

From The Last Valley
A Rift Fanfic

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The Return

The horseman sped down the Way of Past Kings. Night was about to fall, and it was not advisable to be on the road after dark. Not even this close to Meridian, the proud capital of the Eth. Silverback wolves, whose howls filled the moonless nights, where the least of dangers. Rifts could open anywhere, and even though the March Wardens took every effort to close them, the horrors they spewed into the world often roamed the otherwise peaceful nights.

The rider needed not press his horse for more speed, although the animal was exhausted from a long ride. The smell of home in it's nostrils, it activated the last of it's powers to reach the safety and warmth of the stables. The riders face was mostly covered by a large hood, and a dirt-stained and ragged woolen travel coat made it hard to make out the statue or features.

The rider passed the plaza outside the city, in which farmers and merchants offered their wares and jugglers and barkeepers disputed over the attention and coin of passers by. The city watch kept an eye on anyone who entered and left the city, and patrolled the market-town outside.

At the gates, they stopped the rider. One of the guards looked at the dirt-stained figure with obvious disgust. It was clear that the rider had come a long way, but the guard wasn't in the mood to let that pass as an excuse. After all, it was his job to keep the peace.

"Hey, mate!" He blocked the way. "What's your business?"

The rider stopped his horse, and stood for a moment. Then he stretched out his hands, palm first, in a traditional Ethosian greeting, and grabbed into his saddle bags. The two guards both drew their swords.

Instead of a weapon, the rider produced a torn piece of parchment, and handed it towards one of the guards. The man put back his sword, while his comrade drew closer, showing off his weapon.

The man took the parchment, and started for a second. It was torn, and almost unreadable, which he could have noticed, if he were able to read. Unbroken though, and fairly recognizable, was the official seal of the College for Planar Studies of Meridian.

Yet, he was not convinced. Why would the noble college sent for someone in rags to go about their business?

The guard made a stern face. "All right, mate! Get off that horse!" He commanded.

The rider sighed, and stiffly unmounted his horse.

"An honest man would show his face! Off with that hood!"

The rider obeyed, and pulled back the hood and unsheathed the features of a young woman. Long pointed ears jutted out between hair that was the pale colour of moonlight. Her violet skin built a stark contrast to the white

hair. Turquoise eyes stared challengingly back at the guard.

She was Kelari, and despite the, from a human perspective, bewildering colour of her skin and eyes, she was of an unearthly beauty. A feature she shared with most of the elven folks. The man stared at her, his mouth open. “An honest man would.” She answered him. “I beg your pardons, but it’s been a long ride, and I am tired and desperate for a hot meal and a pillow to rest on.”

The second guard, his sword still in his hand, stared at her with his mouth open. Obviously, he he hadn’t seen a Kelari girl on horseback before. The other guard was more composed. He had seen the silver amulet around the girl’s neck, which identified her as a maester of the arcane arts. He poked his comrade in the side. “Put the sword down, mate!”

“But... , we need to check... ”

The guard pointed to her neck. “She’s a mage”, he hissed. “You really wanna mess with her?”

The second guard hastily put away his sword. He clearly did not want to mess with a mage who worked for the college.

“You may pass!” The first guard said, and gave way.

The woman nodded, and remounted her horse. On different occasions, she would have been amused by such duteousness, but right now she was only tired.

She rode into the city, thinking about were to go next. She had official business at the college, but she decided, after all they had put her through, that it could wait for another night. Instead of the marble palaces of the city center, she rode into the narrow alley’s of the Circle. The Circle was the part of town, where mostly common folk lived. In better time it had been the center of Ethosian craftsmanship, and many craftsmen and artisans still dwelled here. When the rifts began tearing Telara apart, more and more people had come to Meridian, and now the Circle was crammed and dirty, and thieves, beggars and whores made up most of the population.

The girl stopped in front of a tavern named *The Lantern* and unmounted. A stable boy came running, and welcomed her. “My Lady! Welcome at our humble inn! May I take care of your horse?”

She handed him a silver. “Thank you. See that she gets water and feed her. It has been a long journey.” The boy grinned, bowed bumbling and led the horse towards the stables behind the inn.

She entered the tavern. Behind the counter, a big woman with a round reddened face looked up at the newcomer. When she spotted the visitor, she beamed.

“My lady Famaniel!” She cried, striding from the counter towards the door. The Kelari girl smiled as the woman approached her. Lathia, as the woman was known, was the owner of the inn. Famaniel remembered well

the first time she had come to Meridian, during her time as a student at the college. She had stayed in the *Lantern*, in a small chamber under the roof, for a few silvers a week. By now she was a maester, but she still returned here to the dusty old tavern that was the closest thing to home she knew.

Although Lathia greeted Famaniel exuberantly, her happiness to see the girl was genuine. “Good to see you alive and kicking girl! Good to see you!”

Famaniel freed herself from the hugs of the older woman. “I reckon, you have a place to lay my head for a night or two?”

The woman laughed heartily. “Ever so well educated!” She roared. “For you my dear, there’s always a room in this house!”

Before she could say “Thank you!” Famaniel sat at a table, a goblet of sweet spiced wine and a steaming plate of meat and vegetables in front of her. She hadn’t known how hungry she actually was, and the smell of the meat made her mouth water.

In Kelari tradition, she usually lived of fruits and fish, but on her days on the road, she had eaten nothing but dried fruit and jerky. She was used to live on very little food, but she was not so deep into her peoples tradition, that she would reject a roasted hare and a goblet of spiced wine every now and then.

While she was eating, Lathia sat at her table, talking to her. By the time she was finished, she new exactly who of the lords in the city had been untrue to his wife, who had been spotted in a whorehouse, and who had fallen from grace.

Famaniel usually was not interested in the newest gossip, but ever since she had been entangled in the daily business of the college, she had found some of that knowledge quite useful.

After Lathia had cleared the table, a girl showed up at her table. She was of Ethian origin, black of hair and with bronze skin. She was in her early twenties, and wore a simple white robe, that identified her as a servant. She was very pretty, and looked more frail and tender then the girls Lathia usually employed.

The pretty girl curtsyed. “A bath is prepared for you, my Lady. If it pleases you!” It pleased Famaniel very much. The prospect of a steaming hot bath was filling her with joy. “I’ll be right with you” Famaniel gulped down the rest of her spiced wine and followed the girl upstairs.

The bathroom was simple. It was just a room with a wooden tub in it and a crude oven. But it was warm, and there was clean hot water in the tub. The girl had thrown some petals into it, to scent it. To Famaniel, this was heaven.

She began to undress, carefully trying not to touch the stains of dried goo on her robe. Some of the creatures she had encountered closing a rift in Stonefield had been quite disgusting, even after they had died.

To her own disgust, she found the rest of her garments not much cleaner, and -even worse- quite smelly. “No wonder,” she thought. “After almost two weeks of wearing the same clothes, that’s what you get.”

Famaniël was by far a cissy, but she always cared for her appearance, and she hated being dirty and smelly. One more thing she’d make Sylver pay for the next day, she thought.

When she stepped out of her clothes, the girl grabbed the pile of dirty garments, and went for the door. “Make yourself comfortable, my Lady!” She said. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Famaniël smiled. “Where are you taking my clothes?”

The girl looked at her astonished. “To be cleaned of course, my Lady! You would not want to put them on again after your bath, would you?”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to walk around naked then.” Famaniël smiled.

The girl blushed. “I’m sorry, my Lady! Of course not! I promise you, you will be pleased with what I have to offer!”

Famaniël laughed. She had intended to send the girl to get her some new clothes anyway. “Thank you!” She said.

When the girl left the room, Famaniël climbed into the hot water, and relaxed. For the first time in days, she felt the tension leave her body. This was good. She closed her eyes, and dozed off for a moment.

A sharp noise brought her back to reality. She jumped up, ready to shoot a curse at anyone who might attack!

The servant girl was standing in the door frame with a bundle of clothes. She had knocked the door open, because she didn’t have her hands free. Curiously she stared at Famaniël. “Did I startle you, my Lady?” She asked.

Famaniël suddenly felt pretty silly standing naked in a bathtub, with her arms outstretched in an attack position. She slumped back into the water. “I’m just still a bit tense. It was a dangerous journey.”

The girl held up the dress she had brought. It was a simple, but pretty dress from green and silver threads. “I hope you like it, my Lady” the girl said. “I thought the green matches your complexion.”

“It’s beautiful.” Famaniël admitted.

“It once belonged to Madame Lathia’s daughter” The girl added.

Famaniël could hardly believe that. Lydia had not only inherited her mother’s cheerful nature, but also her taste. The dress looked a bit too small for her, but Lydia probably didn’t see need to fit the dress after the birth of her last child, as she always felt more comfortable in a pair of workman’s trousers. Famaniël had always gotten along very well with her, and therefore she assumed Lydia wouldn’t mind her wearing the dress.

The girl put the dress down carefully onto a chair, and then stepped over to the oven, to get some more hot water from the stove.

“What’s your name?” Famaniel asked.

The girl turned around. “Mara, if it pleases my Lady.”

“Can you do my a favor, Mara?”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“I’m not a noble woman, don’t call me *my Lady*”

The girl curseyed, and looked down.

“As you wish, Mistress.”

Famaniel rolled her eyes. “They educated you well, didn’t they?” She thought it useless to insist on a less formal way of address by the girl.

Mara came to her with a jug of water. “If you might want put your head back, Mistress?”

Famaniel bowed back her head and enjoyed the flow of warm water running through her hair. Mara then began to gently massage her head. As much as Famaniel disliked the girl’s subservience, she knew what she was doing. Famaniel suppressed the urge to purr like a kitten.

“Are you all right, Mistress?”

“Very much. I could have you do this all night!”

The girl smiled “I can arrange for that, if you wish” she said.

Famaniel grinned. She had already suspected that Mara was not limited to preparing baths and cleaning rooms. She was much more frail and tender than the girls Lathia usually employed. Officially the *Lantern* was far from being a brothel, but many of the girls who worked here would, for the right amount of coin, offer their companionship through cold nights. If one put an extra silver on the counter in the morning, Lathia pretended not to know what was going on, and she didn’t care as long as her girls were treated well by their customers. Most of the time, that was the case, since no man wanted to mess with 20 stone of angry woman.

Famaniel felt tempted to accept the girl’s offer. She was, after all, quite adorable, and she knew how to give a massage.

“Madame Lathia said, you rode all the way from Stonefield?” The girl asked now.

“That is quite so. Yes.”

“My mother always said, Stonefield is very dangerous. She said there live two headed giants, who eat little girls!” Mara said that with such severity, that Famaniel had to smile.

“I have never seen a two headed giant in Stonefield,” she explained. “Not even a one headed one.” There where, however, the trolls of the Stonecrush Tribe. And they where said to have a taste for human and elven flesh alike. Famaniel could not confirm that, because no one they took prisoner ever came back to tell the tale. And she wasn’t keen on finding out, so she had killed all the trolls that she had encountered in battle so far.

“However,” she continued. “Stonefield is not a cosy place. Outside the settlements, trolls and troglodytes roam the land. And Granite Falls has been infested by the undead lately. Not to mentions the rift horrors.”

Mara shivered. “Why did you go there?”

“I was sent by the council of the college. Actually, they sent me to clean up their mess. Sometimes, I wonder what they think, or if they think at all!”

“I thought the scholars were here to protect us. Why would they leave a mess?” Mara asked, cautiously.

“The same reason why we waste our energy in a pointless civil war, my sweet: Politics.” Famaniel sighed and rose to climb out of the tub. The water had cooled down and her fingers had become pruned. Mara fetched a towel, and wrapped her inside it. Famaniel enjoyed the gentle backrub, she got from the girl, and then, now dry, slipped into the dress the girl had brought. It was a bit wide, but Famaniel, who was quite skinny, wondered again how it ever could have fit Lydia. It looked good on her, Famaniel thought.

Before getting to bed, Famaniel decided to go down to the tavern and have another goblet of wine. She had missed the joys of life for too long to resist. Lathia admired how good she looked in her daughter’s dress and she enjoyed watching the song and dance that went on.

When she returned to her room a little later, she was surprised to find Mara in there. The girl was sitting on her bed, freshly bathed and with red ribbons in her black hair.

“What can I do for you?”

“You asked me for a massage earlier, Mistress.” Mara said, with a cheeky smile.

“I did?” Famaniel couldn’t remember to have summoned the girl. But now she was here anyway. And the mage remember how good the massage had felt earlier.

Famaniel sat on the bed. Mara knelt beside her. “Put your head in my lap, if you please Mistress.” She said. Famaniel obeyed. Mara’s skilled fingers ran through her hair and over her head. This time Famaniel did purr.

College Of Planar Studies

Famaniel got up before dawn and left the girl beside her sleeping. She kissed the girl’s temples and watched her eyes twitch a little. Possibly she was dreaming of last nights joys.

Famaniel got up, got dressed and left two pieces of gold for the girl on the bedside. Hopefully Mara would be willing to join her again later.

Downstairs in the tavern, Lathia was up and behind her counter already, and Famaniel wondered if she ever slept at all. She handed a few coins to

the fat woman, and told her she had been summoning Mara, in case Lathia was missing the girl. Lathia just smiled, and said nothing.

The morning air was cold and biting, but the sun would soon rise high enough to chase away the shadows that lay over the alleys of the Circle, warming up the place. She went on foot towards the main plaza. Only few people were actually outside so early, and she went undisturbed. Near the crossroads to the main plaza, a group of men blocked her way. They were obviously on their way home from a long night out, and drunk.

“Hey little girl!” The largest one called. “Up so, so late?” Famaniel rolled her eyes. She was not in the mood for arguing with drunk blokes.

“Step out of my way!” She commanded.

The men laughed. “Or what, sweetie?”

A lightning bolt shot from nowhere, hitting the ground beneath the tall man. All three of them jumped as if the bolt had hit them. “Bloody hell, lady!” The second man, a bald guy with a neck like a bull bellowed. “It was just a folly. No need to kill us!”

The taller man, who had realized that the lightning had only nearly missed his manly parts, grabbed the bald one by the sleeves and dragged him away.

Famaniel continued her way to the college.

Only a few scholars were hurrying along the corridors of white marble. The college was very beautiful. The walls were of marble and covered with mosaics, and the halls sounded from the clacks boots made on polished granite. In its architectural beauty the college could easily keep up with the temple of Sanctum, the capitol of Silverwood, which the Guardians had chosen for their headquarters.

Alas, it was also equal in terms of pompousness and righteousness with Sanctum. Famaniel did not know of any other place she had met more self-satisfied men, and fewer women, than here.

She entered the office of one of them now. Sylver Valis was undoubtedly a genius. He managed what the Guardians had seen as the work of their gods: To bring people to ascension, which meant, they were made immortal. The Guardians claimed this a doing of the Vigil, but secretly Famaniel believed, they used the same technology as the Defiant.

Sylver Valis may have been the first to discover ascension, but it was not him alone to master it. It had been the coordinated work of hundreds of scholars, technicians and craftsmen to make it happen. Yet Sylver claimed all credit for it. And as the discoverer of ascension, he behaved as if he had property on the ascended themselves. He seemed to see the world as a lab for his experiments. His success with the ascension experiments had put him in favor with the Lords of Meridian, but that didn't mean his ingenuity

always led to success. More often than not someone had to clear the rubble of another failed experiment. The price for the mislead magic was usually paid by common folk, such as the people of Granite Falls.

Sylver was already in his lab. Most of the time he slept there, and he didn't need much sleep anyway. Being an ascended himself, he could hardly work himself to death, if he died of a heart attack, he would simply reappear somewhere.

Famaniël entered without knocking. Sylver turned around, when he heard someone enter.

"Famaniël!" He looked surprised to see her again. "You are alive!"

"Of course, I'm alive, you moron" she thought, "You made sure, I cannot die properly."

But she didn't share her thoughts. "Sylver", she said instead. "I hope I don't disturb your work!"

In fact, she hoped she did disturb him. Maybe it would delay him in messing up the next village.

"Oh, no no." Sylver hastily rolled up the scroll he had been reading and turned toward her. "How are things going with Centius?" He asked.

"Centius is where he belongs, on the other side of Titan's Gate. Where ever that leads."

"So you did defeat him?" Sylver looked satisfied. "Good, good."

Famaniël braced herself. "At a very high cost." She claimed. "Fifteen of the city guard died. I barely got away."

Sylver shrugged. "It'll take a lot to actually kill you for good, Famaniël. I wouldn't worry."

Famaniël felt a rush of anger. "These were good men. They fought bravely. We owe them a lot. You owe them a lot!"

Sylver looked at her like at a child. "They're mortals, my child. Mortals die. And it was for a higher course."

Famaniël couldn't believe it. "It was you, who brought that thing in the world. If it weren't for your silly experiments, they could be still alive! It's not that we don't have enough problems already, with a civil war going on, the rifts, and Alsbeth and Regulos trying to take over the world! We really don't need the avatar of a dead god walk around!"

Sylver seemed surprised by her rage. "But if we gained control over it, it would have been worth it."

"Not for me, no!" Famaniël shot back. "If we raise ourselves above the common men, what makes us different from Alsbeth?"

Sylver shook his head. "Famaniël, I am working for the greater good here. We have to accept that there are certain sacrifices."

"Yeah, that's easy to say for you. From your warm and safe study. It's not you, who sacrifices everything! You don't walk through the gates of hell

everytime someone puts a sword through your belly!"

Sylver looked troubled. "All I want is peace for the peoples of Telara, my Child!"

"You know how they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions?" Famaniel was furious now. "I bet Alsbeth's intentions weren't always bad, you know? She bet she wasn't always like she is today. There are things you just don't do. Killing innocent people just to prove your point is one of them."

She took a breath.

"And while we're at it: I am not you're child. My father is dead. Like most of my people!"

Sylver looked at her in bewilderment. "What do you expect me to do? Watch as Telara is torn apart by evil forces?"

"No. But I expect you to follow a moral path, and stop acting as if the world is yours. We are at war, but if we allow ourselves to become our enemy, what are we fighting for then? You'll have to be much more careful on what you're experimenting on in the future."

"Is that a threat?" The arrogance in his voice was suddenly replaced by a mixture of anger and nervousness.

"Yes," Famaniel replied calmly. "if you want to see it that way. I am going to send my reports to the council. And I'm going to add my view of things. Someone's got a close eye on you now, Sylver."

Sylver clearly wasn't happy. "What makes you think I'll just let you do that?"

"Because you know that even you've got to stick to the rules. Maybe you're the master of ascension. But your latest failures haven't gone unnoticed. There are many important robes in this collage, and I daresay not all of them are your friends."

Sylver sighed. "What do you want?" He asked.

"The same as you. Peace for Telara. A chance for a new beginning. But I also want everyone in this land treated with the respect they deserve!" Famaniel put a scoll onto Sylver's marble desk. It contained her report.

"I don't want to be sent out again, to clean up your litter." She said, before she left the room, silently closing the door behind her. Sylver stood there, still puzzled. "Remarkable" he murmured. "Really remarkable."