

Shimmering sunlight filtered in through the open-air ceiling of the palace's great hall, the wide, far-reaching branches of the central tree casting speckled shadows down along the polished marble floors. The Queen sat there in her throne, carved countless generations ago into the very trunk of this tree that had seemed to rise out of the sea of sand underneath, unlike anything else seen for days in any direction: this heart of nature had grown up and out of cool springs and aquifers hidden beneath the shifting desert sand, and now poured a pair of twin streams out from deep within its recesses, filling the hall with a constant quiet trickling. These two streams, angled and directed to run parallel along the length of the hall and then out into the grounds, spread through the rest of the city to join the tributary that spun off from the main river just outside the walls, altogether establishing a paradise of sweet, sultry green here in this oasis around which the capital city had been built.

The wolf standing in his place alongside the throne twitched his nose, adjusted his paws behind his back, and tilted his head just slightly to the side, trying to banish a stray beam of sunlight from piercing into one of his eyes. He could still remember how he felt when he had first arrived here as a pup, all those years ago: his family came from the northwest, in through the gate passing by the palace and its shimmering white stone walls. The canopy of the strange, great tree could be seen even from the city streets, and as his father drew him closer, the young wolf's awe deepened even further. A city of strength and beauty, one of the two economic centers of the southern portion of the entire continent; proof of strength in the face of adversity, in the triumph of the people over all else.

Even over nature itself. The world did not want them to settle here, and yet they did, and from that little seed of determination sprouted this great tree, and out of that tree, a city. From this city a nation, and now here stood Lucius, royal adviser to that nation's queen.

And what a queen she was. Scheherazade Sylvia vai Solm va Maldeth, formally; a strong, bold lioness bearing her father's strength of will and her mother's clarity of mind, alongside whom Lucius had shared his childhood and upbringing. Since his initial arrival in the city under his father's care, Lucius had been directed and trained towards the role he now served, suited specifically for someone of his particular talents – and now he plied that talent in its turn, ears perked yet eyes averted.

That helped with the process, they had found. As a wolf from the northwestern country of Alenar, a good month's journey across the swirling desert and then another two weeks or so between tight mountain passes and frigid heights, Lucius displayed an array of fur from charcoal black to deep grey, rich soil brown to smooth ash white – and it was all of this that made his eyes, sharp, stark pale blue-white, stand out like nothing else. That was the first thing that most noticed about him, and the telltale sign of this talent of his.

Something twinged in the forefront of his mind, pulling the royal adviser's attention back to the matter at hand. A slim, sleek red-furred vixen stood before the Queen, head dutifully bowed and paws clasped behind her back, yet tall ears standing upright as she gave her testimony. Lucius glanced over his shoulder: Scheherazade listened as attentively as she ever did, lounging partially sideways in her throne with chin resting on one paw. The lioness was still quite young, but had learned her duties and responsibilities admirably well. None could fault her for attempting to fill her mother's position, and there were yet some throughout the city who believed she could easily exceed the late Queen Sylvia.

The vixen swallowed and wet her lips. Lucius tilted his head, ignoring the beam of sunlight that came down as he did so. A little feeling, a slight, gentle twist in the air between the two of them, more of an impression than anything else...

“My lady,” the vixen went on, carefully choosing her words, “I don’t mean to presume on your intelligence or understanding of the matter – never – but if we are to continue sending our vintages through the mountains and desert, it would be our prerogative to request extra financing and assistance from Your Highness to make the journey. It *is* a dangerous one, and lengthy nonetheless – and my people in Alenar are unaccustomed to the climate and weather here; I don’t wish to make excuses for the quality of our product, but we were simply unprepared for-”

“Lucius.”

As soon as the Queen spoke, the vixen fell silent, ears flicking back for a moment. Cool blue eyes flashed up from lioness to wolf, then back down to the floor between her footpaws. Lucius bowed his head, cleared his mind, and turned to look at his friend, his sister, and his Queen, her sweet lavender gaze resting easily on his eyes.

“Yes, my lady?”

“Is Vinia here lying?”

This was his purpose alongside the royal throne. Magic on its own was a fairly rare and powerful ability – though generally looked down upon in his home country of Alenar, for a number of different reasons – and Lucius’s particular talent in magic even more so. Speckled throughout history only here and there was there a mage capable of manipulating the very essence of life itself, the deep, verdant threads of force and energy called Spirit magic, and very rarely did these mages find themselves memorialized in the pages of history for respectable reasons. With properly honed Spirit magic someone could read another’s thoughts and influence them, could take hold of another’s body and force it to move against their will, could rewrite their memory, their perception of reality, and their understanding of things, could sap the very life out of plants, animals, people.

He remembered when he learned of the implications of his talent. When they were younger he and Princess Scheherazade would play guessing games together, trying to figure out what the other was thinking – and Lucius would always win. Hide and seek went too easily, too, the point where the lioness had to start reaching out to the other pups in the palace, and on and on. Rigorous training and study, mentoring under Queen Sylvia’s adviser, refining his talent into a skill, learning how to handle and use it... and then the binding ritual, the ceremony that would cement his place alongside Scheherazade’s side when she would claim the throne three years later.

This ritual claimed a few specifics to it, but the most important came into use each and every day that the wolf served his duty here. Lucius Kalla ef Leyo Alenar, right hand and royal adviser to Her Highness Queen Scheherazade, simply could not tell a lie. The ritual prevented him from doing so, magically and physically, and there was nothing he could or would ever be able to do to reverse this. He could not tell a lie, and everything he did specifically while serving his duty to the throne, had to do just that: serve the throne and the Queen who sat in it.

The wolf wet his lips while he searched around, gentle fingers of carefully honed Spirit magic reaching forward, crossing the distance, poking and prodding and feeling. One of the vixen’s ears twitched in response to the pressure, but other than that she seemed unaware of the intrusion. That was something

Lucius never worried about: while those who could use magic at all were fairly low in number, users who could even perceive Spirit at all were even fewer.

After a moment he drew back, straightened up, rolled his head on his shoulders, and looked to the lioness again. "She is not, my lady.

"Thank you," Vinia said, with a nod of the head. She came as the representative of a particular winery sourcing from Lucius's homeland, well known within the southeastern region of the continent for its flavor, clarity, and quality, and was not the least common visitor to the palace. "As I was saying, your highness, I simply wish-

"But," Lucius went on, cool voice again silencing the vixen, "she is not sharing the *entire* truth. She honestly believes that Three Kings is *the* highest quality wine available in the region, and really does have the throne's best interests at heart – but she also knows the value of her vintage, and is trying to-

Suddenly the adviser froze, a quick, vicious shock of energy bursting through him, so powerful and concentrated it felt distinctly physical. Like the sensation of something startling him from sleep, suddenly he seemed to lose focus and recognition of where he was, his head pulling up of its own accord to point towards the source of the feeling: almost straight out the front gates of the palace. It felt like... simply like nothing he could put a name to, nothing he recognized in his years of life and training.

But he knew without a doubt that it was distinctly magical in nature and, even more perplexing, sourced from *Spirit* magic. His entire being tingled with a kind of resonance, physical to mental and beyond; one paw partially raised and mouth hanging open, he focused himself in that direction, trying to see if he could reach out to touch the source, but...

"Lucius. Lucius?"

The wolf blinked, did so again, shook his head – and then was back in the world, the warm winds of the Solm desert swirling in through the doors of the grand hall and down between the boughs of the great tree above him. Whatever that sensation was, it had now disappeared, leaving him with a strange sense of loss and hopelessness. Had he *really* felt it?

He cleared his throat, swallowed, and then regained his posture, again folding his paws behind his back, lifting his muzzle, squaring his shoulders. He leaned forward to peer at the Queen in her throne. "Yes, my lady?"

"Is everything alright?"

*Oh yes, my mistake, let's move on* – is what Lucius first wanted to say, despite himself. He had been bonded to Scheherazade for four years now, and had almost entirely excised such slip-ups of trying to tell a half-truth, or a white lie, but that *sensation* had just put him off-balance. For a moment his lips struggled to form the words, the so-familiar feeling of the bond's strictures pushing and yanking back at him, and then when he did finally respond:

"No."

The lioness Queen frowned; the vixen representative smirked, then quickly hid the expression. It wasn't that Lucius could clearly, succinctly read another's thoughts, with a few in noticeable exception – as Spirit magic dealt intimately with passion and feeling, and as a result his skills took greater effect on, through, and from those with which he felt particularly close, such as Scheherazade here, his wife Azura, and then a handful of others – but more that he could sense impressions and influences. Deception was easy to pick up on; concrete, complex thought could be another thing entirely, yet here it came without a doubt that Vinia's first thought had something to do with Lucius possibly leaving the hearing, allowing her to manipulate the situation without her mindreading associate messing things up for her.

It would have annoyed the wolf more were her estate's vintage of wine, termed Three Kings for its preference among the royalty of his home of Alenar to the west, Mora to the south, and then here in Maldeth, not his own favorite as well. He bowed his head forward a little further, caught Scheherazade's eye, and pushed a quiet, gentle impression through their bond. Scheherazade herself wasn't particularly magical, with no noticeable talent in any of the various types, but she still had enough capability to undergo the required honing and training for someone in her position. It *was*, after all, necessary for Lucius's bond to take proper effect.

She caught his meaning, a little spark of a thought, and turned her lavender eyes to meet his. The lioness wet her lips. "What's going on, Lucius?"

"You know I hate doing this," which was true, as he wouldn't be able to say it otherwise, "but I must request to be excused from this hearing to investigate something."

Then from Vinia Arro, still standing here before them with her paws clasped behind her back: "What is it?" A respected merchant from a low-noble family, her winery was obviously well known throughout this southeastern portion of the continent, and as such the vixen was unaccustomed to being ignored and forgotten, even by a Queen.

Two sets of eyes flicked over to hear, causing her ears to flatten against her head, and then Scheherazade echoed her question. "What is it?"

"I wish I could tell you," he answered, "but I don't even know myself."

Scheherazade raised a paw from the armrest of the throne. "You have my assent. I know you wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't of utmost importance. I can handle the remainder of today's hearings. Please undertake what you must, and return when you see fit."

He bowed at the waist, making sure to angle his body and head so that he did so towards Scheherazade instead of this uppity fox standing in the fore of the hall, bushy tail showing her growing impatience. "Thank you, my lady. I respect your trust, and know that it is a thing that must be constantly earned." And with that he straightened up, took in a breath, and strode down from the stairs that led up to the platform ensconcing the great roots of the tree, sparing not another glance at Vinia where she stood. As he passed he could feel her eyes on him, and as such gave a knowing flick of the ear and tail. An ounce of surprise leached out from the grasp he still maintained around her thoughts and presence, to be swiftly whisked away and pushed down as she turned her attention back to the Queen. This time it was Lucius's turn to smirk, the sharp early afternoon sunlight bearing down on him from above as he stepped beyond the doors to the palace grounds.

The palace of Solm stood atop a portion of compacted earth raised up around the massive root system of the grand tree there in the hall, its presence and careful grip allowing for a greater saturation and health of the soil immediately around it – which meant that from here to the interior walls of the palace, instead of the same swirling, shimmering sea of sand, the guards and attendants could enjoy soft, rich verdancy, plush grasses kept trimmed to ankle-height between the paths with little trickling brooks and streams filtering out and between, so carefully maintained to look natural when they definitely were not. The aquifer that fed the tree also provided water to the river that coursed its way just south of the exterior wall, and generations long past had figured out how to pull from its lifegiving depths to fuel whatever projects they might like around the city.

All of these little fingers of water eventually threaded back together, through the cisterns beneath the interior walls and then back up and out, artificially spreading this little oasis through the rest of the city and then back into the river beyond the eastern gate. Ancient records told of the city of Solm as starting from an unlikelihood here in the depths of the desert, a tall, strong tree in full bloom standing some distance away from an unremarkable oasis, a patch of grass simmering in an ankle-deep pool of clear water – which had now expanded out to encompass the beautiful bathhouse at the center of the city, carved from the same smooth slabs of marble as the palace.

That was a place Lucius loved to spend his time, with or without his wife's attendance but always with her knowledge. In person he and his Queen were not quite so formal: public relations and appearances demanded it, and even now neither of them could undertake such a performance without some measure of amusement and exasperation underneath. As the wolf made his way down the carved steps leading towards the gates of the inner palace walls, nodding to the familiar guards and servants plying their trades about the grounds, he couldn't help but smirk again at the glimmer in Scheherazade's eyes when she had given him leave.

*We both know this is ridiculous*, that glimmer had said – with no small amount of the thought rumbling through their spirit-bond. Of course Scheherazade wasn't going to remove Three Kings from the palace cellars; all three of them in attendance knew this fact, and Vinia was trying, as she had every year prior even before the lioness had taken the throne, to continue to increase the price of import. That wasn't important, though: they would make their discussion for a while longer, Scheherazade dancing around the issue since she had never been able to stand the over-proprity and "honor-bound horseshit of nobility", as she had so eloquently put it, and then they would come to an agreement, retire to the council chamber to draft and sign the contract, and then Vinia would be invited to reside in the palace guest quarters until her return to Alenar the following morning.

*And*, Lucius mused, now crossing over the treated wood bridge over the fork of the stream that crossed in front of the palace walls, *at some point during the night, she'll find a visitor in her quarters*. Another thing that made Lucius smirk, and amusingly enough, put a stir in the back of his mind as well as in a certain portion of his body. Despite having a wife, and the two being a far better match for one another than almost any other noble couple Lucius had met other than Scheherazade's parents the prior Queen and her King, the wolf's interests in that regard simply strayed elsewhere. So Azura sometimes had to... *outsource* her pleasures, of course with his knowledge and assent. She had also come from Alenar, and her family had worked with the Arro winery in the past; the two were actually already acquainted, and from the first time Lucius had introduced Vinia to his wife, he could tell quite easily that there was a deeper familiarity already there.

It made Azura happy, which in turn made him happy. And, besides – there was just something *energizing* about watching it happen, in those instances when he could. That part he could still enjoy, and knew that Azura did the same for him: often times, his alerting her to his trips to the bathhouse were for *her* benefit, as the two often reserved a pair of rooms side by side with a small viewing window in between...

He shook his head and focused himself back on his task at hand, the remnant of the shock still jittering through his system. The stones of the streets managed somehow to remain cool to his footpaws even under the full gaze of the desert sun, the air itself seeming to twist and shimmer a short distance above the walls. All around him swirled the scents of grass and water, simmered to a stronger peak under the constant heat and artificial humidity here; Lucius lifted his nose and tasted the warm air, able to pick out the gentle chemicals and fragrances filtered into the water that fed the bathhouse to his left, and then the mixed myriad of things from the market district to the right.

The city of Solm, capital of the desert, took some time to cross even with Lucius bustling along, twisting and turning his body to avoid bumping into crowds, constantly murmuring apologies and *excuse me's*. Those who recognized him for his position dutifully stood aside, heads bowed and supplications on their lips; those that saw his eyes, the sharp, uncanny bluish-white of a Spirit mage, jerked and stepped back out of shock and fear; and those who didn't recognize him often started a complaint, then saw the way he was dressed and held their tongue for fear of offending some noble.

Lucius paid it neither mind nor care. The Kalla family, his noble House, had long been one of politicians: he cared little for the pointless social theatre. On and on he went, constantly twinging and tweaking at the strands of Spirit energy swirling about the world to try to find the source of that impact from before, each of these little strands just another in the great, mystical Weft that formed the foundation of magical existence and energetic ability, woven intrinsically and inextricably throughout everything. Little pockets of this energy streamed up and out of everyone who walked by, as well as from the grasses and plants poking up between the stones and between the streets; some of it floated freely in the air, faint but there, too delicate for him to grasp and manipulate; and then of course, off in the distance beyond the wall to the northeast, even from here he could feel the burbling, stirring weight of a great concentration of it some way off in the desert.

That was another trait for which the city was known around the continent: the Great Glass Pillars of Solm, said to have been an ancient king's final stand against the encroaching desert tribes. This king was a powerful user of Fire magic, able to dispel the immense heat of the desert or twist it to his will, wrapping himself in a cloak of hungry flame when he went up against his foes in combat, red-hot tongues reaching out to scorch and sap their life force while leaving himself untouched. In the final days of the vicious war between his settled civilization and the traveling cultures throughout the desert and surrounding grasslands, he had called down great goutts of fire from the sky above, for a moment wrapping Maldeth in arctic frigidity as all of that heat concentrated into a handful of white-hot liquid flame – and when the light died out, those pillars of fire left behind solid, shimmering green skeletons, impossibly tall monoliths of glass melted out from the sea of sand all around.

In casting this final apocalyptic spell, though, that ancient king had died, with all historical records and rumors citing it as a prior wound finally sinking its teeth in, or strain and grief squeezing around his heart. From each and every one of those glass pillars, though, stirred an immense depth of captured Spirit magic, vicious and potent and very much alive: Lucius recognized that the king had died since, in his moment of unbelievable stress, he had poured his very life into the casting of the spell. It was a

beacon of unusual energy, and one of the things that had repeatedly caught the wolf's interests when he was younger, even before he had actively awakened to his ability.

A lodestone of sorts. This thought tingled in the back of his mind as he pushed his way out of the eastern gates, eyes slitted against the sunlight and shimmering desert air. From certain parts of the city the jagged peaks of the pillars could be seen, like huge blue-green tendrils of ocean plants frozen in time as they reached up towards the distant sky.

Lucius stood there beyond the gates, one paw in his pocket and the other at his side, gathering himself for a moment. He closed his eyes, took in a breath, tasted the dry sting of desert air... and felt the ancient king's Spirit magic reaching out to him even across this distance, the threads of imprisoned ability wanting to call out to him and draw him in. He knew, though, that it wasn't a kind of power that someone of his skill could properly handle, and as such he had never attempted to draw from their depths, as the city drew its water from the hidden aquifer. Perhaps one of the pillars had ruptured and spilled its bounty forth, or perhaps another traveling visitor had reached out to touch one and discovered an unexpected resonance there.

Spirit magic in its rarity meant that no academy had a skilled user to teach it, which in turn meant, perhaps, almost nobody who *could* actually ever awoke to the ability. Lucius had been pushing for some time to instill a program at Solm's academy, reasonably known for its strength in Fire and Earth, in attempts at rooting out new, undiscovered users of the rare type, and honing their skill towards reasonable usage and productivity, and-

And there it was again, tickling at the back of his mind, causing him to swing around and peer back towards the city as a physical reflex to the sensation. The wolf frowned, mouth partially open, aware of the eyes of the gateway guards yet ignoring him. There was definitely someone in the city tugging on the Weft, in that way that only he himself ever could. It stuck out to him, and attracted his attention, and set his heart to pounding, and... and he realized it was coming from back near the palace, close to the tree that shaped the throne.

For a moment the implications of this didn't quite click for the wolf, wrapping him instead in quiet confusion. Then it hit all at once, and his heart kicked into overdrive – and then he was running back through the streets, careful not to slip on the smooth, sand-kissed paving stones, regal finery twisting and billowing around him. He had always elected to maintain a more Alenari style of dress while serving his duty, in honor of his homeland and family and also since it made himself stand out, and for once he found himself regretting the affectation: tight seams and stitches restricted movements, while the wide, airy, billowy Maldethi fashion had been designed around ease and ability of movement. On his way back through the streets, alongside the market and bathhouse and up the stairs to the palace, having to pause at three different places to catch his breath, he could have sworn he felt a few of those seams pop loose.

Sweat slicking his fur, tongue hanging out of his mouth, legs stinging and sides aching, the adviser to the royal throne bent over himself there at the front gate of the palace to catch his breath again and try to compose himself a bit better. Just like with the original impact, there had been that flash of Spirit magic and then nothing afterwards, a bright burst leaving an imprint in his mind that he struggled to reach. Unsure what to expect, he quickly went through the same set of novice exercises that he had learned back at the academy, a great method of calming and centering himself... and then strode up the steps toward the entrance.

*Should I be on my guard? Should I call for backup? Should I prepare to face some powerful Spirit mage with own ability – or maybe something worse? What should I...*

He kept his ears perked for the sound of a struggle, for his Queen's shouting and grumbling – as in all their years growing up, when sparring she had only ever lost to her father and then the palace armstronger – and the clattering of equipment, but when he stepped into the grand hall with the twin streams burbling softly to either side, all he saw was the lioness still lounging back in her throne, head still resting on one of her paws, with someone standing before her. Something had indeed changed, though: she sat with her head upright and eyes focused, lavender gemstones angled forward and down to keep this new subject in her sight.

Queen Scheherazade's ear flicked, her body and subconscious recognizing the pressure in her link with her adviser before her mind did, and then she glanced up and out at him. Then both ears perked and she straightened up, eyes flashing back down to the canid who stood before her.

"Lucius. There you are. I was hoping you would show up." She looked back down to the visitor. "There's someone here for you."

That didn't seem right. Lucius frowned, still coming up along the middle of the hall. "For me? Are you certain?"

Scheherazade raised her eyebrows. "Well, he asked for you by name. I assumed you were already acquainted." She nodded down at the visitor again, which from here Lucius could tell was another wolf, this one with lighter, cloud-white fur dusted and shaded in spots with greys and browns, not unlike a well-roasted marshmallow.

Tall ears flicked with the sound of his footpaws, and he started to turn his head to look over his shoulder. There was a small smile along his broad muzzle-

"And," Scheherazade went on, "you might be interested to know that he tried to tap into my thoughts."

-and shimmering, uncanny bluish-white eyes, the distinct mark of a Spirit user. Lucius immediately went on the defensive, taking the necessary steps to put up a shield around his own mind while sharpening a Spirit-honed stake of his own, one arm raised up across his body even though he doubted this surprisingly young wolf would put up any kind of physical resistance.

The young wolf opened his mouth to speak, and right as he did Lucius lanced out with his prepared vice, slamming down in place and blocking the visitor from reaching out to the Weft himself. The surprise hit him with a physical force, causing the white wolf to jump and stagger in place – and then Lucius felt shy fingers poking and pressing at his shield, searching and investigating. The way he did it, the preparation and specific method... the realization hit Lucius as strongly as the original burst: this wolf's skill was *completely* unhoneed for one, which made sense, but it was the follow-up realization that shocked him. The sheer *pressure* exerted against Lucius's own will, the seemingly effortless observation that still made the older wolf struggle and tighten his grasp...

It was almost overwhelming. This new, strange young wolf, fur white and eyes nearly the same color, could *easily* reverse this shield and wrest control from Lucius if he put in *any* effort. Lucius hoped to



whatever gods might be listening that he wouldn't realize this – but as he completed his investigation of the magical shield, the other wolf retreated back into himself as though satisfied. Lucius held his eyes while keeping his own strength at its peak, daring the younger wolf to show any kind of knowledge or resistance of their state, but he just *didn't*.

This could mean one of two things. Either this new Spirit mage held devastating skill, honed beyond anything Lucius could ever dream of and thus capable of things even he imagined impossible... or he really *was* untrained, completely ignorant to the limits of his own ability and what he could do.

Scheherazade shifted in her throne, absent from this entire competition between the two. “He tells me his name is Lua Szaro,” she went on, on paw raised towards the young wolf. His ears perked at his name, and he flashed his blue-white eyes up to the Queen, smiled, and bowed his head. “He comes from Dorian to the east.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Lua drawled, voice warm and comfortable, a low tenor with just a touch of a gritty edge beneath it. “It honors me to hear my name on your tongue. I ask for your forgiveness in my intrusion – I truly meant no harm by it. After so long on my own it's just become habit, you see, a way to... judge the intent of those around me, so to say...”

*Dorian.* Lucius's eyes narrowed; he stepped up and around Lua to take his place alongside his Queen again, still working to regain his composure after the long run through the city. Whereas the western Maldeth butted up against the slick, humid, wet lowland marshes of the Mora peninsula, to the east the swirling desert sands gradually gave way to dry grasslands gradually increasing in density and altitude, until suddenly these spilled out over hexagonal basalt cliffs into churning, frigid seawater below.

That was Dorian. An ancient, respected country, with likely the only palace in the country capable of competing with Maldeth's in term of beauty, with polished basalt and green-veined serpentinite carved and hewn directly out of the cliff faces. Lucius had been there a few times before on various diplomatic missions, and he enjoyed and respected the culture and people. The King was a bit emptyheaded, but then again, this stood true for most of royalty.

It was Dorian's *history* that rang true for him, with Spirit magic in particular. Apocryphal tales told of an ancient, devastatingly powerful warrior queen employing an unknown and forbidden branch of the magic to twist her enemies to her will. Some doubted the ancient queen's existence in full, stating the tale to be nothing more than propaganda against magic users; others saw it as a dramatic retelling of little more than a children's fable; others believed it really had happened, but the queen, her techniques, and her relics were now lost to time, where they should remain.

It was mostly nonsense, but still had a deep effect on Doriani culture and history in the countless years following. As a Spirit mage himself Lucius was well aware of the hidden sects within Dorian's powerful citizenry, schools seeking to reawaken the ancient ways and reclaim that queen's power for themselves. And now for Lua to have abruptly emerged from that very country and city – the capital shared its name with the land – with a well of potential far deeper than anything Lucius had seen, even among the academy students with their talents in more mundane types of magic...

Scheherazade lifted a finger. “Lucius, is he being truthful?”

The wolf frowned, lost in thought. “My lady?”

“About his intent. Wanting to know how I feel, rather than seeking to manipulate me.”

“Oh. Ah...” Yet again the adviser steeled himself and dove back in... and this time met no resistance whatsoever, as Lua opened himself up and let the older mage rummage around in his thoughts. Still there was the doubt and suspicion, *perhaps his skill far exceeds mine, and he knows how to make it appear that he's not interfering when he really is...* but everything else felt exactly the same as with the other subjects. Lucius started to draw his tendrils back. “Yes. He is.”

Lua executed a half-bow. “I would not lie to you, my lady.”

“Now he is lying.”

To his surprise this made Lua toss his head back and laugh. “Yes. That much is correct. I am truly sorry. As for the reason behind my arrival...”

He shifted his stance again. Lucius looked over this strange young wolf, this Lua Szaro... that was certainly neither a name nor a style of naming that he recognized. Alenari names were quick and to the point, usually one or two syllables, clearly rooted in the Old Tongue still evident along ruins and in ancient texts; Maldethi names floated like the wind over the land and the culture of its people, light and airy, warm with breath; Doriani names were... different.

*Lua Szaro...* he tasted the sounds in his mind, the flicks of the tongue, the pursing of the lips. No titular naming convention; *Lucius Kalla ef Leyo Alenar* specifically denoted the adviser as coming from an Alenari house of middling nobility – house Kalla, from the city of Leyo in Alenar – while the Queen’s *Scheherazade Sylvia vai Solm va Maldeth*, a veritable mouthful and a great challenge for outlanders, showed both her bloodline as well as her royalty. Lua Szaro was, simply, nothing. Nobody of note, nobody of standard, and looking at how he dressed... Lucius hadn’t really noticed at first, but he wore trousers a few sizes too large for him tied at the waste with rugged rope, and a shirt that hung off his body as though it were intended for someone of a different build. The fabrics were coarse yet at the same time thin, with grungy, dull dye and no decoration or embellishment to be seen.

Not the *worst* he had seen, yet certainly not the best. Lua either did not care about his appearance, or simply lacked the means to procure anything better for himself. Obviously a noble heritage was out of the question, and if he came from a merchant family, he had either squandered his inherited wealth on useless things or simply had none to start with. And then if he was lower class...

Eyes nearly pure white in color flashed over to where the adviser stood, and actually made him jerk upright as though the younger wolf’s gaze carried a physical weight behind it. *So that’s what that feels like.*

“I’d like to not speak of my family and history,” the young wolf went on. Lucius’s ear twitched. “Neither of these exist anymore. I come here before you simply because I heard there was a user of my particular type of magic here. You might understand if I was shunned and feared in my homeland for what I could do, unable to find any kind of teacher or tutor to help hone my ability into something safe and usable.”

*He speaks like a noble,* Lucius mused, with another glance from Lua and another twitch of the ear, *but he dresses like a beggar. Who is this?*

"Which is why..." and here Lucius's eyes widened, body tensing with surprise. He heard and felt Scheherazade shift in her throne beside him as well. Before them Lua bowed his head, arms at his side, and then gradually lowered himself down to his knees to bow before them, muzzle nearly touching the sand-brushed floor. "I come here before you to plead for your assistance and training, my lord Lucius Kalla. I recognize your superiority-" He fumbled over his words. Yet again the elder wolf's ear twitched. "-and wish only to be able to handle my given ability in a way that, someday, I might be able to teach it to others as well. I recognize the potency of this gift, and wish to use it to its full potential."

Both remained silent for a moment. Scheherazade leaned forward. "Is he still being truthful?"

"Mostly," Lucius answered. He noticed the wolf had left out his full honorific title. *Perhaps he is not so noble, then. It was not done intentionally: he simply does not know.* He bowed his head to the Queen; she nodded her assent again. "How old are you, Lua?"

The young wolf straightened up, though still remained on the ground. "Twenty years."

That caught his attention as well. "Young," he mused, then looked away at the pricking of Scheherazade's eyes on him again. One of the most common criticisms of Scheherazade's rule was that she might be too young to properly understand how to run a nation. As it would turn out, she had barely one year on this wolf before them – and Lucius hardly had four on him, so there wasn't much he could say about the matter. "What about your family?"

"I said I do not have one."

"What happened to them?"

Lua's mouth quirked. "Dead," he answered. "I am an orphan."

"Were your parents magical too?"

"I cannot recall."

Truthful throughout. Lucius nodded. "What do you *really* wish to do here? Do not think I failed to notice you changed your speech to please me."

Lua smirked again. "My apologies. At this point it has simply become habit. I really do wish to turn my talent into a skill, and to be able to use it reasonably and responsibly. I had not considered it before until – well, until *your* arrival, but..." He shifted, clasping his paws together in his lap and half-turning his head. "It would be a wonderful boon to be able to add our skill to the academy. First here, and then everywhere else throughout the land. My life would be... far different, had I the training that some of my magical peers had in their youth." He shook his head. "But you don't need me to tell you, my lord, that it is only a certain few among the greater populace that understand what we are as mages, and then even fewer, if any, who understand it as *Spirit* mages." Here Lua paused again, thought for a moment, and frowned. "Not that I would class myself alongside you. You have had the training and refinement; I have not. I know I have the talent and seed of the ability, but I would hardly call it usable."

"And yet, you still do."

“And doing so has backfired more times than I would like to relate.” Flashes and tidbits of memories and shocks echoed through the younger wolf’s head, strong enough for Lucius to sense even in his bare, tenuous link to him. “That is what brings me here. I will live in the city and earn my own keep, if you would have me, in exchange for your tutoring. I simply know nobody else who would be better suited.” Again he bowed down, head to the ground. “Please, my lord.”

Doriani wolf looked to Alenari wolf; Alenari wolf looked to lioness. “My lady?”

Scheherazade nodded again. “I have no qualms against it, but I did not get to where I am by being overly trusting of things I do not fully understand. This is your own domain, Lucius; I accede to your will.”

That was what he thought she would say. Lucius straightened up and squared his shoulders while he rolled the idea around in his head, occasionally picking and bumping at Lua’s mind and thoughts to find any sort of deception or evasion. As far as he could tell – which wasn’t very far, as to this point he had had basically no contact with another Spirit user; such a thing as two inclined mages being in the same room had only happened perhaps four times throughout written history – there was none.

“Very well,” he breathed after a while. “I accept your request, Lua. However, I do have some terms.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“First-” Lucius rolled his eyes. “Stand up. I felt you do the same to me, so you already know I can’t stand this over-formality.” He waited while the young wolf bustled to oblige, paws clasped in front of him. “Second. Are you aware of the Academy, here in Solm?”

Lua dipped his head. “I am.”

“Is Spirit your only capability, or can you use the other magical types as well?”

The wolf half-raised a paw, then paused, lifted his eyebrows again, and nodded towards his splayed fingers. Lucius nodded – and in another moment a warm red-orange flame flickered into being above Lua’s palm, swirling into being from the heat drawn straight out of the air. After some time it tinted to a shimmering, iridescent green, then abruptly puffed into water steam that dissipated up and through the air; only for a moment, though, as then this steam swirled about, concentrated into a single thumb-sized droplet of water, and splashed down against the tiled floor between Lua’s footpaws.

He grinned sheepishly, reaching over to scratch at his arm. “I struggle with Earth magic, a bit,” he explained. “Everything else I had to teach myself. It was... a long walk from Dorian.”

“You’re from the capital city?”

Another nod. “I worked the docks there, until I... you know. Awoke.”

That was impressive indeed. Very few mages succeeded in teaching themselves how to use their craft even in a mediocre, rudimentary fashion; the vast majority failed in doing so and as a result, either completely burnt themselves out from the mysterious source of magical potential, stripping themselves

of the ability to utilize or perceive the threads of the Weft, or in many other cases, resulted in their own demise. And seeing that Lua could use not only Spirit magic, but Fire, Water, and Air already as well...

Lucius thought for another moment. "I shall convene with the Archmage," he concluded, "and have a curriculum for you by week's end."

Upon hearing this, the young wolf's tail actually wagged behind him. His bright eyes lit up even further. "Thank you, my lord. I will apply myself as best I can to your teachings, and work my hardest to make a place for myself in this city of yours," this last said to Scheherazade directly, so as not to disrespect the Queen. For a moment Lucius entertained the idea of offering a room in the palace to him, but then decided against it in favor of learning Lua's character to a better degree.

"Wonderful. In your spare time, it would do you well to introduce yourself to the Archmage and other students at the academy. I will not have you enroll, as you already understand the foundations, but the academy exists for a reason."

Lua bowed again. "Of course."

Lucius waved a paw. "You must be exhausted from your journey. I shall send a servant to escort you and show you around the city; eat what you will and find lodgings, and I shall cover the price. Return here by first light tomorrow morning and we'll begin."

"Thank you." He clasped his paws before himself. "Really. Thank you."

Lucius gave his practiced, refined show smile. "Thank *you*. I look forward to working together. One last thing."

"Yes?"

He angled his head up, intentionally looking down his muzzle at the younger wolf. "I must forbid you from trying to use your ability on another person without my express permission, for the duration of your teaching. Are you familiar with the Maldethi ritual binding between Queen and adviser?"

Lua looked from Lucius to Scheherazade and back. "I wasn't, but now that you mention it..."

Lucius smirked. There was the feeling of shy, gentle fingers poking and prodding again. "It is a longstanding, timeworn ceremony," he explained, now doing the mental, magical equivalent of batting the puppy's curious paws away, "to ensure the trustworthiness and ability of someone in my position. It does not compel me to do anything I otherwise wouldn't, nor does it jeopardize myself, my magical ability, my mental capacity, or anything else in any way. It simply... enforces some restrictions upon me." Here he gave that show smile again, the same one he gave to rather uppity supplicants when they came before the Queen. "I would have you participate in a similar ceremony, binding you to me as my assistant and student. This way, I shall know if you disobey and use your magic for anything other than this teaching – and if I so judge, the consequences will be immediate and dire."

"How dire?"

Here it was actually Scheherazade who answered. The lioness straightened up in her throne, rolled her head on her shoulders, and then leaned in to face the wolf, arms resting atop her legs. "Spirit magic," she began, "is nothing to trifle with. I am not even a mage and still I know this. I have full confidence that whatever punishment my adviser deems necessary, *will be.*"

Lucius nodded. "I couldn't have said it better myself." And that was the truth. "Are these terms agreeable?"

The adviser kept another few thoughts to himself, wrapped in a careful cloak of magic that he now believed might be outside of Lua's skill range to penetrate – but still he found himself fishing for that deceit. Whether it really was there or not, he still couldn't quite tell. The younger wolf thought about it for a moment and then nodded his head, more confidently than expected.

"They are," he said. "I accept your terms, and thank you for your willingness to teach me."

"Of course." Lucius bowed his head as well. "As I said, I look forward to working with you. Wait here, and I'll fetch someone for you."

Lua gave that same smile he had before, everything about his being and appearance seeming to conflict with itself in some way or another. *What an enigma.* He kept an eye on the young Doriani for a moment, then turned and strode across towards the halls leading into the back of the palace. Part of him considered the risk of leaving Scheherazade there unattended with him, but... then again, the Queen could defend herself.

Lucius knew this likely better than anyone else. That *was*, after all, his job.

~ ~ ~

The ritual chambers slept far within the depths of the palace, past the point where the light and heat of the sun and sand trickled away through thick stone. Chilly and surprisingly damp, there were a few servants within the palace whose main task was to keep the sconces through these lower hallways lit – although it also made for good practice for some of the academy students to come here and perform the task themselves with their Fire magic. As of yet, though, none had discovered a way to "tie off" the threads and keep them balanced and in place for extended periods of time.

That was the issue with magic as whole, Lucius knew: it was still an emerging science. So much of it remained steeped in occultism, superstition, and ignorance, and with the world at its current state, working out these inconsistencies and falsehoods was still quite far in coming. There were scholars and researchers who devoted entire portions of their lives to figuring these things out, yet as it went, their discoveries required time to take root, and often those who discovered them came and went before they could truly see the fruits of their efforts.

This fact stood as the central catalyst behind academies like the one here in Solm, out by the northeastern corner of the city. A central lodestone for knowledge, advancement, and practice, when magic was still a thing to be feared and looked down upon in so many other parts of the world; Lucius knew of villages both distant and near that completely shunned the idea, some further down in the Maldethi floodplains, others to the north in forested Loria... really, *everywhere* around the land. A sad fact, but at its heart, another reason why his branch of the Kalla house had transplanted here to

Maldeth – after all, there stood not a single magical academy in all of his homeland of Alenar, to the northwest.

There was this, and then his father easily recognized the potential in his son when Lucius awoke to his ability. Getting a Kalla in the right hand to a throne... his father decided to play on the favors and friendships he already held with the sitting royalty, Scheherazade's mother and father, and from there it was simple to earn a place on Queen Syl's cabinet and a residence within the palace. Then the natural course of things took place, with two children very close in age growing up alongside one another, becoming friends, becoming closer, becoming spiritually inseparable.

Again, the Kalla house had long been one of politicians. Lucius's father sought the position for him, for the family's name – yet did not know that the strictures placed upon the position intended to prevent precisely that.

He still remembered the day of the original ceremony. Of course he did: he recalled walking down through these halls, the flashy, beautiful marble of the palace above turning to the more resilient and sturdy coarseness of sandstone. Thick rugs draped across the carefully smooth surfaces of the floor, tapestries hung from the walls, framed paintings and shelves displaying the works and efforts so integral to the core of Maldethi culture... Lucius paused in front of one of them in particular and peered a little bit closer.

It looked as though this one hadn't been moved since the last time he had looked at it four years ago. He remembered the shape and colors of this figurine, carefully carved from some particular type of clay that so far had only been discovered beneath the ever-shifting dunes alongside another oasis to the northeast, pale grey-green when harvested that ripened to a color almost blue in appearance once fired. A beautiful piece, it showed a pair of otters entwined with one another, head to tail and then back again, as they burst from a shimmering, cresting wave underneath. The artist had placed tiny gemstones at key points along the figure, on the far edges of movement lines and within the pair of otters themselves, drawing the eyes back and forth, up and around, again and again, as these two constantly twirled, swirled, and swam together, never apart.

The wolf reached out for it, paused, then lowered his paw back down. The idea came to him to whip up a gentle breeze of Air magic to lift the dust from the surface of the figure, but he recognized he lacked the skill and delicacy with that type to properly do so, and instead just stood up on his tiptoes to gently blow on it. That done, he lowered himself back down, adjusted the fit of his clothing, and strode into the ritual chamber.

Here was where everything came to fruition, time and time again. Three days had passed since Lua's first appearance in the grand hall of the palace, and three days had Lucius stood absent from the citizens' hearings. That was standard in Maldethi culture, a tradition passed down from the time before Scheherazade's parents: a great airing of grievances held in an open theater, with the citizens voting together on which ones to be heard by the Queen directly, then to be scheduled and assigned over the following handful of days. This week had the Arro winery import issue, then a dispute between the city's premier blacksmith regarding availability of ore and mining operations to the northwest, then a discussion about expanding the wall of the city to encompass more of the farms along the river... and then, finally, the issue of an Academy student who had directly disobeyed his superiors' orders and expectations, which as a result led directly to three deaths, a maiming, and a swathe of fields reduced to cinder and ash.

Lucius had, of course, wished to be in attendance for that one, although preparations for Lua's binding along with the young wolf's introduction to his tutoring had claimed his attention. Still would the adviser be the one to dole out the punishment, though: while any mage could possibly sever themselves from their ability if pushed recklessly enough, it was the sole domain of a Spirit user to be able to force this upon someone else. Lucius *hated* doing it – as he always felt some measure of the agony so sharp it transcended through the flesh – but it needed to be done.

He rested a paw along the heavy wooden door, finished and regularly oiled to prevent either the aridity of the outer world or the dampness from the halls down here seeping in to damage the material. Wood wasn't exactly an easy commodity in this part of Maldeth, and as such, places like here in the palace as well as noble estates often showed excess of it.

This one in particular came from a small, squat tree common in the southern portions of Alenar, known for the density of its wood and its pleasant, almost minty aroma. The finish and oiling eliminated this latter trait of it, and Lucius of course noted the color had changed with the treatment and years, but he had never made a move to replace it – and the Queen never really came down here, either. This was a strictly magical place, and the first and last time she had visited had been for the original binding ceremony.

As soon as he pushed the door open, careful not to brush against the surface of the wood, the environment and aura of the ritual chamber inside seeped in through his skin and made his fur prickle. Most of these past three days had been spent in calling up the old records, refamiliarizing himself with the process and requirements. Several generations back the floor in this room had been replaced with a flat sheet of slate, smoothed yet left specifically unpolished for this purpose.

Lucius looked out and across, eyes working at acclimating to the darkness in here. It was absolutely vital that the sconces remain at the far limits of the room instead of spaced throughout, as burning torches provided an unkempt, spontaneous source of Fire threads which were liable to work themselves into a careful casting.

...Or, at least, that was the common belief. Streaked across the smooth slate in glimmering, powdery chalk were perfect circles crosscut with geometric lines connecting the ritual reagents in sequence: a portion of sand, pure white quartz with all of the other grains meticulously picked out and discarded; a bundle of roses; a bowl of clean, clear water, taken from the oasis at the heart of the city, distilled manually four times and magically twice; a tuft of fur taken from Lucius's inner thigh, then one from Lua's... all nonsense, he figured.

But he didn't know enough to dispute it. *Nobody* did; that was the issue. The wolf sighed, ears twitching at the strange, almost artificial silence in here while the attendants finalized the preparations. Naturally, Lucius and the academy Archmage were acquainted, and he had requested a handful of the strongest, most promising students to help out here. As rare as it was that Lucius could wield his particular magic type, the truth of the matter was, he *wasn't* that potent in it: there were Fire mages like the ancient king who could wrest the cords of heat constantly coming down from the sun above and concentrate it into harsh, molten flame, Air mages who could direct and change the weather, Earth mages who could detect, lift, and purify heaps of metal ore straight out of the ground.



And then there was Lucius Kalla, who could sometimes receive a clear, concise thought from someone by rummaging around in their minds. Lua so far had presented himself as a dutiful student, someone who had grown accustomed to difficulty and hardship and thus recognized the value of the boons he had been given: he was attentive in his lessons, perseverant in his practices. It was still quite early to say, but Lucius could feel a seed of hope start to take root in his chest, his idea and dream of a dedicated Spirit tutor at the academy, testing the incoming students for an unknown ability, honing that strength into something usable, something hardly ever before seen.

Here Lua sat at the far end of the room, near the apex of one of the circles. It seemed he had been here a while: he sat with legs crossed and tail tucked around himself, back straight, shoulders back, eyes closed in meditation. Funnily enough *that* had been one of the hardest things to teach the Doriani: patience and silence. Almost all of the first day and a half had been spent in refining his posture and positioning, another thing that Lucius somewhat doubted about magical practice but knew was important nonetheless.

Sitting there in one room of Lucius's quarters in the palace, window cracked open so the heat of the day filtered in, pacing back and forth while Lua sat, focused, steadied his breathing. Little touches to his head, his bare shoulders, the small of his back, gentle, trying to distract him, trying to make him jump, smiling inwardly whenever he ignored or resisted the reflex. It was all part of the same novice exercises that Lucius himself still practiced: the attention and focus devoted to slowing down, reaching out and *in*, and grasping hold of the portion of the Weft bound so tightly to one's central being.

In these long practice sessions Lucius had gotten a good look at Lua, his figure, his form. Even now he sat wearing barely a loose cloth draped over his loins, white fur visible up and down his muzzle, shoulders, chest, legs, fields of snow with angled outcrops of stone and soil poking through the soft surface. Though they were both wolves, there were some distinct differences displayed between their two breeds: Lua, as a Doriani highlands wolf, had that slightly broader muzzle, ears that seemed more like a fox's in their height and angle, and then of course the lighter coloration and slimmer build. Beside him Lucius felt almost heavysset, though he knew that as far as Alenari wolves went, he himself strayed on the smaller side.

Lua, though... gradually Lucius had begun to *learn* the younger wolf, his personality and the way he thought, and he knew that he had used his abilities for his own gain in the past. That much was obvious, or else he simply would not have been able to make it out here to Solm, on foot, from the capital of Dorian. He carried a pocket of coin with him, another thing that neither a fishery work nor an orphan could reasonably acquire, yet had only a rudimentary grasp of literacy, as though he had picked it up on his own instead of being taught.

One of the young wolf's ears flicked and his mouth quirked, but he didn't open his eyes or look up. That was good; he was focused. Again Lucius looked around the room to see that the students had mostly finished the preparations and now sat in their respective spots, leaving he himself standing here alone. So he, too, started to prepare, reaching up to undo the fastenings of his clothing, the soft rustling of fabric on fur the only sound other than the sparkling of the torches back against the wall.

His shirt slid down off his shoulders; his pants dropped to his footpaws. He shifted, shivered a little bit in the chill of the room, handed his garments to one of the attendants, then turned to head to his own spot – and as he did so caught a flash of half-lidded blue-white eyes, looking him up and down. Lua's

gaze made his fur tickle, and as he turned to take his own seat across from him he thought he caught a glimpse of a smirk soon followed by an embarrassed flick of the ears.

So there Lucius sat, gathering his thoughts about him as he had done so many times before, and as he had instructed Lua as well. By closing his eyes and focusing his thoughts, by brushing everything else about the physical world around him to the back of his awareness, he could open himself up more fully to the tug of magical energy all around him, constantly there pervading through everything; he slowed his breathing, cleared his mind, let himself retreat into the very essence of his being, and one by one felt the other attendants take their places as well.

There was no verbal announcement of the start of the ritual. Lucius was the focal point, and the head of it: once he was certain everyone and everything had taken their proper places, he dug his fingers into his bared legs, straightened his back, rolled his head on his shoulders, and then reached out with a few tendrils of careful, delicate Spirit. Drawn forth like magnets, he could feel the very same coming out of the other attendants as well – for even though they could neither wield nor even *perceive* Spirit magic, still it strung as intimately along their core as in any other living being, and it was Lucius's domain and skill to manipulate it for this.

These were some of the most powerful, most skilled students available at the academy, two of them apprentices to the Archmage himself. As soon as Lucius latched onto them he could feel their ability pour out and throw him, a vast flood like a burst dam – until it flowed back and stabilized, linking each of them together in turn. Slowly he opened eyes and looked from one to the other, noting the way that the binding affected each in turn and how they responded to the procedure: none of these were the same mages as those who had assisted on the day of *his* binding to Scheherazade, but as long as the one guiding the ritual knew the method, this fact wasn't so important.

It all hinged around Lua, though. Power and energy built behind Lucius – again, he felt no evidence of the impact of the other reagents, though still they weighed down the Weft in their respective places and effects – and he reached forward towards the younger wolf before him. Already Lua had exceeded the standard of any other beginning student: he could feel the changes in the magical tapestry around and through him, and as Lucius reached for him he lifted his head, tilted his chin back, adjusted his posture... and reached forward in turn.

Here in himself Lua maintained the same strength of spirit as any other mage around him. This much Lucius had expected, and it lined up with his prior research and experience. It was the *feeling* of his manipulation that differed, though: as soon as Lucius reached forward and took hold of the younger wolf's extended thread of energy, as soon as that contact was made, all of that force and care that he held behind himself tried to rush forward to fill the far, *far* deeper reserve of *potential* that Lua claimed.

It was unbelievable. Lua seemed ignorant of the possibilities, too: he sat there playing his part, paws in his lap, mechanically maintaining his breathing while waiting for Lucius to continue the ritual, all the while the mixed powers flowed and swirled and fought against him, naturally seeking out the mage who was better equipped to handle such delicate energies. For a moment Lucius feared he might lose control of the ritual, and intense fear flashed through him – which then naturally rippled along these temporary bonds between each of them and the rest of the attendants, making them all shiver and squirm in turn. The link quavered, bubbled like a pot of thick stew set on too high of a flame, threatened to overflow and burst and sear through everyone holding onto it... and then it began to stabilize again.

Lucius breathed out a subtle sigh of relief, then focused in on the link again. There were those gentle, careful fingers again, reaching out from Lua's being and poking and prodding along everything in their path, exploring the methods and techniques used here in the ritual, investigating, observing. In their barely three days of practice and study never had the two attempted to link like this, yet here Lua was, just naturally figuring it out on his own. After a moment he took from his own well of interior energy – this was the most dangerous part about wielding Spirit magic, and magic in general: a mage could not draw the energy for their castings from nothing, and everything had to come from somewhere, with the closest and most powerful reserve of Spirit coming from deep within the self – and carefully threaded it over and around the combined link, quickly if a bit messily sheathing it in a tight, concentrated shield, forcing it back into a stable arrangement, where he held it firm.

This impressed Lucius. He would have to rethink his curriculum for the young wolf. With that in place he continued forth with the ritual, reaching out through the tunnel between them, sorting through the delicate interlocking strands of magic, existence, and life there between them, each one nearly inseparable from the others. As far as spirit-bonding rituals went, themselves a rare and obscure ceremony, this one would be fairly simple – for which Lucius felt quite thankful.

It would really be a straightforward process: Lua freely and comfortably let him into his being, which he knew would have been difficult had the two not spent any time preparing, and then relaxed as he felt the older wolf's presence there within him. All around him swirled the temptation to look deeper, to poke and explore just as Lua had done for himself and Scheherazade upon his arrival, but he managed to resist. Everything he could feel told him that this young wolf had been truthful with him, and really sought what he had claimed to desire: the betterment of his skills and ability, in the goal of advancing magic as a whole.

There was something else in there, too, something that crept up and started to curl around Lucius's presence as he pressed the ritual casting into place. As soon as it slid in there, weaving itself first deep within Lua's being and then second in Lucius's own, bound together by a tenuous yet unbreakable binding thread, this other, strange feeling shivered, pulsed, and seemed to dissipate, only to reach out for him again as he retreated. Lucius slid back into himself, took in another breath – it felt as though he were watching his own body from the viewpoints of everyone around him, all at once – and then, one by one, released each of these other threads pouring in from the attendants.

Then, finally, he released his grip on the Weft, and felt it shudder back into its probably place around and within him. Lucius opened his eyes, the exhaustion of the casting thankfully spread out between himself and everyone from whom he had borrowed the power and skill – and still he had to brace a paw against his bare leg to keep himself upright. The world briefly swam around him, forcing him to close his eyes once more until the dizziness stopped. When he opened them again he looked up to see Lua sitting there still across from him, back straight and head up; a shiver rolled through him and then he, too, opened his eyes, bright blue-white seeming to glow with a light of their own in the dimness of the ritual chambers.

It took a moment for the two to find each other there, and when they did, Lua was the first to smile. He nodded around himself and mouthed a question.

Lucius nodded in response. "It is complete," he said. "Everything went... almost as planned. But it has taken effect, and will remain until it is removed."

Lua's tail stirred behind him. He looked down at his paws. "I don't feel much different."

"You won't, but trust me: it is there."

"What will it do?"

"As I said—" and Lucius struggled to stand up. Lua seemed to have no problem: he rose to his footpaws and came over to offer a helping hand down to the slightly older wolf. "It will bind you to me as student and apprentice."

"Well, yes, but what does that *mean*?"

Lucius chuckled. "Whatever I wish it to. Specifically – you might find it more difficult to wield magic when not in my presence," though now he somewhat doubted this after feeling for himself the depth of capability that Lua's talent provided him, "and if you do use your magic for something malicious, harmful, or otherwise *unwise*, I shall know instantly, and it will hamper your ability accordingly."

Lua nodded. "That isn't so bad. I understand the necessity."

"I'm glad you do. The immediate result is, of course, that we will all gather here again to permanently remove your gift."

Blue-white eyes widened. "You can do that?"

"Through Spirit magic, most things are possible." Lucius nodded to the room around them again, and only then realized that both were standing there in nothing more than their undergarments. He paused, coughed into a paw, and averted his eyes; Lua showed no clear evidence of his upbringing and the assumed undernourishment, though by now it was clear that he had used his abilities to turn things in his favor until his arrival here. Lucius could excuse that. He, too, would do what he must in order to ensure his own survival. "The attendants will clean this up; we may return to our practices as soon as you are ready."

"Are you sure *you're* ready, though?" the Doriani asked, arm still clutched around Lucius's midsection. His touch was warm and gentle, yet kept a reassuring firmness underneath – and it was true that the adviser had to lean into him a bit to keep himself up. In the time since his arrival Lua had had to fend for himself in the city, though both knew it was a pointless procedure leading up to his allowance into the palace proper once the quarters were properly arranged. He already ate and bathed in the palace, in the wing opposite Lucius's; the white-furred wolf had availed himself to the more floral scents there, gentle plumeria and hibiscus and passionflower layered beneath a cooler base of vanilla. All imported, of course, but he seemed as of yet unaware of this fact. "You look a bit... exhausted."

Lucius swallowed, sighed, and allowed himself to lean in against the smaller wolf's shoulder. "Surely you've noticed," he said, "that using your skills puts a strain on your own mind and body?"

Lua dipped his head, spreading another burst of that gentle, sweet scent. "A little bit."

"It occurs in small amounts to wielders of the more mundane types—" Lucius grumbled and bent over to fetch his clothing. Lua slid away from him to go do the same for himself, and in that moment, the lack of

the warm touch felt strange to him. “-and is much more impactful for us who use Spirit. It is a fact of which you must be *extremely* careful: for mages like you and I it is much more likely to spend our lives in our casting. This is why – why control is of utmost importance.”

“I see...”

“Do you?” Lucius looked up again, just in time to see Lua tugging his pants up his legs. The other wolf paused there, ears perked and eyes wide, and then slowly continued; Lucius watched those slim paws draw up his thighs and waist, then come around the front to work at the fastenings of his pants – and then he glanced away again. “I enforced no restriction upon you, Lua, like my own inability to lie, but know this is something where you *must* exhibit the utmost care and caution.”

“Yes. I understand.” He bowed his head. Around him the other attendants worked, sweeping at the floor and fetching the reagents, some of them wilted and dried now. “I would not question you, Lucius, but you must know your own limits, too. I take it you have never before taught another student in Spirit, so this will be uncharted territory for both of us. Yes?”

There was a glimmer in those pale eyes. Lucius shifted his shirt on his shoulders, letting it hang open for a moment. Lua held his gaze, fully and freely, as even the Archmage had trouble doing. In fact, so far it seemed only his queen and then his wife were capable of doing that without fear or caution.

“Yes,” he answered. “I suppose it will.”

~ ~ ~

There he sat along the balcony, smooth-carved marble icy cold along the pads of his bare footpaws. At night the heat of the desert trickled away into a more frigid stillness, blue-black velvet of open sky overhead speckled, splashed, dotted, streaked with arcing swirls of distant stars, pale yellow and sparkling white, dim orange and rich red. The twin moons hung in their uneven orbit halfway to the apex of the sky, looking almost like a single oblong object with the way the reflected light slid off of their features here.

Some said it was those two moons that granted mages their power, and one capable of wielding Spirit could only be born beneath a union of the two. Noticeably different in size, they shared an uneven orbit up in the distant sky, seeming to swing and sway back and forth, back and forth in their dance: when the larger of the pair floated in front it dominated the sky and seemed to stand as the only one, but then when the smaller made its round and took its place, it instead looked to stand in front of a mirror, casting back across a larger reflection of itself.

This idea was nonsense, of course. Many nights had Lucius sat here in meditation, reaching in within himself and out across the city, towards the distant glass spires just barely visible past the northeastern corner of the wall, and then up into the sky... where he felt nothing but cool, quiet strands of Fire magic echoing down, reflected off the surfaces of the moons from the distant sun where it slept. Those in themselves were faint, far below the threshold of what someone of his particular skill could grasp and manipulate, though still present. From the moons Lucius felt no Spirit.

*Although...*

He reached forward and slid the earthenware mug a little closer to the edge of the table, then curled his fingers around the material finally cool enough to grasp. Following the midday ritual, he and Lua had retired to relax for a while, with the Doriani being sent to peruse the library at the academy while the Alenari returned here, catching his breath and recharging his reserves, so to say. The younger wolf had reappeared as afternoon had begun to blossom into night seeking another session before they would break for the evening and, pleased with his initiative, Lucius had obliged, and again opened himself to Lua's abilities.

*Perhaps I am simply not skilled enough to recognize what is truly there.* He looked up to the moons again. There was just so much about Lua that caught his attention and interest, with the white wolf's essence so thoroughly entwined with so many differing things, curiosity and interest paired with danger and urgency. It felt almost like chasing something just barely out of reach, like grasping after a shadow disappearing into thick fog – all uncharted territory, as he had said, and a delight to explore.

*Enticing* – that was the word for it, for *him*. The way he had composed himself during the ceremony, reaching out and taking hold of not only Lucius's essence, but that of everyone he carried behind him as well, and then galvanizing and stabilizing the casting when he could still barely ignite a candle from across the room... and then the way he had looked afterwards as well, revitalized, energized. It was he had reached out to support Lucius, and he who had lifted him up from where he sat as the last of his energy trickled out of him. Lua had even offered a shoulder to his tutor on the way up the stairs from the bowels of the palace, and sat with him on one of the steps halfway up when Lucius needed to catch his breath again.

He had offered to fetch him some tea. Lucius lifted the mug and took a sip, then let the still steaming liquid roll back and forth over his tongue and between his lips. To someone unfamiliar with it, the taste might remind them of something halfway between mint and menthol, cool and sweet with a twinge of acidity beneath it, refreshing both on hot days as well as cold nights. The aroma tickled at his nose and spread through his system, and he clutched the mug in his paws and leaned back in his chair, a slow sigh trickling out from between parted lips...

...then rushing out a little faster at the sensation of warm paws tracing down his jaw from behind. Lucius opened his eyes, head craned lazily back, and looked right up into his wife's amber-gold gemstones.

She cooed softly. "Long day?"

Lucius thought about that for a moment. "No," he answered. "The opposite, in fact. I didn't know how much the citizens' hearings weighed on me until Her Highness relieved me of the responsibility."

"Yes, but now you have *another* responsibility to take its place." The slim vixen slid around from behind him and sank down into one of the other chairs at the table, looking out across the city below. She drummed her claws on the smooth stone for a moment. "How is Lua treating you?"

"Better than expected." He reached forward for her paw; she turned it over and entwined her fingers with his. Lucius was quite proud of the relationship the two shared, and it still gave him a tingle when he lifted that paw to his muzzle, leaned in for a kiss, and then picked up the distinct traces of another, familiar scent beneath her own natural aroma. "And how is Master Barachiel treating *you*?"

Azura at least had the grace to feign an embarrassed blush. She flicked her ears, scoffed, and looked out over the city again. “My, my,” she rumbled. “Is my own husband accusing me of *infidelity*?”

Lucius chuckled. “Oh, I would *never*.” And that was true: this was something the two had talked about, early on as well as throughout their relationship. “In fact, I would almost wager your own husband might be encouraging you...”

The two leaned in, each laughing beneath their breath, and then met in a cool, sweet kiss. As soon as it broke apart Azura slid her paw in around his, slipped the mug from his grasp, and took a sip of it herself. “Ah,” she breathed, “that’s still so good... is this the batch we dried here at home?”

He sat back and nodded. “It is. The moonlight-dried, actually.”

“Oh, perfect! I was wondering about that method...” She trailed off, peering into the slightly foggy liquid held within the cup.

Lucius knew, however, that Azura’s thoughts did not actually linger on the bayshoot tea. So many years spent together in such vivid intimacy, with him being a natural-born Spirit mage, meant that the two had forged a special, unique sort of spirit-bond, the kind that required no ritual or ceremony or anything of the sort. Wherever Azura was, Lucius could *feel*; whatever was in her head he could sense, and whatever her feelings, he often shared them.

“Azura...”

One of her ears flicked. She looked over at him. “Your new plaything is really making waves in the palace. Half of the council is speaking about him amongst themselves – a sharp, young, *attractive* wolf shows up out of the blue, and then within minutes the adviser takes him under his wing?” The vixen leaned in, cup held by its brim from her thin fingers, and then took another sip. “Well, what do *you* think they’re saying?”

“Plaything?” Lucius swiped it from her, keeping his eyes level. Bluish-white to amber-gold. “Azura, that’s-”

“Oh, come *on*. I mean, I’ve seen him around – he’s Doriani, isn’t he? Exotic. That slim, lithe body, that wide muzzle, those... deft paws...” She began to slide hers down beneath the table, up her husband’s leg. “You two share something that you haven’t been able to with anyone else, you know. Your magic. You can’t tell me you haven’t *thought* about it, with him.”

“Well, I h-” But Lucius found he literally couldn’t. Embarrassed, he felt his ears pin back against his head and hid his mouth behind his paw as he turned to look down the balcony again. Across from him Azura smirked, gave his thigh a squeeze, and pushed her chair back. “Come on. That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” She looped herself around him once more, draping her arms over his shoulders from behind. Still she smelled faintly of arctic fox, herself a cross; it ignited a warm little flame of relief in Lucius’s chest, to know that his wife was still capable of finding the pleasure she deserved, even if he couldn’t give it to her. “I know you, Lu. I know your tastes. And *him*?” Azura dove in and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek. “I bet you’d think he tastes *wonderful*.”

The Alenari wolf turned his head as she reentered the quarters, ears following the sound of her soft footsteps and clothing rustling across her fur. She was right, of course. She always was. That stood as another boon of their unique relationship, where Azura could tell him the things that he tried to avoid admitting to himself.

Maybe Lua's touch *did* send a little shock of anticipation through him, whenever he felt it. Lucius downed the rest of the tea, wiped at his mouth, sat there a moment longer, then rose to join his wife ; she was busying herself in the washroom to the side, shoulders now bare and voluminous tail swishing around near her ankles as she bent over the sink. Lucius came forward, ran his paws down her sides, and nuzzled into her neck – Azura rumbled softly in her throat and bumped her muzzle against his – then headed over towards the bed.

Try as he might, though, he couldn't get that other damned wolf out of his head, even once Azura had slid in alongside him and pressed her body, warm and lithe and comfortable and familiar, up against his. He wrapped an arm around her and nuzzled in along her neck, breath trickling softly out through her thick fur, and closed his eyes... and still imagined what it might feel like to have Lua here on his other side, the other wolf's slightly wider, longer muzzle on his shoulder, his smooth, flat chest against his back, his floral scent curling around the room.

It was embarrassing, really, and Lucius was ashamed to admit it. Barely three days near him and already he was thinking and remembering how his touches felt, how it looked when he smiled, how his voice sounded... Lucius squirmed, sighed, and tried to clear his head, yet again going through those same novice exercises as he always had before.

And there, at the back of his mind as he drifted off, he could feel a vague, distance presence, still unfamiliar to him yet growing steadily less so as the days went on. Somewhere across the palace, glowing like a half-covered torch light visible through a thick fog, he knew Lua was out there.

He wondered, vaguely, if Lua had had the same thoughts about him.

~ ~ ~