

01 - 01 Prologue Whispers of Winter's Flight

The Dragon's Spine mountain range stretched from the top of the continent to the middle of it nearly vertically, looking like it was the spine of the very planet itself.

The large Leyline and its numerous branches ran beneath it, causing a mystical side effect that resulted in the high mountains being covered in snow year-round, despite their location along the equator of Aetheria.

Along its edges, the eternal winter transitioned to dense jungles, savannahs, deserts, and more, while the mountains retained their winter coat.

It was a harsh environment where only a few could live and only those born there could thrive.

At lower altitudes on the many mountains dense pine forests covered it and many dangerous animals lurked inside of them.

On a plain where the snow reached two meters in height a convoy of carriages gently floated above the snow and several armored figures rode around the convoy on steeds whose featherlight steps barely dented the soft snow.

The lithe quadrupeds were covered in white feathers, perfect for blending in with the snow beneath their pawed feet. The figures riding them were easily seen in their silvery armor, decorated with intricate engravings and emitting a soft glow. The runes running along the edges were both mystical and aesthetic in nature.

The beings wearing the armor were lithe just like their mounts and graceful in their every movement. Centuries of muscle memory make it so they didn't need to pay attention to appear elegant.

The only part of their bodies left uncovered was their elongated ears that extended five to ten centimeters from their skulls and occasionally twitched in alert, causing their head to snap in a direction, searching for any danger but so far only harmless snow rabbits hiding bellow in their burrows were found.

The guards were tense and jumpy but who could fault them considering their charge?

Many of them occasionally glanced towards a carriage traveling near the middle of the convoy, appearing just a bit more well-made and fortified than the rest but that was just a facade. That carriage was a moving fortress and anything less than an Ancient Drake or an Arch Mage would find themselves unable to do more than scratch at its wards.

The inside of that carriage managed to seem both luxurious and elegant without leaning too much on either. The silvery metal was nicely accented in places by a gleaming golden metal as they formed intricate carvings that covered the monstrous enchantments underneath them.

Inside sat a girl seemingly no older than 19 by human standards as she mournfully glanced at the landscape as it sped by her.

She was gorgeous even by elven standards, and her mournful look could tug at the heartstrings of even the harshest of men; alas, it didn't work on the only one that counted: her father.

He was a ruthless man, his heart as cold as the winters on the peaks of the mountains.

He deserves his title in more ways than one. She thought with a slight smirk that quickly disappeared from her perfectly sculpted face.

The Winter King.

That was his title and he was the fifth to ever hold it since the beginning of recorded history. He ruled over the entirety of the Dragon's Spine mountains along with the plains on the other side of them along with any who dwelled within.

She loathed him with all her heart. He was the sole reason she had been regarded with nothing but guilt and remorse since birth.

She glared at the passing landscape to engrave it in her mind, she knew this might be the last time she saw it in her life. The evergreens were pitifully small this far up the mountain but further down she has heard about them reaching hundreds of meters in height, even if this would be the only time she saw them she relished this chance to see those magical forests.

The creatively named Winter Castle was far up on the mountains hidden beyond the clouds and nested in a highland valley between two peaks. She rarely got the chance to travel around even inside the kingdom and she always wanted to see some of the landscapes she saw in her books.

Books were her best friends while growing up and the few her father would definitely disapprove of her having but her eccentric master still smuggled in were her favourites. Those were books on magic, Runes and Spellcraft which she always dreamed of learning.

There might have been a bit of a want for what's forbidden in her obsession with them but she still enjoyed every single Spell she managed to cast.

'Can't have you leak elvish magic to the humans' Her father's dispassionate words would play in her mind as she forsook most of her private time to study and practice.

Even now as her right hand held her chin up as she stared out at the enchanted window her left hand made somatic gestures and conjured up small balls of fire which twisted and turned between her fingers. She couldn't get far without further books in her studies but she mastered what she had and even went beyond it a bit by making up new spells with the Runes she learned.

The carriage felt constricting and she felt a pit settle in her stomach as she thought about why the carriage was reinforced in both ways and why the inside didn't have opening mechanisms. This was as much a prison as a fortress.

The guards readying themselves drew her attention and she lost control of the candle flame for a moment, causing her to yelp in pain as it singed her palms a bit. She flailed it around a bit then blew air on it to relieve the pain.

She pulled on her core and channeled a bit of her mana into the bracelet on her wrist, causing it to emit a gentle green glow as the burn receded on her other hand.

It was a handy thing to have as it had an enchantment on it which always returned her body to its 'prime' condition given enough mana, she was 'gifted' it by her father once he saw her get injured while she was 'playing' around in her room to keep her unblemished and without numerous burn and slash scars.

She of course got those while practicing magic. Back then she childishly thought if she injured herself she would become undesirable enough for the marriage to be cancelled but her dreams were quashed by this pretty little bracelet.

She only stopped struggling against her fate by the time she was 15 and instead decided to make the most of the 'gifts' her father gave her.

When she returned her attention to the guards outside, she saw five of them overwhelming a large bearlike creature with the head of an owl and feathers for some reason.

The Princess was instantly captivated by the beast as she recognized it to be an owlbear she read so much about. It was the villain in one of the storybooks she liked as a child and once she got a book on magical animals it was the first one she studied.

While she couldn't learn any magic, learning about the effects of magic on the world was permissible and so she absorbed knowledge about that with religious zeal. In the end, her father even hired an accomplished Arch Mage who was famous around the continent as an explorer and researcher to be her tutor.

She appreciated the stubborn old elf not only for their shared interests but also for his open distaste for her father, even though he couldn't do much against him.

The mighty owlbear that had felled so many heroes in the books was soon dyeing the snow with its blood after emitting a final mournful shriek that rustled the nearby leaves. The young elf teared up a bit at how the royal guard have massacred one of her favorite magical beasts but she shook her head.

It was dangerous nonetheless, they are just protecting me.

Despite her thought she watched sadly as the carcass of the animal got lost in the distance but not before she saw a few scavenging birds descend on its remains.

They didn't even take its core.

In all adventure books she's read people had to cut up the corpse of their felled foe to get to its core which solidified after its death. It was by far the most precious 'loot' of any monster as it was filled to the brim with both mana and essence, two of the most important things for anyone seeking either wealth or power.

She kicked her ankles up on the seat on the opposite side of the carriage in a manner her etiquette tutors would scream at her for but she couldn't care less at the moment.

What kind of princess am I to travel in a carriage this small anyway? She thought in annoyance even if she knew this must have cost more than a damned castle to make even this big and that kind of cost would make even the oh-so-mighty Winter King wince.

She glared at the metallic shapes covering the inner walls of the carriage like they stole her favorite toy and in a way they did just that. Enchantments used the same Runic system as Spells did so by studying these enchantments she could have maybe learned new Runes to add to her repertoire.

She knew such a thing was heavily discouraged and when she admitted to doing it to her teacher she got chewed out for nearly an hour before the old man grew tired. 'Using unknown Runes in your spells is no better than testing what sticking a spear through your heart does *Your Highness*' he'd said and while she gave him credit for being right she has also personally experienced the healing capability of her bracelet plus beggars can't be choosers.

The carriage didn't as much as jolt even when the open plain gave way to a forest, the terrain grew rugged but it wasn't beholden to such base things as gravity or terrain. It flew just like before a meter above the ground and travelled behind the carriages in front of it, all of them following the first one which tore down the offending nature in front of it to make way for the convoy.

Princess Kha'Lythria or Kali as her siblings called her was robbed of her distraction just like that as the only thing she could see through the windows was the needle-like leaves of the evergreens as they slapped against her carriage.

She sighed, then shifted her gaze away, picked up her small bag from the floor, and began to browse through its contents. She had packed a few books to read today if she got bored of the view so she once again got lost in the worlds of her books, escaping even if only for a few hours from the reality of her situation.

By the time she heard a knock on the door, she was reclining on her seat with it propped against the wall, and the low ceiling of her cramped carriage—dubbed a coffin by Kali—pressed close.

"Yeah?" she asked distractedly, the book held in front of her face still keeping most of her attention. She was just getting to the final part of the novel where the heroine would get her revenge on the evil Dragon for burning her city to the ground, not the best book she's read but better than whatever waited for her on the other side of the door.

"May I open the door, Your Highness?" came the voice of the leader of the Royal Guard Squad assigned to her for this trip. There were a bunch of normal guards too but the nine Royal Guards could single-handedly massacre the rest.

"Sure~" she answered without much thought.

She felt more than heard the enchantments locking the door deactivate one after the other, she couldn't help but roll her eyes at the number of them though. Her long ears twitched as she focused on the sensation traveling from them down to her spine, elves had this unique ability to sense Runes activating and being able to tell them apart with enough practice.

Kali relied on this sense for as long as she could remember to observe anything and everything but she was still far from the proficiency needed for being able to replicate the Runes just from sensing them.

Some sort of mana identification Rune plus the obvious lock Rune with what I'm guessing are a bunch of others that reinforce these two. She noted while slapping the book closed with a sigh and setting it down on the ground.

A few moments later the door lost its last lock and it revealed the cold, white world beyond. Frigid air rushed into the carriage but it failed to make the princess shiver instead, she smiled a bit at the familiar chill.

Winter Elves like her would be a joke if they couldn't bear a bit of a cold, they were one of the foremost ambush predators of this mountain range. They were known for sitting motionless in the frigid weather outside for days waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike at their prey and as one of the few Royalty of that race, those traits were even more pronounced in her.

The male elf that stepped inside wore an identical silvery armor to the rest of the Royal Guards with the only differentiating factor being the different insignia at the center of his breastplate, a Feathered Serpent if Kali was right which was the symbol of leadership and valor in the Winter Kingdom.

She felt his disapproving gaze bear into her as she still lay in a rather un-princessly manner but after a few seconds of staring, he just shook his head, making his silvery locks of hair flail around a bit before sighing.

"We are setting camp for the night Your Highness," he started, "if you wish you could step outside and stretch your legs for a few hours till dinner is ready."

At that offer, she suddenly snapped to her feet and stood before the guard looking at her with barely veiled amusement.

"I'd like that," she beamed up at the deceptively young-looking elf, "Thanks Mythral!"

He just nodded and stepped out of the doorway before offering her a hand in assistance and much to his supposed embarrassment she just leapt out of the carriage and into the knee-deep snow while he stoically retrieved his outstretched hand.

She quickly lost herself in looking around the small clearing they were camping at for the night, the carriages formed a circle around the edges with the few carriages that would provide housing for the staff manning the convoy and the guards.

She probably wouldn't be allowed outside of the circle so she first got to check all the plants and the few lone trees standing in the clearing, you never knew which unassuming plant turned out to be magical. An unassuming magical plant that had the ability to make water out of even in the most arid environments was the cause for the founding of a whole new field of magical research called Alchemy after all.

The said plant was capable of taking some select elements and breaking them down into their components and then reassembling those components into different substances, with this process it could make water out of thin air you could say.

To her slight disappointment, only a single plant turned out to have any magical properties. She managed to busy herself with prodding and poking the pine tree with an oddly metallic bark, she tried cutting a bit of the bark off with her knife but without activating the enchantment on it barely made a scratch on it.

By the time it was time for dinner, she was carving little shapes and forms into the tools she made from the bark. She had a few needles, a knife and a fork. She was still twirling the needles between her fingers when the servants got around to serving her food.

She was sitting with the rest in a tent set up outside for just this occasion, she refused to eat by herself back in her carriage as much as the tagalong maids wanted her to. She enjoyed the illusion of comradery she had with the rest, knowing it wouldn't last.

Can't go crying to father now, can you? she thought in derision as she watched one of her maids look at her eating on a common wooden table with her newly made utensils.

Despite the initial discomfort of the others the princess soon blended into the background with Mythral watching over her attentively without drawing too much attention to them. The cooks managed to put together something palatable even with the basic tool they had on hand while traveling, enchanted tools made for freezing and cooking were useful but the taste wasn't the same as when fresh ingredients were used.

Although she was initially excited to be let out of her stuffy carriage or the similarly stuffy room back at the castle, her joy was overshadowed by the awareness of what was to come. These few weeks would be the last she would spend as Kha'Lythria, Princess of the Winter Elves and after that, she would be one among the many trophy wives of the mighty sovereign ruling over the Kashgar Sultanate

The human empire which bordered most of the Winter Kingdom was always keen on expanding and even more so if the targeted lands were in Elvish hands. The brutes down there who raped and pillaged their way through the erstwhile elven kingdom of water to the south and occasionally raided into the mountains were the bane of any Winter Elf's existence.

Her father in his infinite wisdom decided to get into an alliance with the Sultanate which was founded by humans fleeing the expansion of the empire centuries ago and what better way to show his sincerity than to give his youngest daughter to the Sultan to do with as he wished.

Of course, those weren't his words, he was much more political and 'reasonable' in his explanations and *expectations*. So much so that Kali sometimes felt he might be right but then the fact that it was she who would be the sacrificial lamb always managed to bring her back to her senses. It was a known fact that humans and elves don't trust each other and the ruthless Winter King along with his ancestors was the main reason for this, he wouldn't hesitate to raze hundreds of human cities if that secured the continuation of his kingdom.

Kali sighed as she stood from her seat at the table and waved at the rest with a slightly forced smile, the other elves who just realized that the princess was there all along stiffened a bit and waved back, well the ones that even noticed her silent departure.

She exited the heated tent, Mythral falling in step behind her and headed towards her carriage for the night. She wasn't too tired yet, her Core enhanced her body enough so that she barely had to sleep eight hours a week. If you combined that with her base physique as a Royal Elf the results were quite spectacular, well if you view not sleeping for a week spectacular.

Kali sure did, it allowed for so much free time to read and practice at night when no one bothered her.

The snow crunched beneath her white leather boots as the crisp air made her breaths come out like small puffs of steam. She raised her gaze towards the clear night sky and took in the beautiful view, it was one of the few beautiful things she saw even from the mountaintop castle in the middle of a landscape composed of grey rock and snow.

She swept an annoyingly curly white tuft of hair behind her ear and decided it was enough for now.

Just as she was turning her head to say goodnight to her stone-faced guard she stiffened and a shiver travelled down her spine. It originated in her ears as they twitched in alarm at a sudden release of a Spell a bit outside of their camp.

"AMBUSH!!" her guard roared at the top of his lungs and pushed her into her carriage, "stay inside Princess."

Kali only came out of her shock as she tumbled off of the seating she's been thrown at. She stared back at the now locked door and felt the last enchantment activating on it.

She scrambled to her feet, steadying herself on the wall with a hand, shaking from both fright and the overwhelming dose of adrenaline coursing through her veins. She stared through the window and her jaw dropped in astonishment.

She expected some sort of beast, maybe a Snow Panther or even a Blood Owl, those could cast some rudimentary form of magic but what she did not expect was Elves attacking them.

She narrowed her gaze at one of the attackers, covered from head to toe in uniform black cloth with even his eyes hidden behind black-tinted glasses. She frowned as she realized they didn't have long ears, they could have covered them with the cloth too but as an elf herself, she knew how nauseous they would be if they'd done that.

An Elf's ears are extremely sensitive and had other functions than hearing and sensing spell activations. They were also the reason an elf always knew where they were in position to the ground, restricting the ears of an elf was similar to cutting the whiskers and tail of a cat.

Kali's eyes took in the form of the attacker, he stood as tall as the elven guard he was going toe to toe with but he was maybe a bit more ... er, robust?

Her eyes widened as she saw the attacker easily catch the elf's attack before counterattacking and what should have been a perfect parry sent the elf flying.

The guard seemed to realize something and changed his style of fighting after shouting something to the others who took on a similar style too. They didn't try to go toe-to-toe with their enemies anymore, they deflected blades, dodged attacks, and danced around their enemies. The previous somewhat brutish style transformed into a form of blade dancing the elves preferred when fighting opponents with strength superior to them.

Her blood ran cold as she realized the implications. Elves had a light skeleton and compact muscles that stayed near weightless, their bones hardly broke and could take much more of a beating than any other race but the downside was that elves were significantly lighter than most other races of their size.

This made it so that while they could do acrobatics others found unnatural other races could throw them around in head-on fights. Blade dancing, archery, and magic were their answer to that flaw and it did quite well as the steadily mounting dead *Humans* could attest to that.

"Why would they attack me though?" she whispered to herself as her gaze fixated on her Guard Captain. Mythrral was fighting off three attackers with two already at his feet, headless and an additional one was quickly bleeding out to the side from a large gash along his torso.

She bit her lips and tasted the iron tang of blood on her tongue, the bodies were mounting, and the attackers didn't care about focusing on the combatants, quite the opposite they slaughtered the cooks, maids, drivers and anyone that couldn't fight back while most of them flooded the stronger opponents to keep them from interfering with them.

She tried to push her mounting guilt down along with her myriad of questions and focused on her stoic guard captain as he weaved between attacks and easily played with the humans. Their blades sometimes managed to cut off small tufts of his long white hair but he obviously didn't care as his sabre separated his opponent's head from his shoulder.

Before the other two could retaliate he flicked his off-hand towards them and two streams of white energy leapt off of them, striking the two humans on the chest.

The two stiffened but fought on. Their fight was all but finished though, their movements soon became sluggish and their weapons seemed to increase in weight in their grasp as they had to put increasing effort into each swing. Mythral neither taunted nor ignored them, slipping behind the guard of one of them after a swing and jabbing his saber straight through his chest where Kali thought his heart must have been.

He went limp on his blade but the elf grabbed onto his clothing and swung him around at the other attacker, using the dead man as a shield against the other.

She saw him look around at the fight taking place all around the camp as he frowned. Kali also took it as her cue to survey the devastation, the tents were torn down and bloodied with many of the people she ate along with not too long ago lying dead on the ground.

She felt bile rise from her stomach as she saw one of her assigned maids with her head bashed in, and another victim who was one of the cooking crew had his entrails flowing out of a large gash on his stomach. She ran her gaze across all of the dead elves, feeling indignation rise inside of her as she glared hatefully at the *Humans*. Elven blood dyed the snow red, most of them weren't even fighters and now the number of guards falling also started to increase. The royal guards were overpowering the assailants but the regular guards pulled from the ranks of rangers and the regular military didn't hold up as well, the black-clothed humans were many and the elves only had to miss a single feint to have their lives cut short.

She snapped her gaze back at Mythral and his squad of Royal Guards as they gathered together and went on a massacre among the humans. She realized Mythral must have held back before considerably even if she didn't know why, maybe he was testing his opponents or trying to find out who they were.

Kali's eyesight and cognition were leaps and bounds beyond normal elves and even a normal elf made most humans look like children when it came to that. That was the only reason she could mostly follow the fight as the squad of the most elite warriors in the kingdom had dashed around at speeds that cracked the ground and swept up the snow into a slight mist.

The only reason she could track Mythral at all was that he threw around Spells like they were common pebbles or something, every spell killed multiple of his

opponents with many of them being encased in ice up to their heads.

He is capturing a few alive - Kali realized and now understood that he was still holding back as the more unfortunate humans were frozen from the inside out and then they shattered into a million tiny snowflakes.

Just as her nerves were settling a bit one of the Royal Guards was sent flying, impacting the ground close to Kali's carriage so she could see him trying to get up but soon collapsing back down. The reason was evident as she saw a jagged black dagger piercing straight through his enchanted backplate somewhere around his guts.

The guard shivered as he lay on his back, a few moments later he opened his mouth in a silent scream before his body slacked. He didn't try to get up anymore and Kali couldn't understand for a moment what had happened.

She stared at the lifeless body until the dagger was violently ripped out of the elf and flew through the air in a straight line, it landed in the grasp of a black-clad human similar to the rest with the only difference being aside from the sinister-looking dagger his softly glowing leather armor. It was black just like the rest and runes ran along it in configurations she didn't recognize, not that it said much just that it was different from the ones elves used on their elite armor.

The new arrival wasn't alone either as another three just like him were facing off against the remaining Royal guards. It seemed two of the others also managed to kill one guard each in an ambush somehow if a bit less violently than the one Kali saw.

The one with the dagger stepped forward and launched himself at Mythral, soon they were locked in a duel that Kali could barely follow. Carriages got sent flying, and sections of the forest became upturned but the devastation that followed in their trail traveled further and further away from the camp.

The remaining cloth-clad ambushers took this moment to reorganize themselves and with the two leathered ones clashing with the rest of the Royal Guards they all converged on them. Even if one or even five of them wouldn't pose a threat to a Royal Guard they had to focus on the two assailants who seemed to overpower them while the weaker ones came at them in waves.

By this time very few of her normal Elven Guards were still standing, so the elites could only rely on themselves.

The Elves put up a good fight, fighting against the overwhelming numbers stoically and without giving a single inch, Kali wanted to help them but she couldn't even if she wasn't locked inside her little coffin carriage. She shivered at the thought, what if the humans won? Would they manage to open her carriage and kill her too? Capture her? Or would they fail and let her starve to death inside?

She nervously watched the guards fight and little by little they gained the upper hand, even if the numbers weren't on their side the elves methodically cut down any of the weaker foes that dared enter the fray while mostly focusing on parrying and evading the two stronger ones.

If this continued humans would be the ones being overwhelmed by her guards in time but she still feared the worst now that she began to think about why they could have attacked the convoy.

The strength of these humans was not normal, Elves were superior to humans in every way besides the weight and had all the advantages they could need, and yet a single human was going toe to toe with a Royal Guard captain while two were giving a hard time to five of the normal guards.

Kali wasn't privy to the secrets of her kingdom but she knew that Mythral should be one of their strongest, she was sure her father had some secret force but aside from that Mythral was among the best the Kingdom had.

With humans being both weaker on average and of much worse potential than elves in terms of magic for them to send a task force this strong they must be from a very elite group.

Her thoughts drifted off to what she knew of the Corvus Empire these humans were most likely to hail from, they would be the happiest if they could somehow manage to make the Alliance fall through while also being an empire that spanned half a damned continent so they should be able to send a competent taskforce.

She tore her gaze off of the elves fighting for their life in the clearing and tried to look for where Mythral might be. She quickly found it due to a large explosion going

off in the distance which uprooted more than a dozen trees and launched them through the air.

The lack of light made it somewhat difficult to see to such distances even with her inherent night vision but even from here she could see what looked like a glowing white comet descending towards the site of the explosion. With the night sky as the backdrop even in the light snow, it was easy to see the thing cutting through the air itself as it sped towards the ground.

From a white speck that she might have mistaken for a too-bright star it soon transformed into a comet and then it kept growing in size as it closed in. When it was only a few hundred meters off the ground Kali stumbled backward from the window.

"That's not a fucking comet," she cursed under her breath, gaping at the sight.

The thing had a long serpentine body that glittered in the blueish moonlight, it swam through the air, propelling itself with nothing but its magic and pure force of will as it commanded it to take it where it wanted to be. It had a head resembling a wolf but covered in white scales from around the neck the scales were also covered in glittery white feathers that gave it its name.

The Feathered Serpent.

It was more than a hundred meters long but it moved faster than Kali could see. Elves wouldn't make it the symbol of some of their strongest fighters if it wasn't out of respect for the ancient beasts who were said to be the closest to the bloodline of the ancient Dragons.

They were supposed to symbolize valor and leadership but the intelligent beast cared not for their beliefs as its tail lashed out at where she guessed her Guard Captain and his opponent were. Her heart clenched in worry but she could only trust him to survive as much for her safety as for his own, this monster could probably chew through the flimsy enchantments of her carriage like it was nothing and it had more than enough reason to.

They were thaumavores like their Draconic ancestors, they ate mana itself which was probably the reason came here in the first place. It ate mana and as such the mana

crystal that powered her carriage or the Core of the two who it just attacked would be like an exquisite dish to it.

The ignorant humans probably didn't know they could rouse any thaumavore by throwing around so many spells and saturating the air with mana while doing so but she was somewhat confused why Mythral went along with it. He should have known better, this was much worse than being ambushed by humans.

"I need to get out of here," she whispered with quite a bit of panic.

The serpent would most likely decide to go for the easier meal first if Mythral and his opponent proved annoying and it wouldn't mind getting a bit of extra protein in the form of an elven princess.

The battle intensified as the serpent started flinging Spells all around itself in such a large quantity that Kali couldn't even comprehend how much mana that would take. To take her mind off of the mythical beast she turned her attention back to her guards who were by now almost equal in number to the humans.

Focus damnit! She ran her finger along the silvery metal that covered the enchantments on the door, first of all, she would need to remove those and then she could get to try to disable the locking enchantments even if she didn't have much confidence in actually accomplishing it.

She tried to remove them at first with her fingers but soon realized that wasn't going to work, next she tried some of the few spells she knew. Mage Hand to force it but the thing dissipated, the Kinetic Impact barely cracked the reinforced wood and only made small scratches at the metal and the rest of her spells were less than wise to use in such an enclosed space.

At last, she took out her last option, her enchanted knife, yeah knife and not a dagger. She barely managed to convince her father that she *needed* a utility knife with enough sharpness to cut through mythril and adamantite. She managed to stick it in between the metal and the wood behind it but forcing it off turned out to be a bit harder, the strength was there but even if she put her whole weight into it it didn't amount to much.

Leverage, she needed leverage or a way to use only her strength on it instead of her weight.

She put one of her feet against the wall next to her knife, grabbed it with both hands and then pushed with it as strongly as she could. She let out a yelp as she slumped onto the ground when the thin gave way but she quickly scrambled to her feet and started examining the runes.

She didn't recognize much and most of them were still uncovered but the locking rune was easy to find, being placed in a central position and looking like an almost closed C with a few extra lines here and there. There should be safety against tempering with the runes but she had to hope they haven't put those on this side of the door.

She fiddled with the runes for a while, removing the metal from the other places where she felt locking Runes under them, afterwards she started poking them and shooting bits of mana onto them from her fingers, checking for protections but much to her relief she didn't get zapped or something so it must be safe.

The fighting outside got pushed into the back of her mind as she focused single-mindedly on trying to deactivate the door, the first lock gave way after a few minutes and the rest soon started to follow along.

She was on the last Rune when it suddenly lost its shine and the door she was staring at got torn open. She blinked dumbly up at the battered Mythral, his hair was disheveled and blood was running down from his forehead, he was holding his side with a hand that glowed in soft light while the gash showing through his broken armor was closing much too slowly for Kali's comfort.

"Are you all-" she started but Mythral grabbed her by the waist and jumped away, holding her close to him and making her let out an undignified scream.

"What..." she started to ask once they landed but her question was answered as the feathered serpent crashed down onto the carriage and started ripping it apart less than a hundred meters from them. She swallowed the lump in her throat realizing she wouldn't have managed to get out of there in time without Mythral.

She stared blankly at the monster that was now using a spell similar to Mage Hand to disassemble the enchanted carriage, the only difference being that it used hundreds of clawed arms which floated around the carriage, working tirelessly to disassemble it rapidly.

She got violently snapped out of her daze as Mythral pushed her away before parrying a jagged black dagger to the side, its owner was still nowhere to be seen but her guard kept his gaze focused in a single direction.

"Run Princess," he said without looking back at her, still glaring in the direction the dagger flew back in while also keeping the snacking beast in his sight.

"What?" she asked dumbly, where should she run? They were in the middle of nowhere and there were still humans trying to kill them here.

"Run before the serpent is done eating, I'll keep that bastard here while the others manage the rest," he said gruffly, "we will find you once we are done here but RUN!!"

Kali was so shocked by him shouting at her she followed the order without actually thinking about it. She scrambled to her feet and ran without looking back, her mind focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other without falling.

Adrenalin was pumping through her veins and she felt her heart throbbing painfully in her throat, the sounds of the battle grew distant and she could only hear her frantic heartbeat with the now howling snowstorm as the backdrop.

Princess Kha'Lythria -



01 - 02 Escape and Shelter

Kali was in a trance. The world around her didn't exist, except for the obstacles in her path: avoiding a tree here, jumping over a bush there, and using a tree trunk as a foothold to vault over another bush covered in thorns. She didn't think; she just focused on the here and now without letting her mind wander.

Small twigs snapped beneath her feet as she treaded over the lightly snow-covered ground of the dense forest. The frigid air carried the taste of wood and earth, mingling with the distinctive scent of the pines that surrounded her. Her soles ached

from constant running, as did her knees and arms. Though she didn't keep count, she must have fallen hundreds of times by now.

A misstep here could result in smashing her side into a coarse tree trunk. A missed root hidden beneath the snow might lead to tasting the dirty snow as she scraped both her arms to cushion the fall.

She didn't let those stop her; she got up frantically and continued her dash. The constant stream of adrenaline overrode her sense of pain, but after this long, they were adding up, and she was getting exhausted.

Another protruding rock sent her stumbling, leading to a tumble across the ground. She collided with the trunk of a nearby tree a few meters away, her momentum abruptly halted. Struggling, she pushed herself off the ground using shaking arms, attempting to rise, but her legs betrayed her, giving way beneath her weight.

Collapsing back against the trunk, her head found support in its rough bark. Her breathing remained rapid and tinged with panic, but with each passing moment, the grip of exhaustion tightened around her. Her vision swam as she tried to calm her breathing and settle into a more comfortable position.

It was currently night again. She didn't know how long she'd been running, but she was sure the sun had risen and fallen once at least. The blue light of the larger moon shone through the gaps between the canopy and gave her more than enough light to see.

Kali saw the moon the elves called the 'gentle sister' peak through the gaps. Its smaller crimson twin, the 'wrathful brother,' didn't give off enough light to overpower his sister's, so the night was mostly dominated by the bluish tint on Aetheria.

The trees around here were absurdly large. She could barely reach a third around the trunk of the one serving as her headrest if she tried to hug it, but it wasn't even the largest around. The lowest branches were five or more meters off the ground, and she couldn't even guess how high up they reached into the air.

With her mind settling slightly and her breathing growing more and more controlled, she belatedly realized she still had her bracelet on her arm. She quickly channeled some mana into it to alleviate some of her pain.

The waves of pain radiating from her soles dampened and became a numb pain, and the scrapes slowly closed, leaving only spotless skin in their place. She didn't want to waste too much mana on it, so she left her soles and the soreness all around her body as they were. Those wouldn't be too much trouble, but the bloody scrapes would be annoying.

She sighed as she collected her shoulder-length hair behind her head into a ponytail and fixed it in place with a small piece of silk she always kept in her pockets. With her hair no longer sticking to her face from the sweat, she felt slightly better and checked herself for anything else she might have missed.

Her white leather boots and tight leather pants of the same color were covered in mud from her numerous falls, but she didn't notice any rips or tears in them. They were enchanted clothing, so she would be disappointed in the royal tailor if they got torn just from this much.

On top, she wore a long-sleeved black shirt that clung to her frame and was great at keeping her warm, along with a white jacket that went well with the pants and boots. She liked keeping her clothes white in the vain hope that she would one day need them to help her blend in with the snowy landscape.

She channeled a minuscule drop of mana into all of her clothes and sighed in relief as the mud and sweat were expelled from them and rolled down in drops on the outside. They even cleaned her body underneath them as much as she could have done with a towel and a bucket of water. The slight mana investment was worth the comfort, in her opinion.

She ran her fingers around her belt and pockets, listing all the stuff she still had on her that might come in handy if she wanted to continue living. She didn't know when Mythral and the rest would catch up to her, or if they were even still alive, but she had to survive at least until then.

She had her knife, which was as long as maybe her palm, and was mostly a utility knife, not a combat dagger. With its sharpness, it was by far the best weapon she had. She also had her clothes, which, while not offering much in terms of defense, would keep her covered and clean. Combined with her inherent traits as a Winter Elf, they would let her survive in these freezing temperatures.

She also had her bracelet for healing if she ever needed it, along with a few other enchanted trinkets that might come in handy, but nothing overly useful for surviving in the wild. She had a small pocket brush that could tame her curly white mane in seconds, a small Silverite ring that could create illusions, and a black ring that had a storage space inside it.

The last one was an unadorned black ring with a color so dark that it ate up the light around it, she could only see the outline of the ring and not its exact shape because of that. Currently, it held her collection of favorite books along with a few treats she convinced the castle chef to make for her journey.

She sighed as she thought back to the indulgent expression on the only portly elf she had ever seen in her short life. He was utterly loyal to her father, just like most Winter Elves in the castle, but he always indulged her requests, as long as they didn't contradict her father's. From this, she quickly learned that he didn't care too much about what she did, as long as she didn't get books or artifacts he had forbidden her from having, or escaped the castle.

Well, that concluded the short list of useful stuff she had. It was kind of depressing that most of these weren't hers because she wanted them, but because they helped her become a better bride.

She scoffed at that, the whispering voice at the back of her mind getting louder with her thoughts once again spiraling down that rabbit hole.

What if they died and won't come after me? What if the humans killed them and are the ones chasing me? What if they can't even find me after that snowstorm? What...

She was descending into an endless spiral of 'what ifs,' but the answer she came to at the end of them all was the same simple one.

I just have to survive alone without expecting anyone to come and find me. I need to be careful in case a monster or the humans come after me. And if in the end, nobody comes then... isn't that what I wanted all along?

She fought back a slight grin at her final thought, but she didn't quite manage it. It felt unreal, and she could barely think ever since Mythral tore the door of the

carriage off. She had been frightened, frantic, and then in a panicked trance. For the first time in what might have been days, she could reflect on the ambush with a relatively clear head.

She was sure now that the attackers were from the Corvus Empire. They were too strong not to be the elite force of a formidable nation, and they were the only ones who would benefit from her death. Kidnapping her could be problematic, as that might strengthen the alliance between the two kingdoms, with the sultan having his to-be wife and the Winter King his 'beloved' daughter kidnapped.

Unless proven otherwise, she would believe that to be true. She wasn't a political genius, and she didn't know too much about world politics, but growing up on tales of the villainous deeds of the empire against any non-humans, she didn't think her hypothesis was too much of a stretch.

As far as she knew, the most objective description of their philosophy was that humans were the superior race, and every other race descended from them. It was their mission to reunify the world under their banner. To reintegrate these 'demi-humans' into humanity, the only obvious option was crossbreeding. Demi-humans in the empire were ordered to 'mate' with a selected human and were forbidden from having children with another of their original race.

They viewed this as the ultimate symbol of their conquest over their defeated enemies, and it made Kali sick to her stomach. It wasn't too different from what she was forced to do, but those poor war trophies weren't even called wives or husbands—concubines at best and slaves at worst.

She didn't know how much of that was true, but it surely held some fraction of the truth. After all, it was the common consensus about the nation in her kingdom, according to her history tutor. *Where there's smoke there's fire.*

Not that knowing any of that was going to help her if a frost wolf decided she would make a fine snack. Dense forests of giant pine trees should be the preferred places for their dens. Biology at least was coming in handy, especially her extensive knowledge about how to kill any and all monsters found around the continent from her multiple readings of the Adventurer's Guild's 'Monster Manual.' That was one of her favorite books after the ones about spell crafting and Runes.

She was breathing deeply now, her chest rising and falling with each heavy intake of breath. She let her body grow colder, taking in the temperature of her surroundings to blend in with it. Even though she had barely used this ability of hers, it was instinctual to her, as much as breathing was. Her body was no longer giving off heat and blended in with the frigid surroundings. If anything looked around with thermal vision here, it wouldn't easily spot her.

She felt the instinct switch for the semi-hibernation appear in her mind. It would allow her to steady her core while minimizing her nutrient consumption. It would dampen her mind so much that she'd only be able to focus on any prey entering her vicinity. She pushed it to the back of her mind and, on wobbly legs, she rose to her feet.

"Why aren't there spells for replenishing stamina?" she whined in her head as she gathered her remaining energy to find shelter for now. She needed some sleep before continuing. She could barely stand by now, and her stomach was growling at her.

The snacks in her spatial ring would do for today, but she wouldn't last long if she couldn't find food. Tomorrow she would have to hunt or forage for something.

When she managed to stand, she no longer looked like she'd just been in a fight with a mud monster. She looked like a prim and proper elf if you didn't count her drooping eyes and ears from exhaustion. At least her clothes were clean, and her hair wasn't sticking to her face and getting into her mouth anymore.

She couldn't force herself to sprint like before, so she opted for a considerate walk that transitioned into a jog once she regained some of her stamina.

She kept her eyes peeled and her ears alert in case anything tried to sneak up on her. She only saw endless tree trunks and the snow-covered ground, with the occasional bush that managed to survive down here with most light being stolen by the large evergreens. Her ears only heard the crunching of the snow and her own shallow breathing, along with a few bird calls in the distance or small skittering insects or rodents hiding under the snow.

She knew the mountain range wasn't the most ecologically diverse or populous place, but it was still a bit surprising how calm and silent everything was. Back in the

castle, she could always hear some servant scurrying around doing chores, or the guards marching around.

The silence unnerved her a bit. It felt slightly unnatural, but her instincts were honed while locked inside a castle, so she couldn't put too much trust in them.

She jogged for another few hours, pushing herself more than she'd ever had physically, but she finally found a good hiding place. She could hear the gentle murmur of flowing water in the distance, so she wouldn't have to melt snow for a drink either. That could wait until tomorrow, though. Along with the howling of the wind as it snapped the tops of the large evergreens around her, she could barely make out the more animalistic howls far off in the distance.

Her small sanctum for the night was the hollow trunk of an especially large pine, which reached five meters in diameter. She started to stumble inside when she realized that whatever animals those were could probably follow her scent. Elves usually had a hard-to-detect scent, as they smelled like nature. According to her maids, she smelled like freshly fallen snow with a hint of honey, *like Snowdrops blooming in the winter, they said.*

She channeled a substantial amount of mana into her clothes, hoping their capability in cleaning would also work on her scent. While still channeling, she went inside the hollow tree. She had to squeeze herself inside, as it was a narrow, if tall, opening, but she managed it after a bit, cursing a bit at being 'blessed by nature' in some aspects that were less than useful in the situation.

When she got inside, she promptly collapsed against the opposite wall of the small space and fumbled for the silverite illusion ring in her pocket. She had to feed it almost a third of her mana, but the thing did its job. It had two different illusion spells imbued into it. One was the Minor Illusion spell, which, while a bit limited in its application, was perfect for what she needed.

Like a one-way mirror, the illusion snapped into being and covered the opening on the other side. She could still peek through it from this side, but nothing but bark showed from the outside. Well, she dearly hoped so, at least.

Kali sighed and tried to calm herself down a bit. She was heaving again, her stomach was hollow and increasingly angry at her, she was cold, her lungs hurt, she was

scared and tired. She fought against the tears of frustration, but the young princess quickly lost that battle. Salty tears dripped down her cheeks and froze on her skin before they reached her chin.

"This is what you wanted, Kali. Don't be such a baby now," she tried to admonish herself to no avail as the muffled sobs continued for a bit. She fished out some small treats from her ring to give herself a bit of comfort before she realized that those too could lure the beasts here with their scent.

She hugged her knees close to her body and stared out through the illusion, finding comfort in the beautiful scene of the morning sunshine breaking through the canopy. *Was I ever this alone in my life before now?*

Life was hard.

That wasn't a new thought to Kali, but before then, she never had to fear for her life or find food. Life was easy if depressing before, but now it was hard with a slight undercurrent of hope. She latched onto the hope of freedom, adventure, and magic with all her might.

Even if her guards caught up with her sometime in the future, she would make the best of her time out here. She was free for the first time in her life, with no guard peeking over her shoulder, no disapproving maid to annoy her endlessly, and no hateful father whose silvery gaze made her feel colder than this frigid weather.

She tore her eyes off the sight outside and searched through her spatial ring once more.

"I know I put that here somewhere, but where the hell is it?"

She pushed things aside in their compartments, and in the fifth one, she finally found what she wanted: a small silky pillow covered in beautiful embroidery depicting a snowdrop. She smiled at it. She had taken it along so she could sleep on the road if she wanted, but now it would be her only bedding aside from the somewhat rotting bark covering the ground.

She cast a small spell her old teacher taught her in secret after she repeatedly bothered him to cast it in her room. This was a bit more complicated than the others,

so she couldn't cast it offhandedly.

She closed her eyes while holding her arm out with her palm facing the ground. Runes materialized in her mind with crystal clear clarity as she forced them into being. Mana Gathering, Locate (Insect), Separate, Needle, Rapid Launch. She looked through all of the Runes, fearing a backlash that might blow up her brain. Once she found nothing amiss, she infused all the Runes with as much mana as she could without giving a smidge more than the Runes could take.

The Runes brightened in her mind, now shining with a soft bluish-white glow before she released her hold on them. They collapsed upon themselves into a clump of mana that still followed her intent zealously as it raced through her body and into her palm. She pushed it outside of her body and promptly lost her hold on it once it was further than a few millimeters from her skin.

The spell activated right after, and hundreds of small needles of mana shot out one after the other from the small shining orb. They flew straight at the disgusting little crawling bugs. She sighed in relief, even though she liked most animals, she drew the line firmly when it came to insects.

"They are fine if they stay away from me. After all, they're important for the ecosystem. But screw them if they come closer."

She shuddered at the thought, remembering when she woke up to a large spider crawling over her bed frame just above her head. She didn't know she could make a sound like that before the scare, and her bedrest might have gotten incinerated alongside the arachnid invader.

Once the murderous little orb fizzled out of existence with a green puff signifying having eliminated all located targets in the vicinity, she sighed in relief and laid down on the surprisingly soft ground. Her clothes weren't the best for sleeping, but darkness soon claimed the runaway Princess anyway.



01 - 03 The Master and Chanting

Zadkiel

Arch-Mage Zadkiel was taking his time packing his things while the castle around him devolved into utter chaos and activity. With his dear pupil's departure, he was readying for travel, his time here was up and he was ready to plunge back into his research, just a few months ago a new dungeon sprung up in the wilds of Vitalis far to the East so he had a slight smirk on his elderly face as he placed each of his things into their selected spatial containers.

He liked rings the best, he had two long leather straps with tens of rings hanging off of each and both were secured to his chest so he could quickly reach anything he could want.

Zadkiel was a master of divination and illusion, mostly because those helped in her quest to discover the secrets of nature and its connection to magic. He was an accomplished botanist, biologist, ecologist and geologist among many other things most of which didn't even have an official name.

For a human that would be quite the accomplishment but Zadkiel has not long ago stepped into his third millennia of life which was old even for elves though he scoffed at that notion.

The morons could live for four millennia without even activating their cores if they stayed away from danger.

And while he thought that he knew they didn't have much of a choice with those pesky humans raiding their land nonstop. He had complicated feeling about them, on one hand, the Corvus Empire was unquestionably the foremost nation in terms of scientific and magical advancement and on the other they were utter arseholes.

He only sneaked into their precious little academy's 'forbidden' library and they sent FIVE arch-mages to hunt him down.

Not that they achieved much.

He tricked four into killing the fifth by using one of his most devious illusion spells on them. That's what they get for standing between him and knowledge. Who told them to forbid non-humans from attending their Academy? Stuck-up primates.

Only due to his mastery of divination and expert manipulation of his mana sense did he manage to find out what in the ancestor's name was going on in the castle.

Mythral arrived back at the castle not long ago on death's door while reporting that a group of humans ambushed the Princess's convoy and roused a Feathered Serpent and now the young royal was missing while most of her escort lay dead.

Zadkiel frowned but his thoughts were spinning vigorously, despite his elderly visage his mind was sharper than any of the other elves in the castle aside from the king so he quickly came up with a plan well it wasn't a new plan he liked to plan for any unforeseen possibility like this.

He gently tapped into his mana sense and pushed out a few well-hidden spells, checking for any attention on himself. The King was good with his ever-present sense and divination but Zadkiel was a master, he managed to put up a shield that would make it seem like he was leisurely packing away without alerting the sovereign.

His hand traced the rings on his chest before stopping on one of the last, he plucked it off of its place and held it between his fingers while observing it closely. It was a thin ring of pure Silverite with a feminine design, it had two of his own illusion spells imbued into it but that wasn't why he had it.

He smirked and got to casting. This little piece of jewelry was an exact replica of the twin ring he had given to the Princess only a few days prior. This made it an ideal medium for divination. Hundreds of intricate Runes snapped into place in his mind, two-dimensional, three and even fourth-dimensional Runes revealed themselves, they were connected by veins of mana in an intricate pattern that was a must for any spell of this level.

The Spell Circle as it was crudely called despite being more like an orb was crystal clear in his mind and spotless. He concentrated and through one of the Runes serving for just this purpose, he flooded it with his potent mana.

Once the spell was charged he Activated it with a flex of his will and the complex spell structure collapsed upon itself, a small tendril of mana extended into his mind and started interfacing with it while the Spell Matrix disappeared so quickly that even his essence enhanced senses couldn't catch it.

He felt more than saw with his mind's eyes as it reached its target in a fraction of a second.

His sight cleared as he was now levitating in the air as an imperceptible orb of mana looked down on the peacefully sleeping form of the Princess with the Silverite ring that guided him here still on her finger.

He smiled mentally as he guided the orb towards the ring, it connected and he pushed himself deeply into it. Yeah, he made that thing so it would come in handy for the willful girl if she ever managed to slip her guards but its main function was far more important for her to succeed.

After all, if he could find her this quickly other Arch-Mages wouldn't be far behind. He had to be quick.

He fed the mana making up the orb into an enchantment hidden deep within the ring, this enchantment would set up a nearly imperceptible ward against any divination and keep the girl away from prying eyes. Even he wouldn't be able to find her again once this was in place.

The mana bled into the enchantment, slowly powering up the powerful effect and soon enough he was back in his body, his divination Spell disrupted by the ward. He carefully took down the shields he put up before, naturally transitioning them to show reality underneath to not appear suspicious.

Be free young Kha'Lythria, you deserve far more than your preordained future.

He held no doubt about the girl failing or dying in her quest, the ancestors would guide her. Such a talented girl was never destined to waste away in the desert.

He would help more but he would surely be observed rather closely for a while, he and the king had never seen eye to eye. It was predictable with one of them being a researcher and the other a ruthless ruler. It would be so much easier for Zadkiel if the ceaseless wars would stop for even a few years.

With his part in her tale done for now, Zadkiel finished packing and made his exit from the Castle with the uproar soon being put behind him. He could barely wait for finding out what that newborn dungeon had in store for him.

The sun was still shining brightly through the canopy when Kali woke up, her back was aching and she was chilled down to her bones. She imagined a human would have died from hypothermia a few times by now in her position but she was still fine aside from being uncomfortable.

She frowned down at the illusion ring on her left ring finger, it felt somehow weird and different but no matter how much she stared at it or even sniffed she couldn't figure out what it was.

When she infused the ring with her mana, she felt slight resistance and frowned. With a gasp, she realized what was happening as she managed to push a tiny amount inside. Her mana sense extended beyond her body, and for a moment, the ring felt like a part of her.

The dichotomy of the magical density between the two was noticeable even to a person blind to mana so Kali also realized it even though she didn't know why it was so, just before she went to sleep it didn't have any mana of its own only the small amount she gave it to sustain the Minor Illusion while she slept.

As she was breaking her head over it she felt like her erstwhile tutor was smirking down at her but the image went away as quickly as it came. Could it have been Zadkiel who filled it up? But why?

It doesn't matter, she shook her head, "Thanks anyway master Zedkiel."

Although her whisper was left unanswered, she couldn't help but smile a little. He was one of the few people who truly supported her, unlike her own family. Despite his eccentricities and obsessive tendencies towards research, she appreciated him for both his honesty and helpfulness.

She knew if he could he'd have helped her escape himself but the old man was under heavy regulations and constant observation while remaining in the Castle.

There were never any excuses with him, the old elf always said what was on his mind and quite a few times that got him into trouble but he always got out of it somehow. He talked about war, politics and how her father would put him on a stake if he went any deeper into certain topics unlike her previous tutors who thought that she 'was too young to learn about those topics'.

He was the main reason she wasn't entirely lost now that she was alone, she could think ahead and make plans based on his teachings. Well, she would do that later

anyways. Her growling stomach agreed with her with passion, making its dissatisfaction with a few cookies she ate yesterday before sleeping clear.

Kali touched her obsidian-colored ring against her pillow and it slipped into the spatial storage without a sound, it was always interesting to watch that. Kali couldn't wrap her head around how spatial magic worked or where her stuff has gone or how it made her burn with curiosity but she couldn't get answers to any of those in a forest.

She got to her feet, she felt as fresh as she could be despite the deplorable sleeping conditions. She was still a Winter Elf at the end of the day and winter couldn't kill Winter Elves.

With a mental command, the illusion covering the opening shimmered out of existence and she quickly squished herself through the opening. The sight outside was the same as before but she didn't let that fool her, her ears were twitching at any sound and she snapped her shimmering blue gaze towards the source of each.

A twig snapped, 200 meters away and twenty degrees to the left and on the ground. A brief moment later her head turned towards it and her vision zeroed in on the small ratlike creature as it scurried along on the ground, running into a hole in the ground soon after.

Within a few minutes, she would only turn her head if she could not identify the origin of the noise or if it seemed hazardous. For example, if it was caused by a heavier animal or the snapping of larger branches.

Her sight wasn't as much of an asset as it could be with the numerous thick trunks getting in the way of her sight in every direction. Her vision went on unobstructed for fifty meters at most but her hearing was clear for hundreds of meters and she could here even beyond that but not with the supernatural precision that made her species fearsome hunters.

Her footfalls became more and more silent with each repeated step, she paid close attention to every movement she made and made sure not to move unnecessarily. She has always been a quick learner but she hasn't put much effort into physical exercises so all she had now was her base enhanced by the essence her core produced.

Essence was an interesting thing, every moment she had mana in her Core a small percentage of that would be painstakingly slowly transformed into essence which would infuse into her being, permanently enhancing all aspects of what was Kha'Lythria.

This included her Core which could house just a little bit more mana with each drop of essence that infused it, creating a sort of positive feedback loop that went on and on until she reached the peak of human power. Well in her dreams maybe, but in reality, her Core couldn't absorb ambient mana by itself so it relied entirely on her to do so and for that, she needed Mana Gathering Spells or as they called it in some other places 'Cultivation Techniques'.

Kali only had access to the most basic form of that which was the single Rune called Mana Gathering and it was a pain in the ass to replenish her Core as it was now, she couldn't imagine how annoying it'd get in the future. Her father forcibly imbued her Core with loads of essence to increase her life expectancy but didn't give her any technique to cultivate it further by herself.

If she ever managed to get to a city the first thing she did would be to buy a cultivation technique even if it was shitty, she would have to hold that dumb Rune in place for half a day just to recover from casting a few spells. It wasn't too hard and unlike with spells she didn't need to fill it up with mana, just holding it in place was enough, after all this thing did was pull whatever ambient mana touched her body into her Core.

She'd also have to keep her mana as close to the maximum as she could as the percentile was on her *current* amount of mana and not on the *maximum* so that added another level of pain-in-the-ass into the already shitty mix. Not that she could do that for the last five years of her life with guards, maids and her father with his annoying mana sense breathing down on her neck every moment of her life.

She only got the rune that helped her replenish her mana on her 15th birthday from her eccentric master so before then she just had to watch her stores slowly dwindle. Afterward, she still had to be careful when she used the Rune as her assigned guards had potent enough mana sense to measure how much mana she had left so she had to regenerate a bit every night before spending it soon after to practice.

Setting her frustrations aside she focused back on her senses, her footsteps landed on the soft snow without a sound and her breathing was calm and measured. She was ready.

Her steps picked up speed as she gained confidence, from a crawl she went into a slow walk then a jog and finally a run while relying on her hearing and sight to provide her with direction and on her limited mana sense to alert her if her steps would land on something noisy that she managed to miss with the other two senses.

Now that she was focusing more and had a clearer head the forest was teeming with life, small rodents were hiding in their burrows from the biting cold while birds perched on the countless branches above her while cat-sized predators stalked both from within the canopy.

Those were just the ones that stood out the most but to her chagrin, she could hear hundreds if not thousands of chittering chitinous legs moving along *everywhere*. It was true that this was the insect's world and they were just living in it as Zadkiel tended to say. The arch-mage botanist was for some gods forsaken reason fascinated with the little monsters.

She realized that most activities happened in the interconnected canopy of the giant evergreens and down here she wasn't going to have too much success. If anything lived down here it would be much larger than the ones above and she liked her chances much more with the cat-sized beasts than a ten-meter-tall wolf.

She crouched down, contracting the muscles in her legs like a spring before releasing them. She sailed through the air, easily launching herself up towards the 7-meter-high branches. She passed the first few branches moments later before she reached the apex of her jump, she grabbed at the wet branch above her in a bit of a panic and managed to latch onto it.

Now, hanging there nearly 9 meters up from the ground she reconsidered her impulsive decision to not climb the trunk and jump instead for the speed.

It was worth it though and it was faster. Sailing through the air was fun and the bit of thrill at the threat of falling made her feel alive.

She was smiling lightly up until her fingers started to lose their hold on the wet bark. She looked between any close by branch frantically, looking for one that could serve as a landing point.

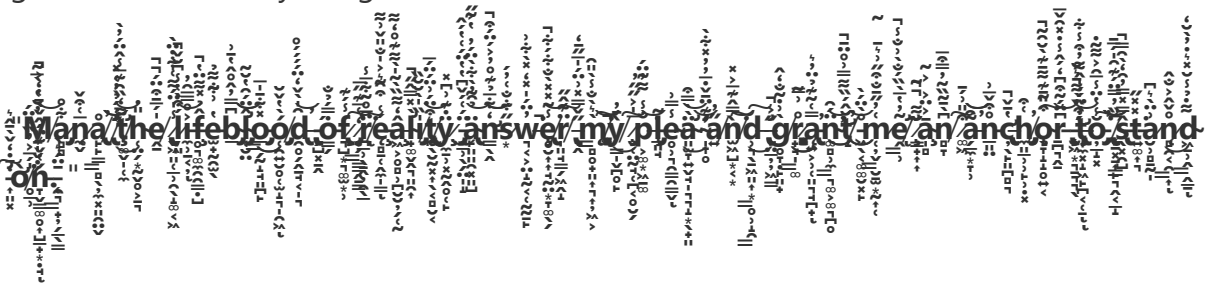
None was under her specifically but a few were in reachable distance, she'd be able to reach them with her toes if she swung a bit back and forth but that was a less-than-ideal thing to do while she was rapidly losing her hold.

Oh, I can use magic now !!

The realization stuck her like a thunderbolt before she couldn't use magic for her problems, it was just a fun thing to do while she was alone at night. She also had just the right spell for this.

Concentrating on runes would be hard and her fingers weren't free to use somatic gestures so the only thing that remained was her least favorite one.

Mana, the lifeblood of reality, answer my plea and grant me an anchor to stand on.



Alien words left her lips in a singsong tone and with each note the Runes of the Arcane Foothold spell crystalized in her mind without any effort on her part. She cringed at the words she spoke but couldn't help but feel thankful to Zadkiel for insisting on her learning every way of casting she could manage by herself.

Both somatic gestures and chanting were clutches for a mage to cast spells beyond their natural capabilities but they came in handy in situations like this. She liked somatic gestures as they were silent and looked cool but she found chanting to be embarrassing.

She released her failing hold on the branch and landed on a semi-translucent shield of mana that started angrily flickering once her whole weight was on it but it still lifted her up a bit after her boots touched it, giving her all the momentum she needed to step onto the nearby branch. She glanced back at the foothold but she only saw glimmering blue dust dissipate into the air by then.

Oh well.

She started grinning a bit as her ears twitched at the numerous prey now being in reachable distance.

She just hoped she wouldn't have to resort to eating rats here, that would be too much of an affront to her sensibilities.

A runaway princess was still a princess.

Princess Kha'Lythria -



01 - 04 Hunt and a Goal

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 100]

[Mana Capacity: 18](= 10 + 5 + 3)

[Essence Requirement: 2.7]

Kali could honestly say that she was enjoying herself quite a bit even though she hadn't managed to catch anything since she started sneaking through the endless maze of branches a few hours ago.

She's observed one of those mangy brown feline predators as it stalked its prey which turned out to be a snow-white owl that was taking a nap inside a small crevice on a trunk.

The feline blended in perfectly with the dark bark of the trees and its claws gave it a steady hold on them even if they were wet and slippery but aside from that she couldn't see any other capability that stood out. The animal didn't look capable of magic but many magical animals didn't, even plants could use magic sometimes but those were passive uses of it most of the time.

There was supposed to be a flower that threw lightning at anything with a pulse that dared come close to it but thankfully those didn't live on this mountain range.

After she watched the cat get its daily intake of meat she observed a few other animals while telling herself that it was so she could prepare herself.

Yes, I'm gathering information about my enemy, most certainly.

Owls, cats, squirrels, rats, hares and she even spied a few large predators stalking below her on the ground. She would have scoffed at them as the ground-walking peasants they were, were they not also either three times her size or on the 'Don't fight it and Run!' list of the Monster Manual's tips for new adventurers.

Though she didn't need it to tell her when a lynx which was *shining* a bright golden color strode through the sparse undergrowth. Its fur was also golden-colored, making it utterly incapable of hiding or camouflaging its presence.

Even her shut-in self knew that brightly colored animals were dangerous and ones that glowed had so much mana that they wasted it on visual effect instinctually. The lynx was daring everybody in the forest to attack it and probably it has done so for a long time and yet it was still here, strutting like a pompous nobleman.

Kali entered her semi-hibernation instead of attempting to sneak away, she wasn't that confident in her stealth capabilities and if she could hear her own steps if just barely this glowing cat might also be able to. She wasn't going to risk it.

When she came out of her muddled state the feline was gone and she still had all of her insides well inside so she counted that as a win.

That state calmed her core and held it in a sort of stasis that made detecting her through it impossible, it would be imperceptible in that state and according to Zadkiel it did more than that but he just smiled mysteriously when she asked what. Annoying old man.

It seemed to work and combined with the illusion it was a nice stealth toolkit she had already. She might just survive this forest.

After that encounter, she was much more careful and attentive to her hearing which was her best tool in this situation.

At this moment she has been stalking her chosen prey for the last half an hour and she was getting bored of the wait so it'd soon be the time she first fought.

She hoped the knee-height flightless bird wouldn't be too much of a fight though, she didn't want to alert any of the dangerous predators so she would have to make it quick and silent. The bird looked like one of those large flightless birds that lived in savannahs where they could run around but this one somehow evolved its legs for tree-climbing and managed to shrink down to the size of a turkey.

It was peeking its dumb-looking head into the small hole probably leading to the lair of some small bird or a squirrel so it had no chance of dodging her attack.

She couldn't use her knife, which was a bit too small for killing the animal fast enough, it probably wouldn't even reach its head if she wasn't perfect in the stab so she opted for magic instead. Totally not because she could finally make use of it after only sitting on it for fifteen years since she learned her first spell.

Now she only had to decide which one she would use, now that should be easy right? She didn't know too many spells after all so it should be quick and easy right?

Water Blade could work but that's annoying to cast as it collects the water from the surroundings, Kinetic Strike could work if I manage to snap its neck with it but if I don't then I'm just blasting it away, fire spells are too loud and I still want to have meat to eat afterward not charred bones, Air isn't too good at attacking either and that wraps up all my current attack spells.

It was said that every mage starts as an Elementalist and Kali was no different, using the base Runes of the five elements as the foundations of the Spells made casting them much easier and put less of a burden on the caster. No need to bother with using versatile Runes to transform mana into a different energy, just give a bunch to the Fire Rune and you had a bunch of fire now to do with as you wished.

In the end, she decided on using Water Blade, even if it was a bit slow to cast it was a great fit for her situation. She held out her palm, facing directly toward the dumb bird with its head still inside the tree.

Water Gathering, Condense, Blade, Hold, Launch, Overcharge.

The Runes were crafted well on her first try but she had to fix them up a bit to make sure she would have any problems, Zadkiel had given her more backlash horror stories than she ever wanted to her so she made sure that her Runes were always pristine and perfect.

Once she was sure they were good she filled them up with mana in a gentle trickle, giving too much to a Rune other than the Overcharge was asking for a backlash.

Once she was done and felt each rune vibrate with power in her mind she ran a last check before flexing her will and Activating them, the runes condensed into a familiar Spell Matrix that was still at her beck and call. She guided it towards her palm and

checked her aim, it was a bit off to the left so she fixed that and with a deep breath, she pushed the matrix through her skin just in the centre of her palm.

The slightly glowing blue orb rapidly started draining water from its surroundings, pulling on the snow and drying up the nearby branches in a two-meter radius. Next, it condensed into a firm orb that could go for a rock based on its toughness after which it lengthened into a crescent shape with a sharp edge. Most of the remaining mana bled into it and reinforced it, making sure it held its shape until it served its purpose finally the sequence got to the last two Runes.

The Launch Rune was responsible for giving the blade its momentum and the Overcharge took all the mana freely given to it to safely enhance said momentum, like this she could shoot the blade much faster than the original spell. This was one of her personal additions and she was quite proud of it even if she knew it was an obvious addition to the spell.

The blue crescent shot off without a sound and the only thing she heard was it slicing cleanly through the neck of the bird before impacting a trunk some twenty meters behind it with a splash. Seems like the Hold rune could only hold it together for maybe a dozen meters after it cut through her prey.

Very much satisfied with the result Kali jumped over to the other branch where she caught her meal before it could stumble off to the ground.

With it held firmly in her arm she opted for leaving the place quickly in case some animal is attracted to either the sound or the blood. The blood could be a pain, she didn't know any wards and ones that could keep scents in or out should be higher levels even among those.

She'd just have to be quick about it and hope for the best.

The blood dripping from the dead bird did make her a bit uncomfortable but after the fight she saw a few days ago it was only that, discomfort. She wasn't close with any of her guards so she wasn't too shaken about losing any of them but the knowledge that all those people died for her or because she was there left behind a sour feeling.

The only one whose name she even knew was Mythral and even he was only the replacement for her original guard. Kali smiled a bit at the memory of her gullible companion, that was probably why he wasn't the one accompanying her plus they'd gotten rather close over the years.

She didn't know where that guy ended up by now but she hoped he was well.

She made her way back to her previous shelter with little trouble, unlike her sister who could somehow get lost in the Winter Castle after living there for more than a century, she wasn't directionally challenged. The endless lookalike trees would probably be a nightmare for her sister but she memorized the distinct sounds some trees made and a few notable landmarks on her way so she managed just fine.

Her thoughts drifted from there and arrived at the source of all of her troubles, her father and the remains of her family.

He was uncompromising and ruthless even with his own family, her mother's exile and her siblings' pleas for reconsidering her 'marriage' falling on deaf ears were evidence of it. Elves were supposed to be a family-centric people, relying on their tight-knit communities to survive this savage world but you couldn't guess that while looking at her family.

An absent mother, a cold and distant father, a constantly annoyed and irritable elder brother and a loving but demure elder sister. At times the Princess found herself hating all of them, her brother Rhy'Lanor always looked like he ate something sour when he looked at her and her sister Ly'Riel who while sook to help her wherever she could, never disobeyed their father.

She knew they both loved her but she couldn't help herself, they weren't the ones on their way to a *damned desert* to get married to a human ruler over there. She sometimes wished she stayed five years old forever when her mother was still there and her father still seemed like a father rather than the cruel king he acted like since then.

She was barely 30 years old, Gods damn it all.

Elves her age wouldn't count as adults for another 20 years and yet she would have arrived in barely a month at the doorstep of her fiance whom she never even laid

eyes on before.

No...., just no...

When she got back she decided to set up the illusion of the small opening after making it a bit larger with her knife, despite it being small the thing was so sharp that it cut through the bark like it was butter so she managed to enlarge it with little trouble. Now she could slip through the illusion quickly while it would still keep out beasts larger than her.

She would have to cook the bird outside so the smoke doesn't gather inside her shelter.

She followed the descriptions about how to dress slaughtered birds from the 'Beginner Adventurer's Guide', first she plucked out the feathers meticulously, it was a bit gross but not as much as what came after. Next, she had to remove the internal organs carefully, hopefully, she wouldn't mess up and give herself some sort of food poisoning. Finally, after that, she thoroughly cleaned it with water collected with a Water Gathering Rune, it also managed to dry out a bunch of small twigs and branches laying on the ground so those would make good firewood.

After cutting off the unneeded parts like its clawed feet and such, next would be the spicing but unfortunately, she didn't put those into her ring, it was always just her secret little storage where she hid her personal stuff and snacks. It didn't stop time as some of the better ones but it was rather large so she only stored cookies and stuff like that.

She sharpened a few sticks and pulled small parts of meat onto them, next she would need to light the fire.

Oh wasn't there, like a specific way to build the fire?

Unfortunately, that part was rather foggy in her memory so she just put the smaller twigs below the larger branches that she snapped so they were the right size. Next, she made a simple sign with her right hand which caused a candle flame to burst into existence at the tip of her index finger.

For small things like this somatic gestures were more convenient, after all the Runes they created were in her palm and not in her head or throat like with mental images or chanting so they were much quicker to cast.

Once the fire got going she held one of the spikes in each hand over it, turning them around so every piece of meat got nice and crispy. With the small pieces she cut them into, she thought they were done in dozen minutes or so but when she bit into one the center was still bloody so she went back to cooking them.

In another few minutes when she retried them, even though the outside got a bit too crusty the rest was fine so she devoured the meat and then got back into cooking the rest. Other than these two spikes she had another four more to cook.

She spent the next two hours next to the fire and eating every piece of eatable meat the bird had on it. The lack of spices was a bit jarring but she was ravenous so she enjoyed it more than some of the meals she got back in the castle.

She doused the fireplace in water after she was done and sent most of the smell far away from her hopefully with a few Gust spells. She also cleaned herself thoroughly with the enchantment in her clothes so she hoped nothing would be lured here.

Now that she thought about it she should get going from here, the further she got from the place of the fight the better. The snowstorm and the treacherous terrain should throw off most of her pursuers for a while or at least make their lives harder which she was more than happy to do even if they were her father's men.

That made her effort in shoving the smell away meaningless, but ah whatever. She still had most of her reserves so she didn't need to take time to replenish them, one Water Blade spell took maybe 6% of her mana and that was one of the more mana-intensive spells.

She didn't use earth spells for that reason too, they were so damn costly and slow. If she wanted heavy impact spells she also had Kinetic spells so earth spells were useless in her opinion but any architect or miner would probably strangle her for that opinion.

She canceled the illusion and headed for the stream she noticed yesterday, she would follow that downriver to help her navigate through the forest. If she couldn't

have gotten too far away on her mad dash so she should arrive at the base of the mountain range in a few days, maybe a week of travel if she kept her speed up.

She wasn't sure how far they'd gotten with the convoy so she wasn't sure where she would end up but *away* was her goal for now. The stream turned out to be a small creek that traveled through the forest, largely uncaring for the many roots it had unearthed in its wake, only going around larger rocks or massive roots.

Kali opted for climbing a nearby tree and following along the water on the lower branches, keeping her away from the ground and the water source that many animals would visit for a drink. She was keeping track of each small noise around her in a few hundred-meter radius so she wouldn't get jumped on and kept herself silent as she skulked along, keeping close to the creek.

Her choice of clothing or rather its color wasn't the best for blending in here with the dark brown bark and bushes of green as the backdrop but she couldn't do much about that. Minor Illusion was a rather limited spell that was mostly useful for hiding openings or doors as it couldn't be moved or altered after it has been put in place and making it interface with the mind of the mage for a mental image would need much more complicated Runes.

Though since it was a gift from the old man she wouldn't put it past him to downplay its potency just so she would be surprised when she finds out about its kinks later. The ring still sat on her finger, she liked its aesthetics and Silverite went well with her choice of clothing, it looked like two serpents intertwining with each other but without the heads or tails.

She knew there was another Spell imbued into it but Zadkiel only told her it was called Alter Ego, that she thought it was some sort of illusion that would make her look different but she couldn't make it to work. Something was missing and she wasn't sure what, so she couldn't use that despite it probably being able to solve her problem.

She was torn between the curiosity driving her to discover the ring's secrets and annoyance at the eccentric old man that didn't even teach her how to use his gift but he also knew she would enjoy the puzzle. It was infuriating. Both how well he knew her and that he was right.

She followed along the gently running water for the next couple of hours, she wasn't as fast as she could have been down on the ground as the wet branches had her making each jump carefully and she slipped a few times even like that. Thankfully she could grab hold of another branch or steady herself before she fell but she slowed her speed even further afterwards.

She could probably survive a 10-meter fall, elves were built like that but it would hurt and that's not talking about the near heart attacks she got each time she slipped, her heartbeat thundered in her throat for a good few minutes afterward.

She felt a bit weird for enjoying it though, she got better with time and the adrenalin-induced thrill was great. If only she could use magic to make it even better.

I need to learn how to fly or glide at least in the future.

Just like that, she set her first long-term goal for herself, hopefully, the first among many.

Feathered Serpent -



01 - 05 Botany and a Mutt

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 100]

[Mana Capacity: 18] (= 10 + 5 + 3)

[Essence Requirement: 2.7]

As she followed the water, the small creek slowly but steadily widened and connected with a few other streams, by then it was two meters wide and Kali realized she's been traveling for well over a day again.

She was just so absorbed by getting better at the acrobatics needed to jump and swing from branch to branch while also keeping her attention on her surroundings. The many evergreens around her were from a variety of similar species, — she noticed once she paid closer attention to them,— blue and green spruces were the most populous with pines as a close second but as she traveled further and further down the mountain fir started popping up but those couldn't reach as high as their humongous cousins.

Fir trees were verdant green and their canopy started just half a meter above ground, providing a great hiding place for smaller animals but they could only thrive now that the larger trees were sparser and didn't obstruct the sun so much.

This also had Kali ambling through the meter-high snow more often than not with there being fifty or so meters between some of the large trees. At least she could see much further ahead without the many obnoxious trunks in the way of her vision.

Her journey had been interrupted before for a few hours when she found a subspecies of fir that had crimson red leaves and had no snow either on or nearby it. She remembered there being a type of fir like that that had magical properties but she couldn't quite recall what those were so she spent a few hours figuring it out.

A bit of a fun interruption along her otherwise monotonous journey, a change of pace would keep things fresh she thought.

She only needed about ten minutes to figure it out when she threw a snowball at it and the water turned into vapor as it reached within a meter of the tree, the vapor then proceeded to seep into the needle-like leaves as if it was a ghost possessing it.

She guessed it worked somewhat similar to her Water Gathering Rune, maybe it was even the thing they based the Rune on. A set amount of Runes was gifted to most sentient races more than 15 hundred years ago by an ascendant entity that called itself Solaris.

Many elves were rather dubious about this occurrence as Cores just started popping up randomly a few centuries ago in people and just when nearly every newborn had Cores this entity just popped up and told them how to use it. It called what the Runes were capable of by manipulating mana 'Magic' and while the Runes were put under severe observation and research, they weren't entirely kept under the hold of the ruling class.

For whatever reason Solaris gave a 'starter pack' as it called it to the Rulers of larger nations under the magical contract that they would teach a large part of it to their subjects. This went differently for each nation some fell while others rose higher than ever on the back of magic. It also didn't help with keeping things peaceful that no two 'starter-pack' was the same. Each had some runes or techniques that only they had on the entire planet.

With time people who were later called Rune Forgers managed to first alter some Runes and then make ones of their own. It was a time-intensive and secretive craft so Kali didn't know any more than that about it but it sounded like something she should look into in the future.

Kali's To-Do List:

- *Learn to fly*
- *Lear Rune Forging*

Ah, I should probably think about more short-term goals no? Hmm

She got to thinking about that once she was done reviewing her experience with the crimson fir. She could hunt so food wasn't a problem and with the stream neither was water. The shelter was a bit of a hit-and-miss but she could keep going for another few days at this pace so she'd leave that to her future self.

Neither of the countries bordering the kingdom near her was too good of a destination, the nearest was the Northern Water Province of the Corvus Empire which was what they called this part of the erstwhile Water Kingdom that was the home of the Autumn Elves after it was conquered.

It wasn't too bad of a place to hide as the bastards oppressed their Provinces both technologically and in education. They only had enough military in towns to defend them from wandering monsters and even those towns were few and far between on the far shore of the continent.

The humans found the Karyst Jungle to be too much of a bother to tame so they just hid in their towns so while the Jungle would be just as much of a pain as this arctic forest she wouldn't have to worry about random humans finding her.

Zadkiel was more than thorough with his education in this so she remembered it clearly, they shouldn't even have mapped more than a fifth of the jungle.

The only thing that probably held back the still-hiding elves from retaking their land was the threat of a legion arriving from the Imperial Core and those wouldn't have much of a problem with putting down a rebellion. Even her father had trouble when a few legions decided to try their luck at invading the kingdom a century ago.

The other nation would require much more travel to reach as it was far to the north, when the jungle ended came a wide savannah and it was split around halfway towards the desert it shifts into, by the largest river on the continent. It is aptly named the Bloodraven River for the large amount of blood the Corvus empire shed while trying to push their border further to the north. Those guys had a weird obsession with ravens, they even called the emperor the Raven Lord or something stupid like that.

Her father had a tenuous alliance with the republic about assisting each other against the empire, so she could either go hide under the nose of the humans or her father's allies.

The Empire it is!!

Well, it might be a stupid idea but if it was who would even think about her doing it? Wasn't it a genius idea if she thought about it like that? It was! She nodded to herself, satisfied with her outsmarting her enemy.

Right, she was thinking about short-term goals. First, she had to reach the jungle which if she remembered right was called Karstirien by the Elves there, much better than what the humans gave it, Karst Jungle. They called it that because it had large karsts in it, very creative though the elves weren't much better but she felt like no one would fault her for being biased.

She opted for walking on the small riverbank instead of making a clear trail through the snow for any would-be pursuers to follow, this put her in a slightly dangerous

position as any animal that frequented the stream for drinking would come across her but she hoped she'd be able to climb a nearby tree before they got to her.

Not that it would help with bears or other animals that could climb trees too. Maybe she'd have to fight then, she was a bit apprehensive about that, the only thing she 'fought' so far was the wall of her bedroom when she used it for spell testing and that dumb bird. Neither fought back too much.

Kali ran thought-up scenarios through the back of her mind, trying to come up with good countermeasures for each of the beasts she knew to live in the area. She already avoided a bunch of wild animals and even a few magical beasts, the animals were mostly easy, and her physique let her sneak around them or just hide until they wandered away while for the magical beasts, she used what she did with the lynx a day ago.

She was mostly sure she could fight off a normal animal with little effort but she didn't have any way of gauging how strong any magical beast was aside from what she knew of from her lessons. Those magical beasts had Cores just like sentient beings and they either evolved to absorb mana passively or from their prey.

The second type was the most dangerous and they tended to attack settlements as other beasts with Cores were much harder to find than a human child for example which it could find plenty of in a small town. The annoying old man once even told her that there was a mutation that happened in a rare few that allowed them to consume and absorb the essence of the target directly.

She refused to believe him at first but the old man never lied to her before, he at most withheld important information. Like how to use the damned ring he gifted her. How useful it'd be if she could just make herself invisible with it.

Illusions were still far from her level of mastery in magic, even a basic Minor Illusion was much more complicated than all of her Spells combined as it was designed to blend in with its surroundings perfectly or mimic something.

The most she could do was Shadow Cloak which was a mana intensive Spell that cloaked her in shadows as the name suggested, it was a Light elemental Spell that would use mana to absorb light around her and the upkeep of that was taxing on

her. She could cast two Water Blades out of the mana needed to keep the Cloak up for five minutes.

As her mind wandered once again back onto magic she almost failed to notice the snow crunching softly only 200 meters to her right, her vision of its origin was blocked by a rather wide fir that sat in the snow. She jumped over the stream and landed softly on the other side of it to put something else between herself and the thing that made that sound.

The crunching was soft but it sounded like a lot of snow was crushed but somehow it was dampened. Fur, it was fur that dampened the noise and whatever it was its furred feet should be large based on the sound. Kali eyed the tree warily as she crept closer and closer to the nearest tree on this side of the water to hide but she was still 30 meters away when a large furry head peaked out from behind the tree she was staring at.

It was covered in soft snow-white fur and she wasn't sure she'd have noticed it just by her vision if it was further away and without the verdant evergreen as a contrast. It was a Frost Wolf, one of the apex predators of the mountains aside from magical beasts but they sometimes had magic of their own though it was rare.

Its icy blue eyes that glowed a bit were an indication of this being one of those rare few and at the same moment, Kali understood why people tended to compare her to these beasts. Its soft and curly snow-white fur was the same shade as her hair and the eyes now glaring at her from afar resembled the ones that stared back at her from the mirror.

Though she hoped her dental hygiene was a bit above the wolf as she glanced down at its large fangs still covered in dried blood as it bared them at her before launching itself into a sprint.

"Fuck," Kali exclaimed in horror as she realized that the tiny stream with its 3 meters of width would hardly stop the beast that already covered half the distance to her.

Her initial stun wore off just then and she launched herself further backward with a heavy leap, while midair she made a hand sign that caused a strong Kinetic force to slam into the snout of the angry canine, making it stumble for a moment.

Now that it was closer Kali realized it was somewhat small for being a frost wolf, those were supposed to be five or so meters at the shoulder on average but could grow to ten if they had Cores and consequently essence enough for it. Beasts with Cores tended to grow larger instead of becoming purely stronger while remaining compact like the elvenoid species.

Yes, that was a word, despite how egotistical Kali found it to name any other species that looked similar to them elvenoid. Well, back when the thing was first used elves ruled over both east and west lasira, which was the continent she stood on now. How far they'd fallen.

She landed on the ground a good twenty meters back but the wolf was just now leaping over the water, she didn't have time to cast any of her stronger spells.

Ah, shit, fu-, what do I do?

Trying to suppress her rising panic she rained down Kinetic attacks on the beasts, they arrived near instantaneously after she activated the Spells so they were mostly the only Spells she knew that could reliably hit the thing while they were both moving this fast.

She landed five Kinetic strikes that delivered kinetic energy directly into the flesh of the beast, the force of it could crack the trunk of the thicker trees here and uproot the smaller ones but the only thing the five Spells managed was make the mutt while in pain. Three assaulted its back, which turned its momentum midjump towards the frigid water and the other two struck near its eyes but she missed both as the thing flailed around from the previous three.

The other Spell she cast was Kinetic Hammer which did fuck all against the wolf, it would have launched her dozens of meters away but the canine seemed to be much more ... dense than her. The Spell was supposed to keep melee attackers away from mages but it was tailored by elves against humans at most, she guessed.

Kali, taking this as a sign, turned around and bolted for the largest tree nearby which was an obnoxiously large red-fir, not the crimson one from before but one with a bark that had a crimson tint. The thing was barely a third of the height of the humongous trees she left behind but it still stood at over 50 meters of height so it'd do.

She crouched, coiled like a spring and released. Barely escaping the jaws of the beast snapping shut behind her ankles, she managed to grab one branch with her left arm but her left slipped. Barely in time, she wrapped her legs around the trunk of the tree, quickly followed by both of her arms, she hugged the tree like a koala.

Just as she was managing to calm her thundering heartbeat she made the mistake of looking down due to hearing the sound of claws digging into the bark. The wolf was clawing away at the base of the tree, jumping sometimes and clawing chunks out of it just three meters below her spot nearly around 8 meters from the ground.

Ugh, persistent mutt.

Kali crawled her way up the tree awkwardly until she reached a thicker branch that could support her weight so she perched on top of it, staring down at the canine trying to make a meal out of her. This was a novel experience for her and she was happy with how she handled it so far.

She was still alive and despite the dog outclassing her in speed, strength and mass she managed to escape from it momentarily. She even had all of her limbs attached without as much as a scratch on her.

"Ah fuck," she flattened herself against the trunk as much as she could as a few icicles as thick as her wrists sailed past her with one ripping the pants open on her left thigh and leaving a long gash. She gritted her teeth in pain but she held on, *this is nothing compared to burning half of my body with a flame spell!*

She glared down at the hateful mutt and started forming visualizing Runes in her mind. The beast probably couldn't shoot does rapidly as it would have done that before or it had to conserve mana, she already thought it might be a juvenile male that has just been kicked out of its pack by the alpha wolf.

If she pushed it it'd probably retaliate even if it meant exhausting its reserves so she should make her next spell count.

Rune after Rune crystalized in her mind and she even used a few somatic gestures to make the casting quicker, after four long seconds she let the Runes collapse into the Spell matrix and felt the scorching heat and devastation the spell promised upon her enemies with a twitch of her ears.

She grinned and the matrix flew into her extended index finger and launched out of it like a bullet. A flaming bullet of fire and death impacted the growling wolf half a second later and exploded in a thunderous boom that made her ears ring.

The fires formed a glowing sphere for a fraction of a second then collapsed upon themselves and were gone as quickly as they came, leaving only ash and the charred corpse of the canine behind.

Kali gulped at the sight while removing her hands from around her tender ears which still rang a bit.

It was a good idea not to test that Fireball Spell in my room.

She was a bit shaken from the near-death experience, but couldn't help but feel giddiness bubbling in her stomach. She's done it, she used magic and killed a magical beast all by herself, yeah there were a few close calls and her thigh *hurt like bitch* but she was ecstatic.

She stared down at her felled foe with undisguised greed. She remembered while adventurers were even a thing since Cores became a thing, why it was so *gratifying* to hunt magical beasts even if one didn't get paid.

If it could use magic then it should have a Core, and once it dies it leaves it behind filled with its remaining mana and some essence.

Ring of Illusion -



01 - 06 The Core and a Welcome Surprise

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 100]

[Mana Capacity: 18] (= 10 + 5 + 3)

[Essence Requirement: 2.7]

The Core was an interesting thing. While the person that had it was alive it was something like a mana construct interwoven with essence and it was so complex that barely anything was understood about it even to this day. Numerous Arch-Mages or even the elusive Magus have dedicated their lives to finding out its secrets but with each one that was uncovered numerous others were found.

But to Kali that didn't matter at the moment, what she cared about was what happened after the person died or in this case, the magical beast.

She channeled a fair bit of mana into her bracelet and hissed in pain as her flesh and skin restitched itself, leaving no sign of her injury aside from the ripped pants. Just as she was starting to feel annoyed at having to feel the chilly air at her thigh from now on the clothes stitched themselves back together just like her skin had done which made her blink down at the white leathery clothing owlshly.

Well, that's neat!

But she put that out of her mind as she leapt down from her perch with a deliberately graceful move. She landed on the ground with her knees slightly bent but straightened elegantly soon after as she strode towards her prize, her *loot*.

She fished out her knife and after dripping a bit of mana into it she started to cut the crispy wolf apart. The knife barely had some difficulty with the task, only slowing when she cut through its ribs. She soon found where its heart must have been based on her biology textbooks and stuck her hand inside the grisly hole she'd made.

When she pulled it out she grinned down at the fist-sized, perfectly spherical crystal that glowed in the same icy blue that the beast's eyes had. She frowned at that a bit.

Mana shouldn't care about what you use it for, elements are just applications of the fuel that is mana.

It must be some visual effect like how some spells glowed when they were visible despite no Rune being used for that purpose. Her eyes glowed for some gods forsaken reason too but she didn't know why. All of her family members had glowing eyes aside from her mother so it must have something to do with her being a Royal elf.

Ah, whatever, another unanswered question to my ever-expanding list.

Zadkiel annoyingly didn't know either just that the phenomenon was observed among some of the other species too who had Royal clans or families.

Her grin dimmed a bit as she realized she didn't know how she was supposed to make use of the crystal orb, in the novels she's read adventurers just 'held it' and 'absorbed it'. She held the orb in both of her hands like the precious little thing it was while ignoring the blood still dripping from it and her fingers.

She did what she thought was most evident and pushed a bit of her mana into it as she'd do with one of her magical artifacts. She threw her head back as her whole body shook and shivered in pleasure from the essence rushing into and through her body from the orb. It spread through every part of her body and spirit and even her Core before it started settling down as it assimilated fully with her being.

Kali fell onto her back in the process without realizing it and was now staring blankly at the fluffy white clouds and the gently blue sky. She raised her hands and they shook but the orb was nowhere to be seen only white ash remained stuck to the blood on her fingers and even that was rapidly dissolving into nothing.

A shiver ran through her spine as the afterglow of the addictive pleasure finally left her some room to breathe. She gasped, drawing in as much air as she could once realizing she's forgotten to breathe throughout the process. She took a few trembling breaths to calm herself.

That was fucking wild! What the hell!?

She didn't trust her voice not to crack just yet so she could only resort to cursing in her mind. She knew absorbing essence was a pleasurable thing but it should not have been anything close to *that*. It was well known that getting essence was addictive but it should be like getting high on some mushrooms or something not getting overwhelmed by pleasure like she had.

Was this the downside of being an Elf? For being so sensitive? No, that shouldn't be. She'd have heard about it if they had a weakness like that.

The only other answer she could think of was that the little wolf had an absurd amount of essence stored in its Core for some reason. She focused her mana sense

on her Core, trying to feel how much it has grown from this experience. She could barely feel the mana as it rushed into her alongside the essence before so she wasn't too sure about it.

She was struck by a sudden bout of panic at the thought, absorbing more mana than your Core could store could damage it even permanently or outright make it explode alongside you like a blood-filled balloon.

Her fears couldn't have been further off the mark though as she took in the feeling of her Core her eyes snapped open in wonder. That was a lot more mana than she had before.

That was insane. The essence must have strengthened the Core just as the mana was flooding into it and even now it was close to full.

She cast a Kinetic Strike as a test which took half a percent of her mana stores before and was blinking dumbly while the Kinetic Strikes impacted the snow and upturned the dirt below one after the other. She could feel mana her mana going down but only after the sixth one did she lose 1% of her mana.

She could control Spell matrixes as far as a meter away from her body and she could feel ambient mana for another four, making that a five-meter radius in which she could sense mana flowing by her gently like an endless ocean. It was just barely a glimpse into it all but she was awed.

She remembered a single Kinetic Strike costing 0.5% of her stores but now she could cast three from that same amount.

That can't be, that's far too much.

She redid the test again with other spells she remembered the cost of but the answer was always close to the first one. She's increased her mana stores by 3 times in one go, that had to be unnatural. Before this the few times she went up a level her stores increased by 10% and she knew mana increased gradually bit by bit with each level and such drastic increases weren't normal.

She gulped as she felt around her nearly full Core and knew that it was close to empty before, that Fireball spell was as costly as it was effective, eating around 60%

of her stores in one go. *Well now that should be down to 20% but if my Core was any fuller it'd have burst.*

She grimaced at that, *right where was I?... Right, gaining this much essence in one go is absurd!*

Then she remembered how her father made her go from a little girl with a barren Core to what she was before with a single Ritual. She didn't know how it worked but she was sure it didn't feel like this, even so, she knew stuff like this was possible.

Not like she could deny it as the experience was quite ... memorable. Yeah, let's call it that.

She knew there were some breakthroughs a person's Core can reach from gathering essence which is more than just a difference in quantity like the one she had. Yeah, she is now several times *better* in every aspect of her being but a person that reached the first breakthrough could still beat her up without giving her any chance to retaliate.

There are supposed to be three all in all. Based on that somewhat dumb 'level' system which gives each person an associated level from one to 500 based on how much essence their Core has those breakthroughs are at levels 200, 300 and 400.

She should have been around level 100 before but with this, she was thinking more around the 200 mark she could be dad wrong and it could be something like 120. Levels were sorta stupid like that, you had to use a complicated mathematical formula to calculate the essence needed to go from one level to the next. This was a puny amount below level fifty but to go from level 450 to 451 it would need more than going from 300 to 350.

It was an exponential curve and it was rather steep by the end. Which by the way was a rather weird thing too, you couldn't go beyond 500 without going through some mythical process called Ascension. Kali didn't know if it was even possible, Ascendants were living gods and each had legends about them.

She of course dreamed about becoming one of them while growing up but slowly her dreams were dampened by the ugly thing that was reality. From becoming an

Ascendant to an Arch-Mage to just a simple Mage and finally just being free from her deplorable fate.

All of her dreams were denied by her father, which was why she was wishing to all the higher powers that were for him not to find her. She was happier fighting to the death with a frost wolf while having to eat birds she cooked without any spice than she has ever been.

Just the knowledge that she was doing things because she wanted to and decided to do them was giving every simple thing a rose tint.

She somewhat missed her siblings but they'd be fine, she hoped they wouldn't worry so much that they went after her. She could see Ly'Riel doing something like that, Rhy'Lanor was so absorbed in his duties that it'd probably take a few weeks for him to even learn about the ambush and her consequent missing status.

She had no idea what her father would think though, she was sure he'd want her back but not what for. He could probably twist this to strengthen the alliance even more and that would leave her free but he was unpredictable. She couldn't ever manage to predict what he'd do.

One day he'd reject her requests about learning magic then he'd give her the healing bracelet a month later after she got sent to the nurse with obviously magical wounds. He was weird, he didn't even search her room or question her how she got the wounds after she told him she burned herself so her fiance would reject the marriage.

She pulled her mind out of the gutters and propped herself up into a sitting position, her hands barely shook anymore, that was good. Next came standing and she had to steady herself on the tree next to her. She was still weak in the knees and her legs were a bit wobbly but it was lessening with every second going by.

It was a *unique* feeling, she remembered feeling like this just after the Ritual. Her body was still tingling in places she didn't want to name and parts that were making her rather uncomfortable. Her feet were numb and it felt like ants were running under her skin.

She focused on breathing as she counted the seconds.

Breathe in through the nose 1, 2, 3, 4, then hold it 5, 6, 7, and out through the mouth to the 8th.

She repeated that a few times and once she felt more steady on her legs and even starting to feel her toes she finally dared to let go of the tree. She stumbled a bit on the first step but then it was gone and in its place was a new store of energy that felt infinite.

She knew it wasn't as this was just like with the Ritual, she was just a weak little girl before that slept through half of the day and after it, she could run circles around the castle for half a day but she did pass out once her energy was spent. It was a deceptive illusion that she wouldn't fall for a second time.

She walked with a spring in her steps, feeling like if she wanted she could jump now ten meters into the air from a casual stride. She did just that, reaching 12 meters at the apex of her jump, she kicked up a bit of snow as she landed with a thump, too excited to care about moving silently or gracefully.

She had a wide grin on her lips and started to jog, slipping in leaps every few steps. She could do it with only one leg, just by putting more force into her ankle as she launched herself. It was so fun she almost missed a large herd of moose ambling towards her in the distance.

They didn't look too dangerous but they were large, like LARGE, the one leading the herd was 4 meters at least to the shoulders with the tip of its large crown of antlers reaching maybe 6. Said antlers had electricity snapping between them while its thick coat of fur was a matte white color, contrasting heavily with its mangy brown-furred brethren.

Despite greed reigniting in her stomach with a never before felt intensity Kali wasn't a moron, and as a person that wasn't a moron, she could count. With that little talent under her belt, she could tell that there were a lot of moos, mooses, moo-...fuck, anyway, that was far too much of them and far too few of her to not get trampled into the ground.

She was rather confident in her abilities after killing the frost wolf but she had to also remember that she almost died, and against a juvenile that was alone. That big ass moose was neither a juvenile nor was it alone.

Time to leave~

Kali turned tale and bounded away, continuing along the stream the annoying wolf chased her away from. Her steps were closer to leaps as each brought her four or five meters far and now that she was making an effort her footfalls were softer but still easy to hear to her acute ears.

She furrowed her brows in thought, was her hearing better or was it just harder to dampen her steps by leaping with each step? She focused and flexed her ears, the area in which she could perfectly locate each sound has expanded, now covering nearly five hundred meters.

If her range got better it was clear that its sensitivity should've also improved. Still, that just made it obvious that she was far from imperceptible or as stealthy as she thought herself to be.

She found herself smiling, she was thinking about what she could improve but not like before when it was more like daydreaming and fantasizing. Even magic was more like a toy that distracted her from reality than the wonderful tool that it was now that she had to survive alone or the well of unending secrets and challenges that it also represented.

She was thinking about practical things and she was improving in ways she liked, she liked being stronger, faster, and the many other things essence gave her just as much as she liked the feeling of power she felt when *her* fireball obliterated the poor frost wolf.

Life was finally worth living.

And I won't squander it!

She felt like she was almost flying, she spent more time in the air than on the ground which was a rather poor tactical choice as it was hard to change her direction in the air but she was trusting her perception to alert her well before anything could attack her.

Instead, she was relishing in the feeling of her shoulder-length hair being whipped about by the frigid wind, she even removed her makeshift hair tie to let it billow in

the wind. It was so freeing to be like that, to just run and exist. Enjoying the beautiful landscape around her and the gentle rays of the sun on her pale skin.

Life was good.

Mythral

Mythral straightened and observed the small opening in the side of the large trunk in front of him, it opened up and showed a small place inside which would be enough to hide two adult elves if they huddled together or a single one comfortably.

The opening had carving marks on its side and he found ash next to the opening.

"Less than two days old," he whispered as his fingers brushed against the wet ash hidden under a thin layer of snow, "she won't be far."

He let out a low whistle, low enough to go unheard by any humans or most animals that might hear it but his newly assigned squad of Royal guards appeared from the dense forest one after the other, saluting to him with their palms above their hearts.

"Report," he demanded gruffly and his men replied professionally.

"I've found the cut-off head of a Barkclaw bird on a nearby tree," the first said, "the cut was far too precise to be from another animal."

"I have found some footsteps hidden somewhat well leading towards a small creek," another reported but the rest stayed silent.

They didn't find anything else worthwhile then, Mythral nodded. He was surprised the King would not only let him live after failing so spectacularly but he also gave him a new squad and the mission to track down the princess.

Mythral was confused but apparently, no divination Spell managed to get a hold of the princess. Arch-Mage Zadkiel would probably know how to find her but he's left just after he's reached the castle.

He was quite sure that he wouldn't wake up again after he passed out soon after he finished his report. That damned human has done a number on him and that

Feathered Serpent managed to get a bit out of his side. He prayed to the ancestors to make sure the human got eaten by the serpent, he had to escape after his injury so he couldn't know the final outcome of the battle but he could hope.

Thankfully his lost arm and flesh could still be regrown by the Royal Healer, a few more hours and he'd have been stuck as a cripple if he didn't find some mythical healer that could heal his spiritual self. According to the healer, the spiritual self took about a day after the person got an injury to take on the injury itself.

Most healing Spells used the spiritual self as the foundation of the spell, they just had to make the body grow to mimic the spirit but once the spirit naturally mimicked the body there were very few things that could help.

Mythral didn't show it in his stoic demeanor but he was worried sick, the princess was out all by herself in the wilds with monsters, animals and the humans that got away all about. He was constantly annoyed with her the first time he was assigned to her but then he tried to put himself in her shoes and it changed everything.

He was loyal to the king and the people but he was sure he'd have thrown a fit when he was as young as she was if his future was decided for him. Especially if it was as deplorable as hers.

Marrying a human for convenience.

Just the thought made him sick, he'd do it if he was commanded of course but not with a smile like the princess had done. He wasn't sure how she was able to smile. Did they not tell her how humans treated their elven *wives*? He didn't know if that was for the better but he pitied the girl.

Still, it was not worse than dying in his opinion, he couldn't save her from her fate but he could save her from death at least.

Please be alive Princess, I'm coming.

Arawn'druil Frostguard [The Winter King] -



01 - 07 The Decision and Resolve

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 150]

[Mana Capacity: 56.92]

[Essence Requirement: 9.3]

After leaving the herd of moose behind her, Kali continued her dash along the rocky riverbank, this helped in keeping her trail as hard to follow as possible though she guessed following along a river was such a basic way of doing it that it'd be predictable.

She'd need to reach the end of the snow-covered landscape unfortunately to have any better options, while she was light on her feet walking over the soft snow without leaving footprints wasn't something she could imagine how to do.

The spotty forest was still all around her, an evergreen popping out from under the white blanket of snow every fifty or so meters. By now she stopped inspecting every second tree in her way, she was familiar with all of the species of trees popping up around here so she only gave her time for interesting sub-species like the crimson-leaved one a day prior.

She had a harder time figuring out the properties of these plants and with each hour she spent without moving she felt herself grow increasingly twitchy. She was taking peaks over her shoulder every few minutes in between the tests she made the poor tree go through.

She had to leave the puzzle unsolved as she couldn't keep herself focused for too long, paranoia was a bitch. She wasn't sure why just now was it that the feeling reared its ugly head and not in the two previous days but she thought she might have been too tired, hungry or focused before or a combination of all of those.

She noticed a small black bear drinking from the now five meters wide river on the same side she was running on, she was only a few hundred meters from it but it hasn't noticed her. It had no visual sign of being magical in any way so she didn't bother to sneak around it.

She came closer and she thought about when did she start considering 2 meters tall bears that probably weighed a ton 'small'. Must have been the damned moose or the feathered serpent, the moose was larger than her carriage by a good margin and the serpent could have swallowed it whole.

Magical gigantism was weird, she was glad elves didn't experience it. The thought reminded her of one of Zadkiel's lectures about magical mutations in humans, the old elf was somewhat fascinated by that as only humans could interbreed with nearly all elvenoid species.

Elves found it hard to even have children with other races within their species but even if they managed to get a 'mixed' child it wouldn't be a real mix. The child would either be the same race as its father or mother with no chance for a half-Autumn half-Winter Elf to be born or something like that.

That was another thing her teacher couldn't figure out the reason for beyond 'their genome must be more versatile than ours'. Humans also tended to have weird mutations in their Cores that bordered on malfunction, one of which was when a human also experienced magical gigantism as they gained essence which was how giants became a thing.

It's not too good of a thing though as the essence is diluted through the larger body.

She leapt over the bear, deciding to do a graceful spin in the air mid-jump which landed her a few meters on the other side of the beast. She gave the animal a bow, fighting down a smirk as the bear finally managed to spin around and growl at her.

"You have no taste," she admonished the animal, giving it a push with a Kinetic Hammer.

She nodded to herself, looking towards the bear trying to crawl its way out of the frigid water. That's what should happen when she used that spell, satisfied with annoying the animal she turned around and continued her travel before the enraged animal could avenge her prank.

Not that she felt like it could do much to her but staying here for long without reason would grate on her nerves and leaving the meat and fur left by the bear behind after their clash would be a waste.

May you prove to be a fine meal for someone else bear.

She felt around her reserves and noted that she was at around 82% now, the few spells she cast along her travel brought her down to this. The size of her new mana

reserve was still astonishing to her but she was still used to not wasting it needlessly, it'd take some time to get used to not being so frugal with her Spells.

Not that my regeneration went up, but I still only have that shitty Mana Gathering Rune that barely qualifies as a Cultivation technique...no I don't think it'd qualify as one, it's just a single Rune.

Kali was a bit annoyed at her lacking knowledge about magic, especially when compared to her extensive information about all the stuff Zadkiel talked about, he always sneaked in a few lectures that could give her insights into magic but never straight-up lectures about it.

Mentioning the breakthroughs while talking about how a random soldier managed to fight off hundreds of others in a historic battle, he also liked talking about the achievements of arch-mages and the difference between magical spices while comparing special talents each had to know Spells.

That was where most of her magical knowledge came from aside from her secret stash of basic books, she was somewhat embarrassed having them but they were helpful even now if only for revision. Who wouldn't be if they treasured books like 'Guide to Basic Runes for Dummies' or 'How to Craft Spells (children's edition)'? She was sure the annoying old man had books that weren't like that but she didn't dare ask, lest he takes away even these.

She didn't know why her father didn't take them away either, he was supposed to see and know everything that happens in the Castle and well beyond.

She went on and on without stopping, paranoia plaguing her and constantly urging her onward. She ran as fast as she could while conserving the most energy, from seeking to have fun while leaping along she now went for practicality.

She hoped this wasn't going to be her future from now on, it would be far too miserable.

She glanced behind, seeing mountains extending towards the sky, the river was running through a valley and she was still following it, so far it'd proven to be a great

guide. Neither side of the valley was too steep with the sparse trees dotting each side she couldn't help but imagine monsters or worse, humans behind each.

It'd been three days since she absorbed the frost wolf Core and she felt like she could go on for another 7 at least. She would have too if she hadn't spotted something far behind her at the mouth of the valley. Just for a moment it flickered, the sunlight hitting it at just the right angle to reflect it straight towards her.

She could recognize the glow of Elven Mythril everywhere, she couldn't make out the figure but it was floating there, overlooking the whole valley. It was a beautiful shade of silver, mixed with just a hint of each color of the rainbow, a more poetic person would say that one could barely catch a glimpse of the iridescence hiding beneath its silver exterior. Kali didn't care though.

Shit, shit, sh-, I need to hide.

She was lucky she was barely peaking out from behind a tree to glance back, maybe her by-now toxic levels of paranoia helped her for once. The backdrop of snow would hide her white-maned head or so she hoped.

She quickly ducked behind the tree, she'd made sure to only step on the top of protruding rocks on her way here from the riverbank so it should do for a hiding spot. She crawled under its low-hanging branches that touched the ground in places, the tree didn't have any snow under its low canopy so she didn't have to worry about that.

Her heartbeat quickened, she felt it in her ears as the blood poured through her in waves, she felt it in her neck as her artery pulsed on the side of it. An uncomfortable feeling settled into the pit of her stomach as she huddled close to the trunk of the tree.

This wasn't one of those giants, it was just a normal pine with deep green leaves reminiscent of needles but its branches were so dense that she could barely peak through a few gaps in them. That would be more than enough for her pursuers though, they wouldn't even need to see her to find her.

She flooded the illusion Ring with her mana, half of her remaining reserves went into it but they still seemed paltry in comparison to what was already in the ring, ah she's

forgotten that didn't she? *No, I should leave that alone, Zadkiel wouldn't have sent it here if it didn't have a purpose, my mana will have to be enough.*

Hide me, please!!

She thought in desperation, hoping for the artifact to fulfill her wishes despite knowing it couldn't read her thoughts. Her ears were so focused that she just now realized that she couldn't feel the Illusion snap into place, it was seamless and while she could see herself she could also tell that the thing has perfectly concealed her inside a cocoon of illusion.

That can wait.

She took a deep breath, let it out, and focused on her body. Her body was already cold but it went frigid, just like the temperature around her, her heartbeat slowed to a crawl along with it. Her muscles were flexed and coiled, carefully kept motionless to not make even a single sound.

Just before she was ready to sink into semi-hibernation she heard a voice speak, it was still hundreds of meters away, "Search around here," she recognized Mythral's voice without effort and barely caught herself from relaxing.

The voice sounded far and she couldn't tell its exact location and distance aside from the direction, he was still more than half a kilometer away then, and with his voice echoing through the valley, he could be much further too.

Kali was wracked with indecision and felt her stomach churn in nervousness, she bit her lips and began to think about it, holing the mental switch to sink into hibernation between her fingers. She could reveal herself and let Mythral take her back into the Winter Castle, the place she grew up in, her home if you could call it that. It would be safe, she could see her siblings again, Rhy'Lanor's sour face was hard to miss but he was good to her nonetheless and she knew Ly'Riel would be wracked with worry.

A single decision right now and she could leave eating spiceless meat, sleeping in the wilds, running through freezing temperatures and fighting for her life behind. All she had to do was not activate her hibernation, let them find her magical signature that her still-roiling Core was probably radiating. She could be safe, she could be fed, and have her needs cared for by an army of maids.

Kali had a wistful look on her face, giving a hug to her sobbing sister in her mind and trying to make her tsundere older brother show a facial expression different than the one right after biting into a lemon.

She closed her eyes and heard a few forms cutting through the air just at the edge of her 500-meter hearing range, she should give that a better name, it was confusing as hell.

Sorry you two, I can't give this up.

After setting the parameters for her hibernation with a mental command, complex thoughts fled her mind and her core calmed into a stasis.

She didn't want safety, she only wanted freedom and a fate forged with her own two hands and not by her father. She knew she was being selfish in the back of her mind, she realized this might not have been the *optimal* decision or even the right one but it was right for her, it felt *right*.

??

As Kali's Core stabilized and the ambient mana calmed into a serene lake a sub-function hidden inside her core activated, it took a bit of the stable mana from the core and forged itself an energy body.

The newborn arcane construct took in all the instructions left to it.

[Hide until they leave, and stay hidden for a day afterward.]

It calculated and possible scenarios flashed through its logical mana circuits, it spread a thin film of mana all over the body it was tasked with hiding. It'd prevent even a single particle of mana from leaving the body to disturb the ambient mana, alerting nearby mages to its charge's presence.

That task done it next calmed each slight disturbance in the mana inside the body of its charge, some very powerful mages could invade the bodies of other people with their magical senses while not being able to sense a place with their senses would also alert nearby mages.

It held mana under its grasp and made it mimic ambient mana, the mana held in stasis inside the slumbering core would be imperceptible even to the most proficient mages. The ability known as mana sense was far from omniscience.

The construct marked its first instruction, — **hide** — as completed.

For the other, it tapped into the hearing of its charge while feeding most of its mana to the ambient mana-sphere. It noted noises that its database associated with sentient being communicating, it waited.

It didn't sense nor count the time until the moment it couldn't 'hear' anything signifying the presence of other sentients that its charge referred to as **they** in her commands. Then its countdown started with 23 hours, 59 minutes and 59.9 seconds remaining or a **day** based on the database housed in the core.

It was still tapped into the hearing of its charge, ready to reset the timer should any being its charge categorize as **they** in this circumstance reappear.

The seconds ticked by slowly but the construct cared not, thought not and bothered not with anything outside of its tasks.

Wait

That was its current task so that's what it did.

The arcane clock ticked and the construct launched its final function.

It sent back a brief information package to the Core, and at exactly 0 seconds it terminated itself, its purpose fulfilled.

Kali felt her core raring back to life inside her as her heartbeat quickened, at first it sent jolts of pain through her but that subsided. Having her heart suddenly go from a handful of beats a day to the normal rate was an uncomfortable experience but one she'd have to get used to.

Blurry memories swam around in her mind as she made an effort to reorient herself.

Right, the illusion, is it still holding?

She found out that it was, the 41% of her mana proved to be enough for holding it in place for another day. Compared to her Shadow Cloak spell which acted similarly this Spell was oddly efficient while also being much more complicated, this made her frown in thought but she attributed that to her master being an Arch-Mage, did he make this ring for her especially? Mages of his caliber wouldn't care about the *efficiency* of all things with the monstrous amounts of mana she assumed they had.

She withdrew her mana from it and let the illusion dissolve, she crawled out from under the tree on her hands and knees with the branches scraping against her back. When she got out she couldn't help but look around warily despite not hearing anything suspicious for miles.

Once she made sure her hearing wasn't playing a trick on her she sighed in relief, for all she knew Mythral was just flying right above her position but her hibernation-addled mind couldn't notice him. She glanced up just to make sure that he hasn't appeared there magically since the first time she checked.

Ugh, that was nerve-wracking, I need a drink...ah, fuck, all I have is water.

Some of her paranoia remained in the back of her mind and she could tell she would be looking above her shoulder for a while yet she wasn't as twitchy as before. She could hide from Mythral, an honest to gods Royal Guard captain.

Her natural abilities did most of the work for her but that wasn't the point, that was still her at the end of the day wasn't it?

She smiled and stretched like a cat, her spine extended and popped along and she let out a soft moan. She twisted her torso around a good 180 degrees and felt her vertebra slacken and flex in her back. Elves were damned flexible, especially female ones, her sister could fold herself into a small ball where Kali could hardly tell where her limbs began and where the rest of her started.

She went through relaxing each of her joints one after the other with well-practiced exercises, this was one of the few physical activities she always enjoyed. After a night spent pouring over books, nothing felt better than a long session of stretching, it relaxed her mind just as much as it did her body and muscles.

It's called yoga or something like that, isn't it?

She tried remembering but wasn't sure, it was mostly just her sister teaching her how to stretch and relax her body.

Her mood grew a bit sombre at the thought of her sister but she shook her head.

"Hope you'll forgive me Ly'Riel," she whispered into the wind, staring over the cold landscape stretching out in all directions, "I can't, I just can't do it," she grew a bit teary, feeling like she was giving up in a way, "I can't bear the thought of being an object, an afterthought to my husband, I can't live like that."

Even if Ly'Riel bent over backward to please their father she was still the one Kali felt the closest to, the woman was a bundle of energy and wore her feelings on her sleeves which was a breath of fresh air among the stoic elves. She made sure that Kali felt loved and cared for even if she always obeyed their father to the letter.

Her mood was dour but it had an undercurrent of hope.

This was the life she chose so she'd make the most of it or die trying.

01 - 08 Wolverine and a Hare

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 150]

[Mana Capacity: 56.92]

[Essence Requirement: 9.3]

Kali tried recalling her muddled memories from her time spent in semi-hibernation, she had to figure out which direction Mythral and his bunch left. She closed her eyes and focused, her eyebrows scrunching up in the process. She recalled brief images, glints through the leaves, and noises which she *knew* were voices but they felt like any other vibration aside from that.

She bit her lips hard as she guided her focus towards finding out which direction she heard these voices from. They were all around her hiding spot, they went around for a few hours and one of them even walked by less than 20 meters from her.

Later, she mentally searched for the latest she heard *voices*, finding them a little over a day ago.

As she opened her eyes, she frowned in the direction where the elves had departed and saw the turbulent river cascading down through the valley and disappearing behind some trees in a bend a kilometer away.

She glanced over her shoulder, considering turning back. She'd stay next to the river which helped in hiding her footprints but backtracking would get her nowhere, going forwards was a no-go, and following Mythral was stupid, she already had absurd senses so an elf further enhanced by essence would be monstrous. She didn't want to tempt her fate, she already felt super lucky with managing to hide from him once.

She swished her head around and looked left, seeing a tall mountainside extending upwards, reaching for the clouds but not quite managing to do it. It had trees spotting its side covering most of it with only the tip being barren. She looked right and saw a smaller peak which had some trees on it but they were nowhere as dense as the other one.

She nodded after thinking for a bit and headed for the larger peak on the left. The other one would be easier to scale but the cover the denser arrangement of trees would make for better cover, her twitchiness lessened a bit but she'd still rather choose the safer option over the easier one.

She walked with steady steps, frowning a bit as she felt the snow being flattened beneath her boot and leaving easy-to-follow footprints behind her. She considered jumping from tree to tree but that was even worse, she'd knock the snow down or even break some branches which would be even easier to notice mid-fight than some footprints.

For the first hour, she grimaced a bit with each crunch but afterward, she managed to distract herself from it. She hummed a song quietly, hearing not a single dangerous animal for kilometers around her. She has been told that while she has a

great voice for singing her talents for it are lacking, not that she sang to entertain anyone besides herself.

I should figure out a name for that perfect hearing thing now, shouldn't I? It's getting annoying.

She decided on 'spatial hearing' for the 500-meter range in which she can hear every sound and tell their exact location in correlation to herself while deciding on calling the rest her normal hearing. Beyond the 500-meter mark, she could still hear sounds but could only tell the direction from which they came, like a human.

Though a human couldn't hear people talk from 3 kilometers away.

She heard smaller animals scuttle inside their burrows, hiding as she passed nearby, she could spot a few ravens on trees and even a snow white owl that was enjoying its sleep. She didn't go out of her way to find animals but she heard a smaller herd of reindeer change their course to avoid crossing paths with her.

Very few animals wanted to find themselves face-to-face with elves or any sentient species according to Zadkiel, Kali remembered feeling dubious about that but it was proving to be right.

Well, mostly.

Kali was curious about what the furry little thing she heard heading her way for a while now wanted so she didn't run or avoid it. It ambled out from behind a tree, kicking up snow as it rushed at her which looked hilarious to Kali. The animal had small legs that barely held its body above the snow and a furry little head with beady black eyes, its fur was brownish red.

It would undoubtedly be cute were it not for the fact that its jaws were opened far too wide, baring its fangs at Kali as it stumbled through the snow. It let out growling sounds through it all and once it was within a few meters of her it jumped, flying straight for her midsection.

Kali sidestepped the murderous furball that was barely over a meter tall if it stood upright, the animal didn't let landing face first on the ground or getting a mouthful

of mud and snow bother it as it quickly reoriented itself and charged at Kali again, growling throughout it all.

This time it decided that since jumping didn't work it'd run up to her and biting at her ankle surely would, unfortunately, Kali stepped back each time just as its jaws were about to close around her leg, leaving the little beast barking and hissing in annoyance before continuing its assault.

It was relentless, not letting itself be discouraged even though she was clearly out of its league Kali thought it might be because since its skull was so thick it might not have the largest brain.

She didn't know what to do with the furball, she didn't need meat and even if she did predators often had very unsavoury meat and this animal despite failing to make her its prey was unquestionably a predator. She didn't want to kill it just because it was bothering her, the thing was barely annoying, she even enjoyed playing with it as it interrupted her monotonous march up the mountainside.

She decided to head for the peak a while back to survey her surroundings, from the valley, she couldn't see much but this peak should give her a better vantage point. Without the river to guide her down the mountain she'd have to find her own way down to the jungle.

The animal barked again in apparent frustration at her still having the gall to be alive despite its continued efforts, not that it was discouraged even half an hour later. It jumped, bit wherever it could, clawed but it didn't have much else in its repertoire.

"I'm sorry friend but you are making quite a ruckus so I'll ask you to leave now," Kali petted its furry head, making it snap at her hand but she already withdrew it by that time, "Bye~"

Kali whistled as the Kinetic Hammer sent the little thing spinning through the air, she made sure it would land on a soft tree a hundred or so meters away. She enjoyed the interruption but all the other animals fled from the growling beastie so she decided to politely ask it to leave.

She barely walked for another ten minutes before she had to send the growling furball on another voyage through the air. Her next hour was spent repeating that

same cycle until she started to grow annoyed rather than amused at the animal which resulted in her adding the Overcharge Rune at the end of the Kinetic Hammer spell she cast that time.

The animal went flying through the air for hundreds of meters, landing barely within the range of her spatial hearing, she initially felt a bit guilty, thinking that she killed it but then she heard it crawl its way out of the snow with a growl.

She assumed the only reason it didn't head straight back towards her was the sound of a normal lynx stalking through the snow near it. The murderous ball of fur seemingly took the feline as just as much of an eyesore as she was and rushed at it without further ado.

She left the bickering animals behind but still heard their fight from this distance and it seemed like the lynx was losing. *Good on you furball~*

Kali hiked through the snowy landscape for another few hours before a small hare caught her attention, at first she only wanted to take a look at it because she heard it make sounds like glass touching glass but once she got closer she realized that the hare was much more interesting.

It was large for a hare, its head reaching up to her knees while its crystalline horn could poke at her stomach without it needing to jump. Yeah, it had a half-a-meter-long crystalline horn on the top of its head which it carried around like it weighed nothing.

Since she didn't remember there being animals like this and she did read about magical beasts called Horned Hares existing she was suspecting this hare to be one of those. Her magical sense could feel the Core inside it but it only reached a meter from her body for now and it was still rather foggy to her, it was much harder to sense things outside of her body for whatever reason.

So, since she was not a reckless person she'd have to find a way to test if it was magical or not without walking up to it and ending up impaled on its horn. She couldn't know how strong it was which was rather annoying so she had to be careful.

So, as a not-reckless person who is also being exceptionally careful, she quickly procured a pebble from the ground, aimed, and threw it at the overgrown hare. It

impacted the side of its body, its soft fur absorbing most of the force carried with her lackluster throw.

The animal didn't as much as jump, only turning its head towards the pebbly in the snow, its little nose moving constantly which made Kali almost let out an audible coo. *Ah, why are you so cute?!*

Not that it would stop her from getting her hands on its Core if she could. Cute or not, essence was essence.

Seeing that it didn't have any reaction to the pebble she didn't know what to think, did it not realize it was an attack or did it just straight up disregard it because it was weak? Maybe it was such a strong beast that it didn't even understand the concept of being in danger, if that was the case maybe she was the one in danger.

She was crouching behind a thorny bush at the moment, peeking through its branches to look at the animal. It would be rather underwhelming if not for its crystalline horn, it was just a large muddy brown hare without that.

She decided to see if it'd react to her attacking it with a Spell but she didn't want it to know where she was if it shrugged it off. She was confident in her sprinting speed now and she was a good hundred meters from the hare so it'd have to be leagues above her in essence levels for its mana sense to reach her.

She started grinning once she remembered one of the modifications she found one night, she was playing with the Light Rune which let out a soft light and was trying to make it move by itself. The problem was that she only knew the Launch and Rapid Launch Runes for moving Spell matrixes so she could at most make the light fly on a linear path in a preset direction.

Now, the thing she found was that the Launch Rune had a range and after reaching it it'd stop and so she decided to chain a few Launch Runes together to see what would happen. It took a few nights of experimenting but she managed to make the floating light zig-zag through the air before dissipating.

She started forming the runes for the Water Blade Spell but added four Launch Runes at the end of it plus a Delay Rune. She calibrated the latter to only release the spell matrix once only the final Launch Rune remained.

Her grin was stretching from ear to ear as she expectantly let go of her hold on the Runes and soon enough the slightly glowing bundle of mana which was the spell matrix sped through the air. The first three Launches got it to around a hundred meters from the hare but on the side opposite to Kali, there the Delay Rune released and the familiar crescent blade of water formed quickly from the snow.

Kali stared expectantly at the Spell, eager to see its effect. Once the blade was formed it quickly shot off straight at the animal, cutting a few thin branches on its way which alerted the hare. Kali saw it turn away from her, showing its back to her as it looked towards the approaching blade which was only 40 or so meters away from it.

Damn that's too slow, should have Overcharged it.

Still, it was a good distraction even if the hare could dodge it. She quickly started casting again, this time a Twin-Kinetic Strike since it was nearly imperceptible without mana sense, calculations flashed through her mind as she calculated the angles needed so the two parts of the spell would strike at the beast from left and right.

Her speed was noticeably faster than before, her mana flowed faster, Runes were easier to form and the equations were just a bit quicker to solve. She activated the Spell just as she saw the animal twitch, with the blade of water being only a few meters away from bisecting it.

The Kinetic spell struck it right after the matrix left her hold, the animal stumbled from the bone-crushing force that slammed into its sides and just as Kali was about to celebrate her victory its horn shone and an iridescent beam of light leapt off of it.

The Water Blade collided with the radiant beam and got swallowed by the radiant light, Kali narrowed her eyes at the brightness and saw a bucketful of water reach the hare but it was more of a shower than a deadly attack by then, leaving the animal drenched but very much alive.

The animal stumbled around a bit, shivering as the water in its fur started freezing. As Kali observed the animal as it stumbled around frantically, seemingly the Kinetic Strikes hurt it enough to make it limp.

As her confidence started to mount the hare did something unexpected, well she could have expected it but she didn't think of it. The crystalline horn started shining and dozens of beams shout out of it, they were only as thick as her fingers but with how many of them there were she would be in danger.

She crouched low, crawled over to a thicker tree and hid behind its trunk. The continuous beams of light incinerated leaves, branches and anything that had the misfortune of being in their way. They flailed around randomly, striking in every which direction while the hare stood still.

Kali watched a branch as thick as her wrist fall after it has been cut off, her eyes widened as she saw the beam that did that head straight towards the tree she was behind. Everything happened so fast she didn't have much time to evaluate the strength of the beams so all she could do was hope for the best.

She crouched low behind the trunk and conjured the costly Shadow Cloak Spell to coat her body, she didn't think it'd stop the beam by much if it could cut through her water blade and the tree trunk but it was better than just praying for the best.

The beam reached the tree, incinerating its leaves and branches with a scorching hiss and a moment later Kali heard the trunk give off the same, haunting sound. She screwed her eyes shut and hugged herself tightly.

The agonisingly long fraction of a second the beam spent pointed at the tree passed and Kali cracked open one of her eyes. *Oh, I don't hurt, arms? Ok! Legs? Ok! Head? My hair is burning! Oh, f--*

She grabbed a handful of snow and coated her smoldering locks in it, snuffing out the fire. That's when she heard a crack above her and only because of her improved acuity did she understand that a rather sizable branch was just about to fall on her head in time to leap into a roll across the snow.

The branch fell and struck the ground with a thrum but it was lost in the hundreds of other branches falling and thinner trees also following along. Kali was breathing quickly, the adrenalin making her a bit jumpy as her gaze snapped in every which direction before she decided to go a bit further away from the hare.

She grabbed the spell matrix of the Shadow Cloak and forced it to disperse as she thought the hare would have to run out of mana at some point, offensive Light spells were horrendously expensive as far as she knew not to say complicated. They were usually not included in the repertoire of apprentice Elementalists like herself.

She stuck close to the ground, hoping that her snow-white clothes and hair would do what they were supposed to do for once and conceal her contour in the snow.

She suddenly flattened herself to the ground, letting a beam pass just centimeters above her head. *Fuck, that was close!*

She quickened her steps and threw herself behind a protruding rock and not two seconds later three beams converged on it, making the snow vaporize but the stone didn't give way. Kali let out a sigh of relief, *It saw me, what do I do???*

The three beams turned into five, then ten and slowly the dozens of beams started to converge on her hiding position. She was a good 150 meters away from the stationary hare but she could tell that it was facing straight towards her with her spatial hearing.

It didn't move an inch though but the stone hiding her was starting to give off disturbing, hissing sounds and Kali started to feel her surroundings start to heat up. It wasn't fast and far from unbearable, the temperature had to crawl up from -20 Celsius so it'd take some time.

Breath in; 1, 2, 3, 4,

Hold it in; 5, 6, 7,

Let it out; 8,

She calmed herself while muttering the instructions for the breathing exercise in her mind, her heartbeat was still soaring through the air but at least her breathing was calm and she could think more clearly. She'd have to get used to the stress of fighting if she wanted to survive out here. *Panicking is unacceptable!*

Just wait you little shit, let's see who can fry the other first!

01 - 09 A mighty foe and gravity

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 150]

[Mana Capacity: 56.92]

[Essence Requirement: 9.3]

Kali felt her anger boiling inside of her, a *hare* even if magical it was still just a *hare* and it was making *her* crawl on the ground like an insect. *Who does it think it is??!* She fuelled her anger into a Fireball which greedily ate 20% of her mana and shot off in the same zig-zag pattern she used with the Water Blade, she had to add another Launch at the end too as she was so far away but those Runes barely cost anything so it was fine.

She heard a few of the beams split off from the rest trying to melt through the rock providing her shelter, they each closed in on the fireball mid-flight and much to her astonishment when the two collided at around 40 meters from the hare the spell exploded prematurely.

The spell thunderously exploded and carbonized a tree and scorched the ground beneath it but the hare would at most have a bleeding ear from the loud sound. Kali bit her lips in frustration, she was down to 65% and her most powerful spell achieved nothing.

She somewhat hoped that her foe would end like its predecessor, the frost wolf and get one-shotted by this Spell but reality didn't want to play along today. *Whatever, it's not like you win just because of this!*

Just to test it she covered the rock with a Shadow Cloak to see what would happen and it was both better and worse than what she expected. The rock turned from its

rough grey color to an utter black, absorbing all light touching it but not 10 seconds later she already felt the spell matrix still held in her palm strain.

It held for another five seconds before it dissipated and the rock returned to its original color, the scorching hiss she associated with the beams melting through it resumed right after.

This means I can shield myself but not for long, Kinetic Spells are the only ones it can't see but I don't think those will be enough to kill it, I'll need to get closer to make sure my spell hits before it can intercept it with a beam.

She peeked out from behind the rock before retreating quickly from a diverging beam, combined with the glances she got and her spatial hearing she started noting every rock, mound and tree that could serve as a cover while she closed in on the hare.

It was dangerous though, she sat on the ground with her back against the rock. In front of her lay an easy route of escape, all she had to do was give up on killing the hare, on getting its Core, and give up on fighting and getting stronger.

Her gaze hardened at the thought, *no, NO!*

She didn't give up her peaceful life to hide under a tree, shivering in fright at the thought of a random *rabbit* turning up and killing her with a thought. She gave safety up once, running away now would be spitting in the face of her resolve.

I will kill it!

Shadow Cloak wasn't complicated, it was just mana intensive so casting it was quick and effortless, the only thing it was straining to was her Core but which was alright, she didn't need to hold it in place for long just until she got from one cover to the next.

Maybe she assume wrong and countering offensive Light Spells was the purpose of the Shadow Cloak and not helping her sneak around at night. Thoughts for later.

She couldn't hold two spell matrixes under her hold so she wouldn't be able to cast anything else while she held onto the Cloak. It was a spell Rather different from her other ones as it had a Mana Gathering Rune in it which would siphon any mana she let out of her Core while she held the matrix.

It was a slight strain on her mind to keep it up but it was inconsequential, she could visualize Runes only using her mind which was much harder than mentally holding a bundle of active mana.

She breathed in deeply, let it out and covered herself in shadows. She dashed out from behind the rock and heard the beams starting to follow after her, light should be precise and fast but while it reached its destination in no time, moving it seemed to tax the animal.

She reached the first of her planned covers but she continued onwards, only a single beam managed to touch her cloak and the matrix was still stable, no need to stop and recast the spell in that case.

Her hair whipped around in the wind as she rushed for the next cover, it was only 20 meters away from her when three beams caught up with her one after the other and started burning through her cloak. She felt the matrix strain but it could hold on for 15 seconds under the combined assault of dozens of the same beams.

It'll hold.

She had to zig-zag through the maze of thinner trees that would give much resistance to the beams and held them fall over as the beams following her cut them in half, she jumped over a large bush with tasty-looking berries and landed on the other side, dampening her fall with an elegant roll through the snow which got her right behind the thick trunk of a dead tree.

It looked like lightning struck it maybe a week ago as it still had some greenish leaves among the bundles of dead, yellowish ones.

This one looks very flammable, I need to hurry!

She dissipated her previous cloak and re-casted the spell, she felt the new cloak coat her body with a thin film of mana, even covering her eyes and leaving her blind to the world around her but Kali was an elf, her spatial hearing guided her better than a bat's echolocation could ever guide it.

This Spell was either made for higher level mages who had much larger range on their mana sense or purely for species like elves who weren't overly reliant on their eyesight.

Kali didn't waste any time and sprung back into action, feeling a few of the beams that were burning through the dead tree prick at her cloak before she left them behind her.

She strained her legs and focus to dash as fast as she could on the slippery ground, she jumped, rolled and slid between covers, closing in on her *prey*. 130 meters from the dead tree went down to 90 then 50.

She didn't immediately spring back into action once she reached her latest cover which was another protruding rock, she could get close to the rabbit but what use would that be if she couldn't cast spells? She could stab it with her knife but that was too risky, she'd rather stay with shooting it with spells.

For now, she was curious what'd happen if she managed to move the stationary hare around a bit so with a smirk she launched a Kinetic Hammer Spell at the animal. She aimed it so it'd hit it from behind so it didn't collide with any of the beams it now concentrated on the rock.

She didn't know what to expect but the pain-filled animalistic shriek that she heard stunned her a bit, she'd just given the animal some upwards momentum so it shouldn't be feeling any pain.

She peeked out from behind her cover and saw the hare reach the apex of its flight around a hundred meters above ground and it started to descend but it was twitching and shrieking like it'd just been struck by lightning.

She noted that it wasn't shooting beams anymore. She narrowed her eyes to focus on the fast animal turned projectile and her eyes widened soon after. *Backlash!*

She realized what it was from the clues in a moment based on the many much too descriptive tales of her teacher, she thought he was enjoying watching her squirm in discomfort as he went on and on about what kind of effects backlashes could have based on many different circumstances.

The horned monster was now quickly approaching the ground but it wasn't shrieking anymore and was visibly trying to make its landing smoother as it descended. *We can't have that!*

Another Kinetic Hammer was formed, activated and sent at the animal, making its attempts at landing gracefully futile as its velocity multiplied. She didn't see the end effect but the landing was more of a *thump* than the *splat* she expected.

It's a magical beast, it ought to be tougher than a normal hare.

She stalked through the snow, making sure to have something in between herself and where her spatial hearing was picking up the movements from the hare, it seemed like it survived its crash landing though its footsteps were uneven while its breathing was heavy and pained.

She sent a bit of her mana sense into her Core and noted that it was a bit more than halfway full, seeing as she still had that much she decided to see how the hare was doing with a Twin Kinetic Strike. She twitched her ears and felt more than heard through her spatial hearing as the animal twitched its body at the last moments to dampen the impact of the Spells.

That was around half a percent worth of mana and it did much better than any of my stronger spells, oh well you can have some more then!

Since it was working and the spell was so cheap she sent them one after the other, always making it so the two strikes would assault the beast from different directions just to make dodging that much harder. All the while she was sneaking closer to it as the animal was becoming more and more frantic.

She soon reached the closes hiding place to the animal she could get to without alerting it, she laid down on her stomach and peeked out from under the low-hanging branches of a Spruce touching the ground. The top half has been cut off but the bottom was proving to be a great hiding place.

Now that her assault halted for a bit the animal was looking around, its nose twitching and its ears raised in an alert but it failed to find her. Kali didn't know why a herbivore like a hare wouldn't just escape from dangerous combat like this but having a Core must have changed its behaviour in some way.

At the end of the day, it was still just an animal, a strong one that could shoot beams of light that could kill her but still just a beast.

She started thinking about her options, first was waiting which she already decided she wouldn't do, it seemed like a cheap tactic that wouldn't help her much in the long run aside from the essence, the experience of fighting to the death was an important thing in all of her adventure novels.

Plus that tactic also risked the hare running away as it realized it was going to die, a beast had to have some sort of survival instinct.

She'd have to kill it, the question was just how she was going to do it. Attrition with Kinetic Strikes was one and she was willing to resort to that but she wanted to try a cleaner method first, she'd still have enough mana remaining afterward.

With that decision her gaze hardened as she stared at the hare, she stuck one of her palms out from under the tree and held it close to the ground, soon she formed a modified Water Blade Spell and let it collapse into the spell matrix which she let go of.

Unlike before, after the spell formed the familiar crescent shape out of the mana-enhanced water it just floated in the air but Kali started a countdown in her head. The Delay Rune she incorporated before the Overcharged Launch one would let it go exactly 10 seconds later with how much mana she filled it with.

At five she started forming another Spell, a Kinetic Hammer this time and released it right as she counted 2 in her head. The Spell struck the animal and gave it enough velocity to send it flying for a hundred meters but the direction of that momentum was the ground this time.

The hare was forced onto the ground by the force of her spell, it must have felt like it had just landed from jumping out of a tower but then she counted zero in her head and the Water Blade shot off from next to her hiding spot and slashed into the prone beast.

Kali grimaced at the pitiful whimper the hare let out but the sound of flesh and bones being rent apart by her Spell took its place and she could no longer hear any noise from the hare after that.

She crawled out from her hiding place and carefully made her way over to the fallen beast, all of her senses told her that the animal was motionless but it didn't hurt to be careful, just a minute ago it was busy melting through a rock after all.

She soon saw the remains of the animal which was bisected rather cleanly by her spell which continued to cut into the frozen ground for a few centimetres before it turned back into normal water.

As she stared down at the second magical beast she managed to best she thought back on the fight, 'revision is the greatest teacher after me' Zadkiel used to say and Kali took his words to heart. She liked to revise her knowledge and test herself so all the things she learned wouldn't fade from her mind so quickly.

A fight was no different, revision was even more important. She went through what she could have done differently or what she could have used to her advantage.

She didn't have to think much as her fight was less than efficient or pragmatic but she wasn't willing to choose attrition if she could end the fight quickly and more importantly with cooler spells. *Yeah, Kinetic spells are cool and all but until I can see their effect Water Blade and Fireball remain superior in my mind.*

The one part she was confused about was the backlash, she didn't understand why exactly the animal had a backlash from her throwing it. From what she learned it could only occur when the mage is activating the Spell, if the Runes were formed wrong or if their order was wrong or if the mana was too much, too little or one of the hundreds of other mistakes one could make when casting the spell won't result in an easy to control spell matrix but in a chaotic bundle of mana that wreaks havoc inside the body of the mage.

Because of that the more mana a Spell uses and the more complex it is the more dangerous casting it gets for a mage. Many use chanting because of this, you can tell much more easily if you misspoke a word than whether a single Rune out of a thousand is off by a few degrees or something small and seemingly inconsequential like that.

Her Spells were all rather low in both mana cost and complexity with two as the outliers but the rest were spells any aspire Apprentice level Elementalist should know according to 'How to Become a Mage for morons', a book she also got from Zadkiel.

She knew that her Shadow Cloak spell wasn't apprentice level but that was just recorded in handwritten notes at the back of it along with the improved Fireball spell she still used but the rest of her spells along with most of her knowledge rudimentary, meant to be given only to those starting out as mages.

Time to get my prize.

She crouched down in the middle of the gore, her face twitching in disgust so she focused her attention on her mana sense, it only reached one meter away from her skin but it'd help her find the Core without searching through entrails even if it had not much use outside of that.

She closed her eyes and sank into her senses, she tried to cut off her regular senses to let her focus on her underdeveloped mana sense but it was proving to be harder than she thought. The soft feelings and sensations she got through this sense were hardly comparable to the strong and precise information she got from her hearing for example.

She's had mana sense before but it barely reached a centimetre away from her skin, she tried to recall how she used that but she never had much use of that either. She just used it to check how much mana was in her core and how to control how much mana she was channeling into Runes.

Although it was annoying the challenge was something she welcomed. If she couldn't numb her senses she'd have to do it some other way, she pulled on a bit of her mana and started guiding it through her body. The bundle of energy swam around according to her will unobstructed, flowing into her arms then her chest and then down into her stomach and expanding into her legs.

She pulled it back into her stomach and formed it into a ball of energy, she started spinning the energy around itself, and she focused on it, only this ball of mana was important at that moment. Her eyes closed and her breathing stopped, her hearing remained but she pushed it into the back of her mind as she focused solely on the feeling of the mana swirling under her control.

Slowly she extracted a small stream of mana from it and guided it toward her skin, her hold on it strained a bit as she approached the former border of her control but

she stubbornly forced ahead. The small stream of mana held her entire focus as it passed through her skin and started to rapidly dissipate while she desperately tried to keep a hold of it.

It felt like she was trying to hold onto a bucketful of water with only one of her hands, the small stream of mana fractured and slipped through her control, rejoining the ambient mana outside of her body.

Why is it so much easier to hold onto Spell matrixes?

Ah, Whatever!

Another entry into 'The endless list of Kali's unanswered questions~'.

She banished her annoyance to the back of her mind, there was a task at hand and her focus was straying. Her goal was to sense the mana more precisely in her expanded mana sense.

She could get glimpses at the ambient mana and she could kind of make out the fleeting wisps that were not so long ago held within her grasp. Right now she saw on the macro scale, she saw waves in the ambient mana and smaller currents as they came close to her and gently brushed against her body before twisting away again.

But what she wanted wasn't on the macro scale, she wanted individual bundles of mana and not what hundreds of those made up together. So she focused and guided a trickle of her mana through her skin and out into the world and with each try she managed to keep track of the fleeting wisps for longer.

Her control of mana also got better if not by much as she managed to hold her mana under her control for longer even once it was outside of her body.

She got lost in the influx of dopamine hitting her with each small accomplishment.

This is what I love about magic!

01 - 10 Mana Sense and The King of Winter

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 170]

[Mana Capacity: 90.2]

[Essence Requirement: 15.2]

She almost forgot why she was even doing this, she was just so absorbed in the practice and the slow but steady improvement.

With each try, she got noticeably better when she snapped out of her trance by an especially frigid breeze touching her skin and sending a shiver down her spine she managed to make a small ring of mana orbiting her body.

Unfortunately along with the shiver went her focus and the glowing blue ring dissipated into the air.

Right, the Core! Stupid!! How could you forget it?

With the practice still fresh on her mind she easily managed to find the Core of her erstwhile foe, it was glowing brightly to her mana sense and made the otherwise beautiful field of ambient mana dull. She picked it up and summoned a bucketful of water with a quick cast to clean the gore off of it.

It was a little thing barely bigger than her thumb and its surface was rugged, compared to the Core she got from the wolf this one looked flimsy and rather underwhelming but to Kali, it was just as beautiful. The previous was a bit weird, all books describe monster cores as being rather small and rugged-looking crystals with only mythical beasts like gryphs and such having ones as large as a human head.

She stared at the little crystal, wanting to absorb it right then and there but she remembered what the last one made her experience. She didn't want to write on

the blood and entrail-soaked snow if she could help it so she walked over to a nice-looking tree not too far away which had most of its branches close to the ground burnt off.

She huddled in close to its trunk so the higher branches would give her some cover of the took long. She never once removed her gaze from the glimmering crystal since she first touched and she continued staring at it as a small tendril of mana extended from her Core and got pushed into the crystal.

She felt a rush of emotions run through her as her mana sense expanded into the crystal, she began to giggle a little as the emotions washed through. The essence that began to trickle into her carried with it a sense of accomplishment which made her thrilled for some reason but soon the trickle turned into more of a steady stream and the pure joy of accomplishment transformed into the addicting pleasure she experienced previously.

"Hmmm," she hummed in satisfaction as it washed over her but the scale of it all was nowhere near her previous experience. She didn't care about that at the moment, she was much too occupied with the moment that ended all too quickly.

She opened her eyes languidly and stared down at the crystal which was surprisingly still there.

"Huh?" she blinked at it, her mind still a bit muddled but she recovered herself in a few seconds. She got two handfuls of snow and smeared them over her cheek before giving them a light slap.

"Alright~" she was still giddy from the afterglow of the experience but she was also curious about why the crystal didn't dissipate like the other one.

She extended a tendril of mana just like before into it and felt that while no more Essence was forthcoming the thing was still filled with mana. Not a small amount either as it felt five times as much as her current maximum stores which she'd still have to test to know exactly how much she improved.

"Hmm, don't most people use mana as a currency?" she remembered that little tidbit from her economics lectures even though she tried hard to wipe all lessons from her memory maybe some of it was useful to her now.

Of course, large transactions were always in heavily regulated coins enchanted to be irreplicable because mana was far too unstable of a currency to use but it worked for day-to-day stuff and most people even preferred it after all mana was strength and strength was safety.

She sprung to her feet, feeling reinvigorated from draining the core of its essence, she pocketed the crystal and headed towards the mountain peak. She still had a mountain to scale.

She hiked up the mountain with a spring in her steps and a smile on her face, being especially sneaky went out the window with that fight. When she glanced back once she saw burned and demolished trees in a 200-meter radius around where she killed the hare.

She was only a few hundred meters down from the peak in altitude when she decided to check how much her Core has grown, she sent her senses into it and focused on that feeling just like she's done when she searched for the core.

She remembered how her Core felt before absorbing the crystal and compared it to how it felt now, *hmmm, around a 60% increase overall, that's nowhere near the previous one but that's still crazy.*

She could understand why people risked their lives to get these Cores, compared to waiting months for her Core to transmute mana into essence stealing it from others was much faster. Even if she tried to keep her mana as close to full as she could since her 15th birthday when she first learned the Mana Gathering Rune, her levels only increased a handful of times since the Ritual.

I need a way to measure it more accurately, it would be great to know how far I am from the first milestone.

Level 200 would be great to reach before entering any settlement, but she didn't know if that would take only a few more hunts or hundreds. The Frost Wolf should not be the norm and even the hare gave so much essence, climbing through the levels should be a slog, not a sprint.

She didn't exactly know *why* it was such an important milestone but she knew that mages beyond it were leagues beyond those that weren't and it was the same with the other two milestones at level 300 and 400. It had something to do with their mana becoming more potent but that is as much as she managed to glean from her teacher's convoluted tales.

The last trek of her journey proved to be more boring than she expected, up here the trees were only spots in the distance and only a few bushes could grow here and even those looked just like mounds of snow at the moment. Said snow was reaching her thighs now and she opted for traveling with short jumps instead of waddling through it.

She slipped a few times but quick casts of the Arcane Foothold always caught her in time when she was about to become a snowball rolling back down the mountainside.

An hour later she stood proudly at the top of the world, or so she felt at least.

This is great!

She could see so far away, valleys, smaller peaks, rivers, and forests. The picturesque view almost made her feel like she should have become a painter just to immortalize the moment.

The skies were clear with only a few clouds swimming along up there and she could even see the twin moons. The deep blue moon floated in the front, clearly visible even in the midday sun with the smaller crimson moon only peaked out from behind it like a little brother hiding behind his dependable elder sister.

They were called Aarendilith and Thalorandor in the ancient elven tongue, standing for graceful sister and wrathful brother. The old language went out of use some centuries ago but Kali thought it sounded much more beautiful than the 'common' that most nations used today.

Some secluded villages and tribes still only spoke that elegant language and Kali hoped to meet one of those one day, 'common' was a human language but she had to admit that it was simple, even the dumbest farmer could learn to speak it with a bit of effort in a month or so if only to sell his wares and not much else.

Even the kingdom's old name of Golad'kar was going out of use and the common translation took its place, even the elven history books mostly refer to it as the Kingdom of Winter or the Mountain Kingdom. In her opinion, it was a sad state of affairs, but what could she do?

From up there she could see how in the direction the valley was going the peaks were steadily getting smaller and smaller. She couldn't see the end of the snow-covered landscape, she'd have to travel far to reach Karstirien.

She held herself back from shouting to check out the famous echo of the mountains, she'd have to get back into hiking soon but for the moment she let herself be captivated by the scenery.

She glanced behind her, the peaks grew taller and taller that was. They stood strong and unyielding, the high mountains were as frigid and ruthless as those inhabiting them and when those same people made use of said nature nobody could contest them.

The history of the kingdom was littered with hundreds of failed invasion attempts but the humans never learned. If the Spring Elves from the Primordial forests combined with the Autumn Elves of the plains failed to take the peaks from her ancestors during the ancient wars how could the humans do it?

Smaller raids were a constant according to her knowledge and every half a century the Black Army of the Emperor would march into the mountains only to return with a fraction of its size a year later. The Winter always prevailed.

Somewhere far behind all these sky-reaching mountains stood two peaks that eclipsed all others and between them stood the castle she had given up on ever seeing again. She wasn't the epitome of patriotism just like her running away from her preordained role showed but she still loved the country and her kin.

Her forlorn gaze recorded the majestic landscape of her homeland, she sat there on the peak until night arrived and the white snow gained a blue tint in the moonlight.

She stood up with a sigh and turned towards her destination, the slopes in that way were more gentle and not as unforgiving and lifeless as the large mountains behind her. *I wish I could fly or even glide, it'd make traveling so much easier...and fun.*

She huffed a bit but she resolutely began her long hike, keeping the direction in her mind so she wouldn't get lost even in the high snow while the trees obstructed her view of the horizon.

She stayed alert throughout her travel, she concealed her tracks and sometimes even backtracked to make it harder to follow her should anyone try to. When she found rivers she traveled alongside them on the frozen ground, most animals were no the wiser to her passing and the few that noticed her trusted their instincts enough to stay away from her.

She hunted once a week just before she'd sleep for eight hours before going back to traveling, her clothes kept her clean and repaired any damages and any accidents she had could be fixed with her healing bracelet.

She went on for weeks and despite never once sensing pursuers she stayed alert and ready to hide at a moment's notice. At first, it was taxing and she was collapsing by the time her weakly sleeping time arrived, but it became natural by the end.

The snowstorms grew fewer in number and gentler as she went on, the thigh-high snow blanket covering the mountains slowly grew thinner and the forests once again started to grow denser. Along the gentle slopes of these mountains whose top was the only place still covered in snow the many plants thrived unlike up on the frigid mountains.

The hardy spruce, fir and pine were starting to get mixed with trees favoring the more temperate environment. The temperature, the plants, the greenery, shrubs bushes and grass were all new sights to Kali and she felt her progress stall but she couldn't feel it bother her.

She's been diligently hiking and traveling, alert and ready all the time for more than two months. She didn't know the mountain range was this large but she knew she was getting closer to her first destination. The Winter Elves' domain ended where the snow no longer fell and with it already only gracing the mountaintops she knew she was close.

Along the way, she only managed to hunt two other magical beasts but she realized her luck must have been something else when she stumbled upon her first two as

these barely increased her mana capacity by 10% each.

From here on out she'd have a much easier time concealing her tracks and if any would-be pursuers aren't already close on her train the constant snowstorms in the mountains would cover whatever she left behind before long.

Ly'Riel

Ly'Riel looked up as she heard the doors to her room slam into the wall, the thud resounding throughout her room like a thunderous echo. There, in the doorway stood her brother, the usually composed Crown Prince seething and heaving like a beast.

"How did it go?" she asked, "What did he say?"

He took a deep breath and walked towards her, crumbling down onto the couch on the couch right next to her.

"The usual," he said distastefully, "'I'll handle it, keep to your duties'", he quoted, mimicking the Winter King's dry voice.

He grabbed at his lock of silvery hair like he was going to rip it out from the frustration, "But she isn't here, is she? She would be if he could handle it and yet she isn't."

Ly'Riel pulled her brother into a side hug, waiting for him to calm down a bit, "She'll be safe, you know how resourceful she is."

"And you know how naive she is," Rhy'Lanor glared at her, "not to say how little she knows about the world, for all, we know she will head into the damned Corvus Empire and ask for help from them to annul her engagement."

Ly'Riel flinched at the accusing tone, she knew her brother resented her choosing their father's side in almost every argument.

"That can't be," she said listlessly, "how could father have not found her yet?"

"You spent so much time with her and yet you know our sister less than I do?" asked Rhy'Lanor, more amused than anything.

"What do you mean?" she frowned at him.

"You know she had that obnoxious old Eldar as her tutor for the last five years right?" the Prince's lips curved upwards.

"...yes..." She didn't know what he was saying but she didn't like that smirk.

"You ever wondered who he was?" he asked, turning to look up at the ceiling, "I didn't, I thought Father just hired random people until one managed to stay with our little hellcat for more than a month."

"Get to it already," she said, glaring at her brother.

"Well," he sighed dramatically, "Turns out the old man came to teach her himself and had a huge fight with Father about wasting someone's potential and such," he smiled then, "I just now learned who he was from Father, he was agitated enough to curse him out with me being present."

"*Brother,*" Ly'Riel buried her elbow into his side making the man jump.

"Humpf," he snorted at her temper, "Well, turns out our darling little sister had the Arch-Mage Zadkiel as her tutor for the last half a decade and he shat on father's regulations as often as he could."

Ly'riel's jaw dropped to the floor, "bullshit," she said which only made her brother smirk again.

"Coincidentally, he left while the Castle was in chaos after *Mythral* returned."

Arch-Mage Zadkiel, one of the oldest living elves in the world and the second highest level one after the ruling Winter Kings, but unlike the he didn't cheat. He achieved his power through many millennia of study and combat and not a Ritual.

He was born back when the High Elves still ruled Iasira and lived through all the cataclysmic wars that followed.

"He didn't," Ly'Riel's eyes widened as she realized where this was going, "He wouldn't!" she nearly shouted, "Right?"

"If Father is right he most certainly would," Rhy'Lanor said calmly, "He is the foremost master of Divination on the planet, if not he then who could hide her from the sight of the Royal Divination mages?"

The Princess grit her teeth, did that old fool know how much trouble he was causing?

"Why are you so calm?" she glared at the now thoughtful Prince.

"Hmm," he brought his fingers to his chin, " why indeed? It couldn't be that now that I'm more clearheaded I find myself quite liking these circumstances we found ourselves in?"

"No," he shook his head resolutely, "I'm most certainly not happy that my little sister has a chance at freedom while protected by the most power mage of our race, that would be treasonous wouldn't it?"

"But the Alliance," Ly'Riel retorted, "and Kali could be in danger, her convoy was attacked by a Feathered Serpent of all things, you know as well how dangerous the wilds are."

"I do," he sighed, "but unlike you, I have access to our spy network too," he turned to look at her deeply, "including the one in Kashgar."

"What are you saying?" Ly'Riel frowned.

"That Kali was disturbingly on point with her thoughts about her husband-to-be."

Her face darkened, she was faithful to her Father and followed his orders. The Winter King always knew best, the Ritual made sure of that but Ly'Riel wasn't the mindless slaughterer most of their enemies thought her to be, she loved her family and her only little sister occupied an especially large part of her heart.

"How sure are you of that?" she asked, her voice as frigid as ice, "Is that information dependable?"

"Yes," the Prince whispered, his glowing blue gaze colliding with her own, "I made sure of it."

"May the ancestors guide her," Ly'Riel whispered.

Her brother snorted, "May she be finally free, ancestors be damned."

Rhy'Lanor -



01 - 11 Karstirien and Capture

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Kali was captivated by the change of scenery for a couple of days, the high mountains wracked by eternal winter were such a large contrast to the rolling hills covered in verdant green forests that she had a hard time getting used to it.

There was so much life around here, she thought the giant forest was lively with the many little animals living off of nuts and berries and the occasional predators that hid in the dense crown of the trees but this forest was a different thing entirely.

The number of animals she saw in a week back in the mountains, where she saw in a day but even if she slowed her pace she continued onwards. She wasn't sure where she should go from here but she sort of kept her direction to be *away* from the mountains.

Now it was the fifth day since she last saw snow on a distant mountain peak and only now did she see the first Karst that was the namesake of this large forest. It wasn't as large as her books described them but she reasoned that might be because she was still on the order of the ancient forest.

It was a towering mass of basalt and volcanic rock that protruded out from the ground and broke through the green ocean of leaves that was the upper canopy of the forest. It was an unusual thing to find here, considering the closest even dormant volcano was on the eastern continent but especially strong leylines tended to have some sort of effect on their surroundings.

One was the leyline that ran right under the Dragon's Spine mountain range which was home to her Kingdom and caused the eternal winter that plagued the whole region and another was this phenomenon in the forest. Her books assumed long ago

the leyline was much stronger in this region and it caused spontaneous volcanic eruptions throughout the region which left behind these majestic karsts.

While she kept most of her attention on remaining hidden and minimizing the trail she left behind a part of her mind always focused on maintaining the Mana Gathering Rune as such she managed almost fill up her Core by now, she only had around five more per cents to go but she'd leave it at that just to be safe.

I don't know if there are spells to forcefully fill up someone's Core to make it burst but there is no reason there shouldn't be.

Her good mood also stemmed from the fact that flightless birds were abundant in the forest, the dumb little things were cluelessly clucking and ambling through the undergrowth, searching for nuts and fallen-over fruits they could eat.

They weren't a new sight to Kali as they made up most of her food since she first found them, compared to the things she had to eat while traveling through the mountains these birds were a delectable feast. The lack of spices was a bit painful but Kali could only dream about spiced food for a while, *I swear I don't even remember how good food tastes after eating things I refuse to think about for months.*

The hair-brained birds were lucky today as she already ate this week, not that they'd ever know death was just around the corner for them. *They shouldn't be so tasty if they don't want to be eaten.* She huffed, what kind of survival strategy was this?

The million and one sounds of the forest were highly distracting but she was slowly but surely getting used to it, the spatial hearing worked just fine but the amount of information it got her was a bit overwhelming. Kali found herself astonished that her brain hasn't exploded yet from hearing every leaf brush against the other, every insect moving around and every little foot that crunched the fallen leaves beneath their weight.

She chalked it up to her increased level or maybe she always had it in her but just couldn't test it up on a lifeless mountain peak, nonetheless, it all distracted her from singular things in her range, things that would have alerted her before in moments now took her a bit more time due to the overwhelming information.

Her normal hearing which extended for another few kilometers was even worse, she barely recognized a few things from that sense, loud howls at night, crashing waves

of a river or thunder strikes in the distance on a stormy night.

That might have been the reason that she only now noticed the ten or so people in the process of encircling her position when it was far too late. They were still a hundred meters away from her but when she searched for them she noticed that the encirclement was already closing in.

"Fuck," she whispered and bolted towards the largest opening in the circle without a second thought.

Whoever these people were they were slow and moved around like bumbling fools compared to her. Unfortunately, she underestimated their number and it turned out that more than a hundred people were closing in on her.

Humans.

She recognized them instantly the moment she laid eyes on the first one, bulky frame, ungraceful movements, unkept appearance and a smell that could kill people. The standard description of a human in the elven vocabulary.

They more than lived up to that description with muddy brown clothes that were torn in places and their unshaven faces. She glanced at their weapons and she saw barely maintained steel swords and shoddy-looking bows.

She zig-zagged between the trees, still down on the ground as the branches were too dense in the tree crown for her to travel there quickly. She saw dozens of them around her position with a few sometimes making eye contact with her before the trunks blocked her vision of them.

She wasn't a master strategist but she was in deep shit, encirclement was always bad and in historical battles they usually counted as a victory and then she didn't even count with the number of enemies that came just for her. *WHY?!*

She was agitated but she kept her focus on her objective, she searched for a weak link in the now close encirclement, that man is limping, the next one is short, that woman is half blind oh that one is malnourished.

In the end, she chose the limping one, he had a shoddy sword in hand and stared vigilantly into the woods, he didn't even see the attack coming as a Kinetic Strike slammed into his chest and sent him crashing into a bush. His shirt was starting to get bloody and Kali felt slightly sheepish at the much too-strong attack.

He will die, *so he should.*

She leapt over the half-dead man and dashed into the forest, trying to focus on all the conversations and curses the humans were shouting.

"Fuck, WHERE IS THE BITCH?" was the most common one if she disregarded the many different curses, half of which she heard for the first time.

"SHE GOT OLAF!" one shouted from close behind her.

"CATCH HER, YOU MORONS!" this one was much louder than the rest and got many of the people behind her to give chase.

They were fast, faster than normal humans had any right to be but she was an elf, she'd outrun them any day of the week. She almost sighed in relief as she started putting significant distance between herself and the humans in only a few short seconds but then all her muscles contracted and she fell forwards midstep.

She found herself landing face-first in the dirt, she got a mouthful of mud and grass but that was all secondary to the overwhelming pain wracking her whole body. It was like getting burnt at every part of her body at once, both inside and out, all of her nerves were on fire and it was hard to think straight.

She writhed on the ground but she didn't feel it as her skin got scrapped on barks or rocks. The pain didn't abate but she was ever so slowly regaining some semblance of thought and when she did she soon realized the problem, a foreign spell matrix was inside her body and discharging something straight into her.

With a feral scream, she threw a torrent of mana at the abominable spell and banished it from her body, the pain stopped but she was still twitching in agony. All her muscles ached and her nerves protested even existing, with all of her willpower she forced the Illusion Ring to hide her but before she could she felt something grab onto her throat and lift her into the air by it.

"Slippery little bitch," a gruff voice entered her ears but she could barely understand it, from overwhelming agony to momentary respite and now she couldn't breathe. She kicked and flailed but all that earned her was the hand around her throat tightening as a fist stuck her in the stomach, pushing any air that might have been in her lungs out and making her cough but with the rough fingers constricting her airways she couldn't even do that as her eyes started to leak tears onto her cheeks.

"Stop that, knife-ear," in the back of her mind she recognized the grin leaking into the voice of the man, "I wouldn't want to damage you too much."

The only reason she hasn't passed out by now was her increased level and the elven physiology but even then her brain needed oxygen which it wasn't getting. Her vision was blurry and her mind started to go numb along with her attempts at clawing at the hand holding her throat.

Her mind slipped into darkness in utter horror and nightmares tormented her all the way through.

Her small feet gave off soft echoes as she ran through the dark hallways of the Castle, each of her steps annoyingly kicked her nightgown up but Mommy said ladies wore those at night so she didn't change it for shorts.

She hugged Tibbers close to her chest so he would protect her if any ghosts attacked her from the shadows, Tibbers was a strong teddy bear so she was safe for sure.

She got closer to her parent's bedroom, her ultimate destination where she would snuggle in between them. She didn't understand why she had to sleep alone since her birthday but Mommy always allowed her to sleep with her if she looked cutely at her.

She heard crashing sounds echoing, a fist struck wood and the wood easily gave way. Kha'Lythria slowed her steps, she was scared, those sounds came from Daddy's work room but he never got angry. Was he fighting someone? She had to help!!

Tibbers let's go save Daddy!

She sneaked towards the source of the sound and it was the workroom where Daddy always stayed, he spent even most nights there.

As she got closer she heard shouts and screams.

"You did WHAT?!" one of the voices shrieked, filled with indignant rage and she barely recognized it as her gently Mommy's voice.

"I HAD NO CHOICE!" another shouted, this one was desperate and just as furious.
Daddy?

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN ASK ME," her mother screeched, "...not even her."

The second part was barely a whisper and she didn't hear most of it.

"There is no other way," he heard the simmering fury in her father's tone, it made her stumble a bit.

"I refuse," her mother whispered and the little girl heard her clearly now, she was just outside of the slightly ajar door.

They aren't in danger, but they are angry, but Tibbers can't beat that up. I should go back to sleep instead.

"What?" her father's tone was cold and questioning.

"I SAID I REFUSE ARAWN," her Mommy screamed at the top of her lungs again.

"I REFUSE TO RAISE MY DAUGHTER TO BE A WHORE FOR A HUMAN."

Kali awoke with a gurgled scream, sitting up quickly despite her whole body being in pain, especially her throat for some reason. She hit her head into something and that sent her back to lying on the ground.

She tried to massage her poor head but she couldn't move her arms from behind her. *What?*

Oh no no no no no no

"BOSS SHE'S AWAKE!"

Motherfucker, why are you so damned loud?!

She would have screamed it into his face were it not for the cloth that served as a gag that was in her mouth. She pulled her arms and they strained painfully against ropes around her wrists, she opened her eyes nervously and was greeted by iron bars.

Her head was still spinning a little from hitting it with full force against the hard iron but she was already panicking. *What? Why? Where?*

Then the memories about the encirclement, the agony and the man that choked her returned in a tidal wave of pain assaulting her head. The headache quickly subsided but she was frantically looking around, humans dressed like unwashed peasants in torn clothes were shoving each other's unshaven and dirty faces out of the way so they could get a look at her.

She couldn't see beyond the hundreds of humans crawling around her small cage, looking at her like some sort of exhibition animal. She blinked but the situation was clear, her panic was still going strong but it was shimmering underneath, letting her think somewhat clearly.

Shit, the artifacts.

She glanced down at her hand, feeling dread crawling up her spine as she saw nothing on it, no bracelet and no rings, *but ... I feel them.*

She slowly grabbed her palm with her other hand, acting like it was a nervous fidget. She felt them on her hand but she couldn't see them, her gaze locked on her left ring finger where the Illusion ring should be and she had a slight idea what was happening.

She calmed somewhat but her situation wasn't much better, her clothes were gone and only some rags were left in their place, the dread returned in full force but she didn't feel any soreness between her legs. She slumped powerlessly against the bars,

staring through the upper ones at the sky above, it was a much better sight than these unwashed barbarians surrounding her.

"MAKE WAY FUCKHEADS!" Kali shivered as she recognized the gruff voice of the man that choked her.

The ocean of people parted and a large human standing a head above the rest was revealed, he was wearing leather armor which looked somewhat well made compared to the torn clothes most of the others wore. He had long brown hair and a bushy beard that covered his neck, his tar black eyes stared at Kali showing no empathy beneath them.

Kali broke eye contact first, instead staring at her feet and she heard the man chuckle at her meek demeanor.

"Welcome to your temporary home," his voice carried an openly mocking tone, "I hope our accommodations don't disappoint a noble elf like yourself."

Based on how weird his men looked at him he intentionally spoke in an exaggerated manner just to mock her but most of it flew above Kali's head. She wasn't a Noble, she was a Royal but maybe that was just his sarcasm? Kali barely knew anything about how humans interacted with each other, she only paid attention to their history and the wars they'd fought.

She knew he was mocking her though and that was enough, she huddled into the far corner of her cage and put her legs between herself and the man, burying her face in her knees. Her initial panic was still there but so was the cold fury at being so humiliated like this, she was an object to them or even less.

'Fooling your enemy is the first step to victory, if they underestimate you you already have the advantage' She repeated her brother's words, he's taught her a few times about military history and strategy, but neither stuck her as something she would excel in but neither did she loath them like politics or ethics.

Some things stuck with her and this one might save her here if she played her cards right.

"LOOK AT ME WHEN I'M TALKING TO YOU TRASH" the man shouted and Kali felt agony overwhelm her body again as she collapsed into a twitching pile of limbs, the pain withdrew quickly now, leaving her sobbing silently on the ground as her eyes teared up, "If you don't want another one look at me you knife eared whore."

Slightly shaking, Kali raised her gaze and met the monster's black eyes. She trembled in fear as she saw him grin at her miserable state but she was sure he had no idea what she was thinking, *don't Fireball him, don't Fireball him, don-* While it would surely be cathartic she didn't know if she could escape the cage and if she couldn't she would be turned into an elven porcupine soon after by the man's vengeful subordinates if not worse.

"We will have a pleasant time together if you understand your place," he chuckled, "from now on you are my pet, my slave, you sit when I tell you and you jump when I call, am I understood?"

Kali nodded meekly, forcefully banishing the half-formed Runes of the Fireball Spell that she formed without thinking.

"AND TO ALL OF YOU FUCKWITS NO TOUCHING THE ELF, NO HURTING THE ELF AND MOST CERTAINLY NO FUCKING THE ELF OR I'M GOING TO MAKE WHAT I DID TO HER LOOK LIKE A PLEASANT MASSAGE, AM.I.UNDERSTOOD.?!"

"YES, BOSS!" the morons shouted back at the threat, making Kali flatten her ears against her head at the loud noise.

"You even get food and water if you behave well," the man turned back to her, "Aren't I generous?"

Kali averted her gaze, the urge to burn him to ash resurfacing with a vengeance.

"What did I tell you before?" his smile was frozen on his hairy face, his hand extending towards her cage in a similar gesture that sent her writhing in pain before.

"Mghf,"*Yes!* she answered in a panic but only a muffled sound went through the gag. That pain was by far the worst she has ever felt and she had burned her skin off more than once.

"Good," he nodded, "Just a little gift to remember me by."

Son of a bi-

Her scream cut off her train of thought as her muscles spasmed and her nerves burned.

"I'm Mortis by the way," he said with a smile as he watched her suffer, "I hope we get along well."

Kali's mind fled and her thoughts descended into darkness as she lost consciousness, her body twitching for another ten minutes before the spell wore off.

01 - 12 Captivity and Meditation

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Kali next woke up to someone poking her with a stick. She cracked her eyes open with a groan and glanced down at the long wooden stick poking at her boobs and then up at the human holding it. *Just great!*

Her body still ached and the position she slept in wasn't the best nor that her arms were tied together behind her back. She almost forgot to act meek due to the annoyance but she caught herself before a Kinetic Strike could end the bloodline of this moron.

"Food and water," the unwashed man said, glancing down at the stuff in his hands then back up at her again, "I'll remove the gag but Boss said I can hit you if you speak even a word."

With a last poke at her boobs, he pushed the refreshments into her cage and went around to be able to reach her head through the bars, "Stay still."

Kali did so, more out of curiosity than due to the order, she only ate a day or so ago so she could go another five days without it at least. Why didn't they want her to speak tho? Did they think she'd charm them or something?

Disgusting, I'd rather die.

She shivered in revulsion as the goon's calloused fingers brushed against her face to untie the cloth blocking her mouth, *Get on with it asshole!*

He painfully slowly managed to untie it after which Kali spat out whatever they stuck into her mouth too. Distasteful humans couldn't even use normal gags.

"Remember no speaking or *chanting* whatever the fuck that is," the resident moron ordered, "I'll tell the Boss if you try."

Kali trembled for real this time, whatever that spell was the pain it caused was horrendous. Now that she thought about it it must be some sort of Arcane Spell, maybe one using Lightning as an elemental base, if the spell matrix only activated once inside her body and then it started dumping electricity into her nervous system that might cause pain like that.

Damnit, I should have sensed it when it got within a meter of me!

She eyed the goon for a bit, her arms still tied together behind her and then the food he put on the other side of the cage, at least it wasn't too cramped, it was around two meters long and one wide while one and a half meter tall so she could huddle into one end of it or lie down without a problem, still it was a pain.

She stared at the moron as he observed her, she strained her shoulders, getting her tied wrists as far as she could then she pulled them forward under her legs. It hurt with the coarse ropes digging into her skin but it was manageable.

"Huh," the moron intoned, "I knew yall were flexible but that's crazy."

She ignored him and instead brought the small flask to her nose, smelling it. *Okay, smells like water and I can't smell anything else in it so it might not be drugged.*

She gulped down a small mouthful at first, tasting it for anything weird but when she felt the same after a few seconds she drank the rest too. *That should last for a week.*

The food was some sort of bread, she grabbed it and grimaced as the thing felt no less solid than the iron bars surrounding her. *Just great.*

Still, it was food. She bit into it, her jaw easily pushing her teeth into it and separating a small bite from the rest of the bread. *Tastes like dried mud.* She noted absently.

She huddled into the side furthest from the observing goon and kept her attention on the food while she strained her ears to listen in on anything happening around the camp. *I have to get used to the increased information, getting ambushed like that was humiliating but avoidable if only I spent time training.*

She knew she messed up hard, she's been far too thrilled at seeing such a different scenery and ecosystem than the mountains that she disregarded pragmatism and let her emotions drag her around. *Damn it, Kali you need to think to survive, this can't happen again.*

Her current situation was both humiliating and infuriating but she wasn't taking it too seriously, *that might be a problem but from what I saw only that 'Boss' of theirs is dangerous and maybe some of his elite goons but without that bullshit spell he isn't much stronger than me, plus now I know about it.*

She surveyed the camp a bit between bites, *ah soo good, this is like eating bricks.* The camp was more of a base, it had wooden houses and a shoddy wooden palisade surrounding it with guards walking around it. People were mostly gathered on benches and tables all around the place, eating, drinking and talking.

When she swallowed the last bite the annoying asshole poked her once again with his stick, now in her side which made her jump a little and hit her head again in the ceiling of the cage.

"Stuff that back into your mouth if you don't want me to do it," his stick pointed at the disgusting cloth she spat out previously but without any alternative she obeyed. She grimaced and gagged but the thing was back in its previous place, filling her mouth and blocking her tongue from moving too much.

"Now come here," he commanded, getting far too used to ordering her around, "OR do you want me to call the Boss?" he grinned at her when she didn't move an inch.

I will burn you slowly to death after I cut off your family jewels you disgusting son of a bitch.

While thinking that she reluctantly crawled over to him and laid her back on the bars, letting him tie the cloth gag around her face once again.

He gave her ears a flick once he was done which sent a shiver down her spine as she jumped away from him, she glared back at him, her gaze filled with hatred and a promise of a slow death.

"Huh?" the moron tilted his head like he didn't know how disgusting he's just been, touching an elf's ear is something you just don't do, even between lovers its a sign of trust as it is the most sensitive part of their whole body not to say very erogenous.

The asshole just shrugged his shoulders and went around collecting the flask before leaving without another word. *I need to steal that Spell from that sadistic asshole just to use it on this one.*

Kali sat down in the middle of the cage, staying as far from the bars as she could, she pulled her legs into a lotus position and closed her eyes. She's learned some meditation techniques before, hoping that their promise to 'strengthen the spirit and the mind' would help with her mana control.

She saw some improvement but the most efficient way was what she did with her mana sense when she tried to find the magical hare's core. Trying to do more and more straining exercises with mana was by far the best method she found for training.

Now she wasn't trying to train that though, she sank into a similar state as back then but instead of focusing on her mana sense she poured all of her focus into her hearing, both the regular and the spatial.

The most evident sounds came from the hundreds of humans talking, shouting, beating each other up and arguing. She paid attention to them first, making sure she heard every said word and it registered in her mind, they didn't talk about anything too important but some were discussing their last 'catch'-es.

Kali first thought all of those would be poor elves like her but it turns out runaway elves are something of a rarity, so much so that she was the first Winter Elf most of these morons saw aside from the one or two raiding parties that came down and demolished a few of their camps.

One of the bunch were survivors of one such attack and had less than kind intention towards her as a result, she noted who they were but she didn't care, none of the bandits here had anything good to say about her aside from her looks.

Back to the 'catch'-es some of the mentioned, it seemed the band of outlaws dabbled in everything they could in the forest. Mining restricted minerals in secret, hunting rare animals for their parts or capturing them to sell to some 'pompous noble in the core' as they said.

Most of their catches seemed to be juvenile magical beasts that they then sold to smugglers, Kali knew there was some sort of Rituals that could turn them into familiars but elves thought that to be a barbaric practice. Higher levelled magical beasts had enhanced intelligence and while they had to be very high level to be on par with an average elf it was possible.

Due to this elves avoided killing high levelled magical beasts.

Kali agreed with that sentiment, killing low-levelled ones was one thing but bending their minds and then cultivating their strength while they slowly became more and more intelligent was torture of the worst kind.

When she was sure that she was listening in on everyone at the camp she expanded her focus, including the buildings in which she heard numerous animals whining and clawing at their cages. She was far from the only victim of these humans, there were even a few inside those cages that sounded like people instead of animals, but what made her so different from them that she was left out here?

She then remembered some of the conversations she overheard, that while she was the first winter elf they'd caught she wasn't the first elf, they were much more familiar with the Autumn Elves that had called these forests home for thousands of years before the humans came around and conquered it.

Still, conquering some of the towns was different from taming thousands of kilometres of dense and dangerous jungle. The Elves still lived freely in many hidden villages though they were preyed on by both bandits and imperials.

Where is the lead asshole though?

She didn't hear nor sense him anywhere in the camp but she put that out of her mind soon after, he must have been out hunting.

She slowly but surely expanded her focus without extending her range further than the palisades, she included any animal sounds first and the annoying chorus of human chatter got dampened by the sounds of animal life.

She took some time to get used to it, it was so easy to miss a single sound that might signify mortal danger when it was accompanied by thousands of inconsequential sounds but then again she couldn't disregard those either. One could become invisible without too much difficulty with the assistance of magic and dampening the sound of your footsteps wasn't easy but still possible with some Air magic.

She knew that just that was one of the genetical Talents of her race, when reaching one of the milestones Winter Elves had a chance of awakening that Talent which was called Soundless, it cut off any sound around the person using it but detecting that person based on the *lack* of sound was still possible.

Zadkiel once managed to divert a lecture about genetic differences between the different elven races to talking about True Talents, she found the topic endlessly interesting too. Some True Talents couldn't be replicated by magic, according to Zadkiel that was because no mortal mage can stand up to the ingenuity of millions of years of evolution.

She stayed there, meditating and listening. She heard the humans make some rude comments about her or wondered what was wrong with her head to be so calm inside a cage but she disregarded them.

She wasn't so weak as to break from a bit of pain, her dumb body reacted instinctively but inside she felt revolted at it, she wasn't going to break from this, she refused.

She wasn't some meek autumn elf that has been living under the imperial boot, hunted like animals for centuries. She was a Winter Elf and a Royal one at that, she'd get through this and these humans will regret ever being born.

Breath, come on Kali. You are meditating, clear your mind.

She didn't pay any attention to the time, she only noticed the sun becoming gentler on her skin. When she got used to the animal sounds she slowly included natural sounds too, creaking planks and doors, and the gentle wind as it whistled between the trees.

Slowly but surely she got used to it, the natural sounds were far too numerous even if she limited the range heavily. For now, her range was reduced to half, making it around 250 meters but she was satisfied, within that it was her domain. No sound would escape her again, *if I can stay focused that is, that pain spell would mess it up quickly.*

She opened her eyes and was greeted by an evening camp as the many bandits were readying gourd patrols for the night and slowly heading into their beds.

She did learn some interesting stuff from listening in on conversations, one of which was that these humans thought that every mage needed to chant to cast spells. She didn't know what brought that misconception on but it was in her favour, they would be caught blindsided when she incinerated them with a silent Fireball.

Come to think of it didn't Master say the humans heavily restrict magical knowledge?

She thought it counterproductive but she wasn't the best at politics or sociology. Her gaze jumped all around the place, trying to take in everything she could see. The trees almost connected their branches above the houses, hiding the camp from anyone trying to locate it from above, most houses were either built from logs or planks of wood and she could tell with a glance that no architect was involved in the process of constructing them.

It was a far cry from the beautiful architecture of the Winter Castle she was used to but then again that was the seat of a King and this was a lowlife hideout, they also had dozens of these all around the forest too should either the elves or the imperials find them.

When a few of the humans headed her way Kali immediately noticed thanks to her better handling of her spatial hearing, she'd still have to work on it to bring out its full potential but it was a good start. She paid attention to them through it but didn't open her eyes, to them she might have looked like she fell asleep while sitting.

"It's such a waste," one of the morons said.

"What?" another barked back.

"I mean all of the elves we find are beauties but this one is something else," at this, she almost felt their gazes prickling her skin. *Compared to you all, a pile of dung would be beautiful too.*

"Don't even think about it," a third said despite also staring at her body intently, "I saw what the boss did when someone touched one of the elves."

"What?" the one she named moron1 who first spoke up asked.

She sensed the big one shaking his head, "Turned 'im into a rug."

"A rug?" moron2 asked.

"Yeah," said the big moron.

"Why can't we touch 'em anyway?" moron1 was playing with fire, even she could tell that.

"'Em noble cocksuckers like 'em fresh or somethin'," the big moron shrugged but what he said sent waves of revulsion through her body.

"Huh," moron one said intelligently.

"Let's just do our job and get on with it," the big moron said, "Boss'll let us play around when we raid a normal village."

Lowlife scum, preying on their own people.

To Kali's sensibilities that was deplorable, yeah her actions also might have negative effects on her kin but she was just putting herself first and not actively making anybody else's life miserable.

After that, with their byplay finished they covered her cage in some sort of cloth. Once they were further away she brushed her fingers across it to get a feel for it. *Hmm, it feels rough and somewhat sticky, is it waxed? That should work for making it a bit waterproof. Is this all that will keep the rain out if it decides to make my life even more miserable?*

That was better than nothing at least, though she couldn't tell for the life of her why she was placed in the middle of the camp, was she some sort of trophy to them? Or did it have any other use like making it harder to escape by placing her in sight of everybody?

The cloth dampened her normal hearing a bit but this just made it easier to focus on the spatial one, she didn't know how exactly it worked even Zadkiel could only make assumptions based on how they worked in what situation, despite being a bit crazy the old man wasn't mad enough to cut open elves to study them even after their death.

All he had to go on was what he could experience himself and others' recounts.

Her attention was pulled to a group entering the hideout, especially the large man leading them who she recognized to be the main asshole. He stood a head above even his 'elite' goons and was built like a bear, she started to suspect he had some Faun blood in him.

Something quickly averted her attention though, she wouldn't have noticed it before but after the group entered through the wooden gate something slipped through right before the gate crashed close. *Now this is interesting.*

01 - 13 Sneaky Intruder and Escape

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Kali focused all of her attention on the silent bubble that followed close behind the sadistic moron, she couldn't hear much but some nearly imperceptible sounds slipped through and Kali noted each and every one of them.

Whatever was keeping them silent and most likely invisible wasn't perfect. They walked around far too confidently to be visible and she didn't hear any of the 'elite' goons make a single comment about being followed.

From the few sounds that slipped through she already knew the person was good, their steps were light and barely made sounds only when he crushed the undergrowth beneath their feet. The steps were heavy, most likely not an elf then they were calculated and stalking.

She heard a deep but muffled grunt as the person pulled himself onto the roof of a log house, yes, that was a man for sure.

With the undergrowth she had a bit more trouble keeping track of him, the lack of the constant noise the leaves make in the wind was easy to follow but on the roofs, she couldn't follow that.

The wind makes noise as it touches normal wood too, it's a pain to detect that though. That was more of a background noise that she instinctually disregarded than sounds she could detect so it took active effort on her part to also pay attention to that. By the time she got a handle on that, the man was already on the other side of the camp, on top of the building housing the other captured things and people.

She heard a weird gritting noise from him. *Is he..gritting his teeth? At least that's promising... if it's not because he doesn't like the state his soon-to-be 'merchandise' is. Let's hope he finds it as abhorrent as I do.*

She was being far too optimistic she realized, let's plan for the worst and hope for the best. *What would the worst possible scenario be though? Hmm, something like him coming here to assassinate the lead moron and silence everyone else.*

Not that that's too likely, but she had to account for the chance that she would be among his targets to eliminate. Someone kidnapping her who actually knew how to subdue a mage would be even worse, she knew there were ways to drain someone's Core of mana forcefully.

That could kill people too, the Core is more than just a storage for mana.

Now back to how could she run away from or kill this person skulking around unseen in a camp of bandits that bested her, to say her chances were bad was an understatement. *They only got me because I was distracted and there were hundreds of them, it was unfair.*

She could cloak the whole cage with Spell from her Illusion ring but if he could do a similar spell but much better she couldn't count on him not seeing straight through it. Minor Illusion was far from the epitome of Illusion spells so she couldn't put too much faith into it.

Let's put fighting him as a last resort, running away in the middle of whatever chaos he will cause would be much better even if I can't make sure the head moron dies painfully.

Kali considered her options, it could be that the guy was only a scout and the spell was only an artefact, which would mean she had to escape before whoever was to raid this place with his information.

She gritted her teeth, she was spiralling down into endless 'what if'-s again which was useless. She couldn't do anything while locked inside a cage.

She still kept most of her attention on tracking the sneaky bubble of silence but she ran her fingers over the bars in the meantime, she searched for a place where it could open up and she found it on one of the small sides of the brick-shaped cage.

She twitched her ears but she couldn't feel any enchantment on the cage, nor any magical locking mechanism like her carriage had. Her fingers slid over bar after bar and on the one at the far right she found a lock, her fingers stopped on it as she felt around the blocky thing.

Did these morons really lock up an elf in a simple iron cage?

She was befuddled but the realisation that she actually didn't have any spell in her repertoire that could easily free her made her grimace. Maybe a Water blade could manage with enough overcharging and a few casts or she could try melting the lock with a Fireball.

No that'd just make it even harder to open it.

In the meantime, the intruder managed to sneak into the building and was walking around the many cages stacked atop each other reaching all the way to the low ceiling. Kali could clearly hear animals clawing at iron bars, birds poking them with their beaks and some animals just sleeping while the three elves were all sleeping deeply.

Are they drugged?

She wouldn't put it past these bandits but that begged the question, why wasn't she drugged up too? She was probably just left awake for entertainment, she assumed. To hundreds of horny humans a woman even if they couldn't touch her was a huge moral boost she thought, especially an elf.

The bubble stopped right before the three elves and Kali heard the man let out a feral growl. She wasn't sure what he did next as the silencing enchantment strengthened for a few moments but by the end of it the man was leaving the building and the three cages had their fronts ripped open.

Holy shit, he is strong...but he freed them...right?

Kali didn't dare to hope, sitting inside a cage should have snubbed out all of her overly optimistic thoughts but she was already thinking about the unseen man as a silent avenger coming to bring his wrath down on some slaving bandits.

She followed his movements and her eyes snapped open when she realised which house he was heading for, it was a bit larger than the rest and more well-built with logs making up most of it and even its roof being well made.

It was also the house she heard the bandit boss snoring, *I don't need elven ears for that, even the deaf could hear him.*

The sarcasm managed to retain her calm as she almost started to panic again, this guy was heading straight for the boss after freeing his priced merchandise. He was looking for trouble for sure and Kali's best idea so far was using a kinetic Hammer on the cage and sending herself flying outside of the camp along with it.

She wasn't sure if she could survive that but it was better than putting her fate into the hand of another.

How else could I get out of- oh, fuck where is my knife!?

She reached for her belt where she usually kept it but found nothing, her rough brown tunic that the bandits dressed her in only had a rope for a belt and the pants didn't even have pockets. They were coarse, made of some kind of plant fibre probably.

Shit, one of them pocketed my knife...and my clothes.

The clothes were nowhere as magically complex but they were still made by the Royal tailor that makes her father's clothes too, self-cleaning and regenerating enchantments weren't easy to weave into the cloth and it could even clean her in addition which made her desperately want to get it back before continuing her journey.

The knife would hurt even more if she lost it, it was elven Mythril, one of the best materials for enchanted weapons especially for elves. It was light with high mana capacity and it was also a good metal to make weapons from, especially for elves who favoured sharp and light weapons over large and heavy ones.

Okay, so, goals:

- 1. Get out of the cage*
- 2. Get out of the camp*
- 3. Stay alive*
- 4. Get the knife back (optional)*
- 5. Get the clothes back (optional)*
- 6. Run away from the sneaky guy (optional)*
- 7. Make sure as many of these disgusting bandits die here as you can (optional)*

Yeah, that looks good.

When her ears picked up the start of a fight inside the large log house she pulled at her wrists with all her power, making the rope snap. She massaged her tender wrists for a bit but she got to removing the disgusting gag from her mouth too.

It was nice of the moron trio to cover her for the night, this way nobody would see that she wasn't as tied up as they thought her to be. She silently crawled closer to the lock and now only paid attention to the steadily developing fight in the back of her mind.

With her focus shifting she started examining it in detail, the soft light seeping through and under the cloth was more than enough for her elven eyes to see it. Her fingers traced its edges and she pushed her mana sense into it but as it had no mana that didn't bear any result.

At this point the fight was still contained to the house and Kali felt a bit conflicted, either the boss moron was much stronger than she thought or the sneaky guy wasn't too good at actually fighting. To her that only mattered because sending Water Blades against the iron bars would surely alert the bunch of morons still ambling around the camp.

For now, let's try the silent options.

The first one was conjuring two needles of mana with a simple Mana Gathering + Separate + Needle + Hold combination, this was the most basic Spell structure for manifesting mana tools but with changing up the Shaping Rune which was Needle in this case.

The two softly glowing needles materialised and fell into her palm, the light was suboptimal but she hoped it didn't show through the cloth. She was far from the best but she got rather good at breaking locks while growing up, by her 20th birthday they had to put magical locks on doors to even slow her down.

Unfortunately the Castle Library's restricted section had mana signature identification not a basic locking system so she couldn't break through that, poor her. Still, this talent of hers that she cultivated rigorously helped her sneak around wherever she wanted aside from a few locations in the castle.

I still don't know why Father let me though, I know now that he could feel me with his mana sense for sure.

Kali expected some challenge in breaking the lock, it was after all supposed to hold her in and even if they didn't know who she was they should know what she was or did the lead moron even fail to check her level? She was confused but she welcomed the foolishness of her enemy.

The lock clicked open and she was free...er, the bandits were still walking around and chattering while drowning themselves in alcohol and some sort of mushroom

powder. Kali was familiar with the prior, she was only *supposed* to drink once she turned twenty but since it was forbidden she felt obliged to do it.

Poor 10 years old me, the maids thought I got sick.

She grimaced at the memory, who knew the 'grape wine' her brother hid in his room was actually death made into drinkable form. A few years later she tried it again with much the same results and she had to conclude that she didn't like alcohol.

She didn't have experience with mushrooms but she knew the ancestors used some for their rituals as hallucinogens, one needed a way to let loose when dragons regularly eclipsed the sun. *Thank fuck they are gone.*

Even their far-off descendants, the Feathered Serpents were a significant problem but the dragons were natural disasters. She didn't know how the world survived the Age of the Dragons but she sure was happy she wasn't born back then.

By now the two brought their fight outside of the house and chaos was spreading throughout the camp, the goons were shouting and searching frantically for their weapons. They converged on the duel's position but from what she sensed the two were leagues above the rest, the sneaky man that she could now sense more clearly at times was bisecting them with off-handed slashes.

With his ... claws? Or is that some sort of clawed gauntlet?

She could reconstruct his movements but it was far from perfect, nonetheless, he was a great distraction. She put an Illusion over the door of the cage to make it look like she wasn't crawling out of it just now. She slowly raised the cloth and stayed under the cloak of the illusion for a moment.

Now that she could actually see what was happening she was glad she put the illusion in place, the goons were rather distracted but they would have noticed her for sure. The fight was now getting closer to her as the boss' house was near the centre just like the open place her cage was put in the middle of.

She couldn't see them at the moment as they were smashing through the shabby houses and demolishing them as they battled relentlessly, the 'elite' morons with their less shit weapons managed to annoy the intruder but they had to stay on the sidelines to sneak in a attack once in a while.

Everyone that could be a problem is distracted, let's get my stuff and ditch this place.

During her meditation, she remembered some of the morons talking about how the boss added her clothes to the storage just like anything else but the only thing she heard about her knife was that the boss might have pocketed it himself.

Annoying, but if they injure each other I might be able to off the bastard and get it back.

Her face was twitching as she remembered how *thankful* the bastards were to the boss for deciding to loot her clothes. Kali wasn't the shy type but she was an elf, pride, arrogance and narcissism were in her blood and disgusting lowlifes seeing her naked body was humiliating.

It's not narcissism and arrogance if it's true.

And more often than not it was, which tended to irritate other species even more not that elves cared what they thought most of the time.

She let the Illusion fall once there were only two of the goons remaining around her.

"Wh-" moron1 started, looking at her standing free and outside of her cage.

"Hi~," she said with a radiant smile as the Twin Kinetic Strikes slammed into him and his buddy. Such a shame she couldn't take it slower but her clothes were more important.

The two morons had their faces crashed in and mixed with their brains, they collapsed without any further sound and Kali grimace at the corpses. Technically that was her first kill and she was somewhat disturbed by the Spells she learned for fun ending their lives so easily.

She stepped over them and headed for the storage building, it was right next to the building with the cages holding the prisoners. She was close to it, the bandits dumped every important building into the middle of the camp so it was easy to reach.

She easily broke through the lock on the door and slipped into the darkness inside, the inside was as basic as it could get with wooden boxes stacked atop of one

another.

It would have been a pain to find her clothes were it not for the bandits being lazy and leaving them in the box she first cracked open right next to the door. Another illusion was put over the door to make it appear closed as she quickly changed back into her enchanted outfit.

"Much better," she sighed in relief as she activated the cleaning enchantment and let it wash away any dirt that might have stuck to her before. The material might have looked like leather but it was as comfortable as silk and it was stretchy, allowing her a full range of motion.

Her ears twitched as she felt a spell activation going off in the duel, she frowned as she recognized the spell instantly. It was the same the bastard has used on her to make her writhe in agony, the sense of it was dampened but now that she was more used to her spatial hearing she noticed it.

It wasn't impossible to hide from an elf's spell sense as she called it, her Ring was entirely unnoticeable to her but from what she knew it required inhuman mana control so most of the things that slipped past this sense were master-crafted artefacts.

The artefact the asshole was using wasn't a master's work but it was good, and that made it harder to sense. *So he isn't a mage, that's good but he might have other tricks up his sleeve.*

The two were by now closing in on the palisades and she suspected they'd continue fighting out in the dark forest after they broke through it. Well, she still wanted her knife back and she suspected the boss to have it either on him or in his house.

House first, then I can decide whether I want to mess with their fight.

The storage might have something useful to her but she wasn't willing to dig through crates full of monster parts and minerals just to find something mildly useful when she knew where her knife was which was far more useful than what she suspected these humans to have.

She slipped out and dismissed the illusion, she covered herself in a Shadow Cloak, her increased mana capacity giving her enough leeway to spend it on that just to

make stalking in the shadows that much easier.

01 - 14 Stalking and Revenge

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Hiding was easier than she expected, the few guards that remained here instead of going towards the fight or outright running away were distracted and made for easy pickings.

She didn't kill all of them but when she had two separated that she could take out with a single Twin Kinetic Strike she took the opportunity. She didn't feel much gratification from killing them, she expected herself to feel cathartic but it just left a sour feeling in her mouth.

They'd captured her, wanted to sell her off as a slave or something like that and their boss tortured her but in the end, they died so easily. So pathetic and weak, a part of her felt pity for them but she was disgusted by that part of her for the previous reasons.

It was a complicated feeling not made much better by the smell of blood, gore and other bodily excrements assailing her sensitive nose. She didn't let that stop her from killing them, they were bandits, parasites, and not even their fellow humans will miss them.

Though from what she knew humans were far less empathetic towards other humans than elves were with their kin, but then again the different elven races weren't the

best of friends either. Winter Elves still held grudges from the old Civil War almost two thousand years ago and his father still loathed Spring and Autumn Elves for their treachery even though he wasn't even alive back then.

That was a sad part of elven history, the war brought the end of an empire and paved the way for the rise of humans and that deplorable empire she found herself in now. She thought her father was an ass but he at least was a good ruler, which arguably was the reason for him also being a shitty father but it was more a fact than her opinion.

On the other hand, the human empire was a parasite living off of its provinces which fed the extravagance of the imperial Core and its nobles. That was the reason she even decided to come here at all, the northern Water Province as they called it was a group of oppressed and stunted towns at the edge of an untamed jungle.

While she ruminated over politics she reached the half-demolished 'manor' of the bandit boss and snuck inside, searching for any place he might have hidden her knife. She found his 'work' room which had an unused table and some shelves mostly filled with skulls, very tasteful decoration. *At least he keeps to his theme of being a sadistic waste of air.*

She rummaged through the drawers and the shelves but all she found were some magical trinkets and papers and ink. Her eyes widened at that, not expecting the brute to know how to write but it seemed she had some misconceptions about bandits.

The trinkets were useful but overall she could do the same they could with one or two Runes. Collecting water or lighting a small flame was far from the epitome of magic, still, she pocketed them. Who knew how much she could get for them if she sold them?

She went through all the rooms and she found some hidden alcohol and a hidden magical artefact, though she was unsure what the small beadlike thing was used for it made her instincts crawl so she crushed it under her boot.

Huh? That was weird, I just did that without thinking.

She let out an annoyed huff, knowing that the boss most likely had it on himself or he might even have a spatial storage artefact, though she doubted that based on the

shitty quality of the trinkets she found.

"Let's see how they are doing," she whispered and reapplied her Cloak before slipping out into the moonlit night, she sneaked out of the almost deserted camp without much trouble through a large hole in the palisades. She could hear them fighting in the distance with her normal hearing if she focused so she headed in that direction.

They left a trail of broken trees and upturned dirt in their wake so she didn't even need to rely on her hearing to follow them, as she closed in on them the sounds of their clashes grew louder and soon they were once again inside her range.

She hid in the tall undergrowth and observed the fight, the sneaky intruder wasn't invisible by now and she could see him in all his glory. He was a towering beast of a man eclipsing even his opponent, he had dark brown skin reminiscent of Summer Elves and he had dreadlocks extending halfway to his waist.

The man fought more like an animal than any human she saw, he stalked his opponent with deliberate steps with his gaze locked on to the now tiring bandit. He reminded her of how wolves stalked their prey and when he attacked that feeling intensified.

His hand was covered in some sort of clawed gauntlet and he snapped it out at his opponent he looked like he'd try biting his face off but he pulled back just before his foe could ravage his throat with his sabre.

Kali's gaze quested over the sadist, searching for any sign of her knife and she found it strapped onto his belt, in her own holder no less. Her brows furrowed in irritation but she stayed hidden, she wasn't sure she could intervene in the fight as it seemed the two were beyond level 200 at least.

It was supposedly challenging to hurt people a breakthrough above yourself with magic and she didn't have any weapons that could close the gap. She could annoy him though, which might help the beast finally end him not that it looked like he needed help.

Unlike his opponent the dark-skinned man was the picture of vigor, his face stuck in a permanent growl and his movements never showing any sign of exhaustion.

Her eyes widened as she felt her torturer ready his favourite spell, she almost screamed in alarm to alert the other man but she held herself back. The spell struck him soon after without fault but the man just gritted his teeth and the spell matrix was banished not a second after it entered his body.

Huh, that's crazy pain tolerance, I could barely think after that hit me.

He growled in fury and his opponent was starting to panic, most likely because he was clearly losing the battle of attrition and his favourite toy wasn't working.

"Who sent you?" he shouted in agitation, "I'll pay you, whatever they are giving you I'm doubling it."

Kali had her doubts about that claim but she didn't know how lucrative smuggling and slave trade was so he might even be capable of holding up his promise, not that she expected him to.

"The only thing I want is your death," the beast-like man growled, launching himself again at his opponent.

She could agree with that sentiment, her mind spun on how she could bend the situation in her favour. The dark-skinned man was clearly stronger than her by quite a bit and she couldn't exactly steal his rightful loot if she didn't help even though the bastard stole it from her first.

The choice was taken out of her hand as the bandit was sent flying and crashed through a tree next to Kali, he landed barely three meters away from her and as he sprung back onto his feet he made eye contact with her shadowy form.

He blinked dumbly at the elf-shaped mass of shadows and Kali reacted before he could recollect himself. A twin Kinetic Strike smashed into him, one hopefully fracturing his right knee and another into his chest to send him back onto the ground.

Kali dispelled her Cloak and started dashing away from the bandit but he only stumbled from her assault, he coughed out a mouthful of blood but he glared at her in fury.

"YOU!?" he howled in rage, "how did you get out you slippery whore?!"

His distraction was awarded by a clawed gauntlet digging into his shoulder, it aimed to rend his chest apart but the bandit reacted just in time to shift his shoulder in the way of the attack.

She turned her attention to the massive man and saw him glance at her, he stilled for a moment when he saw her Kali bit her cheek as she felt his overbearing predatory stare. His eyes weren't human, his irises almost encompassed the whole of his eyes, barely showing any whiteness.

Just like a wolf's eyes.

He grunted and turned back towards the bandit, Kali didn't know what that meant but him not attacking her too at sight was a good start.

"I WILL SKIN BOTH OF YOU ALIVE AND WEAR YOU AS A CLOAK!" the human shouted in rage and rushed at her, he limped at his right leg but it didn't slow him down by much.

He was fast but Kali was faster, she easily sidestepped the man's wild swing and slipped by him to his left. As she passed she touched him with her palm and sent an overcharged Kinetic Hammer right into his body.

The man was thankfully sent flying away from her, he crashed through an old oak tree and rolled to a stop a few meters behind it. When he stood up he wasn't much worse for wear aside from the livid expression on his face. Kali gulped at the sight, *if he managed to hit me with that swing I'd have been bisected.*

She might have the superiority in speed and agility but the man was much tougher and stronger than her and that was further enhanced by his superior level.

That spell should have sent a man of his weight flying for a good fifty meters by her calculations but the weird phenomenon with the breakthrough weakened her spell enough to only launch him a fifth of the way. She remembered feeling the spell matrix dissolve as his mana touched it through her mana sense.

It was hard for her spell to take hold of him, she would have to rely on manifestation spells instead of spells directly affecting his body. Water Blade and Fireball along with

Kinetic Strike were spells like that but she wasn't sure how much more effective those would be.

The beast in human skin reminded her that she didn't have to do the heavy lifting as he pounced on the slightly disoriented bandit. Kali decided that she'd aim to distract instead, her Spells could hurt him still, if much less than she would have liked.

She stuck to her tried and true Twin Kinetic Strikes, they didn't burst his head and body as they should have but they still hit him with enough strength to smash trees to shreds and it shoved.

Every impact made him stumble which was an easy opening to his enemy, wounds started to mount on the bandit quickly and he knew he didn't have long if it continued like this. His left arm was limp, his right leg was barely holding him up and he had several gashes along his chest.

The dark-skinned man would have won by himself in Kali's opinion, it was a battle of attrition really but with her addition to the fight the bandit was constantly on the back foot, receiving wounds one after another without giving any in return.

"Damned bastards," he growled as he ripped something out of his pocket, Kali instantly got alert as she saw a small amulet but the reason for her panic was that she felt a Spell activating.

"RUN," she shouted and quickly followed her own command, unlike the other man who just stared stoically at the bandit as he slowly activated his Amulet, a one-time-use artefact. She didn't know what kind of Spell it held but she could feel that its complexity and mana usage was several times that of her own Fireball.

"Damned mutt," the man said, "I wish I could have taken the little bitch too."

Saying so the dark forest was consumed by light and a shockwave followed a moment after with a thunderous explosion. Kali managed to get almost a hundred meters away from the epicentre but when the shockwave reached her she still got sent flying.

Her body flew through the air without control and impacted a large tree nearby like a rag-doll. Her breath getting knocked out of her lungs was the only reason she didn't

scream at the pain of her back almost snapping at the impact.

She tried to stand up quickly but she felt boiling agony spread from her back, she collapsed back with a whimper on the ground as she steadied her rapid breathing. *I have to heal it quickly, I hope it didn't fracture too much. I don't think I have enough mana to heal a broken bone.*

"You alright?" she heard a deep voice from close to her and she snapped her gaze up at the beastly man crouching over her fallen form. His dreadlocks were smouldering a bit and most of his clothes were scorched but the man seemed mostly fine.

She tried speaking but another wave of pain made her gasp in pain, "Just...a...second," she managed through gritted teeth as she guided her mana into the bracelet.

She didn't think at the surprisingly cordial human, *no he is not, he must have some Faun blood in him with eyes like that.*

The pain didn't abate for a few seconds as her fractured bones got pulled back into place and stitched back together, the bracelet didn't come with a pain-dampening function unfortunately so she had to bear with the disturbing and agonizing feeling of her insides stitching themselves back together.

Surprisingly a bit less than a tenth of her mana satisfied the bracelet, she took a trembling breath as the still lingering phantom pain slowly bled out of her body.

She pulled her legs under her and tried to stand with the tree as help but to her surprise she found the man extending his hand to her. She grabbed his large hand with an owlish blink at the gesture.

"Thanks?" she asked once she was standing, slowly shifting her weight from his arm to her own legs.

He nodded at her, observing her with a curious gaze instead of the previous predatory one that made her feel like a small animal in front of a vicious monster.

"Why did you help me?" he asked in his gruff voice as he glanced towards the previous explosion.

"He stole my knife," she admitted, starting to walk ahead but stumbling on the second step.

To her utter bafflement, the man caught her before she could fall and pulled her upright by the shoulder.

"Let me help then," he said as he let her lean on his arm to which she nodded.

She didn't know why he was helping her but for now, she was more thankful than suspicious. Her suspicion stemmed from the fact that humans liked to introduce other species into their bloodlines, the descendants of elves and fauns were called Halvyr and Daemons respectively were the cornerstones of the Imperial philosophy.

Unlike their enslaved ancestors these mixed-blooded people were the personification of the human's conquest and their victory over their enemies. Halvyr held more potential than humans for magic with some inheriting the elves' natural physiology too while Daemons were far superior to humans in pure combat.

She didn't know which of the hundreds of faun clans this man's bloodline originated from but she could tell it he was at least half human. People like him should be the most indoctrinated and loyal soldiers of the empire.

He was making her doubt those preconceptions with the way he acted but her doubts were bubbling under the surface. *Knife first, then I can think about this more.*

They closed in on the place the moron exploded himself without any actual result aside from making her lose a bunch of mana. A crater took the place of the lush forest with a diameter of twenty or so meters, nothing survived inside that.

The shockwave tore out some trees outside of the crater and the man grabbed Kali by the waist as he carried both of them over the fallen trees with a single leap. Kali's eyes widened in shock at the sudden movements but she held back her yelp with a considerable force of will.

She stumbled a bit as the man once again let her stand mostly on her own, *don't glare at the dude who cal cut you into pieces, don't glare-*

She glared at him as he gave her a funny look, as she took deep, calming breaths.

She turned her gaze towards the center of the crater where she hoped to find her knife. She knelt down around there and felt around the ground with her mana sense, the knife was hard to sense but she could feel the dormant enchantments on it due to her own mana being suffused into it.

She dug into the ground with her hands and only a few centimetres down she grabbed ahold of the handle of her knife. She pulled it out with a sigh of relief, the loss of its holder was a pain but it was just enchanted leather to withstand its sharpness, nothing more.

"Nice knife," the man intoned, eyeing the knife she was hugging to her chest.

She tightened her hold on it, "Can I keep it please?" she asked.

"Wasn't it yours?" he asked, clearly confused which in turn made Kali confused.

"You killed him so shouldn't the loot be yours?" she asked with a tilt of her head, the adventurer guidebooks were clear on the usual distribution of loot.

"Oh," he chuckled, "I'm not an adventurer," he smiled a bit which looked quite terrifying with the large scar cutting through his face from his left cheek to his chin, "You can keep it, I didn't kill him for 'loot'."

Kali tried to hide her relief but she wasn't sure she managed, seeing his amusement so instead she asked back, "Why did you kill him then?"

That wiped the smile off of his face in an instant, "He caught you and the other three elves, yes?" he stated, rather than asked.

Kali nodded, "He managed to hit me with that Spell of his when I was distracted," she felt a need to defend herself.

She averted her gaze awkwardly, it wasn't her fault, oh well it was in a sense but she could have defended herself if she had a better handle on her spatial hearing back then. *Okay, it was my fault, fuck.*

"I wasn't in a much different situation not too long ago so I feel obligated to help," the man admitted, grimacing while probably thinking back on his own experience.

01 - 15 Partnership and Raiding the Raiders

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Kali didn't know what to say to his declaration, it was in a sudden bout of courage that she asked the question. The man just seemed so disarming that she forgot that he could rip her apart if he got his hands on her.

"Sorry for asking something intrusive," she apologised.

"It's nothing," he waved his hand at her as she rose to her feet, now being able to support her whole weight.

She eyed him for a moment, holding his gaze then turned her eyes towards the veritable mountain of mana she felt from a small crystal under the dirt.

"Ah," he said when he followed her gaze, "I'd like to take that if you don't mind?"

Kali nodded, she was a bit regretful at losing an opportunity to advance but then again she didn't quite earn this one and he was already being nice with letting her keep her knife.

The man crouched and clawed out the uneven crystal from the ground, it wasn't too different from the hare's core if a bit more round and vibrant in colour. He stood and hummed in satisfaction as the crystal dissolved into fine dust between his fingers.

He just straight-up absorbed all that mana?

She watched him dubiously as he stood there silently, his eyes closed and his brows furrowed in concentration. She assumed he was doing something with the stuff he absorbed but she didn't know what, maybe there was something she didn't know about absorbing the crystals.

No, there is for sure.

She wanted to ask him but thought better of it and decided not to, she should get going soon. He was more cordial than she expected him to be but she didn't know him and staying next to someone who could end her life wasn't too good for her nerves.

After a few seconds, he was done with whatever he was doing and looked into Kali's curious eyes, he raised an eyebrow at her, "What is it?"

"...what were you doing?" she asked, now that he prompted her the curiosity got the better of her, "if you don't mind me asking?" she added quickly.

While she loathed ethics and etiquette lessons some things stuck and some were just common sense, not that she gained that from real-life experience. She was mostly copying how people talked politely in books, the Kashgar etiquette she's been forced to learn was a pain in the ass and overcomplicated in her opinion.

"Absorbing the essence and the mana?" he asked back, looking confused at her question.

"...okay," Kali would leave it at that, she wasn't sure if he wasn't willing to tell her or if he just didn't get what she was referring to but she didn't want to annoy him.

"Anyway, it was nice meeting you," she smiled thankfully at him, "Bye!"

"Wait," he said as she was already turning away from him and she stiffened.

"Yes?" she asked, a nervous smile plastered onto her face. Did he want to kidnap her as well?

"Where are you going?" he asked with a frown on his face.

"...away?" she answered after a moment of hesitation, "I shouldn't bother you for too long!" she nodded, slowly convincing herself that it was the reason.

"Do you have anywhere to go?" he asked, his frown still present and deepening.

"...yes," she nodded without much conviction, not staring into his eyes.

He sighed as he seemed to understand her intention of ditching him quickly, "I'm going to see if the other three are alright and help them find their village if I can."

Kali nodded, feeling a bit weird at doubting the guy but she caught herself, she shouldn't believe it just because he said so. People lied all the time, she should have gotten used to that while growing up but she tended to not pay much mind to the servants and guards in the castle, most of them never said a single honest thing to her so she didn't put much attention on anything they said.

"Okay," Kali nodded at him, "good luck!"

"Look," he said with a sigh, "I know you don't trust me and you shouldn't but this forest is dangerous," he continued with a look into the dark forest around them, "Wouldn't you consider travelling with me for a bit?"

Kali took a step back and readied herself to run if he got pushy as she answered, "That's very nice of you but, that guy," she eyed the crater they were standing in, "made trusting others a bit challenging, yeah?"

"Let's look at it like this," the man said thoughtfully, "I'm stronger than you but I don't have senses anywhere comparable to an elf and seeing how you fought your combat style meshes well with my own so I think we would have a better chance at surviving out here than alone."

"You'd need *my* help?" Kali asked incredulously, the dude just demolished nearly a kilometre of forest in a duel with a bandit that got the jump on her. She understood that her perception would be a help to him but was less sure about fighting together.

"Yes," he nodded, looking intent on convincing her for some reason, "I don't think it looks like it but I'm injured still, my Core was almost shattered not too long ago and

is still recovering."

"How are you even alive?" Kali asked, gobsmacked at his admission. Getting your Core shattered tended to kill most people and cripple them at best for a long while.

"It repaired itself," he shrugged, "I did lose more than 200 levels from it though."

Kali just blinked dumbly at him and after a quick calculation she arrived at a disturbing conclusion, "You were above level 400?"

"Yes," he answered, though the natural pride she thought was inherent to high levelled people was missing from his poise, "it took a lot of essence to repair it and I don't think I'll be much stronger than you by the time it's fully done."

Well, if he was honest that did change things. He had to be well-travelled and knowledgeable if he reached that high before and she did desperately need knowledge and common sense if she ever wanted to venture into human towns.

Plus if he wasn't much stronger than her she was more confident about running away from him should her still lingering doubts turn out to be true.

"Okay," she nodded, "we can travel together for a while I guess?"

"Great," he smiled at her, "I'm Vorgnar by the way," he said as he extended his hand.

What am I supposed to do now, why is he extending his hand? I should introduce myself! Right, there was a human custom of... shaking hands I think?

She nervously reached out her hand and grabbed his extended hand, not sure if she remembered the gesture right as she answered, "I'm Kha- *cough*," *moron, don't use your real name*, "Kalitra, nice to meet you."

Even if he didn't know the name of the Elven Princess it should be widely known that only Royal Elves had apostrophes in their names. She hoped the glowing eyes and her long ears weren't a dead giveaway but she couldn't be sure what would be common knowledge.

He shook her hand, up and down gently then released it with a smile. Kali retrieved her arm, relieved that she didn't seem to have messed up the handshaking, who

knew she'd regret not listening to some of those boring classes?

She averted her eyes awkwardly as the man studied her for a moment before he said, "Let's go and see what they had tucked away back there, alright?"

"Sure," Kali shrugged, she'd keep her eyes on him for now but he could prove to be helpful if she let him. She had so many questions, some of which he might be able to answer.

He turned to leave, heading back towards the camp along the demolished path he left without further questions and Kali followed him a few steps behind.

Kali felt a bit small, following the mountain of a man. She wasn't small, she was taller than her elder sister and wasn't much shorter than her brother and father but the top of her head barely reached the shoulder armpits of the man, *no I should call him Vorgnar, weird name, not that I can talk.*

Kali was still a bit confused about her own decision to follow along with his suggestion, she knew he was dangerous and that trusting him was even more so but she still went along with it. There was some instinctual part of her telling her that he was being honest and just wanted to help but how could she tell?

Is it the heartbeat? It fluctuates when people lie but that's not an iron-hard rule, maybe that's why I felt like he was being sincere. Because his heart rate didn't fluctuate when he talked?

To her sensitive ears hearing another's heartbeat wasn't hard, it was one of the easiest ways to detect living beings after all. Other things could make sounds similar to footsteps but they couldn't fake a heartbeat and masking it was also hard then again her Race is capable of slowing it down so much that it's barely detectable.

"Why is a Winter Elf this far down the mountains anyway?" the man — no, Vorgnar — pulled her out of her ruminations with the question as he glanced back at her over his shoulder.

Kali blinked at the intrusive question but decided to answer somewhat truthfully, "I ran away from home," she shrugged, "getting eaten by frost wolves seemed like a preferable choice to getting forced into a marriage back then."

"Hmm," he hummed thoughtfully, "Would you like to go back? Do you regret it?"

"No," Kali's answer was quick and decisive, "there aren't frost wolves around here but I'd still rather stay here than go back."

"How did you plan to survive in the jungle then?" he raised an eyebrow and she detected a slightly admonishing tone in his voice.

"I'd have managed," she glared at him, who was he to admonish her?

"Surely," he was clearly being sarcastic but Kali just huffed in irritation instead of gracing him with a response.

The man reminded her far too much of the gaggle of tutors her father sent to hound her, all they had were admonishments and complaints. They always berated her for doing things wrong, that she was inadequate, they couldn't get it into their thick skulls that she couldn't have cared less about anything they were trying to tutor her in.

The maids gave up on clothing her 'appropriately' after a few years of all of the irritating dresses they got her conveniently burning to ash every night. The etiquette tutor almost got an aneurysm at her constant disregard of her teachings and gave up but she lasted the longest out of all of her tutors, almost up until she left for Kashgar.

Most of them called her entirely insufferable and unwilling to learn, *not that they were wrong amount either of those, she strived to be the prior while the latter was just the truth.*

The only tutor she liked was Zadkiel but after he started teaching her he convinced her of paying attention to some of her other classes, like history, biology, geography and such. She did, at first reluctantly but she did give it a fair chance and she found herself enjoying those classes too if she considered them as background knowledge for her magical education.

While she was brooding they reached the campsite in silence but her sense picking up on a few lingering humans snapped her out of her state.

"There are still twenty-seven humans inside," she told Vorgnar.

"Thank You," he nodded in thanks and readied his gauntlets. Kali's gaze lingered on them as the claws snapped out of some sort of hilt hidden inside, quickly turning a regular-looking gauntlet into a vicious clawed weapon.

"The elves are still sleeping," she added a moment later, hearing their deep and consistent breathing.

"I'm gonna clean up the leftover trash," he growled as his eyes made contact with one of said trash, "wanna help?"

"Sure," Kali shrugged.

"HE'S BACK!" the moron screamed as Vorgnar launched himself at him, cutting off his screams a moment later.

He really fights like a beast.

His leap reminded Kali of how wolves jumped at their prey and his wild claw swings were as ruthless as they were brutal. The goon died in an instant as one claw tore his throat open and another sank deep into his chest as Vorgnar pushed him down into the dirt.

Kali's ears twitched as she felt a Spell activation going off from one of the goons a few houses away. She didn't know what he was thinking but just to be safe she conjured up a simple Arcane Shield, *Mana Gathering + Shield + Hold + Overcharge, such a basic spell but it works I guess.*

The spell matrix sped down into her arm and settled onto the skin of her palm, appearing like an assortment of shifting bluish Runes. Kali loved the aesthetic of spells like this, she wanted tattoos too like her brother had but it was considered 'uncouth' to have them in Kashgar so she was never allowed to.

The Arcane Shield materialised in a semi-translucent blue shield floating twenty centimetres away from her extended palm. It wasn't large, only one and a half meters in diameter but it could withstand a single spell of the strength she sensed.

She felt the launched spell arching above the buildings and starting to shoot straight at her, they probably thought she was the easier target. She could have dodged but

she wanted to use the Spell if she's already cast it so she raised her palm, the floating shield floating along like she was holding it physically.

"Incoming Spell," she warned the man who by now was a house away pouncing on another goon that came to check out what the previous one was shouting about.

The spell that looked like a glowing blue bolt of energy struck her Shield a moment after. She felt the matrix strain under her hold and the floating shield was pushed back a bit from the pure physical force the other Spell carried but it held.

The Spell wasn't much to write home about, after the shield withstanding its power it dissipated uselessly but then again it wasn't much more complicated than the five Rune Spell she used. She checked over the shield and felt that it could withstand another similar Spell before dissolving which made her smile.

She then frowned as she realized she's wasted a bunch of mana on overcharging the Spell uselessly, half the amount would have worked just as well. She could sense the rough amount of mana in a Spell matrix so she could have calibrated her own Spell better, she needed to do better than this.

To dispel her annoyance she launched a well-calculated Kinetic Strike which zapped straight down the dirt road she stood on and past two houses before it bent ninety degrees and turned the insides of the goon that attacked her into outsides.

Now that Overcharge was well worth it.

She felt Vorgnar stalking through the camp and systematically hunting down the bandits one by one. He seemed angry as he mauled them before brutally killing them. *Okay, let's leave the scary wolf-man to his stress relief.*

She made her way into the storage room where the non-living loot of the bandits was stored and started peeking into the crates one after the other. Now that she wasn't in a hurry to get her trusty knife back she could take her time to check whether anything of use was hidden here.

She didn't want to just flood her storage ring with trash after all and even that had a maximum capacity though she wasn't sure what it was. She's never managed to fill it up with books or snacks so she didn't care up until now.

Monster parts filled the first bunch of crates she opened, scales, bones and leather for the most part as keeping meat fresh was hard to do in the quantities they'd need to sell to make it worth it. Kali check over the stuff and placed anything she found to be interesting into the spatial ring.

The next dozen crates were filled with rocks, or minerals to put it nicely. She wasn't sure how much they were worth but she put away a small amount of each type. Might be useful once she learns how to craft something interesting, like Scrolls, Amulets or even Artefacts.

She went through the last bunch of boxes and found mostly dried herbs or other plant remains, she stored these as they didn't take up much space besides the bark and wood but there weren't many of those so she stored them all.

Once she was done raiding the place she made her way over to the other building housing the cages filled with the many still living 'merchandise' the bandits had. She heard Vorgnar reenter her spatial hearing range, he's left it a few minutes ago chasing after a few goons that ran away instead of fighting the incarnation of death that the man was to them.

She was curious about the many animals and even more so for the few magical ones but she fought on and made her way over to the three elves. The three were still sleeping rather peacefully despite only having the cold iron floor for bedding.

She jumped up and sat on a cage from where she could see all three and started swinging her leg back and forth, to which the small catlike animal inside the cage started trying to catch her boots. She was amused by the little furball despite it seeming intent on devouring her flesh.

She played around with it until Vorgnar made his way into the building, he watched her antics amusedly but shook his head and leaned on a nearby cage as he stared at the prone form of the three.

01 - 16 Autumn Elves and Alexis

Kha'Lythria

Race: Winter Elf (+50% Mana)

Bloodline: Royal (+30% Mana)

[Level: 180]

[Mana Capacity: 113.6]

[Essence Requirement: 19.5]

Once she got bored with annoying the feline Kali pulled her legs up and sat atop the cage with her legs crossed, remaining forever outside of the animal's reach.

She looked over the three elves, one male and two female with one of the latter being noticeably young. Elves barely aged once they turned twenty, appearing identical up until they reached their fifth century of life, so this elf had to be under that, around 10 or so if Kali had to guess.

The child had long straight pink hair reaching her thin waist, Kali felt a slight pang in her hair as she took in just how malnourished the girl was. She barely had any flesh on her arms, her ribs showed and her thighs were only as thick as Kali's biceps.

All three had a similar complexion, their skin was closer to Kali's than Vorgnar but they had a healthy tan to their skin. The woman looked a bit better but she was also showing signs of having a distinct lack of food for a while, she had wavy ginger hair that was matted with sweat and mud from wherever the bandits collected the poor woman.

She turned her gaze onto the final one, the man, he looked to be around thirty by human standards so he must be above five centuries old, unlike the woman who looked to be of similar age as Kali. He had rather short hair of a similar ginger colour as the woman which made Kali suspect that the two might be siblings, *or father and daughter, he might be centuries older than her.*

Kali's curious gaze went over the legs of all three of them. While Winter Elves were ambush predators of the mountains the Autumn Elves lived originally on open plains and hunted by exhausting large animals and overwhelming them.

They could run faster than most animals even at level 0 without any essence boosting their natural capabilities and they didn't have the light constitution Kali had, instead their legs were naturally enhanced by their magic and essence.

From what she read in history books, long ago they had martial arts focusing on devastating kicks that could rend giants apart and shatter boulders with ease. She knew they deteriorated after the Corvus Empire conquered their lands but she still hoped she could meet one of those famous fighters one day.

Some could still be alive, though they'd probably hate me.

Her grandfather that ruled during the conquest still held a severe grudge against the Autumn Elves for their treachery in the ancient civil war so he refused to grant refuge to them when the humans started hunting them down like animals.

Once her father took the throne he let the refugees in but by that time it was far too late for most of them, some escaped but most hated her kind with a passion and remained in their hidden villages instead of accepting their help.

Now that she thought it all through she was getting a bit nervous about all of this, what if they hate her just because of what she is or if they attack her? She started anxiously fidgeting with her knife as her gaze flickered between the tree elves.

"What got you so worked up?" asked Vorgnar with a raised eyebrow.

"Won't they hate me?" she asked absently, "They are Autumn Elves, you know. They should hate me."

"Why?" he asked curiously, didn't this man learn history? He probably didn't if he really was a captive prior to their meeting.

"Huh," he looked thoughtful after she gave him a quick summary of the history between their races, obviously avoiding mentioning that the big bad King whose decree resulted in the death of tens if not hundreds of thousands of them, was her grandfather.

"We will see I guess," he shrugged and returned to watching the sleeping elves.

Kali groaned in annoyance, was this all he managed to come up with after she took the effort to explain the situation to him?

Rude.

She laid back on top of the cage, staring at the mouldy wood making up the ceiling of the place.

She decided to distract herself from her worries with something productive instead so she let herself sink into meditation as she got back to polishing her mana control. One could never be too good at mana control as it directly correlated with casting speed and even a fraction of a second could mean the difference between life and death.

Her worries resurfaced periodically but she stomped them down ruthlessly and got back to practice, *ah, nice. I can do two blobs of mana now and forming both into orbs is easy, now...and now they are spinning. Just like my head will spin off my shoulder if they manage to kill me after waking up. Fuck. Peaceful thoughts... mana orbs...focus on how nice they are orbiting each other like that.*

Despite her constantly drifting focus she managed to make some progress, it wouldn't have much of an effect on her casting speed yet but just the fact that she could hold onto two separate orbs of mana while spinning both as they orbited each other was already a satisfying accomplishment for her.

Her attention was drawn to the young girl as she heard her heart rate fluctuating and her breathing grow quicker. She would be waking up soon, Kali would have liked to help, heal them from whatever drug the humans used to keep them sedated but she didn't know any Spells for that.

She jumped off of her cage and went closer to the sleeping girl, thinking back on it now they could have pulled them out of their cages instead of leaving them inside even if Vorgnar shredded one end of them off.

"Can you help me get her out of there?" She looked back at him, staring into his wolf-like golden eyes.

He just nodded and walked up to the cage and gently pulled the little elf out of her cage, Kali pulled a piece of cloth from her spatial storage and laid it down on the ground. Vorgnar laid the small girl atop it and Kali crouched down next to the girl.

Being as young as she was the small elf was more cute than beautiful as most grown elves were, Kali imagined her cheeks would be chubby were it not for the malnutrition. Kali got increasingly more nervous as the girl started moving in her sleep, with small twitches in her arms at first, and then she started turning on her side.

Kali reached over to hold the girl's hand but stopped midway, she wasn't sure if that would be appropriate. She has never cared for children, she hasn't met elves younger than her for that matter. She had maids that were around her age but all of them were a bit older and it was their job to care for her, not the other way around.

She pulled her arm back awkwardly and watched the girl who seemed to be having a nightmare while kneeling next to her. She started hearing the woman and the man starting to wake too, their breathing and heartbeat both started approaching the level she associated with awake people.

The first one to stir was still the pink-haired girl, her ocean-blue eyes opened sluggishly and she blinked up at the ceiling. Kali just watched her as she seemed to be in a daze still, finally, their gaze interlocked.

"Hi," said Kali after a moment of silence, "how do you feel?"

"F-*cough*" the girl started, "Fine."

"Drink this," Kali summoned a flask of water from her storage, just now realizing how parched the girl must have been.

The girl snatched the flask out of her hold and gulped it down quickly, holding it with trembling arms as she did so. Once she was done she sighed and passed it back to Kali.

"Thanks," she said quietly, "who are you?"

"Kalitra, but you can call me Kali," she smiled at the young elf, "and this is my ... companion Vorgnar." she motioned towards the large man still leaning on a cage a few meters away.

The small girl visibly flinched when she noticed the bearlike man staring at her and grabbed ahold of Kali's jacket for comfort.

"Don't worry," Kali said, trying to sound calming, "he is the one that freed you three."

"Huh?" the girl looked around with a frown until her gaze found the prone form of the ginger elves.

"You know them?" Kali asked gently as she watched the girl stare at them.

She just shook her head, making her long pink locks fly about.

"Um," Kali glanced back at Vorgnar, "You know what kind of food we could give her?" she asked as she swept her gaze over the frail body of the girl.

"I'd say something natural and nutritious," the man crossed his arms, "We could get berries, nuts and maybe eggs out here that could work but they'd need something filling to get better."

Kali felt the girl's grip tighten on her jacket, her fingers trembling under the force of it.

"Let's wait for the other two before going foraging," she said, "I still have some berries, would you like some?" she asked the child trembling under the effort just sitting put on her. She must have been her for far longer than the others, *or she was malnourished already when they caught her.*

"Mhm," the girl nodded as she looked up at Kali with those soulful eyes that the Autumn Elves were known for. Their hair colours ranged from ginger to pink and sometimes even dirty blonde but the deep blue eyes were a staple.

Kali held her arm out, palm facing up. Closed in and summoned a handful of berries inside before opening it up again which caused the girl to gasp.

"Wow," she didn't stay awed for long as she stuffed her cheeks full with the various berries Kali already tested for poison. Thankfully her bracelet could heal her from that too, it was more like returning her body to the perfectly healthy image that it knows that real healing and a perfect body doesn't have poison in it.

"WHO ARE YOU?" shouted a hoarse voice from behind Kali, making her flinch and droop her ears. She was so absorbed in giving the little munchkin berries and nuts that she didn't even notice the female elf waking up behind her until the shout.

She noticed Vorgnar finally remove himself from the cage and head over to pacify the woman, hopefully, *it was he who wanted to save them, why am I the one taking care of this girl anyways?*

Try as she might, every look at the frail girl who was less than half her age made her heart crack a little. She dropped berries from time to time as her fingers trembled and the food slipped out of them, this in turn made the child tear up silently.

Kali had to stop her from just eating the dirty berries and conjured up a bit of water to wash them.

"We've eliminated the bandits in the camp," she heard Vorgnar start to explain to the frantic woman, "You are free, we aren't here to hurt you."

Her attention was somewhat pulled towards the still-sleeping man, and her ears twitched a little. *Interesting, if I didn't feel him starting to wake I'd have thought he was sleeping for real.*

As soon as she heard the woman scream the man's breathing hitched for a moment before both his heartbeat and breathing steadied into a rhythm that perfectly mimicked what it was back when he was slumbering deeply.

"I'm sorry but that's all I had," she said to the dejected girl, "will you be alright until we get more food for you?"

The girl nodded sluggishly which made Kali smile.

"The other one is awake too," she said as she rose to her feet, she stared down at the older elf. He had better survival instincts than the female at least, it was prudent to learn whatever he could before he engaged strangers like her and Vorgnar.

He glanced back at her, then at the elf on the floor. By now he's managed to calm down the woman somewhat as she was just asking various questions about where and when they were until Kali interrupted them.

The woman glanced at her, Kali saw her eyes widening as the woman stared into her icy blue eyes then she gasped as she took in the rest of her form. That might be a problem, she wasn't sure why she was surprised but the thought that she recognized her or what she was didn't bode well.

"I'm Kalitra," she decided to say, "Nice to meet you...?"

"Ah," the woman said, snapping out of her embarrassing staring, "Selene, yes, nice to meet you too!"

Kali smiled at the flustered woman before turning her gaze at the similar-looking elf still looking like he was sleeping like a log.

"You sure he's awake?" Vorgnar asked with a frown, his own senses probably telling him what her own were.

"Well, if he didn't suddenly fall into a deep sleep right after Miss Selene here awoke even the dead with her scream then he is," she said with a smirk, enjoying the way the woman squirmed at her jab, "you know him? You look quite alike."

"Uhm," the woman glanced at the man and gasped, Kali was tempted to believe this was the first time since she awoke that she noticed him, "BROTHER!" she launched herself at the fake-sleeping man, knocking the air out of him as she pulled him up into a hug and swung him around.

Well even if he wasn't awake before, now he is.

"Sel, let me down," the man was shouting over his sister's ramblings.

"Ah, did you come to save me? did they catch you too? are you alright? is mother okay? how did they catch you? why did you come after me? Are you stupid?" the woman wasn't paying attention to him though.

Vorgnar let out a sound somewhere between a grunt and an annoyed growl as he stood imperiously with his arms crossed and his feet tapping.

The woman stiffened as her eyes zeroed in on the veritable mountain of a man but she was still holding her sibling, leaving his legs to hang in the air as she squeezed the breath out of him.

"Sel," he squeezed out, "...air...please."

"Oh," she let him go and the man collapsed onto his knees, hacking and coughing, "...sorry."

Kali watched on with an amused smile, this woman sort of reminded her of Ly'Riel. Her sister tended to be the same sort of cheerful airhead around her though she knew she was a terrifying battlemage when they were together she was just a bundle of energy.

Her smile fell away as the guilt started setting in, *I wouldn't have met her again for centuries anyway so why am I feeling like this?*

The man rose to his feet and dusted off his clothes, which were the same coarse brown material Kali's were made of. He looked over the other people in the room, most likely tying the voices to faces and just like his sister, the man widened his eyes as he looked at Kali. He hid it quickly and if Kali wasn't looking for it she might have missed it.

"I am Virendel Swiftsream and I thank you for saving me and my sister," he said as he lowered himself into a bow.

"What about her though?" Kali asked with a frown, motioning towards the pink-haired girl looking at all that was happening with curious eyes, "Wasn't she with you two?"

"Ah," the man looked at the young girl carefully which made her crawl behind Kali to hide, "I'm afraid I don't know her." he shook his head apologetically.

"Me neither," said Selene, injecting herself back into the conversation.

Kali crouched and made eye contact with the girl, "Can I ask you what your name is?" she asked gently.

"Alexis," the girl murmured.

"Lexy then," Kali smiled, "Do you have anywhere to return to? Parents maybe?"

That was the wrong thing to ask, Kali realised with a start as the girl teared up and started sobbing uncontrollably. She instinctually pulled the girl into a hug, staying careful not to hurt her frail body.

"It's alright," Kali whispered as she felt the girl grip her clothes as she cried, "It's alright."

"Didn't know winter elves could show compassion," she heard Selene whisper to her brother to which he just shushed her.

She almost forgot Vorgnar was there until he started distracting the siblings with questions about whether they'd like assistance in returning to their homes and how far that'd be.

"Th-*sniff* they didn't," she heard the girl say between silent sobs, "want me."

Kali tightened her hold on the small girl, almost forgetting not to use too much of her strength. Elves were supposedly very social and even if not they were viciously loyal to their family and kin. Kali's parents were outliers in winter elven society, the father that sold her daughter's hand in marriage and the mother that refused to raise her.

The girl's pained whisper hit far too close to home with Kali, her father had some excuses for being as loathsome as he was. Saving the kingdom and securing the alliance were sound excuses if she ever heard any, not that she cared about his excuses.

What could drive a normal elf to abandon their child though? Kali could guess but all she came up with was lack of food or something similar.

"They said I'm a monster," the girl stopped sobbing by now, only silent tears running down her cheeks, "they said only monsters have ears like me, but you have them too right? Are you a monster like me?"

The girl asked those disturbing questions with eyes filled with hope, *she wants me to say yes.*

Kali's thoughts were in turmoil and all of her previous ideas went down the drain, *just what the hell have they put this child through?*

Alexis-

