

The Traveller
By Alana Rigby

The children were always the first to know when the traveller came to town.

“He’s here! He’s here!” The shepherd boy would exclaim, spying the traveller’s distinct silhouette on the horizon, a cloak shrouded back bent low over a tired, dark mare, his wide-brimmed hat pulled low against the midday sun. He’d dash up the hill and, with that relentless energy children were wont to display, he’d spread the word, elated that *he* was the first to know this time, that *he* was the bearer of such exhilarating news.

The children, delighted, would take up the cry, and soon their anxious whispers and squeals of the traveller’s approach would reach their parents’ ears. And though none would be compelled to admit it, the parents too would relish his arrival. For them, the traveller was not merely a well of untold stories waiting to be breached, but also a chance for relaxation and reprieve from the monotony of a day’s hard labour.

The adolescents, those village folk who toed the line between child and adult would, at first, feigned disinterest. They were too old for stories, they told themselves, but in vain were their feeble self assurances made. As the traveller arrived, his weary horse plip-plodding her way through the rustic town gates, they too were drawn to his air of enigma.

“Well,” they’d justify to each other, “nothing better to do ‘round here. Might as well give the geezer a listen.”

And so, by the time the traveller had arrived, by the time he’d emptied the innkeeper’s proffered flask of spring-water and let his mare out to graze, a crowd would have gathered, buzzing and alive with thinly veiled excitement.

“A story, a story!” the youngest children would demand, and, his wizened face cracking into a gap-toothed grin, the traveller would always give the same response.

“It is not a mere story you ask for,” he’d begin, placing a gnarled hand on the little boy’s shoulder, “it is an idea, a memory, a legend that means something very dear to someone, somewhere.”

Heedless, the children would continue.

“A story, a story!”

And the old traveller would chuckle, sitting down on a nearby crate, his walking stick resting between his knees, his talon-like fingers twined tightly around it.

“Very well. Listen, carefully. It started with a...

BANG.

And the cliff-side was giving way, ancient mountainside reduced to crumbled ruin by the wyvern’s wayward strike. Lucius threw himself forward, off the shattering stone, one hand madly groping for some vestige of remaining outcropping to latch onto, the other catching his falling staff.

Bad. His mind, a frantic jumble of half-coherent thoughts, managed to form one word. Then, another, even shorter one emerged, in conjunction with the first. *So bad. So, so bad.*

He was splayed out, hanging vertically off the cliff’s edge, his forearm wrapped around a quickly loosening chunk of rock, his staff gripped loosely between sweaty fingers. Just feet away, the wyvern hovered, the beat of its wings buffeting air in his direction.

“Rh-Rhian” His voice strangled, audibly permeated with the mind numbing terror that raced through his veins. “Rhian!” He called again, louder, though his voice was lost as the wyvern

uttered a guttural noise somewhere between a growl and a shriek.

And suddenly she was there, her ludicrously fined tuned elfish ears picking up his feeble plea for help. Her face was picture of agitated concern as she looked over the cliff side, her knife blade gripped precariously between her teeth, her bracer-adorned forearm extended to help him up. She pulled him onto the plateau just as the wyvern's clawed paw swished through the space he'd occupied.

His feet squarely on the ground, Lucius turned and muttered an incantation under his breath, sending a blazing flare towards the wyvern's gaping mouth.

Dumbstruck, he watched as it connected with its target and dissipated. There was none of the scorched flesh or squeals of pain he had expected, just an angry snarl from the monstrous creature.

"You idiot!" Rhian grabbed his hand and started running, navigating the rocky slope into the nearby valley with ease. "The wyvern's scales dispel fire; you're only making it more angry!" Amongst the hectic feelings of unadulterated terror and disorienting confusion, Lucius managed to feel a twinge of embarrassment. He *had* known that. He just didn't operate so well under high stress situations.

Just as he was beginning to worry that he wouldn't be able to keep up with the elf girl's rapid sprint, she dove for cover behind a rock. He stood for a moment, leaning on his staff, catching his breath while his mind fervently attempted to make sense of the situation.

"*What in the name of the seven hells are you doing?!*" Rhian hissed in consternation. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him down beside her, throwing her overlarge greenwood cloak over them just as the wyvern emerged at the valley's peak.

"Stay very still," Rhian whispered, her lips so close to his ear that Lucius could feel the warmth of her breath. "If it discovers us, you run. I will distract it."

Although her sheer proximity *was* distracting him from her words, distantly, Lucius' mind reasoned there was something wrong with her proposed solution. After all, he was the man here; he was the capable spell caster. She was just an elvish sword-for-hire.

The wyvern inched closer, angry snorts of hot air rippling Rhian's cloak. Absurdly, Lucius was having trouble focusing on anything more than the feeling of her leg pressed against his back, or her arm over his shoulder, holding the corner of her cloak down. The wyvern took one last, seemingly fatal step in their direction, and then there was a sudden gust of air as its wings opened and it took off into the sky, disappearing over a distant ridge in a matter of moments.

Rhian torn the cloak away and leaned back against the rock with a sigh of relief.

"Thank the Great Spirit and all of his disciples. I was not sure we would survive that one." She cast a look in Lucius' direction, her green eyes laughing beneath long, dark lashes. "You look... frazzled."

Lucius flushed, running a dirt-covered hand through his loose, chestnut curls.

"I am frazzled." He admitted with a laugh. He moved to pick up his staff from where it had fallen when Rhian had grabbed him, and then turned to offer her a hand up.

Ignoring him, she sprung nimbly to her feet and began walking, the brief moment of comradeship stowed swiftly away under her commonplace veneer of distant superiority.

"This unfortunate detour has cost us time," she informed him, checking that her many knives fit snugly in their sheaths. "We must quicken our pace if we are to reach the Vale before sundown."

Lucius sighed and fell in place behind her, envying the effortless grace with which she

navigated the rocky terrain. Every straggled root that caught him or unseen stone that sent him staggering would merit an impatient glare from Rhian, accompanied by an obligated steadying hand. Lucius began to suspect there was more at work between them than his characteristic clumsiness; there was something about Rhian's uncanny excellence at everything – at knife play, at archery, at being impossibly gorgeous and incredibly deadly in the same moment– that intimidated him slightly.

Whatever their relationship was, they needed each other. Commissioned by the same man for the same job, they were chosen for their differences, their diametrically distinct skills that somehow worked together in harmonious conjunction. Their task, a typical one: scale mountain, defeat obstacles, find legendary object – personified in this scenario as the staff to which Lucius so dearly clung. Their means: Rhian was the guide, the muscle, the competent know-how that kept them functioning. Lucius was the methodical thinker, the one fluent in six different languages, who could decipher the mysteries left behind by age-old warlocks and avaricious princes. Together, they had succeeded and were now destined for the Vale, the city that dwelled in the shadow of the mountain, where their commissioner waited with their promised monetary reward.

The Vale was, if nothing else, an infamous location; the mountain folk were a hardened people, their cut throat way of life so ingrained in their nature that its ruthlessness warranted no second thought or undue attention. Lucius, a born and bred city lad, felt out of place among these folk of sword and stone, an educated gentleman the citizenry could segregate with a mere glance. Rhian, he noted as they finally did reach the city, bore no similar awkwardness; her loping gait and wary stare put her right at home amongst the Vale folk.

“The Duke will be expecting us,” she said, not looking at him, her eyes alert, one hand resting casually on her knife's hilt.

He wasn't a real Duke, of course; the title merely conveyed an air of aristocratic authenticity to a man who was clearly little more than a common crime lord. Despite his obvious penchant for all things illegal and money-making, their commissioner was an enigmatic man with a great deal of gold to spend on what looked like, to Lucius at least, a trivial walking stick. But who was he to judge; being neither an expert on magical weaponry nor on antique relics, Lucius was certain he was underestimating its worth.

Apparently, he was not the only one who believed this.

“I want double.” Rhian's voice was firm, uncompromising, like crystal cutting glass. They were in a dank, back alley room in what was possibly the seediest building Lucius had ever entered. The Duke's promised reward, several thousand gold pieces, lay stacked neatly on a table between the two parties.

“Excuse me?” Lucius was sure the Duke's expression mirrored his own – incredulous, angry and caught dreadfully unaware.

“I want double,” Rhian repeated. “Acquiring the staff posed considerable unforeseen difficulty; I am certain it is worth more than you led us to believe. Lucius and I deserve double what you promised.”

Lucius opened his mouth to contribute something, anything coherent really, but found himself unable to. Truthfully he didn't know which he feared more, the determined resolve on Rhian's face or the unconcealed rage on the Duke's and the dangerous look of the armed men who stood behind him.

“Do you realize the position you are in?” The Duke's feigned educated accent was wavering as audible discontent wormed its way into his voice. “Do you know who I am and

how easy it would be to tell one of my men to shoot you where you stand?”

Rhian’s response was unhesitant, her faintly accented words confident and clear. “I highly doubt the competency of your men, your Grace. If they were so capable, why would you have hired mercenaries to acquire the staff for you?”

Lucius was sweating, his eyes flitting nervously back and forth from Rhian, to the Duke, to the surly men who palmed their sword handles behind him.

“I am offering to pay you what your labour is worth. Take the offer while it still stands, or you will not be standing for long.”

Rhian actually *laughed*. Admittedly, the Duke’s pun was an aberration on puns everywhere, its undeniable melodrama negating any value it had as a threat. However, *laughing* at an angry crime lord with a legion of armed men at his beck and call was never an advisable course of action.

The Duke’s face was a portrait of shock. Lucius suspected it might’ve been because of Rhian’s laughter. However, it might’ve also had something to do with the knife that unexpectedly lodged itself in his throat. He gurgled, blood fizzed out between his lips, and he toppled to the ground.

“Grab the gold Lucius!” Rhian shouted, a picture of action, leaping over the table, two knives appearing in her hands, though Lucius never saw her reach for their scabbards.

The Duke’s men, recovering from their confused stupor, were still too slow to combat her lightening quick reflexes. By the time Lucius had shoved the glistening coins into his rucksack, she was cleaning her blades on the trim of the Duke’s shirt, her other hand sifting through his pockets and plucking gaudy jewellery off his lifeless fingers.

She looked up at him and smiled. Her only visible wound was a slight scratch across her cheek, a razor thin delicacy that did little more than accent the almond shape of her bewitchingly beautiful eyes.

She’s insane. Lucius decided. She’s insane and she’s dragging you down into her well of insane, criminal actions. All you needed was some gold to pay for your trip; all you wanted was to get an education. All you wanted to was to help people, Great Goddess be damned, and now you’re killing people and coveting priceless artefacts and unwittingly-

His thoughts were cut short by her voice. “We have to go. Quickly. The City Watch will discover this mess shortly.” Her tone brooked no complaint. Lucius, his mind still numb in the aftermath of actions he didn’t quite understand, nodded.

“Here,” she flicked a silver ring in his direction. “His fingers are too large, it won’t fit me.”

He looked down at the jewellery as he followed her through the moonlit streets, their backs bent against prying eyes like the criminals they now were. The ring’s finished surface reflected the stars, sparkling prettily. He had never been much inclined to wearing jewellery, but something about the ring’s unvarnished surface, bare save for a few minute inscriptions in some unfamiliar, ornate script, appealed to him. He looked up at Rhian, a few feet ahead of him, peering around a corner to ensure their escape would go unnoticed. Her hair was mussed from the fight, shoved haphazardly behind delicately pointed ears. She glanced back at him and gestured that they continue. Smiling faintly, he slipped the ring on his index finger.

Perhaps who gave it to me adds to some of its appeal, he mused, following her out into the night.

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“I imagine you would appreciate an explanation?” Rhian looked up at him from across

the campfire, her fingers still methodically dividing the gold pieces into two equal piles.

Lucius was tired. Honestly, he could've waited till morning for an explanation. With a sigh that betrayed his weary resignation, he indulged the elf.

"I was hoping for one, yes." He speared a piece of roasting pheasant meat – the bird, downed, naturally, by Rhian with one quick twang of her bowstring – on his belt knife and brought it to his mouth. How she managed to hunt at night, he would never understand.

"I had been planning to demand a higher payment from the Duke from the moment we received the task. It was obvious the staff was worth more to him than he was paying." Her voice was matter of fact, like the movement of her hands.

"Was it?" In his half-alert stupor, Lucius' jumpiness around Rhian was subsiding. He simply watched her fingers move, mesmerized both by their delicacy and the iridescence of the gold as it shimmered in the inconstant firelight.

"Yes." She shoved his pile of gold around the fire, towards him. "I did not include you in these plans because of your nervous nature. If I had told you of the treachery before hand, I have no doubt you would have given us away."

Lucius opened his mouth to object, then decided against it. "You're probably right."

She smiled. "Feel no distress. It is a quality I admire in you, your honesty."

He was taken aback; his eyes widened in surprise.

She laughed at his expression. "Should it be so shocking that I respect you in some ways?"

He nodded. "Yes," and then, after a moment's consideration, added "and what assurance do I have that you won't just throw a knife at my throat and make off with my share of the gold?"

She laughed again, and he realized how much he enjoyed the sound. *Stop it, his rational self urged. Your life could be at stake, you libido driven lack-wit. Pay attention.*

"There would be no cause for that. Surely you have noted how well our skills complement each other? I propose we work together, for a time at least."

Another expression of shock splayed its way across his features. But then he acknowledged the merit of her words. They were an effective team, despite, or rather, because of their differences.

"I accept," he affirmed with a nod.

She nodded in return, her crooked grin contagious. "Good." She offered a thin-fingered hand to shake.

He grinned stupidly as they clasped hands.

"So, we have a staff to pawn." He stated, in a final attempt to clarify the situation.

"That we do. But first, we must discover what it is truly worth."

"And how do we go about doing that?" He asked.

"Well," she thought for a moment. "It begins with more walking."

He groaned.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow, we renew our travels."

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The traveller paused, as was his custom, enjoying the ardent expressions of anticipation his audience displayed. They sat around him, on weather-worn blankets and overturned crates, children at their parent's feet, friends reclining lazily alongside friends.

"Then what?" the most impatient listeners insisted. "Did they sell it off to some rich man?"

The traveller would chuckle, and, like any skilled proprietor of his tale-telling trade, gave no enlightening response.

“Would some little ‘un run off and fill my flask now?” He asked instead, and at once, three tiny pairs of hands would reach for the container, children running off towards the stream in a gaggle of giggles and contentment.

The adults would take the time to sort their affairs, to tend to the livestock and take in the wind-dried laundry.

The traveller always marvelled at the miracle of his own presence. How strange it was, that an outsider, a man with no city and no name and a face more archetypal than accurate, could entice young, old, infirm and able alike out into the town square, engendering a feeling of communal spirit that oft went unfelt in the village over the course of many seasons. The allure was mostly in the stories, he believed, though there was undoubtedly an art in the telling. Stories brought to the village a vivacity, a life, an enchanting suspension of disbelief that these rural folk would likely never *truly* know in their lifetime. The traveller delighted in bringing them that; he enjoyed the mysticism in telling a tale, the liveliness his words could instil, the memories they could evoke.

And for a moment, to those with watchful eyes, his expression softened, saddened by the last, unbidden musing. But as the children return, he’s sloshing flask in tow, he smiled again and resumed his tale.

“They travelled,” he leaned forward on his walking stick, bringing his great head close to the eager children seated inches from him, “for many days, and many nights, seeking wisdom they could not find. Their obstacles were few, bandits they easily dispatched, riddles that posed no problem for Lucius’ wit, off beaten forest paths Rhian could navigate in sleep.”

A silence fell, and the steady rhythm of the traveller’s words took over, gaining an intensity and momentum all their own. “City after city proved fruitless; no wise woman or guild leader knew the staff’s significance. Soon, they had little choice but to return to Rhian’s homeland, to venture into the kingdom of the wood elves.”

His words continued; the imagery evoked so vivid that the village folk were immersed, lost in the unrelenting sea of his story...

A twig snapped under Lucius’ calf-high boot. Rhian threw a glare back at him, and he wondered exactly how she managed to move across the decaying foliage without making a sound. He looked up at the great trees around him, admiring what few leaves still clung to the branches, their jagged outlines silhouetted by the sun. The seasons were turning; life was leaving the world as winter marched its pitiless self in to take its place. Gold was the colour of the hour, the ancient trees’ greenery giving way to a yellow-auburn shine, the leaves a crinkled, beaten tapestry of their once effortless majesty. Lucius loved this time of year, though the approach frost made his recent vagabond lifestyle a tad harder to maintain.

Ahead of him, Rhian swore. She stood in a quaint, tree shrouded glade, squinting at the sky, her expression some half and half mix of accusation and frustration.

He cocked his head thoughtfully to one side. “Are we lost?”

“No, Lucius, we are not lost.” She snapped at him.

“You can admit that we’re lost, you know.” Lucius’ tone was playfully mocking. A month’s worth of travelling in her company had numbed him to any of the frightened nervousness she once inspired in him.

“I do not get *lost*.” She told him, and though he felt the urge to laugh, her tone

portrayed the utter sincerity she felt in her statement. "We shall make camp here for the night."

He looked up at the sky. "We've got plenty of daylight left."

Rhian shook her head, and he sensed that more than her frustration was behind this decision. "Stranger things dwell in these woods than elves, my friend." She looked up at met his eyes. "Believe me, you do not want to meet the creatures here who, ah, how do you humans say it, go 'bump in the night'."

He smiled at her idiom, and together they made camp, a task that had become methodical and efficient over the course of many repetitions.

"How is it," Lucius asked tentatively, when they had a fire burning and a scraggly rabbit roasting, "that the only time you've gotten us lost is when we're searching for the one place you call home?"

"We are not lost!" She insisted again, between chattering teeth. They were pressed side to side against the night time chill, sitting as close to the fire as they dared risk.

He raised an eyebrow in scepticism, looking down at the slight girl. "We've been in this forest for nearly four days and still no sign of ye olde elvish village."

"I preferred it when you kept quiet and did as I instructed." She muttered, resting her chin upon her knees. Lucius laughed, and for a time they were silent, mesmerized by the supple swaying of the flames before them.

"The reason we are lost," Lucius looked away from the fire. The admission of their misdirection took a visible toll on his elvish companion: her face was crestfallen, her expression toeing the line between sadness and nostalgia. "is because, for many years, I have avoided my homeland."

"Were you exiled?"

"No," she answered quickly, glancing up at him in annoyance. "No, I was not exiled. I left of my own volition."

Lucius was pensive for a moment, wondering how much was safe to say before feelings were trodden upon and unwanted emotions provoked. "I thought it strange that a wood elf would be selling her skills for hire in a place as disreputable as the Vale. Your people are known for their reclusion, for their wisdom and invention. They say that few mortals ever met a woodland elf." Her words, when she finally spoke, were bitter with scorn. "This proverbial 'they' knows much of my kind, it would seem."

"I didn't mean to say-" Lucius hurried to right whatever wrong he had committed, but Rhian cut him off.

"No, no, there was no untruth in your words. My people are what you have labelled them, reclusive, wise. They are bound by tradition, a noble people living by a noble creed." Her smile then could only be called lascivious. "You will have noticed I follow no similar moral code."

He nodded. "I did think it strange. You are certainly the first elvish thief I met."

She laughed then, and he was thankful for the sound. "Do not belittle what I do to mere thievery."

"Well, that *is* what it amounts to."

"My noble cause negates all moral qualms about my 'thievery'." She insisted.

"Oh," he raised an eyebrow again. "Moral cause eh? Pray tell."

She stared straight ahead, schooling her expression to sobriety. "I need to buy an expensive potion to save the life of my ailing grandmother."

She looked up at him. He looked back. Spontaneously, they burst into childish giggles. It was reassuring to know that somewhere beneath the near mechanical shield of efficiency and logic,

Rhian had a sense of humour.

“Very well.” She conceded, “So my motivation may not be significantly just or righteous. I still believe any profit would be better used in my hands than this magical thing,” she nudged the staff with her boot toe, “would be in the hands of that disgusting Duke.”

“I am sure your motivation is nothing so noble either?” She asked after a moment, peering up at him.

He shook his head. “It is self-serving. I simply wanted to finance a sea-crossing voyage. I was hoping to further my education at one of the Eastern universities.”

She nodded.

“That is a pity. You are a surprisingly capable mercenary.”

Lucius smiled at the compliment, and silence stretched between them for a time. The wind whistled sharply, its whispering gusts like icy fingers reaching through their many layers and chilling their skin. Rhian sidled closer against him and they remained motionless while the fire died down to little more than scattered embers.

“I left the village when my brother died.” She said suddenly, softly, her words whispered into the penetrating gloom of the night. Impulsively, Lucius wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in closer. She rested her head against his shoulder in silent thanks. “It was an honourable death, in duel against a pompous king of a neighbouring tribe. You will not understand the ceremony of our ways, but to our people such a death is envied and admired, in idea at least.”

“To watch it, however, one could not see the honour.” Her voice was heavy with her grief; looking down, Lucius expected to see tears, but Rhian’s face was dry, her eyes brimming with emotion and memory, not the salty water of sadness. “Our people had been warring for many months, in a combat that showed no signs of ending. My father, the king had been wounded, and command of our forces fell to my brother, who was hardly fully grown – still a child in many of my peoples’ eyes.”

“Then arrived an offer from our opposition: a proposed duel to end the battle, to prevent further lives from being lost. Their king to ours – who the black-hearted fiends knew to be wounded – the victor of whom would claim the land we contested over. Our situation was bleak, we were losing drastically; the enemy would overrun our walls in a matter of days. My brother knew he had to accept; if he did not, more lives would be lost.”

“Why not surrender?” Lucius probed softly.

“Elves do not *surrender*; there is no honour in surrender.” And Lucius recognized the same scorn in her tone, the same immediate denial he had heard in her insistence “*I do not get lost*”. He realised now that this was a cultural difference between them, an unwillingness to accept defeat or fault, no matter what the odds were.

“My brother did the ‘right’ thing, the ‘honourable’ thing,” as she spat the words out, her voice lost the eloquence and refinement she normally wielded with ease. “It was laughable, the contest. Our enemy’s king was a seasoned warrior, several hundred years of age. My brother had consented to his own death, and his family, his closest friends were made to stand by and watch.”

She shook her head, refusing to continue, to narrate the details of the duel, details Lucius knew were scarred into her memory, that had no doubt played themselves out time and time again in her mind, on nights when sleep made itself elusive.

Tentatively, he placed a hand on her head, stroking her hair gently. The action proved too much for her; she buried her face in his chest and finally, sobbing started. He suspected this was

something she had held at bay, put off by her sheer willpower, her veneer of calculated callousness, her constant need to be doing *something*, in motion somehow, on some absurd quest or another.

“I left my village the day following.” He felt the need in her words; she had to finish the story, to purge herself of details she’d internalized too long. “I wanted no part of a world that would condemn their men to death for honour, in the name of tradition.”

She gulped, having reached an end that satisfied her.

“Are you worried about your return?” he asked, his hand still stroking her head gentle.

He felt her nod against his chest.

“Don’t worry,” his voice was a whisper now, matching hers in raspy pitch. “We will face these people of honour together.”

She smiled then, caught between amusement at the ridiculous nobility of his words and gratitude for the support he promised.

They slept like that, side by side, cloaks thrown around them, the dying embers of the fire their only company.



It was Lucius, ironically, who found the elvish village.

“These symbols...”

“Hm?” Rhian glanced over, a distracted look on her face. The morning following her impromptu confession had proved slightly uncomfortable. Lucius had woken to find her sleeping peacefully stretched across his chest, and had, admittedly, been too blissfully content to move her. She had woken soon after, instantly sitting up and pulling away.

“Lucius,” she had nudged him with her toe, not realizing he was merely feigning sleep.

“Lucius, our time is short.”

And now it was nearing midday, and Lucius was tearing moss from the trunk of a massive tree, trying to make sense of an elaborate inscription gouged into the rugged surface.

“Rhian, it’s a sign post.”

“Elves do not use *sign posts* Lucius,” she chided, exasperation clear in her tone. “It is likely the scribbling of some lunatic...”

Her voice faded off as she approached the tree.

She breathed a curse in her native tongue, the melodic language flowing from her lips like melody from a flute. “How could I have overlooked this?”

The village was above them, as it were.

Seek heavenward for hospitality, Lucius had translated the scribbles to mean, and that was exactly what they had done. Further exploration revealed step-ladder gouges in the trees around them; they scaled these trees and Lucius marvelled at the world’s gradual transformation as they gained altitude.

Hidden in amongst the trees was habitation, nooks and crannies transformed into hollowed out houses, branches between trees fortified with unsteady wooden bridges an elf could dance across, but Lucius dared not to tiptoe on.

“Rhian?”

Having topped a tree, they turned around to find an entourage of elves, a dark haired male at their front.

“Eldair,” Rhian stepped forward and warmly clasped the male’s arm. “It had been some time.”

The inscription had not lied when hospitality was promised. Lucius had privately indulged

worries that Rhian might be unwelcome upon her return, that her sojourn away from her people might have forever branded her an outsider, never to be welcomed among them again. He had also suspected his own presence might be treated with hostility; he feared that to these people he would appear little more than an ignorant foreigner, intrusive and potentially dangerous.

He was wrong, on all accounts. The elves proved entirely cordial, feeding him and providing him with his own spacious chambers (what sort of magic they abused to turn the inside of a tree into a full-fledged bedroom, he would never know). Rhian's reception was even more elaborate – a retinue of delighted folk walked in and out while they dined, greeting her, conversing in elvish so rapid Lucius could not follow. Then, she disappeared for a time, on some matter of ceremony in which Lucius was not included in. So instead, he slept, relishing in an ease and comfort he had not known for many nights.

Their quest was not suspended however. The staff, which remained in Lucius possession, leaning innocuously against his bed table, beckoned silently. With dawn of the next day, Rhian arrived at his door, entreating him to follow her.

“We are to see the disciple.” was all the information she shared with him. Lucius knew better than to press for further details; instead he followed her obediently over the criss-crossing tree tops of the village, quietly amazed at the culture he witnessed in every ‘building’. The wood elves truly were a mystical people, so very different to Lucius in every way possible.

The disciple seconded this observation. She was not the wizened, aged crone Lucius had anticipated – a woman ancient even by elvish standards, wise with the wisdom of many centuries’ experience. Instead, a young elf awaited their arrival, a woman beautiful beyond compare, adorned in forest greens, her skin nearly translucent in its paleness.

Wordlessly Rhian took the staff from Lucius, holding it out towards the disciple.

The elf, for a long time said nothing, and Lucius began to wonder if she was indeed a prophet of sorts. But then she spoke in a voice so otherworldly and terrible, he could feel stronger forces at work in every fibre of his existence. Immediately, he knew something was amiss.

“You bring before us an ancient evil, locked away and meant to be forgotten.” The disciple’s eyes were transfixed on the staff though somehow simultaneously unseeing, focused on something Rhian and Lucius could not comprehend. *“It was wrong of you to bring it here, wrong of you to tempt us so.”*

The disciple moved as if propelled by a force she didn’t understand, rising up, arms outstretched towards Rhian. An eerie glow surrounded her, emanating as if from beneath her skin, lighting her from within.

Rhian let out a strangled cry as the staff glowed in return, a pulsating radiation that gradually gained confidence, its piercing brightness forcing Lucius to shield his eyes.

“I can’t...” Rhian’s face contorted in pain; Lucius lunged forward, prying her fingers from the staff. The disciple began to chant, her words low and menacing, an incantation in a tongue Lucius’ addled mind could make no sense of.

He recognized, however, a powerful spell when he heard one. As the disciple took one final step towards the staff, he threw up a hurried shield, casting a basic protection spell to encircle himself and Rhian.

The disciple bent to pick up the staff.

He clutched Rhian tightly to him, added layer upon layer of further protection. Whatever was happening was an evil beyond his comprehension; he knew the consequences would be dreadful. They watched, paralyzed with terror, as the disciple bared her teeth in a smile devoid

of any recognizable morality. And then, everything went white.

He awoke, Rhian still held tightly in his arms, the edges of his robe singed.

They were on the forest floor. How they'd transitioned from tree-top city to leaf-strewn ground, he could not recall. There was a horrid smell, one he recognized distantly as a smell of scorched flesh.

Rhian squirmed, looked up at him, blinked confusedly.

Not far from them, a muffled groan sounded.

"It was not meant for this world."

Lucius squinted, only then realizing an opaque smoke surrounded them. He perceived a disturbing glow, a silhouetted shape hidden amongst the thick cloud.

"Its evil will tempt all with power. It will use them to cause chaos and destruction."

"By the Spirit," Rhian breathed, slowly worming her way out of his arms. She crawled towards the strangled voice and Lucius unwittingly followed. "By the Spirit, what have we done...?"

The disciple lay, the flesh from her fingers burned away to bone, her face absurdly, perversely intact and perfect while the rest of her body simultaneously burned.

"Take it from me." Her voice was losing the ragged sound of a dark power, reverting to something painfully normal. It made the suffering she was experiencing infinitely more apparent. "Take it from me, to the chamber in which it was entombed. It must be destroyed."

Rhian, tears streaming unbidden down her face, pulled the staff from the disciple's skeletal fingers.

"Lifeblood," the light was quickly fading from her eyes, "sacrifice of lifeblood is needed to bury it forever."

Lucius muddled mind made sense of the woman's dying words. Somehow, through some unwanted moment of foresight, he feared he knew how this situation would resolve itself.

The moments that followed he could not articulate. He and Rhian surveyed their surroundings, marvelling quietly at the destruction the staff had caused, destruction they had avoided only through Lucius' protective spells. The village and its inhabitants were destroyed, burned by a fire that's embers never died.

They left. They had no other choice; there were no words to amend the situation, no actions to alleviate the suffering they had brought. Rhian shed tears in silence, her footfalls slowing as they fled the site of the disaster, the ramifications of their actions visibly weighing her down with each step she took. Lucius had no means to console her; he had hardly understood what transpired himself.

There was no question the staff was evil. As the disciple said, it wielded the power of those around it, working through them to incite chaos. The disciple's power, her divine connection with the Great Spirit, had evidently proven too tempting for the weapon. He held the damned staff now, his fingers firm like eagle talons around its knotted surface.

They made camp some nameless somewhere; the details were vague in his mind, and would remain unrecalled many years later. No words were spoken, Rhian met his eyes and he understood that there was nothing he could do to right this wrong.

He gave her what he could, the companionship he had secretly yearned for suddenly meaning something fundamentally different. He held her close as she wept, shedding his own silent tears, wondering how something that had begun so lightly, so easily, could have metamorphosized into a tragedy he could hardly fathom.

They lost themselves in each other, clinging desperately to the only life that remained, their primal emotions more mournful than any words they could have spoken. They slept, resting against each other, comforted by the rise and fall of chests, the miracle of breathe both a phenomenon they were infinitely grateful for and something they felt they did not deserve.

And when Lucius woke in the morning, Rhian and the staff were gone.

He had been expecting that. He knew where she was going, what she was planning. He had recognized the resignation in her face the moment the disciple uttered her last words – he knew she planned to shed the ‘lifeblood’ necessary to destroy the staff.

It was strange, Lucius mused as he followed in her tracks, knowing he would be too late. Rhian had constructed her life in opposition to the creed her people preached. Her brother had died for honour; she had fled such an existence, giving in to petty thievery and misconduct, indulging in an active quest for dishonour. She thought this way of life would bring her greater happiness than she would find following in her ancestors’ footsteps. It was strange, he thought again, and painfully ironic that she now reverted to these ways. For the deaths she had caused, she would martyr herself. A greater act of honourable conduct, Lucius could not imagine.

He could not explain why he pursued her. He knew where she was headed, he backtracked through the Vale, he followed her up the mountain, he made his way through the valley where the wyvern had first waylaid them on that sunny day seemingly lifetimes away.

He knew he would be too late; he was expecting the site of her, dead on the ground, the staff held tightly against her chest.

And somehow, despite his prescience, Lucius could not still the aching throb in his heart, his head, his soul, he could deny the sorrow, an inexplicable sadness greater than anything he had known, evoked by the sight of her lifeless form. He fell to his knees, his robes absorbing her blood, the blood she had shed to still the evil within the staff.

He pried the cursed object from her rigor-set fingers, and immediately he knew she had succeeded. It was nothing more than a lifeless piece wood now, the blood-for-blood compromise of her sacrifice had stilled whatever sadistic spirit had possessed the weapon.

But she was dead.

It took Lucius several moments, in that windy, wintry cavern, to reconcile himself to this fact. Rhian was dead; she had died to calm an evil, to compensate for the destruction of a village. It was an undeniably honourable exeunt from life.

She had found peace. He saw it in her face as he smoothed her hair away from her empty eyes. He saw it in the corners of the lips he’d longed for; he saw it in the softness of her brow and the gentle posture of her shoulders.

He smiled through his tears, happy, at least, that one of them was content. He stood, the staff gripped gently in his hands, and said a prayer for her.

Rhian had found peace. Lucius would make it his mission to do the same.



The villagers were still, stunned by the unforeseen morbidity of the traveller’s tale, silenced by the dark end to character’s whose lived had seemed so bright only moments before.

“So...” it was not the youngest children who spoke now, but rather one of the adolescents, the folk most resistant to hearing the traveller’s stories. “What did he do? Did he find peace?”

The traveller leaned back on his crate, cradling his walking stick between his gnarled fingers. “He did the only thing he could. He told her story. Inglorious and filled with flaw though it may be, he felt the world should know what became of her. He thought that this, that sharing their tale, sharing the feelings he harboured, feelings he had never shared with her, would bring

him peace.”

An understanding began to dawn on the more insightful of his audience. Details pieced themselves together. The walking stick he cradled with care suddenly appeared more regal, more nefarious, more than a mere piece of discarded wood, chanced upon and salvaged by an old man to help him walk. The aphorism he began his tales with, the familiar words *it is not a mere story you ask for, it is an idea, a memory, a legend that means something very dear to someone, somewhere*, suddenly assumed on a new meaning, a sincerity it did not previously evoke.

It was more than a story, the villagers realized. The traveller, Lucius, got to his feet, leaning heavily on his staff. He smiled at the villagers.

“Remember this tale, if you remember none other I have told. It is one of dearest significance to me.”

Muted sadness met his words, and in this silence he made his leave. The traveller mounted his weary mare, and, with a tired wave, he nudged the horse into motion.

The villagers watched him till he was little more than a speck on the horizon. He would travel onwards, to other towns and hamlets, his distinct figure recognizable in the distance, his coming uniting community, bringing excitement and emotion to places where these ideas were scarce. He would carry the heavy burden of stories with him, the memories he was charged with keeping and conveying. And every telling was magical, every story enchanted, every impact profound.

He would tell his story time and time again until he died, and hopefully, each telling would bring closer to the peace he had so long been seeking.