

KASHI, Kashikoi Yoso, **“The Elements Clever”**

Half-elf, half-humans are thought of as such an attractive and endearing blend of both races, but as a baby, Thalindel, was harshly joked to be a half-orc, half-halfling abomination. Although a stretch of the truth, from birth there was the natural inclination or outright disdain of others to not touch or interact with him. Last memories of his parents on the doorstep of another woman handing her a pouch as he walked in the door. The moment so fast that as he turned, the door was being shut so quickly he barely saw the side of their faces as they turned to rush off. He waddled over toward a window but couldn't climb up a chest that was there.

He called her Nanma, like a mothering nanny not endearing enough to be a grandma, and she called him, Thel, not even Thal for short. Even though he could go outside, every day that passed he tried to climb that chest and look out that window as if he would see into the past and watch them as they left. Eventually, he would jump on, then run and jump on, until he would summersault through the open window, never going fast enough to catch up to them, a very uncanny ability for a 6-year-old, but thoughts of them would slip away from his mind over time. He just took to being Thel.

Her cottage was just past the outskirts of town. Close enough to go in for supplies, but far enough out to be taken advantage of by someone or something. Nothing ever happened though. It was rare he went into town with her and never of anything noteworthy for him other than stares and snickers. His time spent at the cottage was reading books. He read lots of books. The strange thing was you could only ever find a few books at her cottage at any given time. She must exchange them with someone and so odd to remember those books with bright and shiny colors, something so much more than small library he'd seen in town or books of others.

Thinking back to that time in his life, the books were so rich with story and information that he remembered them as if they were alive, people and monsters interacting and telling the story. The imagination of his memories making some of those moments to almost be right there happening in front of him as if they also talked to him. How far an 8-year-old's mind can go to just create a world around them.

He had a favorite place, a stream that led to a 10' waterfall and pool so clear you could see the fish swim at the top until they descended into the depth of the middle. Many times, he floated down going over the top. When he was really focused feeling each ripple of water move out away from him or water itself moving between his strands of hair, he could catch his feet on a rapid rock and effortlessly jump from one to another and leap himself over the crest of the fall. Those leaps seemed 3 times his

height, but in the rush of a moment that seemed a little more than brief by gazing upon the surrounding scenery, why would a boy care about time or what might be a great feat of ability.

Living in the wilderness was a safe space from ridicule where he could explore and learn. She had a fine silken rope he would play with to keep himself entertained. Learning about knots and lassos, he eventually just played with the rope. He learned how to lasso things, climb with it, or make it swirl and dance in the air. In the city, he kept himself busy with it, while she was inside. It was the only time he'd seen people gather to watch him with a sense of awe.

One of those great times, he came out of the pool to find a young girl sitting at the edge on the rocks. By far different than all others that met him, she didn't snicker or shun him. She would smile. The smile of girl that would draw one into her, make their inside vibrate, make them feel a wave of warmth waterfall cascade down from the top of your head finding a way to leave no part of you untouched. Other times he had met and played with her in the forest, amongst bluffs overlooking the stream, or fields of grass.

As great as that first meeting with her there was the day, she held her palm to his cheek. This is beyond description, because he himself was lost in that moment, taken to a world of feeling he had never known. Previously, having seen her weeks or many days apart, it now seemed like each day was a week, and a week was like a month he was so anxious. The day he seemed to get that feeling she was going to show again, he was sitting on the rocks out by the stream.

That feeling turned strange and interrupted as in his head he heard his G-ma call out to him, frantically, "Thel!"

She would call out again louder and with fervor, "Thel....RUN! Run for the city!"

I was panicked. I was scared. I was afraid.

I ran for my cottage.

"THEL, NO! To the city!"

As I ran, I was compelled to the city and while, my heart and soul ran to the cottage, my legs, head, and eyes veered to the city. Even though I never spoke with my friend, I felt her run in the opposite direction...far from my new path. I felt her slip into what would be my forever past. My arms flailed about as I knocked branches away; at times they seemed to move away before my hand reached them. Stretches of ground I had never traversed or thought I could, I leapt over like a mountain lion as I focused on thoughts of leaves in the wind, like launching over the waterfall. Atop a small hill, I looked through a small break in the woods to see the cottage explode. Larger chunks of wall blasting outward crashing into the ground. The old, thatched roof splintering into pieces and scattering out amongst the

area. On the move quickly, I caught sight a figure through the various scattering of the cottage, before I turned to almost see myself ramming into a tree, having to dodge to the side.

Arriving in the city his life became a shunted life, on the move, on the scramble, on guard with nowhere to turn and yet a city so large there are many places to turn, but after trying a few, he would come to realize they were dead end's or a turn into a path where others would never guide him down that way or let him step that way. Alone, his books never showed him a life like this and yet over time, he could morph his learnings into some way to survive.

With a small garden at the cottage, he would venture out and find unique wildflowers to relocate to her garden or she would let him read about it in a book. Some could be combined to make a scent to tantalize one's nose, freshen up a room, and have one forget they hadn't bathed in a week. Unable to remember the name of this one vine he had found, one of the pages of the book he read helped him to concoct a salve that made his finger numb. It was easy enough to find aromatic flowers on the outskirts of the city, he could make some copper here and there.

Finding an old, discarded fragment of rope, he was able to use it in different ways. When the noble's kids needed entertaining while they conducted business, he could make a dropped coin or two by dazzling the children with a dancing rope. He realized that tying a rock to the end of the end of the rope gave it a new dynamic to its movement. He impressed merchants to toss him a coin by stopping it just before their face or hitting their coin pouch with it. Eventually he found the gambler's willing to bet on his degree of skill at dropping the rock into a tankard at distance or knocking over a bottle.

A young child soon enough will lose the favor of pity leaving only scorn for a homeless rebel and even faster for one that is unendearingly looking. Making goods or entertaining would have to be supplemented by a swift hand to swipe baked goods on a windowsill or counter and even more swiftly and slyly to dive into a coin-jingling pocket to lighten the owner's burden. Not trying to take more than he needed to feed himself and survive, others did not take kindly to seeing him do it or catching him, he would improve running, dodging, and jumping to get away and equally as good with sneaking up to them unaware anyone might be there to dip into their unintended donation to him.

The tendency for many to know and watch him, he found working at night easier with his ability to see well in dim light and able to sneak around in shadows. Taking notice of the nature of keys and locks, he figured out how to use scrap pieces of metal to open simple, old rusty locks until finding a set of tools left unattended on a craftsman's table that he could use to manipulate locks that were fancier or in better condition. Able to sneak through a building and find items to resell usually worked, although there were a number of times he had to avoid capture by being fast and agile enough to get away.

Sleeping would take on a true hardship that didn't reach a sense of peace or safety as the cottage. Focusing his mind, he imagined the stinking shreds of abandoned hay on the ground or the cold hard stone itself, thinking them into something softer, giving into his such that he could reach a degree of restfulness.

The barely changing life was a combination of only a few things...sleep, steal, eat, sleep, entertain, eat.... steal-eat, steal-eat, entertain-eat, hungry, caught and beaten for stealing, hungry, steal-eat, hungry, entertain-eat, and so on, that sleep was a secondary function dependent upon the others.

A month ago, I think it was my birthday; I could be 12 now. My stomach has been grumbling 2 days now. Most of the city dwellers are on the watch for me and enough of them are too good hearted to not watch me as I wrangle my way up to travelers. Having not been out in the wilderness just beyond the city for some time, I went to check for any flowers I could use to make into something..

I saw an older man that seemed to walk slowly but much more gracefully than one would think he could move in wild fields. His robes were generally dull tans and browns with accents of bright reds, yellows, and browns. Facial markings masked some wrinkles of time and weathered skin, but distinctly there was some type of design and sharpness to them. His direction seemed to lend itself my way just into the wood line.

Having seen ferocious cats in the wild sneak up to rabbits and prey larger than them, successfully taking their prize, I stalked amongst the trees and brush, correctly anticipating his path. I studied the satchel. I see something shiny moving somewhat freely at the top where a gap is. I could dislodge it. I figure out how the satchel opens. I find my spot to snag it. I toss small pebble into some brush away from me. I swiftly remove the object as the prey looks the other way. I duck back behind the tree. I hide as I hear his quite steps quickly fade.

Enamored with its shape and shine, this can feed me for a long time. I make a different way back to the city. After a stone's throw away, "thump, whack, crack", ordered pains on my head, back, and leg, have me lying on my back, dazed and squirming on the ground. Swirling in my head and blur in my eyes, I see the fuzzy shape of a figure reach down and feel it take my prize from my hand.

I...I.....I.....I.....

Coming back to my awareness of the world and aching body, I rub the lump on my throbbing head. I thought I'd use my leg to get up, but it was unwilling to work through that pain. There he is, that old man. He is just sitting there with his legs crossed and arms resting on his knees such that his hands just extend beyond. His thumb between his index finger pointed upward and three other fingers curled into his palm. Between us is the golden figurine standing on a rock between us.

I lay long enough for the sun to shift between a few trees and still he hasn't moved; he hasn't said anything. With enough strength and desire, I turn over ready to limp away.

"Wait," his fragile voice comes falls upon me with a fear and awkward calmness, "Do you no longer seek your prize?"

"I need it."

"Then why don't you try to take it."

"You will just hit me with your staff, if I do."

"I will not. I offer a test."

"A test, why would I take your test?"

"If you are able to sit before me you may snatch and secure what you desire and I will do the same," one hand points to my flowers to the side, and his other opens revealing my small carved stone in his palm.

This stone was something given to me by my Nanma. She told me stories of how it can represent many things in life. The three ends can represent me and my parents. It can be my past, my present, and my future. It may also become what I want, what I need, and what I must sacrifice.

With the quickness of how he struck me with that staff, he arranged all three items in front of him. Without word, I sat before him, equally as far from them as he was. My stomach growled loudly as I tried to comfort it with my hand. My eyes seeing only my stone. This man so old, so fast, and so calm.

Shakily, my voice utters, "how do we decide to go?"

"I will toss this pebble a few inches in the air. When it stops rising, prior to such that it will fall, is when we begin."

I agree. Our eyes will be on the pebble; his eyes will be on the pebble. Get and secure, maybe I could. Only a moment in the air, the pebble stops. Faster than I ever have, I snatch it, and just before the pebble lands I hold it to my stomach in both hands. As I look up, the flowers and my stone are still there.

"You took nothing?"

Without response, he notes, "You did not take the flowers. You did not take the stone."

"I can sell the figurine to eat," a tear begins to ball up until it sneaks over my eyelid, working down my cheek until there is no ball left.

As my hands twist and squeeze the figurine, my eyes stare down at the stone to watch him it and the flowers with a slow and steady pace, "You didn't try to take anything!"

"I only wanted to see how fast you were. I've noticed how quiet you are and how slyly you can take."

Giving me bread, he says "come with me."

I follow him back toward the city. Unclear what will happen at the city, we detour into the woods. More nervous than before and regardless of him and his staff, I continue to plan my escape. I've escaped many guards. Eerily, he stops as these thoughts wrangle in my mind. He draws two separate circles with a symbol and has me sit like him centered upon it.

His tone still the same and unwavering, "I'm going to leave. If you settle inside you, you will be safe."

I was panicked. I was scared. I was afraid. I felt this way before when I jumped like the mountain lion to be safe, so there my thoughts rested living that moment again. When I opened my eyes. He stood before me. Under me, I could see the symbol now glowed a faint green, but I couldn't see his. There was a series of temples around me.

He told me the symbol would stay until I wanted to leave and offered me a place to sleep and a meal. Showing me around, He places the flowers and my stone upon a spot. Further in the tour I see a display where similar figurines stand. There seem to be a few spots empty. After meal go to sleep. Wake next day, another young boy catches me after taking my stone and flowers. The boy whoops my ass and the monk soon comes.

Challenged in the monks way of speaking, I say I didn't steal, I traded it and show him the figurine I put back. In monk way of speaking, the traded is accepted. As I walk toward the symbol, he says what shall we do with my bed, "my bed?"

Struggling with unarmed fighting given his strength and natural inclination, his life at the temple would take a new path during the weekly spar session. Thel had a natural inclination to dodge and move avoiding many blows, but the fortitude of a young monks sending flurries would eventually connect to eventually beat him down. Thel fared much better in armed combat with a rope dart. His years of practice with a rock in a rope was quite similar. His ability here was equal to or better than many of the other young monks and possibly, a reason they continued to let him train in sparring.

The discipline of a monk is to be prepared for all eventualities, reacting as if the situation was of no greater surprise than any other. Proper monk training prepares them for this, and this day was no different, but different, as he was fighting Pradoha, known as Ken no Shoten, "Focus of Fist!"

Dark and thick clouds stole much of the light leaving a dimness upon the area. Thel's ability to see well in dim light was a slight advantage, because his fore was a young monk not trained enough to

discipline beyond this, so Thel would land more blows, and Pradoha would be less accurate with theirs. The fight not following the traditional routine of getting beat down, Thel might win.

Pradoha attuned himself, centered, and struck with domination, hurling Thel backwards onto his back and writhing in pain. The clouds sprinkling water hear in there, progressed into a cold downpour, leaving mud to streak across Thel's face as he came to his hands and knees. Pradoha, was slowed to close in on his prey as he slipped slightly in the mud, forcing Thel to dwell on what was to come. The foreboding storm, flashing through clouds and thundering vibrations, charged the winds from previously dancing with leaves in the sprinkles to forceful gusts driving branches into a chaos. A raindrop now delivered melds to his face. Thel felt the rain weave itself between his hair and found his foot able to feel what seemed to be a small boulder under the mud. It felt as if he was back in the stream at his favorite place and could jump out over the waterfall again.

I was fully aware; water encompassing me, wind uplifting me, and the ground giving me foundation. I leapt incredibly high, tumble-spinning over Pradoha, effortlessly blocking his attempts for a grounding strike. As I landed behind him, Pradoha turned to avoid a strike in the back which even I would be able to cause significant damage with it. I wasn't concerned where I would strike. Everything flowed through, I was everything around me. Even with my open palm moving at high speed, I was able to sense static in the air. It seemed so much more than that, because I liked that sense. I wanted more and there was more. I wanted to feel it in my palm, and I did. I wanted it to enact retribution for all my beat downs. When my strike landed at his center chest, the power of lighting moved from me to him, blowing us both back to lay on the ground.

The monks tended to both as they laid on their backs. Thel assisted to stand; the monks aided Pradoha, him taking longer to recover than ever before. Monks recognizing the ability to embrace the elements began Thel's training under one of the Mado-shi, a mage monk. Thel had earned respect and his title, Kashikoi Yoso, "The Elements Clever," and would evolve into his new persona, Kashi, as his common name.

Now 18, I was developing purpose. While out in the forest, I was observing the various pedals of a dandelion, my Mado-shi, entered my mind "Kashi...RUN!" Not to the temple, I ran.