

As the eldest son of a middle-noble family as well as a wood elf, Lortian had been shot at before. Some of it was out of propriety - *our bloodline is grace*, his father had told him, *and where this exercise is practical if you ever find yourself in combat, it is also beneficial for your dancing* - and then some of it was just out of a few individuals' dislike for his kind. That was something he'd encountered and dealt with as it came.

Still, though, it didn't dull his surprise at all when a broadhead arrow *thunked* into the trunk of a tree as he passed it, so fast and so sudden that it was the feel of the disturbed air rushing along one of his sensitive ears rather than the sound itself that startled him. He stopped where he stood, probably not the best idea at the moment, and glanced around... but could find nothing between the trees, the vegetation thick and rich after so many years of being left to grow as it would. His family owned a reasonably-sized estate right along the border with the wildlands, and every now and then, one of the - the tribal wilders would venture a little too far, a little too close.

He found the arrow, still wobbling where it had stuck deep into the bark, and gave a firm tug to pull it out. Stone head, though finely crafted; shaft of the same strong, medium-dense wood as the tree it'd thumped into; red-and-white plumage, just barely metallic, of one of the local birds for the fletchings. Honestly, this might just be something that one of his family's fletchers had made for practice, but... even with iron prices as they were, the mine just over the next ridge provided more than enough for fairly free usage within this region. Anyone that had the ability to and literally any coin in their pocket would go ahead and use metal for the head.

"Stay where you are," called a woman's voice from the trees, about forty degrees to the right of where he'd been looking. Maybe he put a little too much focus on the *dancing* part, and not enough on the *combat*. "You will not be my first elf pinned by the throat if you move."

His heart dropped into his stomach - and then leapt back up into his throat once that streamlined form slid out between the trunks, as natural and easy as the wind in the canopy and the shadows along the ground. He'd been shot at before, sure, but never *approached* by one of the wilders. Sleek tan-grey fur with small charcoal speckles, triangular tufted ears, simple bow held in one paw with another arrow on the string, quiver slung around her back and over her hip. Her grip on that arrow was loose and casual, though comfortable; the wilders were supposed to have no equal in skill in archery. She'd missed because she had meant to.

Naturally, he'd been raised to stay away from the wilders. It was said that occasionally some human races ran off and joined them beyond the trees, but by and large their population mostly consisted of animals on two legs: wolves and coyotes and forest cats like this one here in the woods, lions and hyenas and the sort out along the grasslands to the west, snow cats and a smaller, denser sort of wolf in the mountains, and so on and so forth.

Quick run-through of his family's prayers in his head, regardless of how he hadn't visited the chapel on the estate grounds in several years now, and he closed his eyes. Rumors brought from traders and travelers often told of border towns raided by wilders, or sightings, or confrontations or whatever, and of course he never thought that he'd end up as one of those

rumors. The wilder - lynx, maybe; sometimes it could be hard to tell, and sometimes traits differed - wore a simple outfit of hide and cloth, fitting well to the curves of her body without restricting her movement.

That had to have been intentional, too. Whether or not they had different ideas of modesty than the human races, which was entirely possible, Lortian still didn't feel right... *looking* at her, how she was now. Hooded sash hanging over one shoulder and coming across to cover both breasts, a separate shawl hanging loosely around her upper arms, simple thigh-length skirt of jaguar hide. Whether that had been a feral jaguar, or another wilder... it looked to be held up by a leather strap or belt, along which that quiver hung.

As if sensing his gaze wandering against his own intent, within a blink of an eye she'd drawn a long-bladed knife from her other hip and pressed the sharp end against the underside of the elf's chin, tilting his head up and away. A little *oof* squeezed its way out of his gritted teeth as she pushed him back against the tree, the last bump causing that point to prick into his skin. With almost unnaturally clear yellow eyes scanning his face, he hoped that she'd be able to tell his grimace was out of pain (and more than a little bit of fear) rather than anger.

She tilted her head and squinted, and her long whiskers gave a little twitch. Probably identifying him and learning his scent - she likely already knew the reason for his expression. They said that wilders could tell emotions by smell. When she spoke, it came out just as slurred and accented as before, as if she knew the language, and knew she knew it, but just had never had opportunity to practice. "What is your name? Why have you come?"

*I live just twenty minutes in the other direction, he wanted to say; technically you are on my land. I should be asking you the same.* 'Wanted' here had a loose definition. Instead, through teeth still gritted: "Lortian." Would probably be best to comply.

Those golden eyes flicked back and forth between his, head still tilted up and away... and then after another moment, the lynx swiped her knife away from his throat, just as quickly as she'd placed it there. Thick warmth oozed slowly down from where its point had pierced; in the same movement, she slung her bow back over her shoulder as well.

The elf swallowed, and shifted to wipe off that trickle of blood - until the cat's other paw shot out and pinned his hand to the tree, scraping his skin across the rough bark. A little more unsteadily than he would've liked, he followed that up with "A-and yours?"

From his face, to the wrist she held, to his throat, then back to his face. She licked her chops and opened her mouth as if to reply, giving him an uncomfortably good look at small, sharp fangs... and then jerked forward, quick and precise as her knife had, and closed her lips right around that mark, soft sandpaper tongue flicking out and lapping off the blood.

*Probably be best to comply.* That depended on just what, exactly, it was she expected and intended from him. Still keeping his arm raised above his head and now with the blade of her

knife tickling his waist, she drew back, licked her lips again, and swallowed. "I am Rayya." With that blade, she lifted the hem of his shirt just a little bit... then drew that away, too, and sheathed it at her hip. "Your scent is familiar."

"It... is it?" Admittedly, that had given him a bit of a shiver. The feeling of her tongue, fast and fleeting and just the slightest bit rough, with the threat of those fangs settled against his throat... his eyes drifted down from her muzzle for a moment. Just a moment, though, before they snapped back up to hers. "Have you - *been* here before?"

"Been here?" Another moment of appraisal before she released his wrist. Still, though, she remained right there in front of him, so that if he wanted to move he'd have to sidestep around her. "These are our woods."

*Are they, now?* Another thought. While waiting for his response to that, Rayya crossed her arms in front of her chest, and made it just a little bit harder for him not to glance down again. "I-

"You are an elf." That little tongue flicked out again. "A wood elf?"

"I... yes. I am."

"That would explain it." The lynx nodded and took a step back and then, somewhat unexpectedly, held one paw out for him.

Lortian looked at it. Small pink pads set into thick tan fur, like little pillows. Rough, calloused pillows. A silver scar cut directly across the... Lortian didn't know what it was called. The big center pad, along her palm. "Explain what?"

She'd anticipated that question, too; as soon as he asked, the corners of her mouth curled upwards in the slightest allowance of a smile. "The trees enjoy your presence. That is why I did not kill you. Your scent is familiar and comfortable to them."

"The... trees?"

Really, it was amazing how much emotion a muzzle like that could show. Now it was exasperation, though still with a hint of that amusement. Rayya still held her paw out. "Do not pretend that your ears are rounded. You dance with these trees. And they know it and lead your dance."

*That* was what made his cheeks suddenly start to burn, and his pointed ears as well. "You know about that?"

"Wood elves are not the only ones who are in tune with the trees." The lynx gave that paw a firm shake, and only continued when he placed his hand in it. Calloused indeed. "It is in the way you

move, and the way you hold yourself. I have watched you today, and yesterday, and the day before. I have known your presence for months, but have only recently found you.”

Her smile returned, and that combined with what she'd just said removed all doubt from Lortian's mind. That had to have been treedancing of which she spoke, one thing that he'd wished to keep secret above all others. It was a... cultural activity of sorts for wood elves, pulling from their natural harmony with the trees and the forest itself. The feel of the fines between his fingers, the way the young, supple branches relaxed to his touch, how the more venerable ones allowed some of their strength to pass into him as he glided on... eyes closed and heart open, he'd found it quite easy to forget sometimes that it all took place nestled deep into the canopy where any fall would kill him.

He had a talent for it, though, and had intentionally honed that talent into a skill. Even if his father disapproved of it: treedancing was a traditionally feminine interest. 'Feminine' even by wood elf standards. With all of that, though, it still came as a shock to him that this wilder not only knew about it, but also just what it entailed.

It seemed she... *approved*, too, which might have been even stranger. To be fair, nobody had spent enough time in a civil relationship with wilder society to really record anything about their culture or traditions, but... “You know treedancing?”

“*Know treedancing*. Paah.” Her grip on his hand was not at all tight, or threatening, or foreboding. If anything, it felt... *comforting*, as she gave a little tug to pull him with her back towards the trees. Lortian still thought it might be too much of a stretch to consider it apology for frightening him within an inch of a heart attack. “There is a kittens' story that your kind's cluelessness comes from your... similarly noticeable lack of fur.” As if to prove her point, Rayya adjusted her grip and brushed her forearm against his: short without being stiff, soft. Thick plush. More comfortable to the touch than any of his clothing, regardless of how much money he'd spent on it.

Or, rather, how much his father had.

“I am not the only one who has observed you,” she went on, weaving her way easily over the low-lying bushes and between thorny branches. Lortian *would* have been able to do the same - that kind of comfort and ease among the woods came as a result of extensive practice with the dance - if he didn't currently feel like she had him teetering on the brink of a cliff. Whether Rayya was holding him up or trying to push him off, though, he couldn't quite tell. “The others told me not to trust you. They spoke of taking your... estate, you called it?”

“They did?”

“Yes. A few times.” She shrugged. It seemed like she knew where she was taking him, but for all he could tell from her body language, it was equally likely that she'd just decided to take him on a stroll. Those tufted ears of hers put her about at the same height as him, though from

behind he had to look down at her. "Some of them think that all of you are bad. I think they do not see the difference between wood elf and... others."

That came as a surprise to him. Lortian's family knew that there lived at least two separate tribes of wilders in the woods beyond their manor, but all of their investigations and explorations said that they lived *far* in the woods, at least two days in any direction. "I'll have to tell Father to recruit more guards, then..."

Rayya suddenly stopped and turned to face him, sleek muzzle tilted a little bit back so she could look him in the eye. Had she been standing on her toes back at the tree? Actually, what did her feet even look like? Then, as if she hadn't heard him: "Do you trust me?"

That was one he didn't *need* to think about. "I do not."

This time his view of her fangs was considerably less threatening, with her throwing her head back and letting out a rich laugh. Despite himself and his current situation, to his ears that laugh was as pleasant a sound as any could be.

"Good," Rayya said, levelling gazes again. Amusement and now enjoyment alongside it glimmered behind smooth amber. "So you are not brainless. Not entirely. I will not hurt you. Not yet." Another shrug. "Not *too* badly. You will come with me?"

Lortian tried to tug his hand free from her paw, but all of a sudden, that grip tightened and strengthened to the same force that had held his wrist up against the tree. "What? Why would I do that? I need to get back to my father, I should-"

Deja vu, then. Sharp point of a quickly-drawn knife poked up under his chin, tilting his head back. "You *will* come with me." She made sure that he made eye contact with her before continuing - hopefully she didn't expect him to nod assent - and then all of that ice disappeared from her voice, in its place allowing soft flowers to bloom. "You have a lovely neck. I do not want to bleed it any more than what will come naturally."

So it seemed like he didn't have a choice. The lynx released his hand, finally, but by now he knew better than to try to seize the opportunity and escape; besides, with his mind as frayed and battered around as she'd managed to get it within a matter of minutes, he wasn't fully sure he'd be able to find his way back without getting injured. That was just the way of the woods. Like any other skill, if you draw upon it in the wrong state of mind, damage could come to both yourself and the object of focus.

As they wandered, Rayya spoke up every now and again, relating some story from when she was younger or telling of a particular memory in a certain spot, or a "kittens' tale" about some trait of the trees. The reasons the vines hang down so low, why some bushes have thorns and others do not, why trunks have knots. Her mouth quirked at that one, though why, Lortian hadn't the slightest idea.

The thing was, though, once she let him in past that calloused knife-wielding exterior, her company really wasn't that uncomfortable or undesirable. By the time the sun overhead had started to lower and dip down between the trees, and lengthened and deepened the already-thick shadows weaving along the damp earth and low brush, he actually found himself maybe *enjoying* her presence. He certainly didn't mind it, at least. Some of her stories made him laugh or chuckle, and the ones that didn't, he noticed that she would always glance back and look at him - and then turn away with a satisfied expression if he at least smiled.

*What are you planning?* the wood elf wanted to ask, though this was another thought that he deemed better to keep to himself. *What is it you want from me?* Lortian *thought* he might have some idea, but it seemed too... wild, for lack of a better word. That *was* the best word to describe her, naturally.

It felt as though she became more comfortable with him, too, as time went on that day. Her shoulders loosened a bit, she seemed a little less likely to reach for her knife, her whiskers relaxed. That ended up being something else Lortian liked to watch, those and her ears. Always twitching, always moving seemingly of their own accord. Always tickling if she leaned in close to his face.

*"There is a snake over there,"* she said to him once, paw light against his chest. The elf squinted and looked where she pointed. *"Do you see it? It is curled up, by the tree. Look - no, you furless, over there - see? It is not warm enough yet for them to be very active. They are sleepy. It is not hurting us, so we will not hurt it. We go around."*

Then night fell, and with the silver glint of the moon came a gentle chill in the air. Rayya likely did not feel it beneath her fur, but before long Lortian had his arms wrapped around himself and shoulders hunched slightly over, wishing he could go home to his bed but also - this took him a bit of extra thought - not *really* wanting to leave the lynx's company.

Especially not once she noticed his shivering, after she'd brought him to the small quiet lake about three miles from the edge of the woods, and reached over to take his hand again. This time, though, it was a gentle grasp, and one that intertwined her fingers with his, and hooked her arm in around his elbow. Lortian swallowed, looked down at her beside him, and - stumbled as she gave a firm tug, pulling his shoulder in towards hers. There was that plush softness, and lovely warmth beneath.

He watched her muzzle for a while, then, observing the way she looked straight out over the water, pupils catching and reflecting the light of the moon. Then those amber gems flicked over his way, then just as quickly looked back - with a twitch of her whiskers. That had to have been her noticing him watching.

"Lortian."

Though soft, her voice made him jump. The elf shifted again, and adjusted his hand in her paw. She let him. "What?"

"I have listened to the trees today. They know your scent, and they like you." Rayya turned her head to look at him. Another twitch of her whiskers. "I know your scent, and I like you too."

She paused there. Did she expect a response? The elf swallowed, and tried not to look away. He'd heard that that was a bad thing to do when stared down by some animals. Or, maybe it was bad to hold their gaze... "Um... thank you? I'm not sure wh-"

"Tomorrow you will dance for me."

He *what*? She wanted him to-? "Now hang on a second."

"You will be at the foot of the lightning-split oak as the sun begins to rise through the trees."

Lortian wanted to cross his arms in front of his chest and peer down at her with the same look of mocking disdain as she'd given him at their first meeting. Hard to believe that that had been only a few hours ago. However, he made no effort to untwine his hand from her paw. "Will I, now?"

Rayya had chosen that spot with arrowpoint intention: that was precisely where Lortian usually began his treedancing. She knew that, and he knew that she knew it. There was that quirk to her smile again. "You will."

Silence for a second, apart from the soft whispering of a gentle breeze stirring the surface of the lake. "I guess I will, then."

"Good. You can make it back to your - estate?"

"I thought you were just beginning to believe I'm not as helpless as you might think."

Rayya let her smile spread into a grin, and then was up on her toes with her other paw draped behind the elf's neck. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away, expecting her to dig those fangs into his flesh - and then felt another shiver rack his body, as those teeth just barely grazed across, instead with her tongue and lips settling into place right there for a quick moment, before she pulled away.

Then, she folded her paws in front of her and gave a short bow. "I have enjoyed our time together, Lortian of the trees." Yellow-orange eyes flicked up. "May we continue tomorrow."

Odd wilder traditions. Was *he* supposed to bow, too? The elf swallowed. "...Uh. We may."

Another little chuckle, and Rayya turned to slide easily back through the trees, tail giving a flick behind her. For a moment she was shadow; and then she was gone. Lortian remained there along the lakeshore for a moment trying to look after her, to see where she'd gone.

Then he realized he still had his arm half-raised, where it'd been when she'd untwined her grip from his. He let it drop to his side. A look up at the glowing moon brought him back to the present, though, and before long he'd started bustling off through the forest as well.

With how he felt right now, he'd have no trouble finding his way with the trees.