

The days continued to turn one at a time, each one the same last yet still so different in their own ways. The little hunter's shack out in the woods, once used by Lannon's father, and by *his* father before him, and by *his* mother, began to feel more like home. Sulla showed Lannon how to clean and carve at the antlers from their first kill, and an afternoon into evening was lost to the two of them sitting outside, their backs to the wall and facing out over the forest, digging and slicing with knife and pick and claw.

Then Lannon showed Sulla some of the string games he remembered playing with the others in his village as a kitten, before his magic had showed itself in force. Sulla's big fingers occasionally struggled with the small, delicate figures, but his deftness of control made up for that, and on more than one occasion Lannon ended up with his wrist thoroughly caught in the loop of twine manipulated by the wolf's big paws, both of them laughing as he tried in vain to free himself before Sulla let him go.

Throughout it all, Sulla continued looking north, vaguely off from one of the corners of the hut away from the river. Lannon could feel the wolf's thoughts drift and wander and then disappear off to that region, to where he had been so recently and yet already desired to return. It was more than that, though, more than a desire, but a *need*. As afternoon turned to evening, as the whistling and chittering of crickets joined the ever-present sounds of cicadas, the two – wolf and lynx, Sulla and Lannon, hunter and *something* – sat paw in paw, head on shoulder, looking out over the ghostly shadows of swaying trees and whispering leaves retreating into the darkness of deepening night, they both felt that need pulling them towards that strange not-here spot to the north.

Or, at least, Sulla felt it, and Lannon felt it through Sulla. He closed his eyes, swallowed, and listened to the wolf's thoughts and feelings, riding along at the edges of his memories and consciousness like the last vestiges of a fading dream. He was thinking about Tul; this much the lynx could tell. Never-fading grief and agony stung and tugged at the edge of his awareness, much the same as the deep, buried pain that he himself felt whenever he remembered his mother. Terror and pain and loneliness, buffered and buttressed with the warmth of memory and reminiscence and warm, sweet love.

"Sulla."

The wolf stirred against him, one ragged ear flicking in the wind. He stretched his footpaws out before him and gave his toes a wiggle. "Mm."

"Sing me a song."

His shoulders bounced in a quiet laugh. "I don't remember many."

"That's okay. I don't, either. Sing me one that you do."

Sulla remained quiet for a moment. He wet his lips, swallowed, and looked up to the sky, digging around in the myriad mists and trying the locked doors of his still-broken memory. Lannon listened to those thoughts as they floated past, each one associated with a sound, a place, a scent, a voice.

"Ola no'ei'o za sha val va hara," he began, taking a moment to find the melody. It hung there in the warm summer evening air, then floated up and out over the trees. The breeze picked up again – the weather was changing. It would rain soon. *"Suma'val va'a'roa, ov rurel'ei'o az ea..."*

Once I heard a bird calling in the forest, and on that night, it reminded me of you...

~ ~ ~

Day 56
Evening

We departed right as the clouds began to stir and swirl into the premonition of a storm, deep blue-grey against the beginning of sunset. We both feel it now, this pull, this need. It's like an instinct, like a natural bodily sense, something as deeply ingrained and unavoidable as hunger, or exhaustion, or desire. My realization, my discovery of this need, happened at a bit of an embarrassing moment.

Knowing that my record logged in this journal will be read by the faculty of the academy of Solm upon my return, I'll keep the details simple and brief. Immediately following a moment of passion and intimacy, his arms around me and my muzzle in his neck, panting and shaking from exhaustion and elation, I discovered that a certain need still remained unquenched inside of me, and for a while I could neither identify nor describe it. We untwined and lay down, and while he set to work cleaning me up, making me squirm and gasp all over again, I came to recognize it as just what he warned me I would begin to feel.

It was early afternoon then. Tired, satisfied, happy, we curled up on the bed and lightly dozed, though some part of my mind remained fully awake and restless. He questioned me when I stood and began pacing, and it took me another moment to find the words for what I felt. I think he started to feel it through our link as well, just as I could for his.

So we gathered some supplies and left, and here we are now, settled back into a shallow cave with a small fire illuminating the cracks and crevices, and watching the way the shadows dance out behind the curtains of rain. I can tell this reminds Sulla of something, but I'm not sure even he fully recognizes what it might be.

~ ~ ~

Day 57
Midday

The storm deepened during the night, waking us up at least four different times for bright lightning and devastatingly loud thunder. It is uncommon yet not unheard of in this region for forest fires to begin from such an occurrence, but I saw no signs when we resumed our trek in the morning, with the clouds parting and giving way to a pleasantly warm, unpleasantly humid sunrise.

A portion of a short cliff overlooking a bend in the leg of the stream out here caused some flooding in the area what with the relentless downpour of rain. This forced us to veer west for a while, with something else about the region tickling at Sulla's mind and memory. Once he paused at a particular cluster of trees, three little cedars wrapped together as though some giant had come along and braided them as saplings, with the centermost dry and grey and crumbling in places from termites and age and disease.

I asked him what was wrong. He did not hear me. He stood up to his full height, head up, shoulders back, tail arched, then looked around, sniffed at the air, and loped off a bit south from our current path, his

determination, confidence, and to my surprise, fear, evident in our bond. Fear pushing towards disbelief and panic.

It reminded me of the way I felt when I realized it was Emnis's voice, that day back at the academy with the fire and smoke. When I realized it was him who screamed that way.

I struggled to keep up but managed it, and nearly tumbled into him when I did. He had stopped right within the edge of a wide clearing, a spot of earth a bit too rocky and uneven for trees and thicker plants to grow, though where I imagine only grasses had grown previously now stood a low brush of clover and smaller bushes. Sulla looked up, and over, and around, ears back, eyes wide...

...and mouth twitching, trying to form words that would not come. Lannon watched as the wolf glanced back over his shoulder and across the line of trees, as though he searched for something that he knew should have been there. He half-turned, took a step back towards the wall of the clearing, held an arm out with his fingers spread, turned again to face further into the space, pointed, looked forward, to the side, then down.

Whatever was here, whatever he remembered... it *hurt*. It stung so deep that Lannon felt tears welling up in his own eyes, and he wiped at them as he trudged through the low brush to come closer to Sulla. The wolf had padded forward a bit, muzzle swaying side to side as he searched the ground.

"Sulla," the lynx ventured. "What's going on? What is it? We need to – go *that* way, there's..."

Another wave of emotion, panic overlaid with fear on top of rage. A familiar combination. Sulla dropped to his knees where he stood, the brush coming about halfway up his belly from here, and pawed and searched through the plantlife there. Rich, fresh green swayed and parted at his touch, broad blades of grass and curled leaves bending out of the way and folding over, broken and beaten down – until a flash of crusty reddish-orange showed through, wrapped and locked in place by roots and vines and crawlers.

Sulla didn't want to touch the thing. Where everything else required focus and concentration to pick out of the half-link, his sheer *aversion* to this rusted metal thing imprisoned down against the ground came through loud and clear, a wall of mixed and muddled memories and fears wrapped together in tight feral instinct slamming forward. Shocked by the force of that feeling, Lannon dropped to his knees as well, needing to brace himself against Sulla's shoulder for support. The wolf swayed a bit, swallowed audibly, and half-turned his head. His breath puffed out against Lannon's shorter muzzle.

The lynx realized it half a second before Sulla said it.

"This is where it happened."

He brushed his fingers to the side, pulling the caught grasses and stems, and showed the clamped vile teeth of a metal bear trap, long since rusted shut, partially twisted in place and buried beneath the dirt at one corner. Again Lannon could feel the flashes and impressions of memory as they shot through the wolf's head, always there. Sulla straightened up, looked up to the sky, murmured something under his breath, then looked over his other shoulder.

"I came through from over there," he said, arm coming up to point. "We were relaxing after a hunt. Tul was out exploring, investigating some odd scents. I felt her shock and panic through our link, then the crippling pain, and..."

"Help. Quickly." Through their own link Lannon could hear her voice as Sulla had on that day so many years ago, the very same one that had spoken to and guided the little lynx through his ritual a few weeks past. The frantic flight through the woods, the lash and bite of vines and thorns on skin through fur, tumbling out into the clearing so similar to this one yet untouched by those twenty-something years of age.

Just like he had been told, like he had felt, during the ritual with his mind and spirit so closely entwined with the remnants of this hunter and his companion. Something about a white wolf – not one from the tribes, or at least he didn't seem to be. Tall, broad, pure white of fur, eyes blue like the clear sky on that day. He had a sword at his side. The wolves of the forest did not use swords.

And his voice, his *words*... Sulla swallowed and looked back to the clearing. "I was here," he went on, "on my knees, nauseous, aching, with Tul here on her side... and he stood there. Right there, with his – underlings, close by. There were frightened of him. Terrified."

"Is this your pet, savage?" Lannon – Sulla – remembered this white wolf growling, in clean yet lightly accented Common. The words meant nothing to the younger wolf back then, yet still, somehow, just as he and Lannon could understand each other, he still intrinsically knew the meaning of the unfamiliar syllables. This came as a faint familiarity through Lannon's link with him, more of a knowledge of the words rather than the words themselves, with his own mind filling in the missing sounds and syllables. *"It is good that you've shown up. Two pelts will sell for much more than just one."*

Sulla winced. He had spat against that stark white muzzle, and then received a fierce blow across the side of his face that left him gasping for breath and clawing at the ground, face-up to the sky some number of seconds later.

I've seen this before, Lannon thought. He could not pull himself away. *I've seen this all before. I know how this story goes. Please don't show me again. Please.*

Sulla drew in a breath, held it, and let it out. He settled back onto his haunches, fingers close to the rusted trap yet lingering some inches away, unwilling to touch the object. "We weren't anything *special*," he murmured, still seeing the way the white wolf looked at him, how he *spoke* to him. "This was simply what he *did*. A bounty hunter for those in your – *cities*, the ones who distrust and disdain my kind. Who pay to have the pelts of our companions displayed on their walls as trophies. And that foul money had twisted him into a monster. He..."

"I will kill him," Sulla had thought, then and there. Lannon remembered the way that the wounded wolf pulled himself forward and buried his muzzle in his companion's shoulder, where he felt her weak heartbeat and labored breathing, and picked up the fetid stink of poison on her scent. A bear trap clamped around her ankle and an arrow in her side, both throbbing and stinging in Sulla's own their close link. Everything she felt, he did too. *"I swear it. I will kill him. I will kill him. I will..."*

Beside him, here and now, the wolf jerked and doubled over. The shock of the white wolf's sword slicing smoothly, easily down into Tul's side, between her ribs, digging deep into Sulla's own. A cold, vile shiver

lancing up his back, bile and drool dripping from bared teeth and curled lips... and then, there, twenty-six years ago, nestled in his faltering, tepid breast, caught between deep stinging pain both his own and his companion's, Lannon saw where the root of the disease took hold, where the seed settled in, burst out, and took hold.

It wasn't magic, and yet, in a way, it *was*. Just the way that Sulaya had carved his little earthenware cup back at the hut, as though she had tugged and pulled at the currents of energy behind the threads that Lannon recognized as magic. It was simply *there*, a force all on its own, untouched and undifferentiated, a reserve of power and energy in equal parts natural, ancient...

Primordial. Coaxed out and reinforced and strengthened, generation after generation. "*Our strength is in our bloodline.*" Coming nearly to a head in Sulla, finally reaching completion in his daughter, the spirit of the woods.

The lynx threw his arms around his wolf and tugged him close, for a moment squeezing the breath out of him and startling him back to attention. Sulla started forward across the empty clearing, breath now caught in his throat... and then after a long moment lifted a paw up to rest his fingers over Lannon's wrist.

"I lost control," he went on, voice soft. Lannon nodded. "She warned me. Do not shift in anger. Never shift in anger. The magic that grants the shapechange, it..."

"Fueled by emotion," Lannon finished, breath wafting out around Sulla's shoulder and back in against him. "By depth of passion." All familiar.

"'You could lose everything,' she told me." The wolf swallowed. His shoulders shook. "'I am losing you,' I told her, as I knew that already as truth. 'That is already everything.' And then he – he called over one of his lackeys, and gave him his sword, and... her last words, the last thing he would ever heard from her thrumming out through the link, little shockwaves of sweet, wonderful music through a connection soon to be severed.

"I have been able to spend my life with you. I am thankful. Be strong, hunter. I love you. I love-"

Muzzle still angled to the sky, Sulla let out a shivering sigh and then sat back onto his rump, his legs splaying out before him. There he remained for a moment, then leaned back onto his paws behind him; then dropped to his elbows; and then lowered himself down, back to the ground, bushes and grasses rising up and closing around him, and watched the open sky.

Lannon remained sitting beside him, one paw out on the wolf's belly beneath his shirt, stroking and touching at his short, soft fur. Nothing remained to the memory past there: just those words, the confused "what's he saying?" from the one with the sword, the snarled "the gods don't speak your language, savage," from the white wolf. Then the shock of sharp pain unlike anything else, as though he had dug his claws into Sulla's throat and torn it apart, and then the swell, the shudder, the burst... and the vast, horribly, terrifying emptiness, sour flames burbling up, growing, consuming, wrapping him in their embrace, holding him tight and locking him away behind the change.

Then he was gone. And, now, here he was again.

What could he say? Lannon swallowed and sighed, looking out over the clearing again. "I'm sorry." *Are you okay?* he would have asked, but he could feel the answer to that perfectly well through their link. Half-established and tenuous as it was, if he could already feel Sulla's emotions *this* strongly, then he could only imagine how everything on that day might have felt to the wolf.

"I know," Sulla answered, from there in the grass. After a while longer he pulled himself back up and then, gently, rested his head on the lynx's shoulder. "She didn't want me to seek revenge."

"She didn't?"

He shook his head. "No. The magic of the bond, the energy of the bloodrites, the... *power*, I suppose, of the beasts we take as our companions... there's much there that we don't understand. Things lost to time and tradition. Our companions often know things that we don't, as though they're... I don't know. It's been a long time since I've felt it." Here the wolf lifted his head and looked at Lannon. Lannon looked back at him, into those mismatched eyes – one the same mossy green, the other halfway overtaken with soft blue, malachite threaded through with sharp azurite. "She told me not to fault him. 'You do not know him'. As if she did."

The lynx recalled Sulaya, standing there in the river, or between the trees, or relaxing in the pulled-out chair back at the hut, four companion sprawled around her. Stike and Drek flanking her, Su at her side, Tul under her paw.

Our power is in our bloodline. I am Sulaya, the Primordial. I am complete.

"So what are you going to do?"

Once more Sulla reached forward to brush the grasses away from the rusted trap. He pulled in a slow breath and then sighed back out, and then with some effort, pulled himself up.

"I am going to leave this place," he said, looking around himself, "and hopefully never return. Whatever shall happen to that white wolf, will happen. He will meet his due; what should occur, will."

"May it be so," Lannon found himself saying. He, too, rose to his feet.

Sulla's eyes fell on him once more, and after a moment, he held his paw out to the lynx. "Nearly three decades has passed since then, so who knows; perhaps what *should* happen, already *has* happened, and he's buried in a cemetery behind some city chapel somewhere."

"May it be so," the lynx repeated, a little chuckle on his breath.

"May it be so," Sulla echoed. "So, then, what am I going to do? I shall bond you, as close and tight as I had Tul. And then... well, it's up to us to figure out."

Though he smiled, though his tail stirred, the pain remained deep underneath, throbbing and smoldering.

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Day 58
Morning

The closer we come, the stronger I feel myself pulled. We are almost there; I believe we shall reach our goal before the sun makes its course of the sky today, and I believe Sulla feels it as well. He was here recently; he recognizes the landscape, even following our slight detour. The weight and smell of the rain remains on the air, and the clouds overhead make me wonder if it will open up again before our task is finished.

I don't know what to expect. How am I to perform a ritual when I cannot access any sort of magic? Although I suppose, listening to Sulaya and piecing things together from Sulla... perhaps I can.

Perhaps we can, through whatever power it is that drives their bonds and their blood. I can't imagine any other way it could occur, if this has been a rite and tradition among their people for as long as history remembers. They do not actively, consciously recognize or wield magic... but it is there, and always has been. Some of it is here with me now, in the little pocket of awareness that is Sulla in the back of my head.

We are both sleeping later than we used to. I am having trouble pinning down the precise physical symptoms of this bond-sickness, but it is clear that exhaustion sets in easily, and strain and stress have a greater impact on our minds and bodies. It is indeed becoming a need, from an instinct or desire.

We spent all of yesterday walking, keeping a brisk pace to cover as much ground as we could; it is not exactly a pleasant feeling, this need inside of us, but staying close to one another helps. He brought his bow and I my knife, and we hunt when the opportunity presents itself. A pouch in my bag is full to brimming with berries I have been snacking on. They're different from the ones I remember gathering as a kitten near the edge of the wood, and so too are the trees, the bushes, the other plants, and the landscape itself changing the further we travel.

The air is becoming cooler and heavier. I know the sea waits somewhere still far to the north, likely a month's journey at this pace, and whether it is that I feel or the natural change of latitude, I'm unsure. It is different out here, and along our journey, my eyes open and my ears perked, I have become more aware of the fact that we are not alone.

They are not following or pursuing us. Just like the other creatures of the woods, the birds and the deer and the little lizards hidden underfoot, they cross our paths, or take a berth around us, or make a noise off in the distance as they carry out their own tasks. They are there, and they always have been, and just as we respect them, do they respect us. It's like they know our goal and our aim, like they know that I am about to become one of them.

Is this the truth, though? Is that all it takes? I had not thought of it before. The question remains: what are we to do once this is finished? Once I return to Solm with my discoveries, my notes, and ultimately, my failures?

Sulla is awakening. We shall eat, and continue. Almost there.

~ ~ ~

The world around the two continued to change, in small, subtle ways nearly impossible to track. It was in the way the bark hugged the trees, and how the light filtered down through the leaves overhead; it was in the blanket of sounds constantly weaving and wrapping around them, in the soft scent of soil and moss and moisture on the air, and in the gentle springy firmness of the loam beneath their footpaws. Lannon and Sulla walked sometimes side by side, sometimes holding paws, sometimes arms interlinked; sometimes the wolf led with the lynx trailing behind, sometimes the lynx led instead. Never did they lose track of one another, and every time Lannon turned, his eyes never failed to fall upon him.

Always there. The thought made him smile, and either seeing it, feeling it, or simply just sensing it, made Sulla smile as well. Lannon paused where he was and held a paw out to the wolf; he took it, his larger fingers easily encompassing the lynx's, and then led him forward. Still looking back, still smiling at the longer lupine muzzle and watching the way the light sparkled and played over his stone-and-soil fur, Lannon nearly tripped over something catching against the side of his footpaw. He yelped, stumbled, caught himself on a thin tree, straightened up, then looked down... and saw there a smooth, flat stone jutting at a slight angle out of the soil.

Dirtied and smudged, half-buried into the ground and covered with wet, sticky leaves, it didn't seem otherwise out of place. Lannon brushed himself off, reached for Sulla's paw again, and moved to continue on his way, when he saw another stone just like that one... and another, and another, and another, spaced out at first but coming together into a vague pathway, leading forward and off to the side a bit. Granite, like the exterior walls and higher-class structures out in Solm, warm sunset-pink flecked with sparkly white and sharp black.

Out of place here, yet at the same time, not entirely unnatural. Rough-hewn yet deliberately placed, organized and angled, overlapping in spots where time had shifted the earth underneath, skewed in spots where rain had taken its toll. The lynx slowed to a stop along the pathway, lacing his fingers in with Sulla's.

"Is this..."

He swallowed and looked overhead. The trees had cleared and parted away from the path, not quite forming a clearing as before but simply a suggestion of a space here, as though they had grown and shaped around something already set in place. When he looked to Sulla again the wolf's expression was unreadable, though everything that *should* have been there instead lurked just behind their link: awe and wonder, humility, reminiscence.

Then surprise, then wariness quickly melting to relief, and then shock – and disbelief. Frowning, Lannon looked over his muzzle again, then turned to follow where those mismatched eyes pointed. Around the slight bend, the makeshift tiles of smooth granite came together and lifted up out of the earth, in large, uneven blocks to form a pedestal or platform of sorts, looking as though some ancient giant had plucked these boulders out of the earth, squeezed them together, and cut them flat over the top, instead of the carefully carved and intricately designed chunks of masonry to which the lynx had grown accustomed back in the city. There in the center of this platform, shearing through the stones and jutting them aside, rose a thick section of root from some tree surely ancient by the size of the thing, fat and gnarled, smoothed to a tabletop surface with the bared heartwood stained and discolored from countless years of use and rituals.

A shelf of little brownish mushrooms grew along the side of the altar where the root made its way back down into the granite, with a small patch of daisies growing out of the moist soil there – and near that patch knelt another wolf, a Huntress, with snowy white fur dusted with patches of sandy tan and soft shadow-grey. Her ears angled back showed that she knew of their presence, but it wasn't *hers* that had shocked Sulla so. Leaning back against the front of the altar, his head on his paws, was Stike; standing nearby, somewhat startled by the unexpected visitors, was Drek, large and imposing; near Sulaya, sprawled out over the steps ascending towards the platform and altar, was Su, with her slightly twisted hind leg; and then, about halfway between the edge of the stone and the line of trees, waited a young, beautiful feral she-wolf, her fur the color of the sharp frost that covered the leaves and grass on a brisk winter morning.

Golden eyes looked up at Lannon first, and Sulla second. Tul's tail swayed from side to side. She took a step forward towards him, then another; nearby, Sulaya sat back on her haunches and straightened up, watching the she-wolf in her progress. Something seemed to pass between them, then, and Tul padded forward, her progress soundless on the leaf-littered soil.

Sulla dropped to his knees and held his arms out. Lannon's paw went to his muzzle, his own emotion welling up and mixing with the force of Sulla's through their link. Golden eyes flashed his way once more, and then Tul stood before her hunter, tail up and wagging, head forward, shoulders back... and she closed her eyes, and he did too.

Sulla settled his paws against her shoulders, fingers digging into fur that could not be there, and feeling the skin and flesh underneath that no longer existed. He swallowed, let a shaky breath out through the edges of his mouth, touched his nose to hers, then slid his muzzle in alongside her own. Tul tilted her head to the side and adjusted her stance so she could return the nuzzle.

In that instant Lannon felt something *else* tingling beneath this little bond with Sulla, something new yet not unfamiliar to him – to *either* of them – bubbling up and coming to the surface, making itself known from where what of it remained hidden deep within. It floated up, swelled out, wrapped around him, held him tight, and sank in there, sweet and warm and comfortable.

Beside the lynx came the stirring of fur on stone. Lannon glanced to the side just in time to see Sulaya rise to her full height, then step down the stone stairs towards him.

"You made it," she said, voice soft. As always she looked beautiful, the sun playing off of her snow-and-sand fur, her bright feral golden eyes shining just as brightly. A faint smile touched her lips; she looked over Lannon's shoulder, and when he did so again, Sulla was again on his own, arms at his sides, head tilted back to look up at the sky. The others had disappeared as well, Lannon realized a moment later.

Lannon expected all of those horrible, ugly feelings to come rushing back, the agony and panic and fear and grief. They did not. All that remained, for now, was that wonderful little warmth. Sulla smiled, slow tears cutting little rivulets through the fur of his cheeks, as he felt the heat of the sun on his fur.

"As I knew you would," the wolfess went on. Lannon turned back to her again; she stepped forward again, and this time brought her arms around his back to tug him against her. He rolled his eyes and grunted, expecting the usual from her – but instead found it to be an earnest, honest embrace, her muzzle alongside his, her paws settling into the small of his back for a moment before letting him go. Still she smelled so much like Sulla. "Welcome to the center of my domain." Here she stepped back and

motioned to the altar with one paw, the other entwining itself with Lannon's. "For now, it is yours. This is the heart of the forest itself, just as I am its spirit and soul. This is a private thing you are about to do, to be known only by you," said with a meaningful look to Sulla as well, "and nobody else. You are about to partake of the conduit of power and tradition for all of our people, here and elsewhere."

Her fingers were warm and soft, as always. Without even realizing it at first, Lannon let the pad of his thumb play over hers; Sulaya came forward again to take his other paw into hers, then squeezed both, leaned in – his heart leapt into his throat – and placed a soft, sweet kiss to his cheek, her breath tickling at his whiskers.

"Lannon Asaros," she murmured, "son of Azalon, known to my people as father and friend." She smiled again, only adding more fuel to the little smoldering flame caught in the lynx's chest, and stepped away from him so she could approach the wolf. Lannon turned and watched as she helped him to his feet, held his paws, looked him up and down, and then went in for a warm, full hug. Sulla seemed unsure at first, then slowly, carefully, brought his arms in around her as well. And then, finally, he squeezed tight.

"Father," he heard her say. "Sulla. Son of Noma, Luca, and Stike. Second bastion of the old blood. You who have returned, and shall return again." Slowly she extricated herself from the hug, then grinned up at him – and over at Lannon, as well.

And she winked. The flame flared a bit higher. "Welcome, you two, to this ancient place of power. It is here that I became who I am now, sloughing off the bonds that shackled me to my old self – and it is here that you shall become yourselves over again, at once the same—"

Paws held out, she turned one up with fingers splayed to the sky. A small swirl of soft blue and tinted white, and a little sphere of clear water, moisture gathered out of the humid forest air – the equivalent of a higher-level novice exercise, a variant of which Lannon could remember practicing over the river back at the academy – hovering there over her paw, just before it tightened, solidified, and swelled a bit into clear, sharp ice. As before, he sensed no manipulation of the magical threads; the Weft remained untouched. Sulaya smiled again, then turned that paw over, holding the sphere of ice in her fingers –

"–yet intrinsically changed." – and again the ice flash-melted back to water, spraying out from between her fingers and across the soil at her feet. "This shall be *yours*. I am pleased, and honored, to welcome you here to this place, hidden from all save those who need it."

And she stepped forward towards and then between them, paws clasped behind her back, chest forward, head up. Again she winked at Lannon as she passed by.

"I'll leave you be." They watched as she padded down along the stone pathway, where the tiles gave way to soil and debris, and then around the slight bend, until she was gone.

Yet, still, she remained. Lannon could feel her on the air, in the trees, in the warmth of the sun, in the life still pulsing deep inside this ancient curl of root that formed the altar. *This is the heart of my domain. For now, it is yours.*

Lannon cleared his throat, swallowed, and looked over at Sulla again, who was still wiping the tears from his eyes. He gave a little smile; the lynx reached out, and in another moment, felt his paw squeezed in the wolf's.

“So,” Lannon said. “What now?”