

The lynx lounged back along the seat of the carriage, using both the back of the seat as well as the side of the large wolf alongside him for support. Idly he scratched and traced along the pages near the end of his journal, the cover tattered and scratched and bent and discolored, touched by rain and blood and dirt and whatever else over the long months spent out here in the depths of the forest. Long as it was, though, he could still flip back through the pages and remember everything as though it had *just* happened.

*"The forest changes at night." "I dreamt of a wolfess. A huntress. Or – a Huntress..." "Got three sacks of salt; planning on fully preserving the stag from the other day, which means..." "Breaking through the odd block in his spirit is like exercising a long-unused muscle." "It's just a matter of time. As everything." "He woke up." "There still remains much to do."* On and on and on, the quality or angle of his handwriting shifting or changing every so slightly yet always remaining *his*. Maybe he could teach Sulla to read and write; with the tall, clustered buildings and walls of Loria's capital city of Heatherfield coming into view through the grasses, about three weeks remained on the path to Solm across the desert. They would still have to arrange for travel across the sands, though, which could be an ordeal all its own...

*"...we visited my father before we left,"* he continued, mindful of the bumps and lurches along the road. *"Told him that we'd return as soon as we could. He seemed to understand, and I needed not tell him that it wouldn't be another six years before he would see me again. The look in his eyes when he noticed the new piercing in my ear... he was with them for only two weeks, but as I have learned with Sulla, it's amazing how quickly some things can happen. This was also his first time actually meeting him. They spoke for a while, and I had to translate Sulla's words for my father, and he looked at me with surprise that I could understand..."*

Beside him, Sulla stirred. "Lannon?"

He went on for a few words longer. *"Shualaya."*

Outside the carriage, as it had been for the past few days, the only trees in sight were the small, spindly ones jutting up like ribbons from the fields of grass constantly blowing, billowing, shimmering in the wind. Sulla had never seen anything like it before, and still Lannon could feel his surprise and wonder through their bond.

He could also feel how using that word, *life-mate, bonded, beloved*, still ignited a stirring warmth in the wolf's chest. Sulla shifted against him again.

"You're avoiding thinking about it."

"About what?"

"What to do when we reach your academy."

Of course. Lannon rested his paw over the pages of his journal, fingerpads just barely able to pick up the feeling of the text and ink scratched into the paper.

"Well, it's nearly a month away. I can think about it on the way."

"Mhmm." Sulla's paw came to rest over his own. "I wonder if they'll even recognize you."

“Of course they will! I’m still-”

“Are you, though?” The wolf leaned in and rested his chin in his other paw. He really looked quite stunning in this more “civilized” dress, shirt and trousers bound at his waist with a simple belt. A little necklace hung down over the ruff of fur coming up through the collar of his shirt, decorated with small river rocks and beads and, at the center, an image of two figures wrapped together carved in yellowed bone. Lannon had discovered that bone wasn’t so different a medium from wood, for that. “Your eyes are different colors. Your piercings have changed. Your speech pattern has changed, as has your accent – yes, it’s noticeable – and, most of all... you *smell* like wolf.”

All of these were true. Except... Lannon frowned and tilted his head to the side, trying to get a sniff at his shoulder. “Do I *really*?” he asked, voice low.

“Were my eyes closed, and I didn’t know you?” Sulla sat back. “Then yes. I’d think you were another wolf. Even were my eyes open, I think I might mistake you for just a rather... strangely shaped wolf.”

*What is Sariya going to think?* This was, truly, what Sulla intended to ask of Lannon. He had already discovered and decided that no place remained for him at the academy, and no reason lingered for him to stay – other than her. And, yet...

Sulla’s paw still in his own, he shifted his arm and looked over the previous page.

*On the morning of our departure, as we collected our things and had said our goodbyes, suddenly I found myself no longer alone there on the floor of Sulla’s tent. I felt her presence before I heard or saw her, or smelled her, and I expected her to tell me – do not come back. Never return. You have forcibly changed the path and progress of nature, and for that you may never turn back. You bear my mark, and bear it out into the world, for there is no place for you here.*

*So I sighed, gathered my confidence, and then stood and turned to face her...*

...and then found himself wrapped up in her embrace, Sulaya’s muzzle alongside his own, her chest against his, her body pressing forward to share her warmth and presence with him. She smelled as she always had, of cool wind and gentle dew and rich, verdant wilderness, all over the distinct spiked touch of lupine musk. The force with which she bumped into him actually made him totter back for a moment, so that he had no choice but to grip onto her waist for balance.

“Lannon...” she murmured, breath warm in his ear. “I wanted to see you before you headed off, knowing it will be months before your return.”

So already his original idea was out. A little startled, still caught in her embrace, the lynx righted himself and leaned in to bump his muzzle against hers. “Months at the soonest, yes. I don’t know what’s going to happen once I return to the academy, or how long the discussions will go, or what kind of discussions will even occur...”

Sulaya drew back from the hug but kept her arms around his body. Her fingerpads traced back and forth over his lower back, tickling and tingling even through the further-modified cloak he still wore. Yellow

eyes watched his face for a moment; he looked back and forth between those glittering pockets of amber, just like the ones hanging from his ear. For a moment she said nothing, and neither did he.

“Ah...” The lynx turned his head and coughed. Sulaya’s ears and whiskers twitched. “I expected to see more of you after we returned, you know.”

Then she smirked, a much more familiar look for her. “What? Disappointed that I wasn’t hanging around, nagging and bugging you at every turn?” She turned her head as well and dropped her paws a little further down towards his waist. Those fingers started to tease and tickle at his little nub-tail. “Surely you understand that I can’t spend *all* my time here. I may be the spiritual leader of the tribe, but given my – *nature...*”

“Yes, yes, I understand.” Almost despite himself – *almost* – Lannon tugged forward, and ended up bumping his hips against hers. “I mean, I don’t *understand*, but I understand why.”

*For you shall always be unknowable to someone like me.*

“Yes,” she answered. “Which is why I understand why you must leave, as well. You were never here to stay.”

“No. I – expected you to tell me to never return...”

To his surprise, then, her expression changed, ears angling back, mouth tightening, nose giving a little twitch. The huntress straightened up and returned her arms to his shoulders, still close enough that her breath puffed out across his whiskers and face.

“Lannon...” she murmured. The lynx swallowed, wet his lips, frowned – and then shied away when she leaned up and in and then, softly, gently, placed a kiss to his forehead. “When you first arrived here in my woods, yes, I thought of you as... an anomaly, as a stranger, an outsider. Something dangerous and unknown, and you *were*. But quickly you enforced your presence and your potential, and as I watched you here, I learned...”

Lannon paused, one paw resting on her waist, the other hovering near her bare side. He could feel her breath, her hesitation, her heartbeat, here in the air between them; she looked back and forth from his chin to his shoulder to collarbone and back, avoiding his eyes. This strange, powerful forest spirit, this borderline *deity*, avoiding eye contact with him, a disgraced mage, a lynx who had stumbled into the forest and found himself caught in the jaws of fate and love, and...

“I learned,” she continued, “that you are simply unknowable to someone like me.” A shiver echoed down Lannon’s back. “Before *you* appeared here in my forest, I thought I knew everything. I thought I knew what power was and could be, and I thought I knew how things could progress, and how they were *meant* to progress. Sulla remained as he was, since I could neither heal nor kill him, and if I couldn’t, then certainly *nobody* could. And then you wandered in, settled down, did your research... and you did what I could not.” Finally her gaze returned to his. She tilted her muzzle and licked her lips. “And I’m eternally relieved, and grateful, that you chose the one instead of the other.”

“Believe me, I am too. Coming out here, following this... little task of mine – I told them, back at the academy, I came out here to study a local myth and legend. And now it’s evolved into... so, so much more.”

When Sulaya laughed, then, it puffed out across Lannon’s face and made him rear back, and then he was laughing too. Briefly her paws slid down his sides towards his waist, tugged him in again – and then her muzzle brushed against his and she placed another kiss there to his cheek, and held there a moment longer. Lannon felt sweet, sparkling warmth spread out from that point of contact.

Instead of pull away again, though, the huntress drew him back in for a hug, and it felt easy for Lannon to run his paws up her back, to feel at the lines of her ribs and shoulder blades beneath thick fur and tight muscle, to spread over the flowing robes of her priestess’s dress. Her scent curled up into his nose and magnified the little electric shiver still burning there in his awareness.

“I’m glad you came,” she murmured, voice barely more than a whisper. Her heartbeat thumped against his own. “You brought me down from where I imagined I stood to your level, and showed me so many things I had barely considered. You opened my eyes, and you humbled me, and you showed me that truly nothing is set in stone. You showed me that it is okay to fail, and to be imperfect, and...” Sulaya ran her nose in against his neck, then up over his jaw and chin. Lannon tilted his head back with the motion, eyes closed, and swallowed. Her breath tickled along his throat.

“And I am indebted to you, Lannon Asaros,” she went on, the syllables trickling out through his fur, dripping down. “And I will always watch over you, and your father, and your *shualaya*. And you, and everyone close to you, will always be welcome here within my reach,” and she swallowed too, “and my embrace, and...”

And Lannon jumped. A slow, careful touch, light at first, unsure, then growing in confidence and boldness. Sulaya’s lips against his own, her paws having shifted from his shoulders to his jaw to hold him there, lightly, so that he could move away if he wanted – but he didn’t. The warmth breath shivered out from her nose so close to his and over his muzzle, and for a moment she retreated from the kiss then slid right back in, this time a little quicker, a little more boldly. Lannon tilted his head a little, and pressed in, and flicked his little feline tongue forward – and felt another flick in return.

Then Sulaya drew back, a rosy blush warming the white fur of her cheeks and ears, with that same tongue diving out across her lips for a moment. She swallowed and licked her lips again, and struggled to grasp at the words. Lannon’s paws drifted back down to her waist; he ran his fingers in through the short, soft fur, feeling the lines of her hips beneath.

Again she sighed. One paw returned to his muzzle; Lannon tilted his head, eye closed on that side, as she ran her thumb gently along his cheek and over the tuft of fur hanging down from there.

“I have said before,” she rumbled, “that I am the forest’s spirit and its soul.”

“Yes,” the lynx replied. “And you said that that altar out in the depths of the woods – that *that* is its heart.”

“In a way, yes. But you...” She leaned in and bumped her broad nose to his smaller, more angular one. “You, Lannon, are its heart.”

And she kissed him again.

*You bear her mark, he was told, and her favor. A little seed of her power and ability.*

When she drew away Lannon leaned in, head tilted at an angle to make room for her longer muzzle, and brushed alongside hers again.

“Go forth, Lannon Asaros,” Sulaya murmured to him. “Go and continue to change the world, as you have so deeply changed mine and ours.”

The lynx licked his lips. He could taste her, just slightly. “I *will* return, Sulaya.”

“I know.” She stepped back, though kept one of his paws in hers. “I await that day, as does Noma, and Talla, and Tuhau, and little Huca, who looks so dearly upon you now. And everyone else with whom you shared a smile or a word. You will always have a home here with us.”

*...and then we left. Sulla and I, side by side, connected even when apart, bid farewell to his – to our – family, and headed back into the forest.*

“I don’t know,” Lannon said, looking out across the flowing grasses again. “I used to think that there at the academy, with Emnis and Sariya, was my home. I also used to think that the little hut at the edge of Avriel with my father, and the sound of the working looms, was my home. I thought that that hunting cabin within the forest was my home, once you were there to live alongside me.” Lynx smiled up at wolf and reached over to pat his leg. “Home is where you are.”

“And Sariya?”

Sulla’s rich Old Tongue accent painted the name in an entirely different light and tone. Still the thought, the sound, the *idea* of Sariya as Lannon remembered her was perfect and beautiful and lovely, something that really he should *want* to return to. Briefly he thought about meeting her there in the hallway of the academy, himself completely changed, her entirely the same.

“She’s welcome in that home, too,” Lannon murmured. “But I won’t be holding the door for her.”

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Winter wind blew through the nearly-empty branches overhead. Sulla stood there alongside his mother and her companion, looking down over the broad yet young tree here on the little hill in the clearing, this one still somehow bearing fruit. Sweet, succulent little delights, ripe and juicy, lovely to look upon and even richer to taste.

“Here, then?”

“Here.” Noma dipped her head. “Another hunter found her after it happened, there in that clearing. She took her back here, and showed me, and I spoke with Stike...” The older wolfess tilted her head back and clutched her cloak tighter around her shoulders. “I felt something within me break that day, Sulla.”

“As did I.”

“Even as your mother, I know that my agony could hardly rival your own. Especially as it is now, now that I have you back. But you will never have *her* again.”

“I have Lannon, now.” The hunter could feel him back at camp, finally returned after so long away.

*Through Heatherfield, tall grasses and rolling hills, then down through the interminable sea of sand of the Maldethi desert... down there Sulla was regarded as largely unremarkable, so long as he did not open his mouth to speak. He knew a few words and phrases in Lannon’s Common tongue, but still struggled with the wider vocabulary itself.*

*Lannon, meanwhile, seemed to be an anomaly among his peers when he returned. Something about him had fundamentally changed, yet to Sulla he seemed exactly as he always had. The guards stopped him at the gate, and as Lannon could not prove his magical ability, was briefly detained until one of the other students recognized him – and one thing led to another, and Sulla was ushered off to Lannon’s dorm room to wait out what would become a three day process, the lynx bustling in and out of the room, sometimes with someone at his side, often without.*

*Once it was a tall, sleek, regal cheetess, the older woman to whom Lannon had often referred as Archmistress. The head of the academy herself, the one who had first identified the lynx’s remarkable and unheard-of ability in his field, the one who had given her approval for his little venture that had resulted in so much change. The two sat there at the grainy sandstone table in the room, sipping some of the tea that he had kept in his hunting cabin in the woods, talking in rapid Common tongue about what all had happened.*

*Sulla dozed on the bed while this went on, observing and reliving the memories as Lannon discussed them. He felt the lynx’s emotion welling up and rolling back, fear and fright to shock and awe, frustration to hopelessness to grief, to warmth, to affection... to embarrassment, as he summed up the basics of the first ritual, and some of the spaces in between. He did not mention the bloodrites, simply passing them off as another unusual ritual. The archmistress noticed but said nothing.*

*They spoke about his loss of magical ability. Sulla understood that, were Lannon to stay at the academy for study, in some years there might be a method to return him to some portion of his prior power. The lynx did not hesitate to refuse this offer, as it would require him to house here, alone, without Sulla beside him.*

*Finally, at the end of the long conversation, Lannon stood up and came over to Sulla – or, rather, to his pack, next to the side of the bed. “Beloved,” he said, in steadily smoother Old Tongue, “would you be so kind?” This was done for the archmistress’s sake: her little round ears perked up at his usage of the tongue, and Sulla handed his journal to him. From wolf, to lynx, to cheetah, and then into her robes for further study later.*

*“You are always welcome here, should you wish to return,” the elder cheetess bid him. Sharp eyes settled on Sulla as well. “You were right, Lannon, as you tend to be. There still remains much to study and learn, and I would love nothing more than to walk that path alongside you. As your mentor before, and as your friend now.” She left the two of them in the room alone, then, and Lannon came over and slid in alongside Sulla, and the two fell asleep.*

*As night fell, as the blistering heat of daylight curled back into a thick, heavy chill, another knock issued at the door and stirred Lannon awake. He sat up, wiped at his eyes, reached out as if to ignite the candles at a distance, then sighed again and went to do them manually. And then he opened the door.*

“Is he enough?” Noma asked.

“Yes,” Sulla replied. “He will be. He is. And he has been.”

*There she stood, small and sleek, the lovely marten that Sulla had seen in Lannon’s thoughts, memories, dreams, fantasies, so many times before. She came with a smile, quickly erased: she looked back and forth across his face, over his changed demeanor, his ears, his eyes. Those especially, the mismatching colors, one blue and one green. Her nose curled.*

“He said he still has a lover waiting for him back at his academy. What of that?”

*“I’m looking for my lynx,” she said quietly, perhaps so that Sulla wouldn’t hear. “My Lannon.”*

*He held his arms out. Nervousness and shock bounced through the bond, sharp and anxious. “He has returned.”*

*Sariya looked over him again and again. “I have heard the stories around the halls,” she said. “And the rumors. I have heard what happened. And after coming to see you in person, I think... no, I know. I can say with confidence that – no, he has not. Something else has returned in his place. A wolf roughly shaped like a lynx, bearing his voice and his personality but nothing else.”*

“Lannon has moved on,” Sulla said simply. “And still she waits.”

The wind blew again. The leaves of this tree which should not still bear life shuddered and swayed. The scent of fresh fruit curled around the three wolves where they stood. Hunter, huntress, and companion.

And another companion, buried beneath the earth, wrapped in a cold embrace among the roots of this tree.

“It’s lovely,” Sulla murmured. He could feel her presence down there, so close, so far away.

Noma bowed her head again. “As was she.”

“As she ever will be.”

“It was planted alongside her body when we brought her back. It grew but never flowered. Never fruited. Not until one day this past year, on the border between spring and summer when the cicadas roared high in the trees and the dew lay heavy on the grass.” The chieftess looked up over the plump little fruits swinging in place, lifted and teased on the fingers of the winter breeze. “Flower petals swam along the air that day, lovely pink and white and yellow, and filled the camp with their sweet scent. The day after, the fruits had taken their place. And then, some weeks later, you showed up, with Lannon at your side and Talla at his. I could not believe it. I thought it was a dream when Stike told me, *huntress, your son returns.*”

"I returned," Sulla said, "and here I return again."

"But you shall not stay."

"No." Suddenly a swirl of heat flooded the bond. Sulla smirked to himself; it seemed that Lannon had found Sulaya. The wolf gently closed off the link, to allow them their privacy. "For a time we shall – Lannon wishes to bring Azalon – but in time we shall depart again."

"Where will you go? What will you do?"

That was the question that had hung so solidly in the air between them, as soon as their bloodrites had completed, and for all the time since. Sulla looked up to the tree again, then reached up, stood onto his toes, and with a gentle twist and tug, pulled one of the little fruits free. Thick violet juice dripped down the side and over his thumb; he lifted it to his lips and lapped at the rich sweetness, unlike anything he had ever tasted before.

*I suppose it doesn't matter, he thought, sinking his teeth into the fruit. The skin pressed, bounced, rebounded, and then sliced open, and the flesh inside spilled out and filled his maw. Wherever I go, he goes too. And so shall you, though your bones rest here beneath the earth. Returned to nature, kept tight and safe. More so than I could. You deserved so much more than I could give you, and now the least I can do is show you where I shall go in the future.*

A word whispered in his head, a sweet, soft voice so familiar yet so distant, last heard so long ago. Sulla swallowed down the bite of fruit and let the juice drip down his chin.

"We are hunters," he said, simply. Lannon had already come to this conclusion. "And so, we shall hunt."

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