

Archers are born to kill.

I fingered my string, the arrow seeming hot despite the cool day. The hare was completely unaware of my presence. I was a good three hundred metres away. I stood with my legs wrapped around the branch, hanging upside-down.

The hare continued to chew, stuffing grass greedily down its throat. My arrow would slice through its throat, slitting the largest artery, killing it in seconds. Quick, but not painless.

I hesitated again. Arrows. How I wish I had a weapon without pain. The other boys were quite capable of killing and most even enjoyed the pain, seeing it as the cry of a loser. For me, it was a cry of desperation. Of fear. Of death.

This jungle was filled with animals. There were snakes everywhere.

Several types could wind themselves around your bare skin without you noticing. A tiger could appear in an instant and kill you. That was why you had to shoot as soon as you had a target.

The hare. I needed to kill it. But I couldn't. I was no more a killer than I was an elf.

Flicking my pointed ears, I caught a whisper of sound from a trunk further away. My eyes saw another boy. Perhaps I could let him take the kill then release my arrow. I could still look a killer but bear none of the guilt.

It was a girl. Now I looked closely, my eyes were automatically zooming, blocking out the trees' gentle movement. I could see the inch of exposed face and eyelashes as easily as I could see the suns on a clear summer day. The eyelashes were too long to be a male, although both genders kept them well (myself included).

It was tantalising. I could swear I recognised her. But move an inch and she'd see me - see me hesitating and unable to kill. Elves' hearing was incredibly sensitive, and capable of filtering out a waterfall to hear a leaf fall.

Their eyes were even better, and had the ability to zoom and filter, showing only what they were interested in.

I felt a slight push on my soft robe, which didn't match up with the wind. I looked down slowly.

A snake. I didn't see it and they were quiet enough to evade hearing. Was it a poisonous one?

As I studied it, I realised it was a quasvek. Their poison froze you to your place instantly. But their victims were selective. Some they had in perfect killing position and simply slithered away, ignoring them. Others they attacked the instant they could, and it was unclear if they were eaten by the quasveks or by the insects which swarm to the smell of blood within hours. If a quasvek attacked a group of elves, it usually won.

I gasped quietly, all I could see was the black and purple snake winding around my chest, down towards my throat.

It placed its head on my throat. Around it. Rose up in front of my eyes, opening its jaw wide. Long fangs. Dark poison glands.

I was frozen already, scared to death. There was no way anyone could save me now, not this close, not with this snake. Would I be filtered in or filtered out of that unknown decision?

The snake seemed uncertain too. Its evil eyes were penetrating mine, searching me. Cold darkness was all I could see in those eyes.

What was it looking for? Why would it kill me?

It was definitely uncertain. No attack this easy would call for such delay.

My throat was wide open for attack.

I looked back at the hare, my bow still aimed for it, my body too tensed up. It was still eating. It was practically begging to be killed.

Better just me dying than both of us. Sighing, I retracted my taut string, fully expecting four sharp fangs to rip into my throat.

I look back to see the snake had multiplied. There were several quasveks winding around the branch. The one about to kill me must have released a pheromone or given some silent indication.

Several quasvek snakes were investigating me, winding around my legs, my chest, my hands.

My legs were getting tired. I had been clinging to the branch for too long and the excess weight of the snakes was too much. My fear was becoming dumbstruck horror as the danger grew.

Still they came, from some unknown source, tens of them inspecting me, their tongues were flicking in and out, picking up sounds.

I forgot the hare. I was shivering with so much fear I couldn't have shot something two metres away. The only thing that keeps me from releasing my painful legs is the thought that if I did - or if I fainted - I would get seriously injured by the fall, and the snakes would probably...

I felt something sharp on my chest. A scratch.

I began to plead with them, muttering in my soft elf tongue, telling them to leave me alone, let me go.

The snakes suddenly withdrew. In seconds, they had disappeared.

I sit up. It is hard. All my strength is draining rapidly.

I look down at the scratch. It was only slight. Blood could be seen though.

Poison had entered my bloodstream - no doubt about it. I had minutes to live.

I drew back my bow, and fired the arrow just above the archer girl I had seen, my arms seeming to have no strength. I missed her by several feet.

The hare ran to cover and the girl jumped in shock. My head slumped. "Thedas!" I hear her call in anger. She is not in view, but my ears pick her up, the nimble footsteps running towards me, barely any sound to regular ears.

Thedas is my name. It is curious how one's intellect is assigned to a sound, but most of a first impression is taken from sight. My family tree was that of hunters, not thinkers, but I was an exception. I thought on everything.

The first impression one might get from me was good, I hope. I have blonde hair that stretches to the base of my shoulder blades. My eyes are a calming dark blue. I'm slightly short for my age, but my muscular figure is about average. Due to my archery, my figure is athletic, agile and most importantly, quiet.

Animals I hunt have to breathe, to step, push aside grass and bushes, and to shake the ground with their presence. I hunt like a ghost, as all elf archers, my body becoming more and more silent over time. These animals are used to being hunted by elves. I learnt to be soundless, leaping from tree to branch to vine keeping my target in sight. The less obvious the pursuer, the less time they need to pursue.

I'm clothed in a white robe, which would sound stupid to those not experienced in the concealment technique. I hoped I was hidden now, in case a tiger spotted me.

Despite the poison, I am balanced on the branch quite well, and my vision is still fine. I cannot move a muscle, paralysed all over. My bow, ever present and a symbol of who I am, is slowly drifting from my hand's ever-weakening hold.

As it falls, the girl catches it with her feet, passing it up to her hands as she flips to land with a soft pat on the mossy branch beside me. She is agile too, like most elves.

She calls my name quietly, "Thedas?"

The falling bow was a much larger meaning than my dangerous arrow. A bow is as precious to an archer as scriptures to a holy man.

"Thedas!" she says with increasing urgency, her eyes searching mine, which are staring off to the ground.

Another pat on the branch. Someone else had joined us. A boy, older than me by several years. His maturity is evident as he speaks. "He was surrounded by quasvek snakes. He's poisoned."

He must have been watching me. The girl gulps and looks back at me.

"Thedas, stay with me."

The boy picks me up, the girl putting the carefully woven bow around my shoulder. The touch of my bow, however useless the weapon is now, is nonetheless comforting. He speaks again. "We should go to the elders."

I'm brought home by the boy, while the girl heads to the elders. It is not too long before my father is looking in my eyes, pain evident in his own.

“Quasvek snakes?”

“They were swarming on him.” the boy says quietly. “He must have been found to be evil in their sight.”

“Oh, what curse has befallen me!” my mother cries beside me. “My son taken before his youth is even...”

Her cry is cut off by a wise voice. “Thedas.” An elder, a woman, has entered and taken my head. She waves a hand in front of my eyes. “How long ago was he attacked?”

“No more than ten minutes ago.” the boy says.

“His eyes are still reacting. He will live for a few minutes yet. Then comes the trial.”

“Can you help him?” my father asks gruffly.

The woman considers, searching my eyes again. “Yes.” she says finally.

“We need to consult the forest for ingredients. I need five men familiar with the forest, and a pot already boiling.”

“My sister is cooking soup!” another man is calling.

The elves rush into activity while I lie helpless, my bow lying on my chest.

I stare at the leafy roof in resignation. There was no cure for quasvek snakes. It was a curse to be bitten by one, as my mother said.

A hard voice this time. “A curse or a blessing, a thorn or a rose, a death or a deliverance.”

A traveller, I think... yes, his name is... Mangul. He comes with increasing frequency, seeking to sell, but rarely are his wares needed. However, he is known for being well learned, and knows how to bind people to actions with his words.

“I present to you a vial.” his stiff dark voice says.

That he does, a tiny but beautiful crystal flask. The colour of the vial is dark purple, and it is filled with liquid. Mangul continues. “This vial will give a son. Without it, you will have... death.”

My father is not immediately taken by this offer, but he makes the mistake of looking at my mother. He melts under her soft weeping.

“I will pay any price. Give it to him.” he orders. He too knows there is no cure. Not from elfkind, anyway, and they had the best healing methods.

Mangul nods. “Your elder will be brewing a potion. I will mix it in. If your son does not recover, you pay no price, and I will give to you...”

“We don't want your gifts.” my father has regained some of his courage.

“Just take your leave if you fail. We would not wish to see you again.”

Mangul nods beneath his brown hooded robe. Only black can be seen beneath it, no flesh. "It is agreed."

The elder woman comes in, looking in my eyes with concern. "He has time." she says with a relieved smile.

She looks up at Mangul, disapproval at his presence quite evident, but she says nothing. Wise women do not criticise without good reason - gossip was for busybodies, not for women of wisdom. Mangul was a man of questionable character, but he had yet to be proven - and she had yet to be given leeway to judge.

Mangul drifts silently out the door after her. What was in that flask, I did not know. It could be water. By mixing it with the elders' potion, he could claim victory without doing anything. In reality, he lost no valuable ingredients should the potion fail, and gained whatever he wanted should either potion work. He hadn't agreed a payment.

I was unable to explain this to my parents. But then men of travel are unpredictable. He could genuinely want to sell a cure... or genuinely want to deceive.

My father is not a man of thought, but he knows travellers' ways and follows Mangul out to check his potion is mixed as promised. I mentally compliment him on that.

The elder woman returns. The potion is a curious blue-purple colour, and Mangul's flask is empty. She bears it in a simple cup. Would there be time, she would call on the gods and goddesses, a desperate yet powerful cry I had seen before. But there was not, so she simply murmured a short prayer and raised my head for me to drink it.

My eyes focused on the cup. The purple swirls, not quite mixed, did indicate Mangul's flask. I strained to open my mouth, but despite how small the scratch and how little poison entered, my muscles are as weak as wet flower petals.

She opens my mouth for me gently, pouring the liquid in slowly.

It is hot. Even as I swallow it, I sense the taste of berries, a type that is poisonous if prepared incorrectly; an insect is in there, I recognise the smell but can't place it.

"He is coming to the trial." Mangul says calmly, interrupting my thoughts.

He seems to know as much as the elder. I guess that's not surprising.

"Will it be painful?" my mother whispers to the elder woman.

"No, there is no pain." she says calmly, her words reducing my worry considerably.

Mangul speaks again, knowledgably. "The elements that will pull him through are strength, courage, commitment, and intellect."

My mother looks more hopeful. She knows my intellect. Her worry frightens me though. The thought of leaving the world at this early time is nothing but dismay to me.

I had yet to kill my first animal - my first hare even - yet to be named an archer among my family, yet to marry. Not that I had anyone in mind, but there were marriages aplenty for the adults. Skill deemed the victor as much as the daughter's father.

My eyes are closing of their own accord. The elder woman has put my head back on the soft uneven floor, her voice distorting in my mind. "Thedas Silima, you are about to make a choice. Whichever path you pick, be certain, and never turn back."

I am briefly aware of motion. My breathing is coming in short gasps, but my body is limp and painless. I am talking, but I can't make out the words.

Then the world fades away again.

The world. I see it with passion of such beauty, such unexplored wonder. A place of hunting and death for archers. But not for me. I walk with my bow proudly. I will fight with honour, and fight for good. I fight without regard for my death. There is no honour in allowing a death of the innocent while there is still breath in my body.

Mangul is somehow present, in the distance. I can feel him, a calm and cold gaze examining me, calculating my progress. Evaluating me.

Mangul has a duty with me. I can feel that, too. He is a man of shrouded robes and worn sandals, a man of layers where none are exposed.

My world needs me. My family needs me. Far more than for my own self, I desire to come back. I cast my desire to the gods and goddesses, a desire from an elf boy, for life to again raise my chest and light my eyes.

The world fades back in. I am still breathing in gasps and am covered in sweat, a rarity for elves. Despite that, there is no pain, as the elder had said.

My eyes are open, but they can't see anything. My ears hear a dull thumping sound, a constant double beat. It takes a while to realise it is my own heart.

By then my vision is returning, slowly. I'm relieved; blindness would make any elf useless. My hearing too is giving a hollow sound which is rising in pitch.

I swallow and find my throat isn't sore. My hearing improves considerably. I'm lying on soft leaves, probably my bed. People are talking nearby, quietly.

My ears flick automatically, locking onto the sound.

"...can't. There is no way he can ask for that." my father says. He seems angry.

“It is our custom. You are bound by your own words.” the elder woman says, regret in her tone.

“But he is not something that can be simply given away.”

“If you do not give Mangul what he asks, he is permitted to take what he wants by force.”

“I will fight him.” my father mutters darkly.

Even from this distance, I can hear the elf elder shaking her head. “It is murder to kill a man trying to take payment for what he sold. You have to return the thing you bought, or ask him to choose something else. To forbid him his payment is theft, and to kill him for trying to take it is murder.”

My father is lost for words.

I sit up, my body protesting at every movement. Strolling around is awkward, but then it moves more smoothly. I walk out to the conversation.

“Thedas is not something that can...” my father begins before I push past the strings of shells acting as a door.

“Thedas!” My mother exclaims, running to embrace me. I clutch her tightly.

“You were close to death, young Thedas.” the elder says with a smile.

My father pulls me into an embrace too. I can feel his eyes burning over my shoulder. His anger is not directed at me. As we split apart, I know I have to ask, so I say it.

“I am not something that can what?”

My words cut the mood. My father glances at my mother, then turns to me and sighs. “I promised I would give Mangul anything. In return for your life, he has requested you to be given to him.”

“What?!” I exclaim in shock. My mind is racing through ways I could get out of this. My father by tradition owned me, the same tradition by which they own daughters, and give them away to their husband in marriage. However, sons prove their own adulthood and break the ownership by being tested to be a worthy successor for their family skill. In my case, it would be declaring me an archer.

But I had not been declared an archer. I was recognised as having inherited gift in archery, but I had yet to kill, and before that, I had the sense to not dare take a declaration. No one asked me to, us elves all held a deep respect for letting people choose that day for themselves. You set your own path from then on, with your father no longer a protector, and to be found a

poor archer would (if challenged) make your declaration null, which was a terrible shame.

So I was my father's property. There was logic to Mangul's request too; with me being dead, there would be no way to pay with me.

“No! I won't leave you!” I say urgently. From the doleful expressions I'm seeing, I seem to have no choice. I refuse to accept this. Leave my family to pursue the whims of a unfamiliar traveller?

I run out the house. “Thedas!” my mother calls, trailing off. As I go past the door, a large hand grabs my shoulder.

Mangul looks down at me. At least I think he does. It's dark out and underneath that robe is barely any visible skin.

I am about to tell him what I think to his face when he speaks, calm and booming. “Is this my blessing?”

There is silence from the hut, then the elder woman speaks. “Yes.” No doubt she is feeling the pain of the family; even young elves are quite empathic.

“I shall talk with him alone.” Mangul says. He leads me away, to the outside of the elves' forest city.

For my intellect's sake I stay quiet. Before I seriously consider this request, it would not harm to find out more about what he wants me to do.

“What is your name?”

“You still don't know?!” I ask in disbelief.

“I want to hear you identify yourself.”

“I'm Thedas Silima. I'm from a family of archers.” I say proudly.

“My name is Mangul. I am a monk.” he says.

A monk?! I practically flee there and then. Monks are learned and incredibly dangerous beings. They wear hoods like travellers, but never allow any part of their flesh to be shown. It is not known what species they really are, for monks are trained in magic and can do things that render an attack from the strongest weapon powerless.

The magic is, if legends were true, incredibly powerful: they can create invisible yet impenetrable barriers, move faster than sight itself, and even create copies of themselves. If any of those are true, my attempts to flee would be pointless.

Travellers often dressed like them, since travellers were also warriors and pretending to be a monk was pretending to be someone invincible - a good way to reduce the number of battles you have.

The monks are few in number, and they live in the mountains in the coldest part of the country, due north, studying magic in the caves there.

I came to my senses. “You're not a monk. What would you be doing here?”

“That is for a later story.” Mangul says in his deep voice. “If you say to your family I am a monk, what will they do when you're gone?”

“They won't let me go, they'd hide me.” I said in realisation.

“Assuming I took you forcibly.” Mangul says.



He probably could, if he was a monk. My mother would be out of her mind with worry.

“Yes, they would worry, and worry, until eventually their sorrow kills them.” Mangul decrees. He spreads his arms. “I could have taken you anyway. But this way, without force, you relieve them of the strain of sorrow. We monks may be powerful, but we understand family bonds.”

I think for a while. He's right; he's planned this well.

I speak again. “So you take me, and I agree to go?”

“It removes me from attacking and taking you by force. You protect your family physically and emotionally if you put to them that I am a man of good. With your intellect, you will no doubt figure out how that is true.”

He places his hands together. “I will escort you back for your farewells.”

“Will I need my bow?” I ask along the way.

Mangul seems to have rehearsed everything. “Far be it from me to relieve you of your gifts. Take plenty of arrows.”

No worries about that, I think grimly.

My father looks up at me as I come back. “I have chosen to go.” I declare sadly. “Mangul is a good man.”

“A good man does not desire children as payment!” my father snaps. He clearly thinks I have made the wrong decision. I would have to convince him otherwise before I left.

“He doesn't want me as payment, he wants me as an archer.” I say, speaking mostly truth. If he didn't want me to retain my archery...

“He advises me to bring plenty of arrows. I want to go, father.”

“Would you desert your family so easily?” My father asks in anger.

At this statement I become furious that they would even think that I could do that. My father picks it up instantly. He's never felt me so angry.

“I'm sorry.” he says quietly.

I calm myself down, and speak again. “I am going. I have a duty to fulfil just as you have yours.”

“Yes.” Surprisingly, my mother is first to agree. “We are bound by your hasty oath to a man of questionable character.”

“He is a good man.” I insist. “He told me things, and done things that only a good man would have done. Trust me.”

My parents look at each other.

In five minutes, I have left. I carry two quivers of arrows, one packed full of arrows. Elves rarely do that with quivers, it makes it difficult to take out an arrow quickly.

Mangul waits for me. “I will take good care of him.” he says sincerely.

On the way, I take one last look at the city of the leaves.

Mangul walks calmly beside me. I take out an arrow and put it on my bow, in case a night creature appears.

His voice booms. "Rending a gate open is an attempt made by few and I am to succeed. Divine me therefore a new location, and cast me to the northern hills, along with my guest the elf boy."

So saying, he opens his hands, which are burning with a fierce green light.

Before I register what he said, he puts his hand on my forehead, and his other hand on his own.

Suddenly I'm standing on cold rock in pitch blackness. My ears hear only dripping of water and the murmured conversation several tens of metres away.

"You really are a monk!" I said in surprise and horror.

Mangul doesn't smile. "A cold and wet home is no home indeed - render this cave comfortable and stop the leaks. Light this cave and warm it."

This time his hands are purple. Mangul is taller than me and simply reaches up, touching the cave ceiling.

In a flash, furniture appear, the dripping noise stops, and the rocks around heat up until my feet no longer feel them as hot nor cold.

Now I can clearly see the size of the cave, about 40 feet long and 15 feet wide. Caves lead off from it, not so comfortably lit.

"How did you do that?!" I gasp.

"My methods are teachings of thousands of years. You have elf magic of

similar power, but just a different use."

"I have similar power? How do you know?" I ask.

"Men with empathy can detect magic. You could not see it because you're used to feeling your elf community's magic. What do you feel now?"

"Nothing." I say. Now it was gone, I realised I had gotten used to it. The feel of the elf community was one of lightness and protection, a pressure on my skin. Now I felt insecure and nervous.

"There is one rule us monks are bound to. That is to speak truth. Your task is exploration. We will use magic to see what you see and hear as you hear. But only your magic is capable of transportation. The magic I used to place us here was taken from you."

"I never saw you take it."

"I put my hand on your forehead first before we transported."

I remembered that. "But your hands were glowing."

"One casts the spell, pays for it, and then uses it. They pay with magic, and they use it with gestures. I am going to take you to the rest of the

monks. You are to be transported to somewhere so far away, you cannot even see it in the night sky.”

“Why?”

“Have you heard of the legends of men?”

Men. They varied in so much, that they were famous for it. You had the incredibly strong, the incredibly weak, the incredibly agile and those unable to move at all. They tore themselves apart with war, and being unable to breed with other species like elves, soon died out entirely.

They were so numerous it was hard to imagine, but eventually, war took its price. They were the main species of this planet, smaller than the giants, bigger than the dwarfs.

“I have heard of them.”

“Yes. They have been found on another planet. There is something we desire to fix.”

“What?”

“There are no other species.”

“What?!” I repeat in astonishment. “No foxes or squirrels?”

“No, no. I mean there are animals, and insects, but there are no elves, no dwarves, nothing beside humans.”

“So it's a complete opposite of this planet?”

The monk paused. “Yes... and we're not sure if man can cope on their own.

We are sending you to their planet, to observe them. You are to mingle with them.”

“For how long?” I ask.

“Up to a few years. We are not completely sure if you can come back, so you should be prepared for that.”

“What?!” I gasp.

“Clearly you're not prepared.” Mangul says sagely.

“You want me to risk forsaking my planet?!”

“You're going either way, and you're not someone who strikes me as idle or suicidal. You either have us as allies, which will benefit you immensely, or we simply abandon you on the planet.”

“The men will help me. They will attack you.”

Mangul replies with scorn. “Going on the word of a child, and without our magic? It would be foolish and impossible to try. Our magic shields this entire planet from their prying eyes. They will have no way to find us, no way to attack us, and more importantly, little reason to believe you.”

He's right. Men were not famous for their understanding of magic. They preferred to simply investigate into nature and their surroundings.

“You elves are not so bound to appearances and laws that are never broken still can be according to your teachings. With men, once a theory

is accepted as most likely, it is scornful to the point of impossibility to contest it. With elves, you never give solid foundations for anything. It leaves you much to question, but more importantly makes you find the truth.”

“Why must you interfere?” I ask.

“These men are probably going to kill themselves. We observed explosions so massive they could even be seen from here, wiping out miles upon miles of nature which may very well never grow back. As an elf, you know the value of a planet lies in its plants. A planet will need your species to keep its growth high.”

I nodded. It was certainly not a shameful duty, and just imagining all of that destruction made me wince. Men would never understand the glow that a plant gives, without elves. “I see. I am to rescue a planet.”

“Yes.” Mangul confirms.

“Why me?”

Mangul looks down at me. “You are smart, you are confident, and you are attractive. Men value these traits above all others.”

I can't help smiling at the complements spoken so factually. Then a thought strikes me. “My archery doesn't seem to matter, then.” I say glumly.

“A warrior is always respected with men, even in peace-time. And besides, your skills in archery will demonstrate that you are not simply a malformed man.”

“Why send a child?” I ask.

“Children are inquisitive by nature. It would be difficult for us to constantly guide you in investigation. And children are protected by adult men, even abnormal children. It would not be hard for them to kill a warrior elf, but there are few who can kill children.”

I smile. “You're sending someone of perfect qualities.”

“We would not want to fail. Infiltration of hidden alien planets is not without risks. Should we fail, humanity will again wipe itself out. Should we succeed, we will cause peace.”

“You speak so kindly for other planets and for me, but you would force me to go?” I ask.

“We are people of darkness.” Mangul says menacingly. “We are for doing good, but our ways are dark and we follow them without regard for feelings.”

I stop walking, making him turn and face me. “I don't believe you. Since we've met you've been nothing but kind, even if it's awkward for you.”

Mangul says nothing. Beneath his hood, there is only blackness, which is fixed under my gaze.

“You are not evil or you simply would not be doing this at all.”

“Incorrect. We fight for the greater good. Saving a planet is more important than saving one elf boy. We may do evil in your sight, but it's simply for the greater good.”

“Good is good, there is no way to have a greater good.” I argue.

“That would be true if a certain elf boy was not so selfish.” Mangul says.

“If you want to do good, you should follow your heart, not your self-preservation.”

Mangul *was* good at binding people with his words. I can't argue with his logic.

“Fine. I will go.” I say sadly. “But I'll miss my family.”

“We will watch over you as well as through you. We will also study the transportation and if possible send a monk through too.”

“You will?!” Now I know he is a good man under that shadowy veil.

“Yes. We are for the greater good. A monk would simply work against our purpose if sent first, and besides, we cannot do it with our magic... yet. We will record and investigate your travel.”

“When will you be sending me?”

“In two minutes and three seconds.” Mangul says. “We have three points of departure within the next three years, where no planets or moons are blocking the path. It is fortunate a boy of your qualities was found so quickly.”

“You're welcome.” I say, a smile across my face.

Mangul looks at me and withdraws slightly. “Stop your elf magic. We must hurry.”

“What magic?”

“You are placing a spell of desire. It's probably something subconscious, but please, stop.” Mangul turns away and continues to walk.

I raise my eyebrows. Spells of desire? Is that what elves did by smiling? Elf magic must be instinctive.

I hurry after him.

“We are ready, Mangul.” a monk says as we enter a larger rounder cave.

Above is the clear night sky. Mangul walks me to the centre of the cave.

Around me, tens of monks are sat on stands placed evenly in a circle. A web of lines painted with perfection connects each point of the huge star, and upon each point a monk sits, only darkness under their brown robes. “We have fifty two seconds, and a margin of five seconds.” Mangul says.

“Yes, Mangul.” one confirms with the same tone.

“Thedas, please stand absolutely still, and face me. Moving a twitch could mean you arrive with part of your arm gone.”

“Yikes.” I quickly make sure I am standing still. Mangul and the greeting monk go to their points on the star.

“Begin.” Mangul says.

“Portal of peace and wealth...” one monk says.

“...of fierce fire and empty ice...” the one beside him continues.

“...we send to a new location a boy...”

“...a boy of elf origins...”

“...from whom the power of elves...”

“...shall be withdrawn and used to pave...”

“...a path to this location.”

“Grant to us a vision and an ear...”

“...to see and to hear...”

“...on the decisions he makes, and...”

“...grant him protection, always.”

The monks continue for a while, speaking so rapidly I quickly lose track.

“Commend it thus as a sign for nature, borne by nature's own power.”

Mangul says.

I am standing perfectly still. Not even a twitch. All hunters are good at that.

“Be it so.”

As one, all the monks slam their right hands on the ground. And that is the last that I see of my home planet.

“Who is this boy?” a man's voice asks.

“I just turned around and there he was. In the flowerbed.”

I am lying on tulips. I recognise their scent. The man is angry, angry at my intrusion.

I have wrecked something of theirs without meaning to. My body is slowly regaining strength. I get up quickly and give them a reassuring smile.

“I'm sorry. I didn't see them.”

My species' voice is unfamiliar to this world. It is afraid of me.

The man looks at me with shock. He realises it too. “Who are you?”

He's holding a gun. Those things are dangerous. He's not pointing it at me though, just holding it at his side.

“Drop your gun.” I say.

He raises it instead. I quickly flick the bow off my shoulder and snap an arrow to the string.

My speed surprises both of them. But the man looks quite aggressive. I don't want to make a bad first impression on this world, but I don't want to die either, and guns are fast and unnatural weapons.

Elves never used them. They could predict the total destruction that would follow unnatural death in nature. An arrow is nearly completely silent, and consists of wood from nature, feathers from nature, and stones from nature. The bow is tendons from animals of nature and wood from nature's trees. Sometimes only wood is used, if you can find the right elasticity in wood.

Men used guns. They were creatures based around power. Until their bitter end, they threw all their might into tools of destruction.

I dive over the fence, and land on hard mix of stones. It stretches for more than I can see - an unnaturally regulated road. Not worn by feet, but created artificially.

This planet stinks of men. I find myself nearly suffocating. Nature itself has been torn to rarity under man's relentless desire for power. So the legends were true.

I needed time to think and to fully adapt to this planet. I needed nature's warm embrace, however slight. Even Mangul's dark magic cannot be felt now.

This planet may be lively and heavily populated, but to me it is cold and empty.

It is beyond depressing to exist on this planet. It is heartbreaking.

I need to find a high place, and find some trees. There, at least, I might find some comfort.

My desperation fuels me. I quickly put the arrow back and place the bow over my shoulder.

I can feel the elf magic in them both, subtle but persistent. Very subtle outside this world, but inside it, it is obvious by its foreignity.

I'm cowering under men, but I realise the truth even as I run to the trees far down the road: Elves are strong. In this world, my magic is something the planet is scared of. It is so used to man's destruction a nurturer is beyond its understanding.

I pause as I see the line of trees. A road with two lanes on both sides of a grass centre, with trees, planted in a perfectly straight line but growing uniquely, just as nature intended.

I run to the tree ahead and hug it. Thank the heavens trees are still alive in this world. Nature was torn by men, but it lives on. It has recognised me as a true and innocent doctor to its wounds.

I'm crying. I realise as the tiny sound of my tears wet the grass. How could men do that? What kind of monsters are they?

I have a desire to kill for the first time. Kill this entire planet's carefree molesters. Destroy them and let nature live from the decaying remains of their bodies.

I realise now why Mangul sent a boy. An elf man would be so hostile to the species that destroyed this world that he could fix nothing. An elf boy was not yet able to be consumed with hate.

I had to fulfil my mission by forgetting this hatred.

So I let it go. I dive up onto the tree's branches, hugging the trunk once more. My tears trickle down the struggling wood and nature finally relaxes after centuries of struggle.

“Who the hell is that?”

There's a human boy watching from the road. He sees me and what I do, but as I look at him, I realise his eyes hold utter confusion and astonishment.

He is clueless to nature's struggle.

There are others around him. I don't want to scare them.

A soft wind blows my hair, caressing my cheeks. Nature accepts me here, and is glad of it.

He sees what I do, and yet sees nothing.

I mutter in my elf tongue.

“You torturers.” I mutter in elf tongue. “How could you do this?”

I can barely control my anger. If I lost it, all eight of those below would die. Half of them are children.

My hand is twitching, heading for my bow.

“I am a doctor. A doctor is forbidden to kill even if he wants to.” I say to myself. To hear my elf tongue, nature shivers in delight.

I realise I cannot kill these people. Not only do they not have a clue what

I'm upset about, but they are sympathetic. They do have feelings, they just are ignorant. They have none of the elf instincts I have. I forgot my species was so gifted.

Nature speaks as the wind blows once more. “I will protect you. Command me as you wish.”

Nature has never submitted so easily. Even the elder elves had to spend decades to get nature's recognition and respect. But then again, this planet has no elves. It clings to me, quite rightly, as its only hope.

I wipe my tears and turn. There is no one below who can help this planet now.

A beast rushes to the ground underneath, roaring consistently. It is artificial, and besides, I have nature's protection. It has no hope.

Nature does nothing. The beast is merely a machine, but far advanced. My bow and arrow must look like idiocy to them. But their machines look like idiocy to me.

Where should I go?

As another machine roars toward me, I drop from the tree and land softly on its back. Child's play.



It's incredibly smooth. My feet find little grip, but little is all they need. Its driver notices me and the machine screeches to a halt. "What the hell are you doing?" he yells.

I consider ignoring him, but I soon realise he's not going to go anywhere with me.

I look at the road ahead. My feet are toughened by rough bark on my planet.

The man walks up to me. Suddenly alarmed, I ready my bow.

Judging from his dive backwards and sudden look of fear, he's not used to this sort of aggression.

He's thin and looks to be of normal strength.

"What is your name?" I ask, relaxing my bow string.

"Jack Lopez." he says, reaching into his back pocket.

He takes out a small device. It's not a gun, judging from the shape. He presses it then holds it to his ear.

Maybe it's a translator? No, he understood my question, he doesn't need one.

Another machine has stopped beside us. This one has more than one human in it.

The man called Jack is slowly stepping back to his machine's entrance.

"Hello, police?"

Police? The word seems familiar.

"There's a nut on top of my car. He's got a bow and arrows and he looks really odd." Jack says quietly. But for my ears, he might as well have yelled it.

He's getting help. His device must be communication. I can hear it talking back.

"Is the man trying to hurt you?" it says.

"No, he just jumped on my car. It's a kid, not a man."

I twitch my ears. It's an automatic instinct which helps to filter out sound.

At the sight Jack looks even more confused. "He's twitching his ears in a really odd way."

"We have received calls of a similar nature. Are you located on 21st Street?"

"Yes." Jack says.

"Try to keep him occupied. Police are on their way."

He's calling for help. He doesn't have a gun so he's getting people with them. Police.

My reaction times are good, but from memory, guns worked with exploding their projectile. The force of an explosion is much more powerful

than a string being released.

I don't want to risk guns. Jack has stepped behind the machine's door. He's using it as a shield.

"What's your name, kid?" Jack calls.

"Thedas Silima." I reply.

I pause. "You want me to wait here for the police?"

He didn't expect me to say that. Humans are so complex that they cannot conceal any emotion, and my eyes pick up every flicker of movement now they're focused on him.

He shows surprise and fear. "Yes." he says quietly.

I drop down and step to the driver's seat. For such a complex machine, I'm not surprised to see multiple controls. It would take me too long to learn it, especially without a teacher.

Dials. I examine them to see the machine's capability.

140mph. Interesting. Convert to metres per second... just over 62 metres.

Geez, that was fast. Way faster than the air-speed of the fastest bird on my planet.

But he was not travelling that fast when he went beneath me. Why?

"Your machine can travel at 140 miles per hour... why weren't you going that fast?"

"It's illegal, Thedas." Jack says, still trying to work me out. "You're only allowed to travel 40 miles per hour on this road. 70 miles per hour on the motorway."

Half the speed was still very fast. But 40mph was within the speed of a tiger. I could cope with it.

I put my arrow back again, and re-shoulder my bow. The police. I had to avoid them before I found out more about this planet.

I realise that the machines are forced to be on roads. In trees, I have a chance.

"Do you have a map?"

It's a slim likelihood, but surprisingly, Jack quickly opens a small cupboard in his car and hands me a folded piece of paper.

I open it. "Where are we?"

Jack takes his time to find it. I hear a weird wailing in the distance. An artificial call.

As he shows me a spot, his other hand grabs my bow.

I watch calmly as the bow begins to heat up under his hand. An archer's bow will not tolerate the touch of an enemy.

He struggles with it, trying to twist it out my hand. And it's there I make another discovery. His body is weak.

I hold onto the bow and the map, my eyes locking onto the position he pointed out. It seems accurate. More importantly, there is a forest on the map about a kilometre north.

I have a direction. I quickly fold the map. Jack releases my bow, staring at his hands which are red from heat.

“Farewell, Jack.” I bid him, diving over him and beginning to run.

My top speed is high, but I rarely need to run. I should do okay.

The wailing is getting closer, I’m running towards it. It is loud, so I dive into the trees again.

Another machine, white with blue stripes, blue and red lights shining alternately from the top. It passes below, making such a racket I clamp my hands to my ears.

Police is written on the side. They got here worryingly fast.

I hurry towards the forest.

I can't shoot at them first. Not only do they have the deadlier weapons, but Jack had plenty of opportunity to hit me or disarm me, and he chose the more passive option.

I continue running, and it's not half a minute before the police car has come alongside me.

They wind down the window. “Hey kid!” one calls.

Two men, burly but clean-shaven, dressed in black, wearing caps with a sort of chequered pattern. One is holding a circular control I saw in the other car, presumably driving, and the other one is holding a device attached to his shoulder. A communicator, judging from the way he's speaking to it.

“Good morning!” I call disarmingly, not changing my fast jog pace.

The men glance at each other, perturbed by my cheerfulness.

“Kid, would you stop running?” the man is eyeing the dial that reads speed, it's showing about 27mph. He could keep up with me even if I was running full speed.

“Sorry, I'm in a hurry.” I reply.

“Are you going to the sinema?”

“What?” I don't know this word.

“Are you going to the sinema?” the police man asks again.

“I have no idea what that is.” I say, quite comfortable with expressing ignorance. The only thing dumber than lack of knowledge is lack of knowledge growth.

The men's glance lasts a bit longer. “Why are you dressed like that?”

I consider my clothing. White vest and pants under a long white cloak.

This material resists dirt somehow, elves always wear it so they can look clean.

“This is how I regularly dress.” I reply.

“Why do you have a bow?” the police man asks.

I'm stalling for time. Every second I'm getting closer to the forest. I look back at him. “I'm an archer.”

“Ah. Well, that makes sense.” he replies.

We continue moving for a few seconds before he speaks again. "Are those fake ears?"

Oh. Stupid. The most obvious trait that separated me from human species was physical changes. My senses were much sharper, my body much more agile, and my ears were pointed back.

"No, these are my regular ears." I reply, half indignant. The police man asking questions is quick to apologise. He still doesn't recognise me as a nonhuman.

"How many people are on the planet?" I ask him.

"About seven billion... why?"

7,000,000,000 people? That was incredible. My planet had a percentage of that.

He asks me why. Well, time to say the obvious.

"I didn't know it, I've only been on this planet for five minutes."

I flick my ears, this time on purpose. Judging from his expression, he's not sure if I'm joking. "Are you an alien then?"

"No, I'm an elf. Do you believe me?" I ask the police men, hopping lightly onto the front of their machine.

The two men look astonished. "How old are you?" the driver says.

"Twelve years old." I reply, not really seeing the purpose of this question.

"Were you in someone's garden and threatening them with your bow?" the driver continues.

"Yes, I landed on this planet there."

"Fine, Thedas, would you mind getting in the kar?"

"The kar?" I repeat.

"Yes, car. C-A-R." the driver spells it out helpfully. "The one you're sitting on."

Oh, the machine is called a car. They stop it so I can get in, and the driver points to a handle on the outside.

As I get in, the driver leans over to his partner and murmurs, "He's guilty of breaking and entering and threatening with a weapon then."

"So Thedas," the driver is eyeing me in a mirror on the roof of the car.

"Where do your parents live?"

"On another planet." I reply. "Would you mind taking me to the nearby forest?"

"If you are an elf or not, you have somewhere else to go first." the driver's partner replies.

"What are police?" I ask them.

"We keep the peace and make sure the law is followed."

Ah, customs. My planet never needed such harsh enforcement, since all crimes were seen by nature of some sort and an elder could get to the truth with ease.

“How many of you are there?” I ask.

“Enough.”

Enough to watch all seven billion. Wow.

“Do you have guns?”

“Some of us do. But in the UK, regular police don't.”

“What's the UK?”

“The United Kingdom. It's a group of four different countries, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. You're in England, in Kent, the south east.”

Huh. The police are a good source of information. Probably because they are curious about me and have more authority than the other humans I had met.

I'm in a country where guns are uncommon. That might be Mangul's aiming, but is more probably good luck.

“Where are you taking me?”

“The police station. We want to find out if what you're saying is true.”

“I don't lie!” I say indignantly.

The driver grunts in apathy.

I suddenly realise there's not enough room to pull out my bow. I curse my own idiocy for disarming myself. I had better make sure I get out soon, but there's no handle on the inside of the door.

Trapped like those lobsters I once saw. I'm no cleverer than a lobster. How comforting.

I had my knife with me as well, which I used for sharpening arrowheads.

It's tucked into my robe on the left inside pocket. I suppose I could use that, but it isn't very dangerous.

I decide to make the most out of the ride. The first thing I notice is there's roads surrounded by buildings everywhere. The buildings are various sizes and made of artificial materials, mostly red bricks. Trees seem to be used for decoration rather than growing naturally. Of course, men pursued power, so they pursued control.

They stop the machine besides a building with a blue light outside.

“Theudas, I'm going to need to take your bow away.”

“You can't touch it, it'll burn you.” I warned hurriedly.

“Why is that?” the driver asks as he gets out.

“An archer's bow doesn't tolerate the touch of an enemy.”

The driver opens the door and I get out. He puts his hand on my bow and frowns in confusion as it grows hot under his hand. “Fine, you can carry it.”

He brings me into the station. There's a big wooden desk with two policemen behind it.

“Whoa, an elf, right out of Lord of the Rings.” the one on the right says, leaning forward. I grin at his interest.

“Oh, I saw that.” his partner says, investigating me more closely. I grin at both of them and they smile back.

“You should check out his bow. When you hold it, it gets really hot.” the driver sighs.

“Really?” Now both the policemen behind the desk look interested, and they seem to like me. My empathy's picking it up. On impulse, I hand them my bow.

“Holy shit!” the one on the right says. He passes it quickly to his partner, who can barely hold it for a few seconds. He throws it back to me and looks amazed when I shoulder it without hesitation. It wouldn't hurt me.

“How is it doing that?” he asks.

“I don't know how. It does it automatically.” I say again.

“Are you a real elf?” he asks.

“Yeah!” I say quickly.

“Why is it on my shift...” the driver groans.

“Just send him off to Missing Persons, his name's Thedas Silima. That bow must be some sort of radio-controlled toy.”

They take me to another room. The amount of machinery they have is incredible. The room has one person in it, a man with a bald-top head. It's rumoured monks look like that, but no one has ever found out. I think of Mangul far away, and wonder when he will send a monk, if he could.

Then I recall that they had three times they could send people. I had to trust the planets to be aligned up in time. I don't know how fast it was to send me here, but they can't send a monk whenever they feel like it. I was on my own.

The man is looking at me. “Name?”

“Thedas Silima.” I say again.

“How is it spelt?” he asks wearily. I get the feeling he's been working for too long. He's tapping at a device. I recognise the men's alphabet spread all over it. Next to it is another weird device which was emitting light. I wish I recognised more machinery in this world – Mangul won't be helped by my poor descriptions. And judging from how commonplace they are, it would be odd for me to ask what they were called.

“What are you doing?” I ask instead. He looks up at me tiredly. I grin to get him on my side. I need someone I can talk to.

His eyes grow wide as I smile and he withdraws slightly. It reminds me of Mangul's reaction.

“You're casting a spell of desire over me. It's probably subconscious, but please, stop.”

I could get people to desire me by smiling. I should smile more often. Friendly people were talkative people.

"I'm trying to find any relatives so we can send you back to your family." he says gruffly.

"It's useless." I say bluntly. "I'm from a planet too far away to see."

"Mm-hmm," he says, clearly dismissing this, "Can you spell your name for me?"

I do so. I found English less challenging than Elfish, although I wasn't a master at either. Elfish is rarely written down anyway, there's little use for it.

He finds no results, judging from the repeated tapping of the letters into the glowing device and the regular sighs.

"Are you sure that's how it's spelt?" he says finally.

"Yep!" I grin again.

A smile drifts across his face. He likes me, my magic must be taking effect.

A few minutes ago, I was just a task to complete, and now I'm cute boy dressed like an elf.

Mangul's voice echoes again in my mind. "You are smart, you are confident, and you are attractive. Men value these traits above all others."

I had to reveal all three of those traits. Intellect was hard to show though, until they realised I wasn't part of this planet. I had little general knowledge.

How did Mangul know I was smart? Did he just guess from the fact I recovered?

No, I doubt he would have offered the vial with such extreme conditions – he had agreed never to return to my home village. Being that he was searching for an elf to begin with, denying himself access to an entire village for the sake of a guess would be idiotic. But maybe he was in a hurry to use that particular period where he could send someone. Hmm. No answer to that; he could have been in a hurry and did something desperate, or he could have found out using magic.

The man is talking again, into another device. It's similar to the one Jack

Lopez used – a communicator.

"I'm bringing you in for a diannay test." the man says.

"What is diannay?" I ask back.

"Deoxyribonucleic acid. It lets you identify a person with a sample of their body, like a hair."

Amazing. The police could do so much with that. If a criminal dropped a single hair, the police could identify them. In our planet, the trees identified any miscreants.

There's a thud from a room nearby, and my ears automatically flick to face it. The man looks startled, but escorts me down the hall. I seem to be attracting the attention of a lot of female men.

"You're certainly popular with the ladies." the man comments. I grin back, and realise the ladies are fixated on me after that. That subconscious spell of desire must work strongly on the other gender.

"He's cute!" one comments loudly, and laughter spreads over the floor. I'm embarrassed so I quicken my pace, huddling into my robe. Stupid desire.

The police man takes me to another room, where lots of people dressed in white coats are working with lots of machinery. "Thedas Silima needs a diannay check."

"An elf, huh?" An intelligent-looking man wearing crystals over his eyes looks at me. The crystals are very thin, nearly invisible.

I flick my ears at him. His eyes widen too, as surprised as anyone else.

"Some Lord of the Rings fan, I bet." the weary-sounding man says.

The intelligent man looks me over again. I wonder what the crystals let him see. "Yeah. He certainly looks the part facially, but I don't know about the clothes."

"I did a check for his name, but nothing, so it's your turn." the weary man says, wandering off shortly after.

"What's your name, son?" the man asks.

I step back quickly. Son? I'm not his son. Was I just adopted? No, that can't be right.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm not your son! Thedallas is my father!" I say with a tone of dignity that surprises even myself.

"I meant it as an expression of friendliness. You're not literally my son, or this whole diannay check would be redundant."

He IS smart. I can tell from the way he talks to me. Other people were more cautious and protective of me. This man treats me like I'm capable of independence, like I'm intelligent. I like him.

"Thedallas huh?" he's tapping away on one of those letter-carrying grid of buttons. It's quite neatly designed, and very systematic. I would prefer a nice disorderly nature, but mankind probably couldn't live with that.

"And what's your name?"

"Thedas Silima." I don't have to spell it out for him. He's correct the first time.

"Are you afraid of going home Thedas?" he asks, not looking up.

"What?" I ask in astonishment. Where did that come from?

"Well, if your name wasn't found by Konstabel Luke, you're lying about your name."



“I'm not lying!” I say indignantly. “My name is Thedas! I'm from a family of archers descended from Silima! He was one of the greatest archers in elf history!”

My serious tone stopped him in this line of questioning, although he didn't seem to believe me.

“Do you know anyone named Legolas?” he asks. Odd question – but I do.

Why does he know that?

“Legolas Hurte. He's a herb collector. He trades with the travellers.”

He's looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“What are those crystals in your eyes?” I ask him outright.

“Crystals?” he repeats. I nod. Apparently I got the word wrong.

“I'm wearing contact lenses.” he says. “They're invisible... how did you see them?”

“My eyesight is a lot better than a human's. I saw them by the way the light reflects from your eyes differently than Konstabel Luke's. I have to focus like that to be an archer.”

“So how good is your archery?” he asks.

“I can shoot a petal from a flower at 300 yards while falling from a tree.” I had pulled that off a few times, once in front of several classmates, making me briefly famous.

“Maybe you can show me sometime.” he says.

“What's your name?”

“Me? Alex Gurdale.”

Alex. That's a pretty awesome name.

“What are the Gurdales famous for?”

“Uh... nothing really.” he admits, seemingly taken aback. I keep talking to him like he's an elf. Humans probably don't have such customs to fill their father's place. I suppose that gave you more freedom.

“You're an interesting lad, Thedas.” he says, grinning as he turns back to his glowing device.

“You're an interesting human, Alex.” I reply cheekily.

His name sounds nice. It's hard to describe the way I feel when I say it, mostly because it's so subtle.

“I'm just going to pull out one of your hairs so we can test your diannay.”

It's painful but I let him do it. He places it under several machines. He glances at me wide-eyed, and then beckons another white-coated man over.

Eventually they're all crowding around the machine, glancing at me frequently with looks of amazement.

“Thedas, are you from another planet?” Alex asks.

“Yes. I came from a planet too far away to see.” I reply.

They retreat hastily like I have some sort of plague. One picks up a communicator device and starts talking. "We need the chief of police down here. We've got a boy with completely inhuman diannay."

I flick my ears. "Did you just start to believe me?"

The commotion this diannay test has made is incredible. The place is swarming with men dressed in clothing that completely covers their body.

Alex is taken off by them, and one of them escorts me out.

"Thedas, why are you here?" a man asks, his voice muffled by some sort of filter he's wearing in his suit.

"I was sent by a monk called Mangul, because this planet has no elves and is going to destroy itself with war like the humans that used to be on our planet."

The man writes down the response hurriedly. "How did you get here?"

"I don't know, they used magic."

I'm beginning to feel odd... I wanted fresh air.

"What species are you?"

"I'm an elf!" I say again, grinning despite my stomach.

Something they're holding starts beeping as I smile.

"He's using mind control!" the man holding it says with alarm.

"What?" I ask in confusion, but there's already so much talking my voice vanishes.

I end up in a white machine, like a car. Several of the men dressed in those suits are watching me intently, holding devices that were supposedly monitoring me. I feel tiny under all these glares. The only thing that reassures me is the bow I still carry.

"Are you okay Thedas?" one of them asks.

"No!" I say with sudden anger. "There's too much inspection and packaging up and fear!"

"Fear?" he repeats in confusion.

"Elves are empathic, even young ones. You all are radiating waves of fear and disgust!"

"Reading of remote nervous systems..." one says quietly.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" the man asks, still radiating fear.

All this is enough to make me nauseous.

"You can let me out of this machine into a forest. Nature trusts me."

There's frantic scribbling from the one taking notes.

"You all are making me feel sick. Relax, please. I'm only twelve. I'm not going to hurt you." I say, holding my stomach.

The pulses of fear lessen, but I still feel ill. "Actually, if he's empathic, he *couldn't* hurt us." one says.

The machine's motion is like a horse-cart, but you can't adjust your balance for the turns. It makes me feel sick.

"I need some fresh air. Do you mind?" I say, turning to the two doors behind me. No handles.

"Relax, Thedas. We've never had an alien on our planet before. Especially one that could speak Inglesh so fluently."

"Inglesh? This is what men always spoke. Elves kept the language so they could remember men."

"Men speak hundreds of languages. You're just speaking the main one." the talkative one explains.

"Oh." I look down. Men are even more diverse than I thought. This reaction to their first alien is understandable. But that doesn't make the fear any less nauseating.

"If I don't get fresh air, I'm going to throw up." I say with finality.

"What did you eat?" the man says.

"Some lamb and lettuce in sauce. That was ages ago." I realise I'm hungry too. I ate that saucy thing for lunch... and whatever nutrition that medicine had. Since then I hadn't eaten.

An empty stomach doesn't make this travelling any less nauseous. I feel bile rise up in my throat.

I smash into the van doors, and they give way surprisingly easily. I dive out and roll, quickly realising they were travelling very fast. Maybe the 70mph Jack Lopez had spoke of.

And they're in a queue of cars. No sooner had I jumped out another one nearly hit into me, but I roll fast enough to land with my feet on its front. I shove off it, pushing myself up into the air, my feet leaving big indents in the machine. Those things are pretty weak.

I land on top of the second machine, the one behind the one I just exited.

The men inside are clearly surprised by my speed.

It's pretty nice feeling nature's wind on my face. The machines are travelling rapidly. On impulse, I drop down on one hand, hanging off the machine, so I can see the dial with mph.

It's travelling at 84mph. A quick glance is enough for my eyes, so I flip back up. The wind is clearing my nausea quite well, I suppose I just wasn't used to travelling without pushing through the air.

"Thedas!" the talkative man yells at me. "What are you doing?!"

"Enjoying the wind!" I call back. "And it's beautiful." I mutter in my elfish tongue. My hair is flying wildly. I've never travelled so fast before. I have to crouch down, since the shoving by the wind onto me is so strong.

"What's Thedas doing?" my ears filter out the strong muffling of the wind and fixate on the man speaking.

“He's not running off, apparently, judging from that grin he's enjoying the wind, like he said.”

“That grin seems to be the cause of the mind control, the monitors go off the roof when he smiles.”

“Should we stop the convoy?”

“No. Did you see him jump off the van behind us? He's strong enough to stay on.”

“Incredible. He's only twelve and physically he's stronger than a man.”

“He's not human, remember? It wouldn't surprise me if this alien was not only physically better, but mentally better than humans.”

“Look at the dent he made in the van behind us. I hope he's alright.”

“He didn't whack into it accidentally or we'd be picking him up in an ambulance. He made that jumping onto the roof.”

“70mph collision and no injury.”

My feet were hurting from that, but it had faded. The metal I hit into had collapsed inwards, allowing most of my momentum to be absorbed.

I wanted a forest. These guys were just travelling in a huge man-made road, split into six lanes by dashed white lines. On the three lanes on my right, several machines were driving past in the opposite direction. The road went further than I could see. There were hedges in sight, and quite a few trees lined the road, but there wasn't a full forest.

A bright flash from the right side. I look back to see a machine stopped at

the edge of the road, a man holding a black device to his eye and pointing it at

me. He's soon out of sight.

I spend about half an hour up there, until I see flashing lights on the right

side. One of the machines had hit another one and there's police cars around

it. There's people in the cars.

I found my body moving by itself. I roll to the left and fire an arrow straight into the back left tire of the car beneath me.

The arrow is stronger than I expected. The shaft jams in the wheel, and

forces the wheel up off the ground, then jams into the underside of the car.

The car pulls over quickly, the speed sharply decreased by my arrow.

When the speed is low enough, I jump off, running to the accident.

There's

a lady trapped inside, behind the wheel they use to drive the car. She's bleeding. The seat's pinning her.

I push the large police man aside and grab the door, straining. It tears off,

and I shove the seat back, hearing it snap loudly.

The lady has blood coming from her mouth. The police man pushes me

aside and presses a button on the far side of the lady.

The strap holding her to the seat releases, and the police man carefully lifts her out. I take off my robe and lay it down on the road, helping him lift

her onto it.

Hmm. I had to use the elf healing method. I could only heal small injuries

by myself on my home planet with it, but I wanted to help this lady.

Focusing, I imagine all of my body sucking into a ball. I cut the ball in two

and move it through my arms to my hands, which I put on her head and

chest.

A fierce green light emits from my hands. This healing method uses my

body's muscular power to boost her recuperation speed. I've never seen the

green light so well though. Every time I've used it previously, the light had

been dim.

Nature was submitted to me. Maybe it was playing a part in this.

The lady coughs. Her eyes open slowly, then fill with astonishment.

“Are you okay?” I ask her in Inglesh.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“I'm Thedas Silima. I'm from a family of archers.” I say proudly.

“What are you?!” the police man asks. He had backed away when he saw the green light.

“I'm an elf.” I reply nonchalantly. I help the woman back onto her feet.

Everything man seems to have made seems weak. The machines called cars look so strong but they crumpled when I jumped onto them. Why was I so much stronger than men?

Nature asides, my species was probably just more advanced physically, although the machines of men were breathtaking in complexity. Maybe men's complex machinery could tell me statistically why I was better. Not that it was entirely relevant to my mission, but I was curious.

And Mangul did say my child's inquisitiveness would help accomplish the mission. I should ask as many questions as I wanted.

The men that were in the queue of machines have come to a halt and are running towards me. “Thedas! Stop touching her!” one calls.

I look down at the lady, expecting her to have a rash or something. But there's no visible reason for me to not touch her.

“Why?” I call back.

“Who is this guy?” the police man next to me calls to them.

They ignore him. “Thedas, your touch could be harmful to humans. Why do you think we're dressed like this?”

They're holding monitors of various sizes. I frown at them. “I don't have a plague or something. I'd say my touch helped this lady.”

“She does look a lot better.” the police man agreed, although his expression showed he clearly didn't want to be associated with me.

One of the men turns to me. “Thedas, how did you help her? We saw that green glow.”

“It's an elf healing method, I use it when I injure myself.”

Every word I say is being scribbled down hurriedly. I feel like I'm being explored, and it's disturbing, to put it frankly. This group of recording men is becoming less and less enjoyable to be around.

Alex was a lot friendlier. He was also the first one to believe I wasn't a man.

I don't know many elf methods. I do know a concealment method though.

All I needed was a forest and I could vanish with it. Even my white robe responded to the magic and changed colour to conceal me.

Maybe I could do it in plain view, being that Nature was in submission to me and was aiding my methods.

I can't. I don't want to leave my robe and the lady's still sitting on it. I continue to help her up, ignoring the men's order to stop touching her.

Weirdly, they don't stop me. On my home planet, if you didn't do what your elders...

“Stop reminiscencing.” I say to myself quietly. You don't explore a jungle while comparing it to a house. You accept it as a separate environment.

I lose no time putting on my robe again. Underneath that I wear simple white clothes, made of the same material. Trousers and what men call a long-sleeved t-shirt. I don't see why it is a t-shirt when it's the same t-shape as a regular shirt.

The police man is taken away. His being around me makes him something to be carefully analysed as well. I dread to think what the injured lady would be subjected to after my healing method.

If I dreaded what the lady was going to go through... what would I be going through?

My robe's material reflects all dirt and the woman's blood just runs off it, without leaving a mark. This makes those suited men scribble even faster. Soon they'll be writing so fast they'd set their paper on fire.

The thought makes me grin. Immediately their monitors start beeping again. They all step back, except the lady who seems captivated by my smile.

What is it about my smiling that makes it attract?

Thinking about my escape from this group of fearful analysers, I realise I shouldn't leave my arrow in the tire. I only have a limited amount, even though I'm carrying more than usual. If I left it, for all I know they could track me down if I ran away later. I had no idea about the machinery of this planet -

I should leave as little traces of myself as possible.

I run to the tire and pull it out. It's a mess, but repairable. Surprisingly, the shaft is intact.

I look up and realise there's a bridge up ahead. I can see it in the distance.

I would've seen it earlier, but I was looking at the accident.

If I jump in the water, it would remove my scent and conceal me. No doubt with my more advanced physique, they would decide I had survived, but I needed to escape. The concealment method worked best when you were surrounded by nature... trees or water both counted. Hopefully it wouldn't be too cold or too much of a drop from the bridge.

I hop back on the machine at the front of the queue. The one I had burst the tire of was the one before. With a flat tire, I doubt it was fit for travelling.

It takes a few minutes, but the men are anxious to move me to somewhere secure. The convoy moves off again, minus a few cars attending to the accident victims.

After a while the cars enter a crowded city, then enter a two-lane road and pass over a small river. The bridge is a colourful bridge made out of blue, cyan, and white poles. There's a road in the middle, a blue barrier, then pavement, another barrier, then about a ten-metre drop to the water. I don't have much time to decide.

By the time I'm jumping from the bridge, the men have managed to stop the cars again. "Thedas! Come back!" I hear them yell as I fall.

I ignore them, a second later hitting the murky water.

It is FILTHY. I hadn't realised it, but these was where humans must dump their garbage. I resurface quickly, tying my robe tighter so my skin will touch as little of the water as possible. It's icy cold, too, but with the warm sun, I can bear it.

"Concealment method." I remind myself, focusing.

This time, I imagine myself fading into the water around me, my body becoming transparent. "Nature, transport me away from this bridge." I call quietly.

The water current increases in speed. I feel something's hands grasp me.

It's made of water. I take a gulp of air and duck underwater to join it.

I'm carried away at extreme speed. It's slightly eerie feeling several pairs of hands holding me and tugging me, but knowing I couldn't see them.

In minutes, the bridge is out of sight. I make my way to the side of the river, shivering with cold. I'm getting hungry, too. At least I escaped those analysers. I needed to stay concealed and move away from the river. Then I needed to get warm and eat some food.

If I could find someone like Alex, I could talk to them. The streets are busy with cars. There is a few people walking around though.

This city stinks of man... my trip underwater didn't help. I stink too. I can't concentrate on my concealment method very well, and I needed a lot of focus because there wasn't much nature in the city streets.

There's a smell of food. A fish and chip shop.

I wander in and find two men and a lady busily moving food about.

Judging from the signs, I needed money to buy from here. I wouldn't even recognise money if I had it.

Sighing, I turn around. With my river stink, I'd stand out anyway. I walk around the side of the shop and wearily slide down in the alley. My bow is the only thing warming me now. How easy was it to catch an animal on my home planet...

Well, I said that, but I had never killed an animal yet. I kept hesitating until they left. I had no difficulty spotting one on my home planet. On this planet, the only ones I've seen had been pets.

Time passes. I'm staring at the ground, hungry, cold, tired.

"Hey mate."

It's another man. This one has a small beard and moustache. Brown hair, sticking out from his head in a way I hadn't seen before. His eyes are dark blue, and pupils are larger than normal. What I notice most, though, is his offered hand and friendly expression.

"Interesting ears." he says, more of a comment than an insult. He reaches for one and tugs it gently.

"You waiting for your parents?" he asks.

I shake my head mutely.

"You look cold, little elf, and you stink."

"Yeah, I know." I say sadly, looking down.

"Are you planning to do anything about it?" he asks.



Hmm. Well, “No.” I had nothing thought out. I just wanted to escape from those invasive people.

“Do elves eat chips?” he asks.

“I don't know.” I sigh. Not that whatever chips are is relevant.

“Right, I'll be back in a minute.” he says. “Don't go anywhere.”

Like where? Is this another analysis guy trying to trick me into thinking I've escaped? Is it some sort of trap?

“Two small chips.” the man says in the shop beside me.

Rustling and shovelling sounds

“Two fifty.”

There's tinkling of metal.

“Cheers.” the man says.

I don't register what he's up to until he hands me food.

“Huh?” I blink at it. Why was he offering me help? I hadn't even smiled at him and used that spell of desire that Mangul talked about.

“Well, unless elves eat by staring, you'd better take it.” he comments sarcastically.

“Who are you?” I ask him in astonishment.

“Well, I'm known as fee. Spelt P-H-I.”

Phi... that was a name given to a particular number men were interested in... I think. My memory was somewhat shaky in that area. I didn't realise men could be called numbers instead of a name.

“Elves starving and freezing to death hit me right here.” he taps his chest empathically, then pauses. “Well, not literally, or I'd probably need some sort of medical attention.”

He's very sarcastic. I had always wondered about that saying that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit... it could have been said sarcastically.

“Well, eat up. I'm going back to my place if you want to accompany me.”

“Sure.” I grin at him and feel that instinctive spell bounce out from me. He takes a direct hit, but his expression doesn't change like everyone else. He just frowns slightly.

“I've been wanting to ask you something, but it can wait.” he says, helping me up.

“Thanks.” I try to copy his tone.

He's suddenly holding my bow. He got me up in such a way that my body's standing up movement concealed the slight brushing of the bow down my arm.

He's a pretty sneaky fellow. I start to watch him like a hawk.

He holds the bow in his hands carefully. “Hmm... this is some pretty realistic gear.” He tests the string.

“Well, I am a pretty real elf.”

“Why is your bow warming up?” he asks me.

“It doesn't let itself be held by the enemy.”

“Fair enough.” Phi hands it back to me without regret. “You have enemies?”

“I guess.” I take the bow with some confusion, lost in thought again.

Do I? Those analysers weren't friends nor enemies. They wanted to study me.

“Do you have enemies?” I ask him.

“The only enemies I have don't know they should be hostile.” Phi says. He's cryptic. That shows intellect.

Yes! Phi seems like he could understand me. With his intellect, I could reveal my own intellect. There's no point in speaking things that cannot be understood.

But at the same time... that ability to take my bow without my even noticing... I never heard of people who could do that.

“How did you take my bow?” I ask him.

“Like this.” he reaches out and puts his hand on it.

“That's not the same!” I say.

“Where's my other hand?”

It's clenched into a fist next to my midriff. I step back quickly.

“It's a technique called misdirection. I point you in a direction and you won't notice anything subtle in a different direction. Pickpockets use it a lot.”

“Pickpockets?” I don't know the word.

Phi doesn't seem put out by my lack of general knowledge. “People who steal things from your pockets. Or rather, pick things out. Hence the name.”

“You humans have so many machines.” I say wearily.

“Machines?” he looks around, “Yeah. You get used to it.”

It was noisy. There were sounds of cars to replace the songs of birds. How I longed for a nice, quiet, plant-packed forest.

“Phi, what is your family famous for?”

Phi hesitates. “Well, why does it matter?” he finally said. “People aren't bound to follow the path of their ancestors. Times change, beliefs change, and amongst that, tradition becomes idiocy.”

Huh? Men's customs are completely different to elves. We keep trades going for tens of generations. I'll need more time to accustom to men's customs before I take any action about their planet.

The man called Phi gestures at my chips. “They're hot.” he says, eating one anyway.

He's right. Chewing it, I realise the food is just cooked potato, with salt. I should make sure I don't overdose on salt.

Phi continues his peculiar style of walking down the street. I tail him.

What is that type of walking? He's slouched back and walking slowly. His body language is showing boredom. Well, more it's reeking boredom. Like the world just bores him and he's walking among it because he had no other choice. He has confidence in that walk, too.

I don't want to know what my own style of walking is, but I can't help looking in the shop window beside me, and register my own style of walking and facial expression.

My walk is indecisive and awkward. I look nervous and my hair is filthy, not to mention the rest of my body. My robe is still pure white, having resisted the river's stench, but my hair is a muddy blonde. How can Phi be so relaxed with me tagging around?

I don't want to embarrass him. I quickly finish off the chips. He threw his paper in a large pot, so I copy where he threw it.

“Camouflage method.” I sigh, no longer worried about starving. I try to use it, but the method isn't working at all. Of course, there are not enough trees, just man-made structures.

Phi doesn't even look to see if I'm following. He just strolls in his casual way for several minutes until he reaches a house. “Elf dude, wipe your feet when you come in.”

The mat says 'Welcome'. His house is warm and dimly lit.

Phi walks into a room where machines fill all the edges. On a desk, there's a flat device with the alphabet on it, like the one the weary-looking police man and Alex used. It's a different design though, it's curvier. There are three light-emitting devices, and a device I can't describe.

“So what's your name?”

“Thedas Silima. I'm from a family of archers.” I say, reminded of Mangul.

He turns on the light-emitting devices. I'm still not used to artificial light.

Judging from the way he uses the devices, he's familiar with these machinery – he's pressing buttons on the flat device very rapidly.

“I'm a free lance soft wear developer and ethical hacker.”

Free lance? Soft wear? Hacker? I don't understand these words. Soft wear... his clothes did look soft. I had a feeling that's not what he meant though.

He looks over his shoulder and notices my expression. “Thedas, where did you come from?”

“A planet too far away to see.” I say, sitting on the floor.

“How come you're filthy but your clothes aren't?”

“The material doesn't let things stick to it.”

“I need some clothes like that.” he says, getting up. “Before you stink out my workplace, how about you have a shower?”

“How does it work?” I ask. I'm standing in a tiny room. Above my head is a tube with holes in the end.

Phi grins. “This is a power shower. It's called that because it uses electricity to change the temperature of the water. Twist this dial to change the temperature, and press this button to turn the water on or off.”

“Right.” Doesn't seem too hard.

“You have to be nude, obviously. I dunno how old you are.” Phi says, turning around.

“Twelve years!” I grin at him.

“Right.” he says after a pause. “Once you're done cleaning yourself, you add some shampoo to your hair. Keep your eyes shut and mix it into your hair properly. Once that's rinsed out, hop out the shower and use this towel to dry yourself.”

The shower surprises me, but it's quite relaxing. Maybe this is why Phi can be so relaxed. Whatever that river muck is, it's soon disposed of by a drain underneath.

I dry myself and dress again. The water on my skin is pushed away by the clothing so I'm soon dry.

“Phi?” I call. “I'm done.”

There's a weird sound coming from his workplace. And a sort of bubbling.

“You want some tea?” Phi calls. He doesn't sound scared.

“Yeah...” I call, adding quietly, “Whatever you think tea is.”

It was a plant species. Did he want me to eat it?

Apparently it's a hot drink MADE from tea.

Phi settles in front of the machine, looking at the writing on the screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask eventually.

“Let me explain to you the basics of machinery. It'll help you understand things better.”

Phi explains binary, electricity, what all the machines around him do. It takes over an hour. The tea is quite nice in taste. Then he says something really interesting.

“I can access the sum of human knowledge with this device.”

He taps a small black box, which has lit up numbers which are flashing. I gaze at it in awe, half-expecting it to react to his touch. Nothing happens, but I notice all the wires feeding to other devices.

“With this cable, I access much bigger machines which will send me data from anywhere in the world, nearly instantly.” he traces one cable to a port in the wall. “And with this one, it transfers the data to my computer.”

He taps the computer underneath his desk. “And this keyboard and mouse let me tell the computer what to do with it. I can display the data on any of these three screens with software.”

His explanation is detailed. “You seem pretty used to explaining things.” I say approvingly.

He grins. “Well, software developers tend to mess up, and they talk to other developers for help via the Internet. I've been giving and getting help for years, so I'm used to explaining. If you're explaining something from the basics means you can work out most of the other things that you don't know.”

“Why do you program computers?”

“It's something I enjoy doing.” Phi says, leaning back. “With a computer, I could change the world in an instant with some malicious code. I could improve the world in an instant, or destroy it. It'll be difficult, but not impossible.”

Wow. His little set of devices could destroy or improve the entire planet?

This guy either had a big head or he was very dangerous.

“Writing code to affect things I shouldn't have access to is hacking. I told you...” he prompted me.

“You're an ethical hacker.” I nodded.

“Right. That means I hack things if they don't suit my ethics. For example, I might hack into a website that hosts illegal content and take it down. The fact is though, the world is eventually going to destroy itself. We've had two world wars, where half the planet has tried to kill each other. Then countries got nuclear.”

“What's that?”

Phi sighed, looking up. “Basically, everything in the world is made up of tiny particles. Nuclear energy is splitting and joining those particles. When you do either, there's a lot of heat energy released. If you don't control it, it has the power to disintegrate miles of buildings around it, and all the people. If you're outside that destruction, there's material which causes incurable diseases that goes into the sky and can spread much further.”

I couldn't imagine that.

“The explosion from splitting an atom looks like this.”

He typed on the keyboard and brought up pictures of mushroom-shaped clouds.

“It was nuclear bombs that stopped the second world war, but more countries have them now. They have hundreds of missiles that can pinpoint any location on Earth and explode there. As soon as one country drops a nuclear bomb, the floodgates will open and entire countries will suffer. And because of the wind spreading the diseases,

you can even destroy countries without even intending to. There's potential for incredible destruction. Fear of that has led to peace, but it's getting shakier as time passes.”

Mangul would be watching all this. Their magic chant included showing the monks what I saw. This man has explained more to me than anyone else.

This 'nuclear' thing was probably what Mangul was talking about when he said, “These men are probably going to kill themselves. We observed explosions so massive they could even be seen from here, wiping out miles upon miles of nature which may very well never grow back.”

“How is it that you're so relaxed about meeting me? Everyone else has been scared.” I say, thinking back.

“I find fear to be stupid when it goes beyond common sense. I have a right to be scared of you as a weapon, but no reason to be scared of you as a person.

You're not an enemy and I'm not planning on making you one, so why should

I care what sort of tricks you have?”

“Huh.” I say, musing. Phi appears to just be... apathetic. He had a good point though. There's no reason to be scared of anything unless it's hostile. And as he said, I'm not.

Unlike other places, this house feels like a home. It's not open and public like the police station or just the city outside.

It's Phi's own house. He chooses who goes in, and he picked me.

“There's people looking for me.” I tell him.

“I expect they're government officials?” he says, catching me off-guard.

“How did you know?”

“The government have to manage big things like the first visit from an alien species. Apparently they botched it up.”

“They were too extreme in analysing me. I felt...” I paused, looking for a word.

Phi puts his hands over my mouth and nose, cutting off my air. I can't breathe!

Is he attacking me already? Is he scared of me after all that he said?

What's going on?

Phi speaks calmly, stopping my scrabbling. “Relax. I'll let go in a bit. Just think up words for what you're feeling right now.”

He lets go a few seconds later. I gasp for air.

“Calm down Thedas. I think the word you're looking for is suffocated.”

“You didn't have to demonstrate it!” I snap.

Phi grins. “Maybe not.”

He's a dangerous man. I remember thinking that. Just now, he could have suffocated me. He looks thin and small, but he's actually quite muscular, more than a child elf anyway. But all elf things are stronger than man things.

He's probably less powerful than me despite having more muscle, but I'd rather not chance it.

Why did he suffocate me? It was good for a demonstration, but it wasn't necessary at all. Was he testing if he could get away with attacking me?

I can't read anything from his expression. My elf eyes have filtered out the entire room and are picking up every flicker of emotion on his face.

"Your eyes look interesting," he comments. His face now shows interest.

Elf eyes changed noticeably when filtering the environment. The pupil would change shape and eye change colour to something more intense. There was also considerable magic passing out from my eyes, a sort of energy with a purpose. I couldn't detect it on my magic-filled elf planet, but here, it was very apparent.

Phi was again caught in it. Again his interest changed a little into a more focused curiosity. He was trying to understand it... analyse what was happening. Unlike the others, he could detect what was changing, instead of merely realising I was doing something.

"Hmm. Are you putting some sort of spell on me just by looking at me?"

He had got it in one. He was more empathic than I was. Or else just good with logic.

Of course, his programming had intensified his ability for logical thinking and problem solving. Elves must be known of on this planet, to a degree anyway. What was this Lord of the Rings thing I kept hearing about? Elves were apparently similar to me in that.

Maybe real elves existed on this planet already? No, why would nature be so easy to comply? Nature had a personality that matched the state of the planet. So this planet's nature was weak and desperate. No wonder I was sent.

"What makes you think that?" I pretend to be surprised.

"My body has a feeling like pulses of low-power energy are passing through it. It's pretty hard to pick up if you're not looking for it."

That was how I felt it too. I could feel the pulses in the air and Phi's reaction. Phi was surprisingly intuitive for a man.

"Elves are quite a big thing in a particular film series called Lord of the Rings. One of the main characters is Legolas, an elf archer."

"What's a film?" I ask him. Wasn't that a layer that could form on top of liquids?

“A recorded video and audio compiled and sold. Also known as a movie.

They can be pretty interesting and usually hundreds of thousands of people watch them. For the really big films, people dress up like the characters and go to the sinema.”

“What's a sinema?”

“C-I-N-E-M-A. It's basically a place with lots of seats and giant screens to show films in high quality.”

Oh... so that was why the police had asked me if I was going to the cinema. They thought I was dressed up like an elf in honour of a film, not that I was a real elf. If they had realised that then, with their diannay test, I probably would have been taken off by those over-analytical men before I even reached the station.

“What's a diannay test?”

“‘Diannay’? It's three letter abbreviation, you're saying it wrong. D-N-A.”

*Ohhh.*

“The test extracts a bit of information from your body cells. Even though the cells are small, the amount of information they contain is so large that it's impossible to match up with anyone else on the planet. It works with hair, skin, etc.”

Seems both Alex and Phi were reliable sources of information. It was unlikely they knew each other, and the information they told me coincided.

“Hmm. Seems you're wanted.” Phi says thoughtfully, showing me a video.

“An alien has visited Earth? Officials deny the story, but CNN have captured the exclusive video footage of the alien.

“The alien has the appearance of a twelve-year-old boy, with ears that are controlled independently. The boy appears to be an elf, and looks like this: ”

An image appears, in sharp quality. It's me, standing on a roof of the van.

I'm looking at the screen, or rather at whatever captured the picture. It's pretty apparent that I'm not human, from the easy grip I have on the van.

“This alien has confirmed superhuman strength, as this picture was taken when he was standing on a van travelling over 80mph. Officials have given no comment about the origin of this boy, but he is a missing person. He is suspected to be in the London area near the River Thames. If you see or have seen this boy, remember he is armed with a bow and arrows, so do not approach. Just call the police; any information will be appreciated.”



Phi reaches into his pocket and takes out a phone. I watch him in astonishment, and he looks at me. "Should I call the police? You'll probably be discovered within a week."

"Please don't. I've learnt a lot from being with you. You're not someone who is scared of me. We can talk freely."

"That's probably true."

He has no detectable amount of fear despite that report of superhuman strength. It's incredible. All I feel from him is relaxed comfort...

"Well, tell you what. If any of my stuff gets damaged when the police kick down my door, you're paying for it."

No concern in that. It was a joke. I don't understand this man.

"Why don't you care about things other people care about?"

"Good question. How many things should I care about?"

"Umm..." Is there a right answer to that question?

"If I just care about being well, I have to take so much precautions that it becomes a lot of wasted time. If I care about my things, I have so many things it becomes impossible to protect them. If I care about my body, I'd have to greatly inconvenience myself with thick protective clothing. If I cared about anything material, or about myself, I'd be wasting time in a selfish way. So my way of life is apathy."

"Is there anything you do care about?"

"I care about you, Thedas." Phi grins. I'm taken aback. "As I said, "Elves starving and freezing to death hit me right here.""

He taps his chest again. "But in all honesty, I figure you'll be moving on in your way soon. I can't imagine throwing you back out. If I did, police would kick down my door to ask me what I did to you. If I didn't, police would kick down my door to ask me what I did to you."

He chuckles.

"I can't get rid of you. I had two choices when I saw you in the street: ignore you completely, or help you completely. There's little point putting only a part of your effort into doing something. If I just bought you food and then left you, you'd be in enemy hands."

"How would the police find me if you don't call them?"

"People probably saw you with me." Phi sighs. "If that's the case, then you'd be taken back to the police within today. If not, someone will eventually see you inside this house, and it'll be within a week, a month at best."

I sigh dismally. Again, an intellectual man who'd be taken away from me.

Phi taps away at his computer. "What I'm going to have to do is back up all my information. If the police run off with my electronic devices... they could wreck my data."

“Oh.” I say dismally, feeling guilty.

“Don't worry, I'll be done in about forty minutes. Try not to get arrested before then.”

“Drop box synced... box dot net synced... file zilla synced... git hub synced...” he mutters to himself, tapping away busily.

“Okay. My main backup program is doing its thing. Forty minutes. After that we're good. You want some more tea?”

He's concerned about my wellbeing, not my species. He's smart, kind, funny, and good with explaining and predicting. I resolve to stick with Phi as much as I can.

“Yes, please!” I grin at him again, feeling the same pulse of energy. It's starting to bother me the way I can't control it.

As we sit sipping the tea, Phi asks me to tell him my story. So I do, while he types rapidly. I start from the hunt for the quasvek, how Mangul got involved, my transport to Earth, Jack Lopez, Konstable Luke, Alex Gardale, the vans taking me away, my healing of the woman, my escape into the Thames, and how I met him outside the fish and chips shop.

“So you want to see a forest?” Phi asks.

“I did want to.” There's still an aching desire. “But I want to stay with you more.”

“How cute.” Phi says, half-sarcastically. “If it wasn't for your magic you'd be dead outside the fish and chips shop.”

“Hey!” I start up indignantly. Phi raises his hands, grinning. “Kidding, dude. You need to calm down a bit.”

There's a rapid tapping at the door.

“Probably the rozzers.” Phi says nonchalantly. He sees my confused expression and adds, “a.k.a. the cops, a.k.a. the police.”

I jump up, looking around hurriedly. “I need to hide!”

“You probably do. But if the police want to search here, they can.”

I end up standing nervously near the front door, out of sight. Phi opens it.

“Hello officers. What can I do you for?”

“Have you seen this boy?”

A faint rustle of paper.

“Yes, I just looked at him.”

“Where?!”

“On the paper.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

I soon realise Phi doesn't want to lie to hide me. He's just clever with his words.

“I saw him earlier, he was wet outside the fish 'n' chip shop.”

“According to witnesses he went from the shop with you.”

“He was following me for a while, yeah. But I haven't seen him recently.”

'A while' being the entirety of the journey... and 'recently' being the past minute. His wording made the police man assume longer times than what Phi actually meant. But even Phi wouldn't be able to lie for too long. Phi hadn't turned around the entire time I was following him. He could say... and he did:

“I haven't seen him in my house lately, but you're welcome to search.”

Calling their bluff. Depending on how badly they wanted to find me, they would accept or deny his offer, but suspicions about Phi's character should lessen.

“Yeah, okay.” the officers must really want to find me.

Now Phi has pretty much given me away to them. What do I do?!

Camouflage technique is useless here. No nature.

I could go outside. I know very little about where I am, but if I remember where I go I should be able to retrace my steps.

The police are probably experienced with searching for people. I need to get out the house.

I open the window beside me and hop out. The police men are directly to my right, but haven't looked my way.

The brick has tiny holes and a rough surface. With a good run up, using both window ledges, I could climb both floors and get onto the roof. But they both needed to go inside and not look out the window while I was doing so.

I can't believe Phi practically gave me away. I wanted more security from him than that. Besides directly saying I was there, he couldn't have opened me up for being found any more.

The police men are stepping inside. They haven't seen me. The front door closes. Quick, time to go.

I run away from the wall, and then run towards it. With the first jump I reach a metre up the wall. I manage to get to the roof, then I see the piping around the roof is very thin.

I have no choice. I grip it, putting all my weight on my feet and spinning around on the gutter. I'm falling too quickly though, so I have to put all my weight on the gutter.

There's a cracking sound from the gutter, but I'm up. I quickly run across the roof and down the other side, lying down. There are some tufts of moss on the roof.

Phi is talking to the officers, who are going through his house individually.

He's asking about me. Apparently I'm dangerous but whether I'm an alien or not, the officers haven't been told.

After about five minutes the officers thank Phi and head back to their car.

They drive off. I dive down from the roof onto the grass beneath, and go to the front door.

“Oh, it's you.” Phi says, as if he didn't expect me. “Why are you here so soon?”

“Huh?” I blink at him. “The police have gone.”

“The police aren't stupid Thedas. They have plenty of experience with detecting other people's presence. They would have watched the house for you to move around.”

“Oh.” I say dumbly.

There's rapid tapping at the door again.

“Looks like the gig's up, Mr. T. You going to run away or something?”

Phi

asks, walking to the door.

Fear again. The police men with guns. Another chance at intellectual conversation...

I decide what I have to do. I have to make Phi and me inseparable. From now on, I won't be agreeing to anything unless he is unharmed and I can freely talk to him. His casual apathy and intellect to manipulate people suggests such a deep analysis of the world around him. Apathy to any new scenario would require analysis of so many previous scenarios that you just would know the solution instinctively. Thus you could be apathetic permanently as no problem would be difficult.

He also showed a good knowledge of people. His communication as a software developer, and his demonstration by talking those police in such a way he never lied, but they still got the wrong idea, was something I'd never seen before.

“Hello officers.” Phi says. “What can I do you for, again?”

“You're under arrest for kidnapping.”

I sling my bow from my shoulder and fit an arrow to it. Those officers were two seconds away from death, I thought menacingly.

“Is the kid in question a human? Because if not, he is not a kid by definition. The law does not apply to him any more than if I 'kidnapped' a cat.”

The two officers are looking at each other. I can tell.

“Thedas, are you in a worse place than before I met you, and have I abused you in any way?”

“No!” I call back. Maybe Phi can even talk his way out of this one.

“Reveal yourselves to the officers and state your desire to stay or go.”

I hurriedly put away my bow and arrow and step into the hallway. The two officers are there, one holding out handcuffs, but not moving to put them on Phi, who is leaning against the door as calmly as always.

“I want to stay with him.” I say quickly.

“If you have nothing to say further, gentlemen, I will bid you farewell.”

You couldn't get any more manners than that. Phi was wiping their inadequate entry in their face with his politeness.

“We'll call the station.”

“If you insist on staying, I'd rather not pay to heat my front garden. Step inside again, gentlemen. I'll make you tea while you wait for a reason to get Thedas to leave me.”

He does invite them inside, and even makes them tea! I'm astounded by his courteous manner. When presented with the police, he becomes very pleasant with his words, very much like they're inconvenienced guests, rather than it being them who were inconveniencing him.

It would be perceived as mocking, bar the fact he hasn't actually reverted from overflowing with politeness to his regular manners. So from the police's point of view, they don't know if he's always like this.

Still, they're relieved he's compliant, and that I'm not leaving his house.

That's the last thing I want to do. I'm sticking to him like glue, following him around.

“Officers, I'd like to ensure justice is served within this house. Please call the station.”

They do so, on little communicators on their shoulders. I can hear another car pulling up outside. Phi checks his watch, and winks at me.

Oh. He's stalling with his courteous manner so his backup software will finish. Clever enough, I guess.

“Officers, please take Thedas Silima into protective custody under suspected violation of immigration laws. Peter Hinks will be taken in as well for suspicion of harbouring an illegal immigrant.”

Peter Hinks? Who was that? Was that Phi?

Phi nods at me. “That's me!” he says cheerily.

Another two cars pull up outside. There's a lot of bustling coming from outside.

“There's no need for handcuffs.” Phi says, sipping his tea. “Thedas might need some though. He's an illegal immigrant and he might run off.”

“No way!” I whack the handcuffs out the officer's hand and across the room, “Leave Phi alone!”

Magic is emitting from my eyes again. This time it feels hot. My eyes are probably becoming predatory. That's a scary sight, it happens during combat.

First the pupil's width lessens considerably, but the height remains the same. The irises change colour to green, like a snake, or rarely, red, if the elf is extremely aggressive. I'd never seen red before, but green had

appeared often during contests and fights. I'd heard rumours that red meant something was wrong with the blood vessels, they had burst with high blood pressure or something. But red also increased your ability to fight several times over.

Green was mostly for scaring your enemies, it gave no fighting advantage. My eyes were probably green now.

The police men flinch and lean back, the magic scoring direct hits on both of them. Mangul would call it a spell of fear.

"Phi would be me. It's my nickname." Phi says cheerily, oblivious to the police men's fright.

"If you touch him..." I begin, the magic intensifying.

Elf magic is surprisingly effective. The men are cowering despite their larger strength and higher authority.

Phi puts a hand on my shoulder and I look up at him, the magic flow instantly stopping. I feel my eyes revert to their regular dark blue colour and size.

Phi hesitates briefly. "Relax, Thedas. These two gents are quite aware that either of us could kill them. It's not good manners for a host to kill his guest."

Again with the humour and understatement. Phi was still as relaxed as ever. I take his advice and relax too.

Wait. Either of us could kill them? Was Phi that dangerous?

I recalled his misdirection and suffocation demos. He was quite capable of overpowering at least one of these police.

Outside, I hear two more cars pull up.

"Thedas, apparently you're an illegal immigrant. Did you come here without a passport?"

"I don't know what a passport is." I reply, confused.

"It's a little booklet that tells people who manage who comes in and outside of countries what their identity is. Those people are immigration control."

The cops are whispering amongst themselves.

"Finish your tea and we'll get moving." Phi says, taking another sip.

There's a vibrating sound from his pocket. He shows me a small device.

'Backup completed.' is written clearly in artificial light. Oh yeah, the grid of lights were called screens.

He's stalled them enough to copy his data to a safe location. Nice.

Phi finishes the rest of his tea quickly and goes back into the device-filled room. I get up to follow him, and suddenly my arms are pulled back and there is two metallic snapping sounds. The police man has put handcuffs on me.

"What do you think you're doing?!" I yell out, anger filling me again.

Phi gives me a look which says 'relax'. He sits down at his computer and types quickly. The policeman behind me wraps his arms around me. It figures he's the stronger one.

The other one heads for Phi, who presses two final keys, and his computer locks.

I grin at this, but the police man doesn't seem to care, he just grabs Phi and puts handcuffs on him.

Phi speaks to me. "Thedas, the more capable you appear now, the harder you will find to obtain freedom. Greater danger calls for a stronger jail."

What he was saying was I should escape later. Fair enough. The less I showed of my abilities now, the stronger the element of surprise I had.

"Fine." I say, letting myself go limp. It's painful, the way the officer is holding me. It forces the sharp edge of the handcuffs into my back.

I force myself to relax. Be more like Phi, I say to myself. Apathy.

Relaxation. A calm mind is a focused mind. A focused mind is an intellectual's best weapon. Make Mangul proud.

I grit my teeth. I want to be with my family. I want to be with Phi. I will make these things happen.

"Let's go." the officers shove me and my saviour out towards the back of their car.

What could best be described as a mob greets us. There's people with cameras and microphones, people waving signs... at least twenty of them have accumulated. They all start yelling when they see us handcuffed.

"Mr. Hinks, how do you feel about..."

"Thedas, is it true you're an alien from..."

"Welcome aliens in the name of planet Earth!"

"Go back to where you came from you dumb elf! We don't want any more..."

"Get those handcuffs off him!" one yells angrily.

The police cannot physically get past all of those people, who are inquisitive and apparently conflicting in opinion.

The officers retreat quickly, closing the door. "Damn mob snuck up on us!" one snaps, grabbing his shoulder communicator device.

"Walky-talky." Phi tells me, gesturing at the device. He's taken to naming devices I wouldn't recognise, so my vocabulary would improve.

"I-E at the end, not Y." Whoops. I mentally correct my error.

As the officer presses the walkie-talkie device, it makes a tuneful triple beep. "Unit 504 repeating call for backup. There's a crowd here of about twenty people, and it might get nasty. We can't leave the building."

He releases the walkie-talkie and it beeps once. Soon after he gets a replying three beeps and message in a lady's voice:

“Roger your call. Special ops are already en route. You'll have backup within five minutes.”

“Good thing I finished my tea.” Phi says dryly. “Ops is short for operations, Thedas.”

I nod at him. We wait for the extra police to arrive. I tune in to what the people outside are saying.

“We don't want aliens around. It's hard enough keeping track of things as it is!”

“If an alien wants to contact us, it's a superior race because it came to us, so we should take its advice!”

“What if the advice is stupid? You know, against human nature? Aliens probably don't understand that.”

“Why does he look like an elf? Is he just pretending to be one or is that his true form?”

“For that matter, is he even a he?”

“Where did he come from?”

“Why is he around this Hinks guy?”

“Where's his U.F.O.?”

“Why do the police get to handle it? The aliens should be met by regular people!”

I soon realise there's a lot of opinions. I should expect that from the most diverse race in history. The crowd outside is growing gradually. I don't know how people worked out where I was, but leave it much longer and everyone in the country would be flocking to see me.

That thought makes me scared. I can handle myself in talking to a crowd.

But go over a few hundred and I reach my limit. It's just scary, the amount they outnumber you.

Plus, with that amount of human interest, how could I do any communication with nature? So far, due to man's population being so massive, I had barely had any time with nature, and I haven't even SEEN a forest.

Still, I did find Phi. He is relaxed about what I am, and very informative.

In this mass of mankind, I found a perfect guide.

His wisdom is apathy. The ability to have no cares. It borders on arrogance and recklessness, though. Not thinking (about the damage they were doing) reduced the world to the shambles it was. But not thinking (about the form of the saviour) can save it.

Apathy is a good system for a planet so vastly populated. If you don't care, it's almost definite that someone else will out of the billions available. But for a planet with less people, it's not so guiltless to forsake caring.



Mangul. I keep thinking about what he said.

“We will watch over you as well as through you. We will also study the transportation and if possible send a monk through too.”

He had a method of transport to this planet. He had demonstrated it.

There were a lot of monks involved in sending me. I wouldn't be surprised if that was every monk on my home planet.

I wondered if it had exhausted them or something. My magic was a bit like tensing muscles, except inside of the cells rather than the cells themselves. It was difficult to explain. It was tiring, though, that was for sure. I wasn't experienced in elf magic that much, but I had been told (from an elder elf) that we are the only species whose magic is intertwined with nature. The more you were part of nature, the more magic it gave you. If nature submitted to you entirely, you barely had to use any of your own power. Although you couldn't do what you want. You had to know how to use the magic.

I also knew from experience, if you were exhausted and you hurt yourself, you couldn't use the healing technique. It was close to muscular energy, overlapping, but not completely. My basic magic techniques never drained me, they weren't that demanding. Monks like Mangul probably did have techniques that were mind-bogglingly difficult to prepare and required a lot of 'magical strength'. Monks' magic was strong too, but no one had dared pry as to how. It was said they dedicated their lives to magic studying, and it was common sense that they would be good at it if so.

The yelling began to die down outside noticeably. More policemen were arriving – I could tell from the sound of their boots on the pavement. They must be there to keep the crowd back from me.

We went out shortly after. At least fifty people were struggling to get a glimpse of me, and yelling questions at me. There were about ten policemen, eight in special uniform and carrying guns, holding them back.

Phi and I were helped into the back of the van quickly. All eight of the special uniform police men - I assumed they were special operations police men - got in with us. We sat near the front, although I couldn't see the driver because of the thick metal that separated us.

The eight police men, a visor covering their eyes down to below their chin, were sat near the doors, guns ready should any of the mob get too close.

The doors were shut quickly by the nearest special ops man, and the van peeled off.

A terrible squeal emitted from the top of the van. It was shockingly loud, and I clamped my hands to my ears, yelling “Ow!”

The noise alternated in pitch then changed to a different tune.

Phi was wincing too, but he was bearing it. To my considerably more sensitive ears, it was agony. It can't be deliberate pain if humans can take it easily.

Forcing my hands further into my ears, I hummed loudly and stamped my feet in an effort to drown out the siren.

The eight policemen hurriedly talked together and one spoke into his shoulder communicator. Soon the noise stopped.

I sighed in relief. I was sick of man. I wanted the sound of nature, wind through the trees, water running over stones, birds declaring their territory and desires in song.

Just thinking about it made me angry. Phi, beside me, was giving me a concerned look. He put his arm around my shoulders.

I knew my bow was going to be heating up under his arm, but he didn't move or even react to it. "Thedas, calm down. I'll get you what you want. If you act like a child and go out of control, they'll force you into more restraints."

Act like a child? ACT LIKE A CHILD?! I was burning up over here. Their sirens, their numbers, their machines, their destruction of acres of natural growth for grids of artificial buildings of straight edges and repetitive design...

I was so sick of this planet.

Wait. No. This planet was so sick of its people. They act like nothing's wrong and ignore the planet's suffering. If they don't wipe themselves out with war, they'll wipe themselves out with carelessness to nature.

I, for one, wish humans to suffer for their carelessness. Their brutality to kind nature. Molestation would be an understatement.

Phi's arm is still around me. My bow must be at a burning temperature, but he's keeping his arm around me anyway.

Not all humans are bad. Not all have much to do with this destruction. It would be wrong to generalise. Phi made his software programs and barely affected the planet. There were probably people who did nothing but chop forests down all day. Those...

"Your bow still thinks I'm an enemy huh." Phi says quietly. He takes it from my shoulder and puts it in my hand. "But you know better."

"Put the bow back on his shoulder." one of the police men call at me, waving his gun.

Phi takes the bow and puts it on his own shoulder. "I dare say your speed is pretty fast with the bow. I have to give you time to think twice."

He's right. If I was angry, I might kill someone before I even thought about it.

"Friend." I say in Elfish, grabbing Phi's hand and putting it on the bow's tip, and putting my hand on the other tip.

To me, it was the same temperature as always. To Phi, it was a very hot temperature, but it would start to cool down now I told it Phi was not an enemy.

Phi wouldn't be able to use it though. He was not an elf, and he wouldn't know the twinges of nature's magic that indicate wind speed will increase, how to control the arrow while in flight (something I was still learning), just how far the arrow would tilt and be off-centre, etc.

The archer elves of legend, my ancestors, were excellent with the bow. My oldest ancestor (Silima) had even created an arrow that would split into several smaller arrows. No one had seen it since his generation, otherwise all the archery family tree would be trying to use it. With a quiver of this fearful weapon, he had stopped an army of a hundred. The army's species hadn't been mentioned, though.

"Thedas, can you speak English?" the police man at the back asks.

Phi raises his eyebrows at me. I nod at the officer.

"Are you an alien?" the officer asks.

"If by alien you mean was I not part of this planet, then no. I am more a citizen of this land than you are." I say bitterly.

My eyes lock onto and zoom into his face, picking up the slight movement behind the visor. The cop's face changes to show surprise.

Surprise? Why were men so oblivious?

Phi seems to be the exception. Rather than dismissing me, he was reading me. Trying to figure out my mechanics. I suppose that was a software programmer's job.

In a way, he is like the other men, with his curiosity.

But they are releasing the sickly stench of fear and apprehension, whereas Phi is relaxed. I bet there could be a hundred angry men with guns aimed at him and he'd remain level-headed. I could stick by him and my empathy wouldn't make me nauseous. That will be so nice.

In fact, the only reason the police men's fear isn't making my stomach upset is Phi is releasing relaxation and thoughtfulness, and he is closer to me. He's cancelling it out for the most part.

I decide to follow his lead and relax as best I can. In response, the police men grow uncertain.

We are driven for about ten minutes. Phi's phone beeps. He fiddles with it for a minute, and then grins.

"Thedas, how are you holding up?" Phi asks me.

"I feel sick." I whine. "Fear makes my stomach queasy."

Phi nods. "Well, don't throw up on my clothes. I like these ones."

What? I thought he was concerned about me. But he was more worried about his clothes.

"Thanks a lot." I say sarcastically.

"No problem." he replies, just as sarcastically.

“We're here.” the policeman says as we come to a halt some fifteen minutes later. By that time I am seconds from emptying my stomach onto the floor.

Phi walks out with me. There's a group of fully white-suited men who look at us both with suspicion and curiosity, scribbling down notes.

“Peter, come with me.” one says, walking off to the left.

I follow behind him.

“No, not you Thedas.” the man says, gesturing away.

“I'm going with him.” I say, emphasising the whole statement.

The white-suited man is clearly eager to investigate me. Phi is an inconvenience that should be removed. They probably want to inspect us individually.

“Thedas, you are an alien right?” one of the other white-suited men ask.

Judging from his young voice and the angry looks from his accomplices, he was new.

“Yep. I'm an elf.” I say for what is probably the seventh time.

“Thedas, you and Peter need to be separated.” the first white-suited man tries.

“It's not happening.” I say forcefully. I wish I could force my eyes to become predatory to scare them into doing what I said. But the eye control was completely subconscious. I simply had to get angrier and it'll turn on by itself.

I feel my hand twitching towards my bow. Then I remember Phi has it over his shoulder.

“What Thedas is trying to say is that he can pick up emotions easily, and my apathetic nature makes me far less repulsive to him. Your analytical, fearful approach is making him feel he's in a minefield.”

“Yes. Exactly.” I agree heartfully, relieved that someone can understand what I'm feeling.

The white-coated men (no surprise here) scribble furiously. The one who was trying to separate me sighs, clearly eager to get on. “You two can stay together then.”

“So where did you come from?”

“Llangwych. It's a small part of the tree city of Yunqwich. It's mostly the south, bar one part in the north. The owner there refuses to let it be called anything else.”

“How did you learn Inglesh?”

The main language of men, huh? “I learnt it in school. The elder showed how mankind was abundant and varied the most out of all the species on my home planet before he offered to teach Inglesh. Their varying left a lot of knowledge and theories, and it was an easy language

to learn. It was useful for anyone who was a thinker, a noble, an artist, a writer...”

“Why do you know it then? You're an archer.” Phi said.

“Yeah.” I mused briefly. My parents knew I was clever but not all of my classmates had reacted like that hearing I was learning Inglesh. Many saw men as fools for committing self-genocide. The elders didn't attempt to say they weren't; to every insult and compliment applied to man's species, they replied, “That was true for *some* of man.”

Anyway, back to the question. “I learnt Inglesh because I am intelligent and wanted access to any resource of knowledge. Man had much knowledge, "from mummification to intergalactic space travel".” I quoted from the elder's first lesson.

“Hold it. Are you saying men knew how to use intergalactic space travel?!” one of the scientists said with astonishment. Their curiosity is becoming stronger, but unlike fear it's not sickening so I don't mind.

“Yes, that's what the elder said. Well, implied.”

“How did you get here?” the leading white-suited man asked.

“I was transported using magic from the monks.”

As I say the word monks, a feeling of fear begins to build in the men around me. I carry on.

“They transported me here by reading out a long list of words. The floor was painted in a huge pattern, I had to stand in the centre, and they sat on the edge. They took turns to read out words, then they all hit the floor with their hands and when I woke up I was lying in someone's flowerbed.”

True magic was going to scare these people. Their way was science and they didn't like magic.

“Where did they teleport you from?”

“Teleport?” I asked in confusion.

“It's a word for instant transport, without any in-between movement.” Phi explained.

“Oh... Men can do that?” I said in awe.

“No, but they want to.” Phi grinned.

Oh, that was why they had a word for it.

“I don't know. The head monk, who was called Mangul, said he was sending me to a place too far for the eye to see.”

“Do you remember the layout of the stars? Even a vague answer will help.”

Phi looks at them with some disbelief. But I do remember. I was outside at night often, and there was rarely cloud.

I remember my home. And Mangul's offer – neither showing good nor evil in his tone. My mother weeping over her sick son. Before I realise it,

tears are beginning to form. I quickly wipe my eyes. They wanted an archer boy to be sent, not a crying baby boy.

I reply as firmly as possible. "I remember the stars. They helped me with directions."

"We'll need you to draw it, if you can. Do you paint?"

"No, but I'll try."

"How many moons were there in the sky?"

"Three. One rotated around another, and the other two circled my planet."

I said. I realise I can say anything and they'd lap it up as truth.

Still, Mangul didn't send someone who was supposed to be lying about his identity and origin. On the other hand, I recall myself having said: "The men will help me. They will attack you."

Mangul had replied with scorn. "Going on the word of a child, and without our magic? It would be foolish and impossible to try. Our magic shields this entire planet from their prying eyes. They will have no way to find us, no way to attack us, and more importantly, little reason to believe you."

They could find him by comparing the star layout. They believed me because I was alien to the planet and they had no choice. No way to attack, though, I don't know if that was true. Plus he said the magic shielded them. It might be possible he hid the entire planet with a spell long ago.

Still, it showed Mangul had underestimated them. Or maybe he was just trying to make me give up the idea of the men attacking him.

Maybe inside he was *scared* of them?

Anyway. It was irrelevant.

"So it's so far away you can't see it. That's not much to go on." the head scientist muttered. To my ears, any human's mutterings and whispers were as easy to hear as normal volume.

I wanted them to find Mangul. If he couldn't bring me back, maybe they could.

"Thedas." Phi says softly as we enter the white building, and walk down brightly lit corridors. So much man-made precision angles. It made me feel like I was suffocating.

"Yes?" I ask quietly.

"If you want anything, ask me." he says, tapping my bow very subtly.

"Mr. Hinks, we will need to take tests to ensure you have not been contaminated."

I frown, indignant. "Why test him? You should test me. It's your machines and your systematic design which is making me sick!"

The man goes silent and drops back meekly.

We go into a small white room, with a soft white carpet and interestingly concave walls. The walls are actually flat and vertical, but the white painting has been done in such a way that there are tiny circular caves all over the wall. Completely random, too. I might need to reconsider my assessment that humans love systematic design.

In the middle of the room is a turquoise desk with four lightly cushioned turquoise chairs, two on either side. The back of the desk has a large mirror.

There's something odd about it.

The head scientist, apologising for his choice of words, gestures to the seats opposite the mirror. I take a seat and Phi follows suit.

Only three scientists stay in the room.

“Mr. Hinks, have you felt any ill effects after making contact with him?”

I glare at him. For all his apologies, he can't put it nicely.

“Yes,” Phi stops both of us short, “I have a severe lack of tea since he arrived.”

He grins and chuckles until he realises the scientists aren't amused. “Mr.

Hinks, we are trying to do an extraterrestrial study here. Please give concise, accurate answers.”

“Thedas, do you need some tea?”

“I'd love some.” I say, realising how my stomach is still pretty upset about the trip in the van.

“Great. I'll co-operate fully if there's tea and biscuits.” Phi is quite fearless of their authority and uniform. Or rather, quite apathetic.

I grin, more at his confidence than anything else. “Me too.”

That spurs them into action. They start talking urgently to the radios under their helmets. They're incredibly interested in me, but you don't need empathy to know that. They'd probably give me the king's crown if it meant cooperation.

Phi continues. “Mr. Thedas here is easily put off by fear. His empathy makes it nauseating. I suggest you remove your full body suits and talk to him like you would any kid.”

The men seem to consider it. I grin at them, only to have them practically jump out of my view.

“The hell?” Phi says in astonishment as they vanish under the table.

“Thedas, stop smiling please.” they say from their hiding places.

That just makes me laugh. Phi can't help joining in. “What are you planks doing?! Smiling won't hurt you!”

“He emits a wave of electromagnetism when he smiles. We don't know if there are any ill effects to it.”

“It's pretty low-level, I'm assuming.” Phi says. “I was using a computer near him and nothing malfunctioned. Not me, either. I didn't malfunction and start having an epileptic fit.”

“What's that?” I ask him, calming down but still grinning.

“It's a weird disease called epeeepse. E-P-I-L-E-P-S-Y. People who have it sometimes have fits where their body starts jerking around, they wet themselves and start foaming at the mouth and crud like that.”

I laugh again. “I can see you!” I put my head under the table much to the scientists' alarm. They dive around to avoid my gaze, hilariously.

“You guys are nutcases.” Phi says with some seriousness. “Thedas.”

I look at him, feeling the magic parse into him and around him. He doesn't react to it at all, just nods at me. “Can you do anything else that's magical?”

“I can make these three people dissolve into air by looking at them.” I lied.

The three scientists lose no time exiting the room rapidly, amidst gasps and shrieks. I burst out laughing again.

Phi joins in. “You know what, you can have your bow back. These guys don't need it to be scared stiff.”

“Thanks.” I can't help feel a bit of relief when it is back in my possession. I realise what is slightly off about the mirror now. People are standing still beside it, shuffling a bit. They're probably watching me through it... somehow.

I'd never heard of glass which had a mirror on one side. Clever design.

“Lemme test if it's working.”

I stand up, stretching a bit. Phi looks up at me. “If I had an apple I would offer to let you shoot it off my head.”

“Why would you put an apple on your head?” I ask him, perturbed.

“So you have something to shoot.” Phi explains. *Duh?*

I pull an arrow from my quiver, turn and fire into the mirror. It shatters, cracks spreading across rapidly, forming shapes that the shockwave of the impact soon tosses down.

Behind the glass are at least twenty scientists of various ages and colours.

My arrow was aimed in the direct centre and I narrowly missed at least three of them. It embeds an inch into the concrete wall while the glass has only just finished cracking.

Archer elves, when they want to, see their arrow's devastation in slow motion. Warriors could slow down time to an extent, and archers were no exception. What were hastily fired shots to humans were well-prepared shots for an elf archer.

I can see the expressions of shock spread over everyone's face. Phi's expression was... a much milder reaction, but still shock.



The scientists are panicking.

Phi looked at me. "For someone who's empathic, you do enjoy scaring people."

I glance at him in surprise. "Well, they were already radiating fear before we came in here."

The scientists keep looking back at me. They're not cut out for me, not like Phi is. Phi would probably just be 'inconvenienced' by a volcano forming around him.

Phi calls out. "Guys, no more one-way window tricks, okay? He can tell you're there."

"And grow up!" I yell after the last one leaves.

Phi nudges me. "You're quite noisy now."

I grin at him. "That's elf nature. When they are the cause of fear, their confidence increases."

"Reacting to empathy I guess." Phi sighs and leans back, looking at the glass scattered across the floor. "How can you prove to them you're not harmful?"

"Get an elder to..." my voice trails off as Phi gives me a questioning look.

"We don't have elders that do stuff like that. Our elders start to lose ability to do things at around 60 years old."

"How long do humans live?" I ask in astonishment.

"Around 70 to 80 years."

"What?!" I step off the chair and away from him. "You all die before you're a hundred?!"

"Yes... how long do elves live?" Phi asks calmly.

"Hundreds of years. Sometimes over a thousand," I say quickly. "Where humans diseased? Did something plague their bodies and decay them permanently until their organs finally gave up?"

What is humans' rapidly-decaying disease and is it contagious?