

The same flash of primal terror still shot through the young lynx's chest as the wolf trudged out of the trees and into the light. Lannon forced a smile through it, but deep inside he kicked himself – he had wanted, had hoped, that after their recent encounter that would no longer be a problem. *I suppose it's fair*, he mused, watching the way the sand and gravel split and spread beneath the beast's heavy footsteps, *and I suppose it's instinct for a reason*. If his six years spent studying magic had taught him anything, it was that instinct was one of the most powerful important things to which anyone had birthright.

The wolf stayed slow and careful in his approach, each footstep taken deliberately, almost silent on the bank. With his tufted ears perked Lannon could only hear the burbling of the water around his legs, and the quiet roar of the distant little waterfall further down the river. As usual there were no birds, no bugs, no sounds of life in the area around this beast. As though it existed in a slice of the world all its own, where its presence simply blocked out everything else.

Everything else except for Lannon. As the wolf approached so too did he step closer to the bank, cool water dripping off the fur of his bare body, gentle wind giving him a sharp reminder of the warmth that had just left his body which, in turn, made him blush and think to cover himself again. His eyes flicked away from the wolf for a moment to where his clothes sat on the bank – and when he looked back the beast's ears had perked and he had tilted his head.

Lannon paused, too. *Do you recognize this?* Footpaws sinking into the wet mud of the bank, he held one paw up towards the wolf and then raised the other towards his clothes. *How much of the man remains in you? You know the law of the forest: the hunt, the chase, the kill, the retreat. You know how to disappear among the wind and trees and the shadows as any beast. Yet at the same time, you recognize another, alone in the woods with you.*

This close, separated by perhaps three or four paces, Lannon could see the almost-familiar shapes of the brow, the snout, the muzzle, the chin, the cheeks. Was that really just yesterday? The sensation of actually *touching* this creature, of feeling tough skin and the warmth of life beneath coarse fur, the first *real* sign that he existed and that he was *here* alongside Lannon. Having reached his clothes Lannon stopped, held his paws in front of himself, motioned with his head down towards the pile... and then against everything those six years and before had taught him, went against his instincts, turned away from the wolf, and leaned down to pick his things up.

His heart thrummed in his chest and the nub of his tail tried to flick and lash behind him, and yet again he was glad for its absence so that it could not belie the tension that rocketed through him. As he picked up his trousers and unfolded them, his ears flicked over to the sound of slightly quickened heavy footsteps along the gravel. Lannon lifted his head and looked over to see the wolf nearby but, still, far away: where the lynx to reach out an arm he couldn't touch him. Were the wolf to reach out, though, he could probably run those uneven, knobby fingers over Lannon's shoulder, and wrap them behind his head, and...

He coughed, half-intentionally bringing his pants over to cover himself. A yellow eye flicked down over his body and then returned to his muzzle. *Is that a man thing or a beast thing?* he thought, brow furrowing for a moment. *Recognition of the face – or, rather, the eyes. When I look to his clouded eye, his good one shifts, just slightly, to remain on mine. When I look down to his mouth, that eye shifts down. When I look up at his ears it comes up; when I look straight at his eye it holds my gaze, the pupil changing and adjusting just slightly. But that's curiosity I see there, isn't it?*

*Where my instincts are screaming at me to drop everything and run, to put as much distance between myself and this creature as possible, what are his telling him?*

“You, um...” Lannon cleared his throat and looked back to his pants. “You caught me in the middle of my private time. But that’s alright. I forgive you for that.” Again he returned his gaze to the wolf. The beast stood there, hunched over as always, twisted legs half-folded beneath him in something between a squat and a stand. He tilted his head with the lynx’s words. “You probably smelled me, didn’t you? On my clothes, I mean. Do you-?”

And, slowly, he held the pants out. Still the wolf recoiled a bit, head pulling back and ears flattening for just a moment. Then, yellow eye still on the lynx’s muzzle, he leaned in, dropped a paw to the ground for support, looked to the pants, looked to Lannon again, and sniffed. Then again, and again. He turned his head to the side a bit, pushed into the fabric, took another breath... and then Lannon giggled with the feeling of that hot exhalation rushing out between his fingers, soon followed by the sensation of the wet velvet nose running along his pads.

“Yeah. See?” He carefully pulled his pants away and then held them in front of himself. “These are mine. They fit perfectly. Well, not *perfectly*... my first night back I sat with my father at the old setup and got them trimmed and hemmed and all of that. Fingers never really forget how to run a loom or mend a tear. You know? Oh, here, let me...”

Lannon half-raised a paw, this time keeping an eye on the wolf’s muzzle. A brief split of his concentration, a readjustment of his thoughts... and a couple of fine yet intense strands of Fire pulled from the sun’s cord-thick rays, mixed with Air siphoned away from the wind, and Water from the humidity of the forest. The wolf blinked and reared partially back even before Lannon had composed and executed the spell, and when the stray moisture sloughed off his body and slid down into a puddle around his footpaws the beast leaned in again to get a closer look, brow furrowing.

The lynx glanced down to fit one footpaw into the leg of the pants but still stole another look, and couldn’t help but smiling. That was the most... *relatable* expression he had yet seen on his creature’s face. He wobbled, reached out for something for support, found nothing, and nearly tore his pants again in regaining his balance, then moved to pull up the other leg as well.

“Are you familiar with magic?” he asked, voice low. Again he stumbled, and this time out of the edge of his sight he thought he noticed the wolf reach out as though to support him. “It’s a strange thing. I grew up with some meager talents – my mother had them, you see, but she couldn’t do much – and then... some odd things happened, and then I learned there’s a school, and... well, six years later, here I am.” Again his heart leapt into his chest as he pulled his shirt down over his head, but when he regained his vision over the collar the wolf had simply sat back on his haunches to watch him. Lannon moved to slide his cloak over his arms as well. “And,” he finished, and motioned towards the beast in front of him. “Here *you* are, too.” Soil- and wood-brown fur mixed with stone grey and sandy tan, mottled and dappled by shadow and old wounds, thick cords of muscle weaving in and out of the arms and chest and...

And a certain heft and presence, impossible for Lannon to ignore, right there between the legs resting along the ground. With his eyes there he was reminded of his brief distraction during his bath just a few moments ago, and then past that, a quick hazy flash of something that might have happened in a dream,

and for a moment he imagined that instead of the ground on which that thick-furred, supple-skinned heft dragged it was-

Nothing. He coughed, shook his head, forced another smile, and then moved to sit down as well, spreading the foot of his cloak out behind him. Even with this short distance between them, it still put the wolf head and shoulders above him; the canid leaned in and adjusted again, arms coming forward to brace against the ground directly in front of him, blocking that little distraction from view. Lannon let out a breath.

“Sorry.” The lynx wet his lips. “I don’t even know if you can understand me. You wouldn’t speak Common, would you? My village is mostly cats like myself, but ever since I was a kitten I’ve heard – well, rumors, I hope they are. I can’t imagine...” *I can’t imagine you ravaging a village and killing indiscriminately*, he almost said. Then, though, he remembered the sight of the wolf barreling through the trees to take down a deer, and the glimmer in his eyes as he tore flesh from bone, as hot blood soaked into his fur and dripped down his chin. In those moments more of the beast remained than the man. “Um. There’s more wolves to the north and west, and then especially southwest, closer to the Alenar border. Are you from one of those villages? Well, no, most of those are far from the forest...”

*“It’s the wolves, isn’t it?”* his father had asked. Not just any wolves, but the tribe – tribes? – out in the heart of the forest, those that practice their obscure, mystical crafts, that bind themselves, man to beast. Realizing this Lannon paused again, head tilting with the thought. *Man to beast. That would explain – but, no, it’s not an actual, physical thing. Every time I’ve run into them before it was the two of them, hunter and companion, and they’re almost always there, once a day, watching me. I wonder if they’re here now.* He prepared as though to send out his usual pulse of Spirit and Earth to judge his surroundings, but then remembered it would have no effect.

“But, then,” he went on, and rested his chin in his paw. The wolf looked down and then back up, his ears splaying sideways. “You don’t really look... are you from one of the tribes? I don’t know enough about them to know if they have any kind of... marking practices. I don’t think anybody does. It’s a hostile relationship, unfortunately. Nobody knows where they are, other than *out there*. I would love to meet them sometime, but...” Lannon reached up and lightly fingered at that spot on his shoulder through his clothes. “Well. I guess you could say we’re already acquainted. It was a misunderstanding, though, and really I should be thankful, since it’s what introduced me to my special talents – you know, with magic there’s a handful of different types, and one of them is...”

He trailed off. One liquid gold eye watched him, the wolf leaning forward, huge paws braced against the ground between him. Those ears, the one torn and the other tattered, splayed sideways again as Lannon stopped, then came up in expectation. Short black whiskers near his mouth perked up and forward, then came back again. The huge head tilted, the eyes blinked, the tongue came out to flick over black-fleshed lips. His tail swayed behind him, brushing over the sand and gravel, and moved to half-curl around his bare waist.

Lannon blinked and straightened up. What had he been saying? “I – oh, sorry,” he began again. “Here I am, talking up a storm... I do that when nervous. I’m Lannon.”

The wind was the only response. He sat back a bit, adjusted his posture, and moved to motion at himself, paws coming in towards his chest.

“Lannon. Lan-non. That’s me. Lynx.” He reached up, ran his fingers behind his large ears, then pinched a forefinger and thumb over the tufts at the ends. “Lynx. I – am Lannon, and I – am a lynx. Do you understand that?”

For a second, for the quickest flash, the wolf’s lips twitched and pursed as though to speak, but no sound came out. Lannon waited a moment longer, then gave a soft smile.

“And you,” he went on, eyes again grazing over the beast’s body. He could think of one thing in particular that a wolf would have over his own species, but... “You are a wolf. *Wolf.*” Instead of going for that, though the idea *did* send a shiver and a spark through his abdomen, he reached forward, kept his eyes on the beast’s, and touched those broad shoulders. A quick jerk shot through the beast and Lannon nearly yanked his paws away, but after a second each of them relaxed. Or, they didn’t relax, but neither did they move; and he slid his paws down over the arms, following the grain of the fur and the lines of muscle, coursing and arcing down like currents in the river behind him.

Down the arms, over the wrists, to the paws... slowly, gently, Lannon worked his fingers in beneath one of the wolf’s palms and coaxed him to lift it up, his balance shifting over to rest more fully on the other. This one was truly huge, easily capable of encompassing both of his own, or his entire head, or likely grip halfway around his waist in one grasp. The lynx turned that paw palm-up and brought it closed to himself, and with his other paw ran a pair of fingers over the creases and pads, more like pillow basalt in their shape, coloration, and texture than his own, soft and squishy, relatively unused save for the expected charring and scarring from magic practice. His own fingerpads bore the heaviest marking, calloused and scarred with pinpoint spots from years growing up next to a loom, stitching sleeve to body, cloth square to square, pricked and poked by needle until it began to happen without him noticing. Some of those had disappeared over the years but he still noticed he could *feel* a lot more with the fingers other than his first.

Lannon ran his fingers over each of the wolf’s, feeling the little twitches that the gentle touch pulled out of him, noticing the lines of age and strain along the thick claws, and how those were blunted yet still somehow sharp. Finally he looked back up to the beast, who head leaned in and now watched with interest. The liquid gold eye met the lynx’s again.

“Wolf,” he repeated, with a smile. Lannon looked from that bright eye to the blank one beside it. “Do you understand that? I’m – a lynx.” He reached up, pulled on one of his tufts, then straightened up and leaned forward to reach for the wolf’s. He dodged out of the way for a moment, ears flicking back and whiskers pinning forward again, but then let the touch happen. Lannon ran his fingers along the rim of the ear, following the cuts and gashes and nicks, along the side, up over the top, and back down towards the head.

He realized his smile had extended into a grin, and that the wolf’s eyes had drifted shut. Lannon coughed again and drew his paw away. A second later those eyes opened again, taking a moment to refocus on him.

“Do you understand?” he asked again. “I’m a lynx. My name is Lannon. You’re a wolf, and your name is...”

It might have been his own imagination and hope, but for another second he thought recognition flashed in that golden eye. Again the wolf’s mouth twitched and moved, but again, no sound came out

other than the normal slightly-harsh breathing. A little disappointed, Lannon folded his paws in his lap again. The wolf glanced down, tilted his head the other way, half-lifted one of his own, then let it return to rest on the ground before him.

Sitting here with the wolf, so close that he could barely, *barely* smell the touch of feral canid on the air, that not-quite-familiar sharp spice that made his fur stand on end and set his tail-nub to twitching, Lannon tried to search through his thoughts for the goals he had so carefully and specifically laid out in advance. *I need to... I need to... what? I can't recall, really. I'm just amazed that I'm here, and he's here, and he's letting me touch him like this. It's like...*

The wind blew again, rustling the trees around them. Lannon found himself starting to relax even though that tension still strung through his entire body, his legs desperate to unfold from beneath him and propel him away into the trees, his ears perked and constantly moving and adjusting at each noise and sound. He shifted again, rested his weight onto one arm, and with the other reached forward to start tracing a fingerpad around the wolf's paw.

Each of the fingers, oblong and twisted, having maybe one too many joints, stretched out across the gravel. The claws, thick and blunted at the end, pressed into the earth; the fur was straggly and matted, growing in so many different directions, thin and patchy in places. As he ran his finger back and forth over the lines and curves and grooves the wolf shifted again, fingers flexing; Lannon jumped and nearly pushed himself backwards, but the wolf moved slowly and carefully, also adjusting his posture and weight, so that he could turn that paw palm-up again.

Lannon paused, unsure, then reached forward. First he spread his fingers out and tried to run them in between the wolf's, though quickly found he couldn't quite reach all of them. Then, glancing up at the much larger beast, he turned himself a bit, scooted a little closer, angled his paw... and placed it palm to palm, fingers stretching up, each one barely reaching halfway along the length of the wolf's corresponding digit.

Then, he remembered what he had hoped to do. With his paw still there pressing against the wolf's, warmth and presence passing between them, he turned his body again and looked up to see that angular muzzle pointing down towards him, the cloudy eye searching for his face and never finding it. Each of the wolf's breaths puffed out over his face and tickled his whiskers, the air hot and acrid.

Lannon licked his lips, swallowed, and then reached his other paw up, first touching it to the beast's shoulder, then neck, then jaw. That eye flicked over towards it and then back to his muzzle; smaller fingers drew down over the line of the jaw towards the mouth, then back up along the snout, over the eye, behind the ear.

"Hey," the lynx murmured. That ear twitched underneath his touch. "I'm gonna try something. Okay?"

*Do you trust me?* he almost asked, but held himself back at the last moment. He held the wolf's head lightly in his paw, fingers reaching up behind the ear, thumb curling in along the brow. Lannon tried to quell the pounding of his heart, closed his eyes, shifted his focus, went through those so-familiar novice exercises... *the black curtain drawing down, obscuring the stage through which everything else in my mind presents itself as a play. The sight dims, the sounds melt away. Nothing remains except myself, my goal, and the Weft, all around me, entwined and entwining.*

*Air in the wind that tickles my fur. Fire in the warmth of the sun. Earth in the ground and the trees all around me. Water in the river as it flows by. And then, muted beneath everything else, subtle and evanescent, the bright glimmer of Spirit, woven into the plants, balled up in each little insect and animal, swirling around in the fish, pulsing and brimming in myself.*

*Nothing from him. The strands wrap and warp around him, bending away, as though he doesn't belong. Not as though he doesn't exist, but rather like he is something else, a stone sitting upon the fabric, a hole in the loom. A void. A...*

His fingers twitched among coarse, warm fur. Hot breath wafted out over his muzzle and made his whiskers flick again. The paw underneath his twitched, the fingers lifting for a moment, curling over his and then spreading open again.

*What are you?* The little strands, the threads, the careful seeking fingers of Spirit, curled out from within Lannon to poke and prod at this strange void in the Weft. *Where are you? There must be something there. You are here. I can see you, I can feel you, I can smell you...*

*And I can sense you. There you are, deep inside that space, wrapped in layer on layer of something... strange. Something vile. It's like a scar, and – is that what it is? Is that why I can't find you?*

The more he pressed and pushed, the more he could feel the carefully maintain strands of magic start to slip between his fingers. From the things he had read and the little research and history that existed, Lannon was by no means strong in Spirit magic, though the fact he could wield it at all was of course still phenomenal. It took a toll on him, sweat beading out through his fur, muscles tightening and tensing, heartbeat picking up again, lungs feeling as though he was again drawing in the hot desert air all over again. He felt like a kitten back at home sitting across from his father at the looms, weaving and binding thread to cloth, but this time the threads were soaked and dripping in oil, falling from his fingers and pulling themselves free.

He scrambled to bring those threads back into his grasp, to wrap and tie them around this tight little ball of *presence* deep inside the encompassing void, a little knob of something sharp and intense, deep and powerful, bound up into an impossibly small prison. If he could only chip away the exterior, if he could only peel away that thick, tough scar to allow the rest of the world in, if he could pry it away and...

A flash of something, of thought or memory. There was a wolf, a hunter, bow across his back and knife at his side, his paw buried in the plush headfur of his companion. He looked down at her, and she up at him, and Lannon felt something pass between the two of them, but couldn't tell what. They looked forward again and saw another one, a huntress, older, taller, her wisdom showing in her eyes and her history worn along her body. She lounged back along the earth with a blanket beneath her and her weight resting against her own companion, a huge male snoozing softly against her back. One of his ears flicked, and she reached over to rub it; something passed between them, too, though how Lannon could tell this much, he wasn't sure. The huntress opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out. The hunter listened, nodded, gave a reply, then waited. While he waited he glanced at the huntress's companion, and saw there a single bright yellow eye, suddenly opened, suddenly focused on him, and-

And then the beast jerked and yelped as though struck, throwing Lannon out of the connection. Dazed and dizzy he fell backwards, the force of the broken link shocking through him and twisting the world around him; the lynx groaned and rolled first onto one side and then the other, paws on his head,

wishing that the ground beneath him would just hold still. Then the pounding began, a sharp yet deep ache in the back of his skull, pushing its way forward... he squeezed his eyes shut, coughed, rolled over onto all fours, and heaved.

Nothing came up, though when he opened his eyes he saw a splatter of blood across the gravelly earth, still growing from a steady drip leaking out his nose. Each of the little stones shone with the brightness of the sun, so he closed his eyes again and, shakily, rolled back over to sit down. There he remained, entire body shaking, chest and stomach repeatedly tightening, pulsing, heaving with the blowback from the shattered link, each retch pushing sharp pain out through his limbs.

Therein lay the danger of magic, in the inherent risk that came from wielding it. Through his years at the academy he had seen countless mishaps, fur falling out of the user's skin, fire coursing up through the veins and charring the limb from the inside, electricity zapping out and throwing the caster into an hour-long seizure. Water rushing back in and swelling the body until, one time, it literally popped; ice taking root and spreading, devouring, crystal veins coursing up, closing in, steaming in the desert heat. There were no reports or witnesses of what happened when Spirit magic backfire.

Slowly, eventually, the worst of the headache retreated, though the throbbing still remained and clouded his vision with each pulse. Lannon wiped a paw across his forehead and then his nose again and then, squinting through the harsh glare of the sun, discovered that he was alone. A scar cut through the riverbank ahead of him, likely the spot from which the wolf had propelled himself, with another few clear marks further up to show where he regained his balance and disappeared into the trees.

Lannon remained where he sat a moment longer, still waiting for the throbbing to die away, still a bit dizzy. Slowly he managed to pull himself to his feet, wobbled, and then found his own balance. The dripping from his nose had stopped, though when he reached down for his pack he felt something more trickle down the back of his paw. When he looked he saw there, between each finger, five little slash marks digging in through the fur and skin, right where the wolf's fingers would have been had he closed his paw. His first instinct was to pull another little burst of Spirit and Water magic to stop the bleeding and knit the skin back together, though another thought made him decide that that would not be a good idea.

Instead he returned to the river, washed the blood away, and hobbled up to make his way back to the hut.

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*Day 16  
Evening*

*Symptoms: Intense, throbbing headache at the onset, reducing over time to a lingering but still strong ache. Light sensitivity, and vision fogs when looking at light sources. Overwhelming dizziness and vertigo when it happened, and waves of that dizziness still occasionally return. Strong nausea forcing repeated vomiting, though that might have been from the pain of everything else. Slow nosebleed, washed off in the river, and then halfway home discovered another trickle from one ear. That's not a good sign, but other than the headache, now I feel fine.*

*Moving on to notes about my research. Made more large steps today. Made contact again; he seems scared of me, as I am of him, but he's so curious. It seems like he's afraid of physical touch but at the same time deeply desires it. Something I noticed early on is that his presence imparts an unnatural silence in the world around him, with all of the bugs and other creatures going abruptly quiet as though to let him pass. Today I tried to investigate that.*

*As far as I know there's no real precedent for this. The history and usage of Spirit magic is patchy and unreliable at best, with the best- and most commonly-known instances being, of course, the ritual binding of royal adviser to the queen of Maldeth.*

*In particular, the event that first comes to mind is the binding of the previous royalty, adviser Lucius Kalla to queen Scheherazade Sylvia. Records and eyewitnesses show that, post-ritual, the two were made constantly aware of each other's presence and thoughts. It is not unusual for a wielder of Spirit magic to be able to read another's mind, though this ritual ensured that it was a two-way street to better deepen the bond of trust. The other, perhaps more important part of the ritual, however, was to magically and permanently restrict the advisor from being able to lie.*

*Looking at the track of history that soon followed, from Scheherazade's usurpation to Lucius's claiming of the empty throne and declaration of his wife as his Voice, this was probably a clairvoyant safeguard.*

*It is a subtle and complicated maneuver, even by my own skill standards, and there's so much that can go wrong. This is likely what caused the symptoms when my link with him broke. We had made and established a connection, and I managed to find what I can only describe as his life energy, hidden deep inside a shell of what might have been a scar, or a shield. It's like nothing I've ever seen or read about before.*

*The lack of knowledge surrounding Spirit magic as a whole, as well as the complete absence of any mentor in the school, means that it is a slow road, as it is far too dangerous to practice on a live subject. Spirit in itself takes much more finesse and delicacy than the other four types of magic, so this dexterity was already in place. The binding ritual involves laying a "network" of sorts around the subject's life-energy – again, for lack of a better word; it is like their innate source of magical power, if they have access to it – and inextricably tying it in place. The goal of the binding is to create a seal so tight and secure that it is effectively impossible to remove. Lucius was by no means a powerful Spirit mage, but even with his measure of influence over his people and the surrounding lands, he never found someone capable, or willing, of removing this net after he took power. Perhaps he said something to Scheherazade when she returned to strike him down, but by all other accounts, he maintained complete silence and instead had his wife speak for him.*

*Therein lies the power of webs of Spirit magic. I have never seen or executed one myself, but I do not think what the wolf has in place is a similar web. It feels like something else, like something that grew or fell into place – like a wall or, again, a scar. I tried to dig into it and peel it away to release him from inside, but something went wrong. I got a flash of memory that must have belonged to him – again, not an uncommon occurrence when messing around with this type of magic – but then was thrown violently out of the link. I did not see what happened to him, but I think he felt the pain as well. I heard him yelp before the dizziness overtook me, and he was gone by the time I came to again.*

*Final notes: Encountered something like a shell around "him". It doesn't seem to be inherently linked to spirit magic, or magic at all, but the fact it's there to start with is unusual. Assumption: it's this shell*

*that's forcing him to maintain this twisted form, as everything I saw in that memory shows that he was, at one time, a regular wolf, and indeed a member of one of the tribes. I do not know if the one in the memory was him, or if it was seen through his eyes. The memory itself was a young male hunter with his companion speaking to an elder huntress with hers present. Who, though?*

*I deeply hope that this interaction does not set us back. I almost felt as though he had started to trust me.*