

# *Lost and found under the Northern Lights*

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Strange things can happen under the northern lights in early autumn in the depths of the wilderness.

A Man travels alone in the wilds. He wanders through pine forests and hikes the shores of cold streams as the sun glitters on clear waters. He has felt a calling, a pull to this place and he is not sure why.

He revels in the solitude of the forest, he sees the tracks of wolf, bear, deer and moose in the sand on the shores of the creek. Squirrels chatter, ravens croak and the morning sun shines down with welcome warmth on his back and shoulders. He pauses on a rocky flat at the edge of the stream and there he drops his pack at his feet. Small twigs and dry grasses are gathered and a small fire is built on the rocky ground. Here he sits to warm his lunch and let his pale eyes search the landscape for the reason why he feels that he must be here. Mosquitoes buzz over the steady susurrus of flowing water in the background as smoke drifts silently over the creek and through the trees. He lets the sounds of the forest and the stream envelope him and he breathes in deeply and closes his eyes for a moment before exhaling slowly. The lines of his face settle in a content, almost reverent expression. This place, this wilderness, it has a hold on him in ways that he can't explain. He is comfortable out here, so relaxed and at ease with his surroundings, a far cry from the tension that usually nips at his heels in the depths of the city. The man smiles and packs up the remnants of his lunch and rubs out the fire, taking the time and care to make sure that all of the embers are out. When he shouldered his pack and steps away he leaves behind barely a trace of his presence in this pristine wilderness. He heads west, an eagerness in his steps and an expectant look settling onto his craggy features. This Man is no stranger to wild places but this time he senses something different about his surroundings, a subtle tingling in the air around him, a sense of anticipation that drives him deeper into the wilderness.

Worn but comfortable boots travel a path over the pine duff in the cool depths of a forest. In places a few stray shafts of sunlight finds ways to reach through the dense canopy and push away the shadows from the thick undergrowth. Insects carve complex trails around brilliant green growth sprouting up from soft moss and the sweet scent of the earth and the trees curls around the Man like a soft blanket. A look of bliss enters his grey eyes and the years seem to fall away from his face as he walks. The call is strong here, he feels it tug at his soul, telling him to linger here for awhile, to listen to the trees, to the insects, to the earth, but he feels something stronger yet spur him on.

The day wears on, approaching mid afternoon, and the Man has found his way into the hills. He crests a rocky ridge amid stunted pines, sweat beading on his brow. He stops to catch his breath and let his eyes rove over the land. There are mountains in the distance, tall mountains capped with the season's first snows. A compass is checked and grey eyes squint into the distance. A nod of his head and a quick scratch of the stubble on his chin and the Man descends over the ridge, heading towards the craggy peaks that break up the monotony of the horizon. Maybe he'll find what has been calling him there.

Evening approaches and the mountains swallow up the sun. The Man sits on a log and stares quietly at the sunset. The colours are near indescribable behind the silhouettes of the ramparts and the forest grows quiet as the light fades. A small fire burns in front of him and the flickering flames throw the rugged features of his face into sharp relief. Every wrinkle there, every line and scar tells a tale of the years this man has spent wandering through life. His is a story of a lifelong search. Decades he has spent looking for something that he has felt that was missing in his life. It is an intangible thing, this sensation of not quite being whole and he never has completely understood what exactly he was looking for. Even now he still is at a loss but he senses that he is closer now to that thing than he has ever been before, he can feel it in his bones. He knows that soon he will find some answers and that his search will finally end somewhere out here among the trees and the rocks. He throws a fresh piece of wood on the fire and stares as a storm of sparks drifts up like a cloud of fireflies into the rapidly darkening sky.

The temperature has fallen with the sun and a delicious coolness settles on the forest. A lean-to lies behind the Man, resting gracefully between two trees. A sleeping bag lies there, as does his pack, yet he stays beside the fire as the night deepens and the stars grow bright overhead. The sounds of the night time forest swirl around him and strange thoughts flow through his head. He still feels the call and senses that it is much closer now. It tugs at something deep inside of him, that part of him that he has never been able to understand. The call comes from all directions and for a moment he feels fear at what he might discover. Wide, worried eyes scan the darkened trees, darting to and fro among the shadows. Ears strain into the silence while the fire crackles and sputters in the darkness and the ghostlike shapes spawned by the dancing flames play strange games with his mind. The fear dissipates, something deep inside tells him that he is not in any danger. He senses there is nothing sinister about the call, rather it is soothing, gentle, and so very inviting, a call to rest after so many long years of searching. He contemplates this for a long time before he retires to his sleeping bag. His fatigue catches up with him but for some reason he cannot sleep. Some of the old aches and pains flare to life and the man grimaces as he shifts position. He is not as young as he once was and he knows that his years of hiking deep into the wilderness will soon be at an end. His search will end soon one way or another and the man is content with that. He lies awake for some time, thinking and staring up into the impossibly deep vault of the night sky. The northern lights are out in force on this night and they move and shift among the glittering stars above him, meandering across the sky in a myriad of colours. The call grows stronger and its touch wraps gentle fingers around his soul. A soothing voice is in his head, and it eases his thoughts like cool salve on a burning wound. The lights above dance, whirl and

whisper and soon the Man finds himself drifting off to sleep, content within the embrace of happy thoughts and warm feelings. He hears the hauntingly beautiful chorus of a wolf pack singing their evening songs just before he gives in to sleep. The aurora above twists and turns, colours shifting and changing in tune with the howling wolves as the man sleeps deeply below. Silence settles over the forest and the aurora spreads out to encompass the entire sky. The wolves howl again, a haunting, beckoning call, and the aurora above shimmers in harmony. Below, cocooned within the comfortable warmth of his sleeping bag, the Man begins to Dream.

*There is a sense of anticipation in the cool air. The howling is close now, he can feel it ring in his bones and he makes his way towards it. Something feels different but he can't pin it down. The dream spins around him as he walks through the woods, the beckoning song of the wolves calling to something that lies deep within him. With each step in the direction of the chorus he can feel that unknown entity awakening within and he is in awe of the sensations that course through his body. The arthritic aches in his knees and hips are gone and he walks with ease for the first time in years.*

*The twilight forest is still and quiet and an obscuring mist drifts slowly among the trees. Grey eyes scan the forest, seeking to penetrate the fog and find the source of the call. Shadows move in the mist and the song grows strong around him, streaming into his mind from every direction. Ahead, the light grows with the rise of the morning sun. He moves in the direction of the light, his feet barely touching the ground. Something follows behind him, hiding in the shadows and the mist. It watches him; he can feel the weight of its stare on his back and feels a strange power behind it. It is the Caller that lurks back there, he understands that now. He feels a brief touch of fear slide through him at that realization, but it is quickly replaced with a sense of nervous anticipation. The soft moss under his feet makes walking almost perfectly silent, yet he is sure he can hear the soft suggestions of footsteps in the mist behind him. Branches rattle in the silence and the Man reaches the edge of a small clearing just as the mist begins to thin out.*

*An astounding panorama stretches out before him. He is up high, at the very crest of one of the myriad of foothills that roll on for miles in every direction. Pine trees surround him on all sides, shadowed against the twilight sky. The mountains across the valley are dappled in shadows and strange colours as the sky brightens in the east. The Man stands in awe of the scene and can do nothing but stare at the stunning beauty of nature spread out before him. So beautiful, he has never seen anything like it in all of his years and he feels something within him swell in joy at the simple fact of being alive and being able to see such a sight. Was that why he had been called to this place? To see this astonishing landscape? He feels that that is part of the pull but there is another aspect to it, something different, something deeper, older, and far more powerful.*

*The Man hears a noise behind him and slowly turns to investigate. He knows that the Caller is back there, watching him, gauging his reactions to his surroundings. Shadows in the mist move and shift, playing strange games with his mind as he squints into the drifting fog. All of a sudden he realizes there is something there at the edge of the clearing staring right back at him. An amber eye reveals itself out of the mist, then*

*another and the Man is enthralled at the power behind those eyes. A form takes shape as the mist retreats into the trees as the morning light brightens in the sky above. A dark shadow against the background grey of the forest; a wolf, it sits there and stares at him intensely with those captivating eyes of gold. The Man feels a sudden rush of fear spread through his body at seeing this potentially dangerous wild animal so close to him. For a moment he is ready to turn and flee but the animal's piercing stare talks to something deep within him, telling him that he is not in any immediate danger. The fear melts away and he suddenly understands that this is the one that has called him to this place.*

*It is so easy to become lost in those eyes. They speak to him of the ageless beauty of the land and the joy of running free through the forests. That stare speaks volumes of a life where life is simple but hard, where the pack is family and the forests and mountains under the endless sky are the only world one needs to know. The Man feels that stare strike a chord deep within him, and he begins to understand why he has been called here. It takes great effort for him to turn away from the black wolf, but the Man knows that he must or he will lose himself in those amber eyes.*

*There are other wolves there at the edge of the clearing, the black wolf has brought his pack with him to judge this stranger. The Man's eyes dart worriedly among the group that has silently formed a semicircle around him. Five of them, there are, and all have their eyes fixed unblinking upon him. The black one is probably the alpha, he sits slightly forward and apart from the rest and still stares at him intently. The others range in colour from the typical mottled grey and white wolf markings to one that is a pure, clean white. That one sits the closest to the black wolf and the man is startled to see that she has eyes of pale blue. He's never heard of a wolf having eyes that colour before and he ponders that for a time as the sun reaches the horizon behind him.*

*As the sky brightens, the Man can feel something pass between the pack of wolves, some silent communication. There is much glancing at one another for a brief moment before all of their eyes turn back towards him as one. There is a brief moment of motionless silence where the Man begins to wonder what his fate will be and then all of a sudden, the black wolf's tail wags a couple of times and his muzzle splits into a panting canine grin. A thrill rushes up the Man's spine and the black wolf tilts his head back and raises his muzzle to the sky. The first rays of the sun touch the peaks of the mountains in the distance and the black wolf voices a throaty howl. One by one, the others join in, each voice adding a unique note to the chorus as they sing a triumphant song as the sun rises over the land below. The chorus stirs something deep within the Man's soul, he knows has heard this song before, he has even sung it himself and ancient memories suddenly burst forth. The man turns his head up to the sky and adds his own voice to the chorus of those around him. The reason why he is here is crystal clear to him now. This is home, this is family, and he has been away for far too long...*

The dream slips away like sand between his fingers as the Man returns to wakefulness, the song of the pack ringing in his ears. The sun has just risen and the faintest wisp of smoke rises up from the remains of the previous night's fire. It is a beautiful morning of clear blue sky and still, cool air. A squirrel chatters deep in the forest and the echoing

croak of a raven can be heard in the distance. The Man rouses himself from his bed and contemplates the world around him silently. He breathes life back into the fire and makes coffee, hoping the blessed caffeine will clear his head and help him make sense of the odd dream and why he is feeling so strange and good on this wonderful morning. He eats a simple breakfast but his mind is elsewhere as he eats. The call is still there but it is gentle, even playful now and he can't believe the sense of rightness that it sets flowing in his veins. He shakes his head slowly from side to side. What a weird night, he thinks to himself as he stands up to stretch. He walks over to the edge of the clearing to get a better view of the mountains and stops suddenly when he looks down.

There, easily visible in the soft earth of the forest floor, is a perfect wolf track. The Man frowns and kneels down for a better look. He sees other tracks now, tracks that he knows weren't there the day before. He sees how they approach to scant steps from where he lay sleeping and something wakes within him. Painstakingly, he begins to follow the wolf tracks away from his camp and into the forest. It is not an easy task. At times he loses the trail completely and spends long minutes casting about in search of the trail that tantalizes and beckons him to follow. He trots through the woods, a distant smile on his face, and all that lies behind him grows farther out of memory with each step along the trail.

Some days later, the Man's tracks are followed by others. They have found his belongings at the camp he had made, but they have not found him. They follow his trail into the woods, wondering what had possessed him to leave things so important for his survival behind. The man's boot prints wander to and fro among the trees and the searchers follow slowly. This is not the first time they have been out after a missing hiker or camper and they know it will not be the last. These woods claim one or two a year that are never found. The natives that live in these parts say that these mountains and these forests are a sacred place, a place that belongs to the wolves and the bears, the moose and the deer. They say that the spirits here are powerful and mischievous and can sometimes play tricks with men and as the searchers reach the banks of the river, some of them begin to understand why this is a place of ancient legends and stories.

There are pristine boot tracks in the sandy mud on the banks of the river. They lead west, heading deeper into the wilderness, and the man who made them walked with purpose in his strides. The tracks disappear where they cross over a narrow spit of washed gravel and they do not reappear on the other side. A single set of large wolf tracks continues on from there and joins up with the tracks from five others that came in from the opposite direction. The tracks mingle and from there six sets of paw prints head off towards the mountains. The searchers cast about futilely for some time, searching for more signs from the missing hiker. They find none, it is as if he had just disappeared from the face of the earth. Frustrated, they turn back, knowing that this one will likely never be seen again.

As the group of would be rescuers heads back to camp, a chorus of six voices rings out from the depths of the woods behind them. The wolves are happy and their song touches something inside each and every one of the searchers.

They suddenly understand that their missing hiker wasn't lost anymore. He'd been found, just not by them.