

Day 1

Afternoon

Things here are exactly as I remember them, yet at the same time none of it feels familiar. It looks the same, it feels the same, it smells the same, but it's still completely different. Something here has changed, but at first glance, at first investigation, even that isn't fully obvious. It's like there's a constant tension in the air, like something is constantly on the verge of shattering, but it never quite makes it there.

The folks at the village remembered me, too. Of course I stopped in to see my father and let him know I'm alright. He's doing well for himself, considering, though he said his arm had been bothering him a bit. Now that I'm more experienced and practiced I could help him out a bit more than what I did for myself before I left. He was the only one to grin when he saw me, and then did so even wider when I showed him what I'm now capable of. "I'm so proud of you, Lannon," he told me. The six years I haven't seen him have started to make his age apparent on his face and voice, and in his movements. "I'm so, so proud."

The others were a bit less welcoming. They smiled and greeted me, but I could tell they had hoped they had been rid of me for good. Their sharp eyes went from my face to my ear, their expressions subtly changing as they followed the map of my piercings there: quiet nostalgia at the silver stud, acceptance at the electrum, reminiscence at the gold, shock and disbelief at the tall silver-alloy cuff along the other side, then confusion at the hanging chain. Mostly as I had expected. I greeted each and every one of them in turn, showing that I recalled all of their names and thought fondly of them. A lie of course, but unlike some with my skills, I am not bound against such a thing.

I told my father why I had returned after six years away. He nodded and listened, he offered me tea and dinner, and while we sat down I told him of all that had passed in that time too. He was shocked, as I was to realize just how far I had gone and how long it had been. He hugged me, and we spoke some more, and then he told me what he had heard.

The myths were true. All of them. Rumors of some hideous beast in the woods, something that couldn't possibly be of natural origin. It had been there for at least two decades, stirring quietly deep in the heart of the forest, but in recent years had started to push out towards the tree line and even start harassing some of the other border villages. Something with bright yellow-orange eyes, sharp and piercing like midday sunlight, and standing some seven feet tall while hunched over, misshapen and bulbous. "It looks like a wolf," he said, "shaped by someone who had never seen another living creature. I'm not sure it's even that. Nobody is." Its stare is empty and hollow, as though it is a shell of a creature with no soul looking out from within.

I stayed the night with my father, as he showed me he had kept my part of the house unchanged for my return. He knew I would one day come back, after all, as did I. In the morning we had breakfast – I brought some spices from the academy down in the south – and spoke a little more as I prepared to continue on my way into the forest. I noticed him eyeing my ear, and of course the cuff piercing in particular. He asked me about it right as I had settled my backpack onto my shoulders again.

Hearing it from my father made me blush, admittedly. I told him I'd tell him all about it when I finished my study. He paused, then grinned again and nodded.

And I was on my way again. Away from home, into something new. I couldn't help but wonder what waits for me out there. I suppose I'll soon find out.

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It smelled like rain. Lannon lifted his head and took a deep breath of the pleasant woodland air, in that inhalation feeling the trees all around, the bushes near his footpaws, the moistened earth beneath, the decaying leaves and fallen branches, the smell of wet stone... and, of course, all the other creatures of the woods, milling around with few paying him any second notice. Down near the border with the grasslands the trees remained shorter and thinner, swinging and dancing in the breeze and providing good spaces under which to lie for a nap. In here, though, well into the depths of the woods, he could tilt his head back and look up as far as he could and still not find the peaks of the trunks. In here the land rolled and slid with soft hills and small creek valleys, and the trees did not notice.

He loved it. The lynx let his coat shift a little bit further off his shoulders as he walked, for the third day in a row spending his morning just wandering around in the woods, finding his way around, learning the immediate radius. Shortly after his explanation of his task his father had directed him towards an old hunting shelter deeper in the woods: *"head straight from the smith's and keep going until you see the lightning-split elm. It'll be about an hour's walk, and even if you miss it you can just turn back and try again; the trees are sparse enough there that you'll be able to see it a ways off. Once there, look up to the sky and head as closely northeast as you can. Eventually you'll hit a small river, usually no deeper in this season than, oh... the center of your chest. My, you've grown tall. From there follow it north and west, and soon it will bend. Keep on following that, and once it widens out head up the hill on the near bank and keep going, and you'll soon see the shelter."*

It took a few tries but Lannon eventually found the place, a nice, cozy hut blending in with the trees around it, separated from the rest of the woods by a small clearing. It was clear the place hadn't been inhabited in a while, so while his first day out here was spent in making it livable, now he devoted roughly two hours a day to continuing to clean it up and get it prepared. The archmage had given him leave to stay as long as he needed to complete his study, and he yet did not know how long it would take.

Nothing of this sort had ever been done before, as far as he knew – or at least, not in this particular realm of the discipline. Lannon glanced down as he walked, careful not to catch on any of the twisting roots or protruding stones, watching the way his footpaws just slightly sank into the rain-softened topsoil. He had done a lot of reading leading up to this, both for his studies at the academy as well as for his own personal interest, and to his surprise the only instance he could find was of some sword found thrust through the chest of an ursine skeleton in a cave far to the northeast.

How often is superstition and myth linked to magical events? he considered, slowing down to choose his path down the next hill. *There's still much we don't know about our world. This could actually be a totally natural occurrence, something that had spent its history alone and is coming out only now due to the changes in its environment. I did notice the tree line had been pushed considerably back since I had left. But, then, if it were magical...* the lynx stopped where he stood, reaching out to wrap his arm around a thin tree trunk, and looked around the low valley below him. *I would be able to feel it. Is that what this tension is?*

It felt like ice upon the surface of a lake about to crack beneath his feet, like an overfilled bag ready to burst at the seams, like a wooden support beam bending just before it shatters. Lannon looked down over the valley, feline eyes zipping from the small movements caused by a breeze pushing through the bushes, to an uneven rustling caused from a hare diving out of view, to the slow, lazy drift of the clouds past the canopy far overhead, and yet he couldn't see anything about it. The sounds of the forest wrapped around him, the rustling of branches and leaves, the soft squishing of the soil beneath him, the quiet murmuring of the river down across the other hill where he took his daily baths; the scents embraced him, the heavy, wet musk of the other night's warm rain, the bright, full spice of verdant plant life, the distant cloying sweetness of a dead animal, the smooth touch of the streamwater in the distance. There was nothing strange there.

The lynx began his descent along the hill, careful not to let the soft soil slip beneath his step. It wasn't so different from what he had grown used to at the academy, far to the south past the shifting sands of the Maldethi desert: the air was warm and the ground soft, but up here it was due to pleasant humidity rather than scalding dryness. Lannon had grown up here, though, and knew the change of the seasons. This heat was already at the peak it would reach throughout the remainder of spring and the summer after it, and then the temperature would start a sharp decline with the onset of autumn when the floor of the forest thickened with fallen leaves and heavy branches, while these tall trees remained full and strong with their green needles.

Then the snow would come. Lannon hung onto a low branch as he approached the bottom, one of his footpaws sliding out from beneath him in a pool of slick mud. He had never been there himself, but roughly another three weeks' journey by carriage to the northeast would show where the forest gave way to a coarse, rocky shoreline, beyond which stirred the northern ocean and its endless expanse of white-capped waves and blue-black water. Cold winds came down from that ocean, twisting and spinning above the wide forest and mixing with the clouds overhead to seize their rain, freeze it, and spread it out below like ash, drifting down and coating the ground in a thick blanket of white. That was what he missed the most about his time attending the academy – the snow.

Or, rather, precipitation in general. In his six years studying magic in Maldeth Lannon could recall no more than three times when it rained. The city itself, Solm, had been constructed around a fairly large oasis, which itself drew from a massive aquifer hidden far beneath the desert sands, wedged between a layer of limestone and then one of solid granite underneath, and-

Again the lynx lost his balance, this time without anything to steady himself. He wobbled in place, swung his arms, then felt the world spin beneath him, only to have it come speeding back up to send a shock up his back from the base of his tail. He grunted, looked up to the sky, then let himself fall down onto his back, then immediately regretted it once he felt the soft, sticky grasp of mud seeping through his clothes. Grumbling to himself Lannon peeled himself off from the ground, reached back to feel what all mess he had gotten onto himself, began weaving a quick mix of Water and Earth magic to slop it all off – then felt a tingling in the air, not unlike someone breathing along the sensitive fur of the inside of his ear.

This tingle made him freeze, though, and set his heart to beating in the quick quarter-second before he turned his head to look down, feeling more of the mud start to stick to the fur of his ankle. Right then he felt a resounding *thwock* in the earth beside him, causing him to yelp and jump up. Right there lodged halfway in the soft ground stood an arrow, the revealed half still swinging slightly with the residual force. Lannon's spell trickled away from his grasp, the intent and will suddenly wiped away under the

distraction; a quick glance over the arrow, from the type of wood in the shaft to the arrangement of the fletching and type of feathers used, told him all he needed to know.

Immediately he stood up, mud and slickness forgotten, and scanned the forest straight out from where he assumed the arrow had originated. One of his paws went up to his shoulder, partially reflex and partially to satiate the slight itchy tingle that had begun in that spot, while he concentrated on the trees and bushes across the low valley. As expected, though, he could see nothing of note there, and as such he straightened up, took a slow breath, steadied himself... and began weaving another small spell, one that he had refined on his own as a kitten.

Mostly Earth this time, with just a touch of something else. That touch was precisely the catalyst for his departure from home, when he had suffered a wound and stitched it shut while still blinded with pain. It wasn't until he had arrived at the academy some months later that he learned just how unusual it was for him to be able to *perceive* that type at all. Aptitude in magic at all was somewhat rare, as Lannon had been the first in his village to show an ability in generations, but to be able to both see the threads of Spirit magic entwined throughout the world as well as pull and manipulate them... the number of mages capable of such listed in the double digits, and each and every one of them had gone down in history because of it.

Then here he was, young Lannon Asaros from a small town in the western portion of the country of Loria, a lynx with warm blue eyes, a pair of pinpoint scars on his chest and back, and nothing notable to his name.

Yet.

He kept that simple weaving close to himself and then sent it out, shocking down into the wet earth and vibrating forward and around him. In an instant he became aware of everything going on, from the little beetles scuttling beneath fallen leaves and worms in the dirt to birds sitting quietly in their nests far up in the trees, to snakes weaving their way between low-lying bushes and young hares hiding in their burrows. Lannon stretched it out further, feeling the familiar gentle exhaustion that came from weaving Spirit magic – it had to come from something already extant, another rule of magic he hadn't fully picked up on at first: he could not pull something from nothing, and as such, often had to draw on his own reserves of life and energy to fuel the magic – and quickly, quietly went through each of the little signatures, identifying and tossing them aside, until one nearly shocked him off his feet.

Two of them, actually, the second popping into his awareness right after. Deep, powerful wells of strength and potential, ferocious in their intensity, forcing his threads back out away from them and stunning the lynx so much that he lost his concentration on the spell. Such forceful presences and he hadn't been able to see them – and even now knowing they were there, and *where* they were, he still couldn't. His eyes scanned the section of woods where they stood: the two wolves, one upright and the other feral. Just as he had expected, and also as expected, he still couldn't find them when he looked without seeking the magic.

Slowly Lannon raised his paws, showing he was unarmed. His heart stuck in his throat; he had encountered a situation like this before, back before he had left home in the first place. The others in his village had been raised on stories of the tribe out in the woods, a large group of wolves – perhaps several groups, families, clans, whatever – who consort with ancient magic and form unimaginable bonds with their feral companions, huge beasts reminiscent of their species only in appearance.

Lannon had heard some of those stories when he was a kitten. Paws still raised, standing as firmly in place as the slick mud would allow, he scanned the bushes and trees, back forth over that spot where his magic had pinged. There had been stories of how the wolves creep into houses at night to snatch away disobedient children; stories of how they capture dishonest kittens and feed them to their wolves; stories of the things they do to punish their own disobedient children, foul and horrible methods involving switches cut from young tree branches, sharpened sticks, smoldering bark.

As he grew up the stories changed. He was told that each and every one of the hunters – that was what they called the wolves who walked on two feet there, the *hunters* alongside their companions – could tap into dark, powerful magic, allowing them to forge and maintain whatever unnatural bond they have. He was told that with that magic they could twist and overtake another's mind and force them to do their bidding. He was told that the wolves made active sport of hunting the more "civilized" folk out in the villages and towns, occasionally breaching the protective shadows of the woods to pierce throats and hearts, and in Lannon's case his left shoulder, with their stone-tipped arrows. Once or twice it had been a steel arrowhead, oddly enough, though the lynx figured they had just salvaged lost ammunition from the villagers.

Then, finally, there had been a story of how the immoral union between hunter and companion could produce vile, hideous offspring, an impossible aberration halfway between man and beast. As far as Lannon could tell, that was the origin of what he now sought and hunted, the reason for his return.

So long as he himself did not end up as the prey. He swallowed, still watching that one spot, and then twitched; another bush near the edge of his vision shook, and in that moment he gathered his concentration and sent out another pulse of his Spirit magic. The two had moved over there in the meantime, more quietly than the wind through the trees. It was a she-wolf there behind the bush, a huntress with her male companion large enough to stand above her head when she knelt. She shifted, still silently, to draw an arrow from the quiver slung around her waist; she nocked the arrow and drew the string back, limbs of her bow stretching and tightening with the force; she raised it, kept it close to her muzzle, tilted her head...

Lannon coughed and half-turned towards them, trying to put on the guise that he did not know where they stood. "*Oras,*" he said to the forest, hoping his words would reach them. *Peace*, he had said, in what he thought was the old dialect of the continental tongue that the tribe spoke. It was similar to the common tongue in many ways yet still very clearly stood as its own distinct language, and due to the rarity of its occurrence in the modern world, no clear translation yet existed.

In his own tongue – "*mola ia'la io'le farurua dola'lo*", simple and clear grammatically. *I mean you no harm*. In *their* language, in the Old Tongue... the lynx frowned, feeling his heartbeat quicken with each second. He pursed his lips, tried the words, hesitated, tried again.

"*Mole...*" No, he thought, *subject first...* "*Eo mole... faruru dola... ea?*"

Nothing for a second. He let the magic drip away from him again, the threads slippery and unsteady from his nervousness. Then, in a fraction of a second, a quiet *snap* and a sharp hiss: Lannon squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, expecting to feel the sudden, familiar pain of an arrow slamming through his body, only to feel instead a shock through the mud near his feet.

The first arrow had been a warning shot, and then, the forest wolves never missed their mark. So the second had been a dismissal. Lannon released a sigh, nodded, squeezed his paws together in an expression of thanks, and immediately changed his path to follow the line of the valley instead of trying to cross it. It wasn't until he had arced back around towards where he thought the cabin was that he let himself relax, though. That was going to be a danger throughout his entire study here, and one he needed to watch out for. Even so, he kept himself alert on his way through the woods again, reminding himself of familiar landmarks and every now and then sending out another pulse of Spirit to see if he was still being followed.

He was. Lannon brought the two of them down to the slow-flowing river down the hill from the cabin, where he had started taking his daily baths. There he sat for a while, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the time to relax, before standing back up to gather some herbs to prepare with his dinner later. As the sky began to darken with the approach of evening, his pulses started to show that the huntress and her companion had at some point left him, allowing the lynx to breathe freely again.

Still no sighting of what I'm here for, he realized on his way back to the cabin. The area immediately surrounding the hut had started to become fully familiar, while the regions of the forest further out could still confuse and misdirect him. Maybe I'm doing something wrong. Maybe... I'll try something new tomorrow.

Or tonight.

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*Day 4
Morning*

Something has changed. It's hard to say precisely what, though. We've always known about the tribe out in the woods near home, and yet none of us have any idea how expansive it might be. Yesterday I encountered a huntress and her companion, though never actually saw them. Taking of note of it as something to investigate at a later date. It would be quite beneficial to forge and maintain a positive relationship, and to dispel the hurtful rumors spreading through my town and, I'm sure, many others along the forest border.

Today I will again go on a walk to more confidently learn the terrain, though will do so at a later hour than I have been. Perhaps the beast I am searching for is nocturnal. This means I will have to exercise more caution, and as such, I am bringing my knife and a bow...

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*Day 6
Afternoon*

Returned to town to purchase a fishing rod better than the children's craft of a stick and a vine that I attempted. Thought I saw something out across the river early this morning while bathing, yet a magical investigation showed nothing there. I must have still been a bit tired, though, as I had some trouble grasping the strands of Spirit and pushing them out. It is a slippery school, though, and one I still haven't fully gotten the hang of. I know for a fact that perhaps I never will, and it is a blessing of its own that I

can manage it at all. I mark it down here since it was still an odd occurrence, though, as something that hasn't happened to me since my second year at Solm.

I have not again encountered the huntress since she welcomed me to the forest. This does not mean she is not there, of course. I have not yet been here a week, and yet every day I still learn more about the tribe and their ways. They are silent and invisible, as much a part of the forest as the trees and the wind. Sometimes I stumble upon their tracks in the mud and detritus, the lithe footprints of the hunters and the thicker, heavier step of their large companions. They know I'm here and they're allowing me to stay, at least for now.

...

*Day 8
Morning*

The forest changes at night.

Lannon crept through the low-lying bushes along the crest of hill, carefully maintaining his step so as to make as little noise as possible. He knew of something he could do with magic, a little trick intertwining Air and Water around his footpaws to dampen the sound as though it came through a thick fog, but he needed to focus his concentration elsewhere right now – and, besides, those two were easily his least comfortable when it came to types of magic.

A week out here and he had yet seen nothing. Nothing *distinct*, at least: there had been some prints down in the riverbank one morning, a broken branch another day, and then an odd feeling in the air just before he climbed into bed tonight. That feeling had remained, it had lingered and deepened and intensified, until the restlessness spread to his legs and he found himself pacing around the small room of the cabin, alternating between flicking the candle in his desk lamp on and off with hardly a thought. His aptitude in Fire was strong enough that he could do most tasks with it without even trying, and in those several minutes his mind was indeed occupied by other things.

With that feeling the night, too, had deepened, as did the darkness of the forest around him. Before long Lannon found himself wrapping his cloak around himself to head out into the cool, still-humid air of the outside world, tall ears flicking this way and that with all the noises of the not-quite-sleeping woods. Spring continued to meld slowly into summer, and with that, all the palettes of the world around him changed too. Warm greens brightened and ripened into the rich deep shades of full life, pinpoint blooms and blossoms of red, and orange, and white, and pink, and down between the fallen leaves the occasional small blast of lavender-purple, all flowing between them. The sounds changed as well, crickets and cicadas and any number of other things joining the ranks of the musical conversations of birds overhead and the chattering of squirrels and rodents, the occasional far-off song of a wolf, the low braying of a stag, the commotion of a wild boar.

During the day, that was. All of this and more during his morning baths, during his daytime wandering of the woods following the sketchy little map he had penned into the back of his journal, during the afternoons and growing evenings as he settled in to forage ingredients for dinner. At night the forest changed.

The greens and yellows and whites turned to black, and blue, and grey; the birdsong died away and gave way to the quiet humming of owls and sounds of crows scheming, with the cicadas carrying on their own songs heedless of the rising moon; the scents and smells with which he had grown so familiar from his childhood became muted and twisted, dampened beneath the gathering dew of night and the distant yet distinct feeling of *something else*.

That was what drove him further away from the cabin now, when the sliver moon hung high overhead in the spaces between the trees. The forest was home to him, a familiar and comfortable change against the expansive sands and hot stone of the academy of Solm in Maldeth where he had lived for the past six years. The forest was home, and yet nothing about *this* forest felt like it. Not right now.

On he wandered, raising a paw to brush against the trunk of a tree, angling his shoulder to slide away from a branch, spreading his stance to maintain his balance along a slight decline. Very rarely had he encountered a feeling like this out there, away from home, although it *had* happened once. He had been lying in his bed staring up at the ceiling, a thousand thoughts running through his head, an odd sensation of *something* pounding through his chest, all just like tonight. He had stood up, gotten dressed, glanced at himself in the mirror, sighed, and then headed out into the halls of the academy, and then from there out into the streets of the city. Back then he had at least known what it was that drew him along, and within another few weeks he imagined he could put a name to both that feeling that tugged at him and its source.

It wasn't so tonight. Again and again the lynx looked up to the moon between the trees and then back down to the forest spreading out before him, thick yet sparse at the same time, dark and shadowed in the pale illumination of the night, lonely yet... yet he knew he wasn't quite on his own. Slowly, carefully, Lannon gathered the familiar yet strange threads of Spirit from around him, pulling them in both from the grass beneath his footpaws as well as out from his own core. Tonight it felt a little shaky and slippery, both from his own exhaustion as well as from whatever it was that curled its mists around between the trees and constantly drew him along, a tantalizing scent just out of reach, a promise of warmth that he just couldn't believe. Those thin threads, tenuous and fragile – for that was about the strongest of Spirit that he could wield, still in itself remarkable – he held tightly while he split his concentration to gather more, slightly denser threads of Earth, interweaving the Spirit in the gaps between, balling it up... and sending it back down into the ground, in the same small pulses that had become so familiar after casting them so often these past few days.

Lannon could feel the threads as they parted and slid out through the ground, coursing up and down the wrinkles in the earth, curling through the roots of the trees and bushes and sleeping flowers, bouncing off of whatever it met and coming back to him. It was certainly not the *simplest* spell he could utilize the type for, but by now he had performed it enough times that the sudden influx of information was something easily dealt with. Just like every other day out here Lannon easily picked through the signs and pieces and tossed the unimportant ones aside, eyes closed, feeling the world around him rather than seeing it.

Then, though, it stopped, the intertwined threads loosely unraveling and trickling away, the sudden empty space in his mind left by the magic leaving the lynx somewhat dazed and dizzy. He wobbled in place and opened his eyes, then made the dizziness worse by looking quickly around himself. This time, he was certain, it hadn't been a fault of his own doing. Six years of study in a talent which for him had been until that point entirely self-taught meant that he had become intimately acquainted with accident and his own failure, and this was not one of those.

In fact – the lynx straightened up, gathered himself, and trudged forward through the bushes a bit further – this felt exactly like the mutual practices he had been put through time and time again, the little competitions in class not to discover the greater mage between the two students, but rather to teach what to do if another is encountered in combat. This sensation felt, one for one, like a spell caught mid-weaving by another mage and dismantled, the power siphoned out of it to redirect for their own purpose.

Although... yet again Lannon slowed in his pace, leaning against a thick trunk for a moment while he looked slowly around himself. Not *quite* one for one, but to be fair, it had been quite a while since he had encountered someone in class capable enough to redirect his magic back at him, and never had it happened with any of his Spirit spells. This almost felt as though it had just *failed*, after the casting. As though some part of it, some foundation, had ruptured, split, and fell away, leaving the strands to dismantle themselves and drip apart.

So he tried again, and it happened again. And again, and again. Gritting his teeth, the lynx tried his best to wrap his will around the same threads of Spirit and Earth, to weave them together and intertwine the magical threads to follow that will, and yet they slid through his fingers. With a heavy sigh and a slump of his shoulders he released those threads and, with them, the intent to cast the spell, and leaned sideways against the tree to catch his breath.

Something was wrong. It had been just a feeling before, just a sensation, but now he could see and sense it permeating the forest around him. The light of the moon felt dimmed, the darkness had thickened, the cicadas had fallen silent.

And he was not alone. Still panting from the exertion of his failed spells, still exhausted from all the sleep he hadn't yet gotten tonight, Lannon swallowed, steeled himself, went through the so-familiar novice exercises that had been taught to him his first year in Solm, and then with a flick of his wrist sent out a quick burst of controlled Fire bound in place with Air. Constrained in a tight cage of the latter he had woven together thin, delicate threads of the former, much finer than the Earth he had used before: his talent in Fire, placing him far above his classmates in the same type of magic, meant that he could wield it both much more powerfully as well as far more efficiently. The actual threads he again drew from both himself and the world around him, sapping some of the summer warmth out of the forest air and tying them together into the ball he pushed out between the trees.

Unlike his little trick with Earth and Fire, taking concentrated willpower and intent, this feat of Fire he could do while still catching his breath and clinging onto the tree for support. The makeshift magic lantern floated out in front of him, burning bright yet cool, its pale yellow light casting long, distorted shadows through the forest around it. Lannon had to shield his eyes against the glow at first and then looked around it, knowing that whatever had interrupted him he likely would not be able to see. Already ideas were coursing through his tired mind, thoughts of some magical barrier or presence igniting these strange visions and hallucinations in the villagers' imaginations of wild beasts and terrible demons, and-

Lannon's claws shot out and dug into the bark of the tree against his side. A huge, lumbering abomination, halfway between man and beast, broad-shouldered and thick-muzzled yet hunched, bent, twisted. It raised its head as Lannon's lantern passed by, the light seeming to stretch and distort its face even further: it was a wolf from head to toe, yet the lines blurred between where the man began and ended and where the feral beast took up its place. It had tall, wide ears, one tattered and ragged and

the other torn off halfway up, one of its bright starlight-yellow eyes obscured by a thick, cloudy mass through which only the barest darkening of the slitted pupil could be seen.

Its arms and paws were *massive*, claws nearly as thick as two of Lannon's fingers held together cleaving through the low root of the tree near which it knelt, within spitting distance of the lynx. Coarse, unkempt fur, blackish-brown like the other day's rain-soaked soil, showing rough skin in uneven patches and half-healed scars and gashes; its tail clung tight to its body, its powerful legs bunched beneath it in a mess of twisted muscles and protruding sinews. Even so, even when kneeling, poised to leap, Lannon could still tell it was taller than him.

Its black lips curled back in a fierce snarl as the lantern approached, still idling slowly by. Thick, sharp fangs showed between fresh reddish-pink gums, heavy strands of saliva rolling down from those bared teeth, surprisingly straight and tight in its mouth. Even in the relative warmth of the night its breath still puffed out in the still air, hot dense clouds wafting through the spaces between protruding fangs, twisting and curling before fading away. Lannon tried to inch back, tried to whip up a defensive spell in the event it moved, but when it did so it was so, *so fast*, dousing the lantern with an impossibly quick swipe of its paw in the time it took the lynx to blink. The magical strands unraveled and popped free, the stray heat and air quickly dissipating up through the trees and returning the forest to its stiff darkness.

This time, though, it was not silent. The cicadas remained hushed and the owls no longer sang, but Lannon could hear the thing's breathing, low and raspy, cold wind through a mountain cavern. He hung onto the tree and tried to work himself backwards, trying to find purchase along the still-slick earth and sticky fallen leaves, while his eyes worked to adjust to the sudden darkness. Slow, rhythmic, rumbling, as though it growled in its throat with each exhalation. Lannon imagined he could feel that hot breath puffing out towards him, wrapping around his neck and muzzle and pushing its way into his awareness, the beast smelling him, identifying him, *tasting* him... he squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away, any prepared spells leaking to nothingness through his grasp.

This was it, then. This *had* to be it. The fallen leaves and branches beneath its massive footpaws, each one nearly half the size of his chest, crunched quietly as it approached. There was a feeling, a sensation, an aura of wrongness about it, of some kind of otherness that stifled the world immediately around it and sent Lannon's heart shivering and reverberating in his chest, that ignited a restlessness in his legs, that sent his mind to sprawling through a thousand thoughts and ideas. He felt that breath puff against his face, felt it tickle his whiskers and sting his nose; he felt the sensation of those lips pulling back, felt the rumbling growl trail across and down his muzzle and shoulders like coursing rain; he heard the thing swallow, felt it tilt its head in its investigation, heard the wet, sticky parting of lips and tongue as it tasted the air and nearly the lynx's face as well. Shivering, teeth gritted, he half-opened his eyes and looked up to see just that: that wide, gaping muzzle, the pulsing throat, the sharp, dangerous fangs dripping with drool, the broad, flat tongue... the single bright yellow eye, glimmering at him from above, sliding slowly backwards as it began to straighten to its full height.

Lannon closed his eyes again and drew his arms over his head. It had swiped away his lantern as though it were just a firefly passing by. Delicate as though threads were, it was still pure, harnessed Fire magic: without the proper dismantling, without a second touch of magic applied, the spell should have destabilized and exploded, scorching the beast, the forest, and Lannon with it, and yet a swipe from its claws had simply doused the flame like any other candle. There was something terribly wrong here, and he would not live to find out what. The lynx cowered down in the mud and brush of the forest, legs shaking beneath him and ears splayed sideways across his head; the beast stood tall and fierce above

him, silhouetted in the light of the moon, its form and shadow twisted and wrong, *incorrect*, something that should not be. He heard it, felt it tighten and tense its muscles in preparation, just as Lannon prepared himself for his last few seconds alive.

Those seconds stretched on... and on, and on. Slowly the lynx opened his eyes, straightened up, and then lowered his arms. Again he was alone, all on his own in the heavy darkness of the forest with nothing in his ears but the pounding of his own heart. Then, gradually, the other sounds joined it: the songs of the cicadas, the noises of the owls and birds in the trees, the hissing and chittering of other beasts and bugs.

Lannon reached up and touched a spot on the side of his muzzle. A thick, sticky strand of wetness clung between his cheek and fingerpad when he drew it away. He looked out through the trees and into the darkness, tall ears perked the sounds of footsteps which just were not there.

Confused, dazed, and exhausted both from the lack of sleep and due to all the adrenaline suddenly emptying out of him, Lannon waited there a moment longer and then turned to find his way back to the hut. When he got there he stripped his cloak and clothing off, stretched his arms over his head, climbed into the not too soft bed... then got back up to draw the curtains before the window closed.

Then he lay there looking up at the ceiling, listening to the muted sounds of the world outside. The different trails of thoughts began in his head and started trying to weave themselves together, but as those threads dripped and slid like oil between his fingers, his head lolled to the side and he fell asleep.

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Even as I slept it was still there. The shape, the form, the shadow; the claws, the teeth, the eye. I don't know what this is. There were whispers throughout my childhood of something terrible out in the forest, but the stories never gave it form. That began only after I had left. Now, though, it has form, it has intent, it has a hunger.

But I don't know why. Nobody does. Where did it come from? Why is it here? What does it want? Why does it look like that? Specifically: what is it? Can it speak? Of interest: what is its link to magic and the Weft?

Notes. It is capable of deconstructing a spell already woven and cast: I put together an illumination lantern and it swiped it away, without destabilizing the spell. It has some kind of presence, or exudes some type of aura: the forest went silent shortly before I became aware of it. Need to investigate whether this thing is what was interrupting my weaves with Spirit magic, and if so, why.

This means I must track it down and find it again.