something you need, isn't it?" she said, voice so much like her mother's as well. It tugged at Sulla's heart. "Something you know you need. You've started to feel it, and it burns at you."

He nodded, trying to avert his eyes. She would not let him look away. Instead she tilted her muzzle and wet her lips, those eyes shifting back and forth between his own.

“Green eyes...” she murmured, and then smiled. “I had your green eyes, too, once upon a time. I think you were there for that. It was so long ago.”

*Now you have your mother’s gold.* Sulla smiled, too. It came from deep in his heart, from far back in his shattered, mismatching memories. *It looks good on you.*

Slowly those paws, so much smaller than his own yet still bearing the same feral strength, made their way down from his muzzle. Her fingers spread out along the line of his jaw and tilted his head up; then her thumbs came in and circled around, pressing up against the underside of his jaw and in towards his throat. Then her fingers curled over and settled around the back of his neck, while her thumbs came in and pressed at each end of the scar.

A flash of memory, one that he had carried with him throughout that awful long night spent in the between – a wolfess approaching him, one the appearance of which made him stop in his tracks and *remember*. Four legs at first and then two, and she walked up to him, touched his shoulders, murmured words lost to time and memory in his ear...

“*She is gone,*” she had told him, that day so many years ago. He could not properly place when it had been, or what had come before or after. “*I am here.*” Then, mixed and muddled between the constantly churning sea of so many other broken memories and emotions, grief and guilt welled up, powerful and consuming.

He recognized her, though. So much lost to time and rage and grief, and still he had recognized her even then. “*Love... you...*” he had said, the words rough and uneven, the effort painful from a throat no longer used for speaking. Again and again he had murmured those words, trying to get them right, trying to get her to understand. In that moment, with this sleek, beautiful huntress, his daughter, embracing him, this huge, rugged, twisted abomination, the only thing that mattered to him was that she understood.

Today, here in the clearing, she ran her fingers over the scar along his throat, one side to the other. Her touch felt sweet and cool, like fresh river water trickling through his fur. Sulla shivered and sighed.

“*I love you too,*” she had told him then. “*Noma said that was always your deepest strength – love. Your deepest strength, and your greatest weakness.*” And see where that had led him. In that moment, hunched over and kneeling down, arms wrapped around her, he had felt cold – and then a sharp, intense heat, and that heat spilled out and poured down over her lovely cloud-white fur, and she became bright crimson red. Then she was gone, and the pain trickled out of him and disappeared.

And then he woke up, and again he was alone and in pain, and never again did he see her. Never again until now, when she touched at his throat again, and now drew her gentle paws across it instead of the blade of her knife, with the pommelstone of amber with a little black scorpion caught inside. He had had one like that once when he had been a hunter, though his had borne a spider instead.

“Sulla.”

He looked up at her. Satisfied, she drew her paws away from his throat and again folded them behind her while she leaned forward over the altar. The smooth, carved wood, the altar itself having been apparently shaped from a revealed knot of some giant, buried tree root, looked stained and discolored with age and all of the things that had passed over it in the many countless years. Sulla wondered how many more times it had been visited since he had last come here; in all the years since, he had never been able to find it again.

And then, two days ago he felt the pull again, the very same one as he had with Tul by his side, setting out on their bloodrites. It was not quite as strong, and changed in a way, but it was there – and now he was here, and he didn't know what to do.

Still she smiled, though, and now rested her muzzle on her paws, her elbows atop the altar. "Grandma Noma used to sing a little song to me when I was puppy, a little lullaby to help me sleep. It was one of your songs. Do you remember it?"

He frowned. His lips, silent, formed a word.

*"Sleep you soft, little wolf, sleep you long..."* she began, that smile persisting, growing. *"Sleep you well, little wolf, 'til the coming of the dawn. Do you remember? Sing for me."*

Sulla's mouth froze on those words. He reached up and touched at his throat, trying to show her, *I can't. I'm incapable. It is beyond me.* And there, he felt...

Felt smooth fur unbroken by any part or slash, and healthy, supple skin beneath. So when she had touched his throat earlier, when he had closed his eyes, and inhaled, and sighed, was that-? That cooling sensation, that little tickle, the same soft feeling like when Lannon drew his little kitten claws through the fur along the sides of his arms or his lower back...

*"May a wish, may a dream..."* Sulla. Sing for me."

He swallowed, wet his lips, and sang.