

The Smiths of Këdu

Once upon a time, in a fair land called Arcolina, wise Elves of long-ago times founded a school to pass on to young Elf lads and maidens all the Elf-lore, songs, poetry, stories, and Elven crafts that have been carefully accumulated over the very long history of the Elves. The ancient founders of this school called it Këdu, for which the best translation into our language is “*gift*”, but more than that, a gift that has been lovingly kept and cared for until the time of the giving, like an inheritance. It is certain that the young elves who studied there were well aware of the great gift they enjoyed.

I have not said much yet about Elves – who they are, how they live, how they dress, and how they are like – and in many ways – very *unlike* us. You know, I’m sure, that they are an ancient people, long-lived compared to us, small in number, and that they live almost invisibly in the wooded and unsettled areas away from humans. Their great commission from the One is the care of His creation, but particularly forests, streams, lakes, and their wild inhabitants. I suppose that when humans lived a good deal closer to the forest, men and elves were fellow-travelers. But we have grown apart, now, and I am one of the few to have befriended an elven family and learned their lore. The little I have learned about them you may read elsewhere and I need not repeat it all here.

Of all the crafts practiced and preserved at Këdu, the most beloved were those of the Elven smiths who worked gold, silver, copper, and baser metals like iron and tin into the beautiful tools, implements, and artwork that adorn elven houses and workshops. But would it surprise you to learn that you might have seen their work yourself? While it is true that elves have little use for commerce, they occasionally have need of goods or services most easily obtained from men, and their most convenient stock-in-trade is the exquisite craft work. Invariably, when such a work finds its way into the hands of men it becomes itself a këdu and often is entrusted only to one of their great institutions, and, should you see one, there is a very good chance that it was fashioned at Këdu by a young apprentice.

In the time of this story, there was at Këdu a young preceptor named Annëthelia, a lore-master, whose wanderings took her one day deep into the woods of Illisbarrow, a country infrequently visited by men and thus a likely land for elven-kind. Coming around the end of an old mill-pond she thought she heard the sound of a smith's hammer ringing on the anvil, and curious to know the source, she walked closer. She had not gone too much farther when a voice behind her asked quietly, “Whom do you seek, Wanderer?”

Turning, she saw an old elf in smith's vestments, amused at surprising her. Annëthelia was not one to be shy, so she raised her hand in greeting and said, “I was seeking no-one until I heard your hammer, but since then I have been seeking you”. She

paused for second, then continued playfully, “You move quickly for a *gr̥er̥g-be̥er̥d!*” using the affectionate name elf-children call their grandfathers.

“Then your quest is ended”, the old elf laughed. “I am Alían, with Charislee, the caretaker of this forest – and I will be glad to be your *gr̥er̥g-be̥er̥d!* if you have none. But who do I have the privilege of adopting today?”

Annëthelia smiled and answered, “I am Annethelia, lore-master and harper at Këdu, and though I need no more grandfathers, I have many young smiths at Këdu who might”.

“Well, then we must sit by the mill-race and discuss this new family”, the old elf said, and so they did. Annëthelia told him all about her class of apprentices, of Elian, Emalia, Illiam, Maila, Sonle-Jak, Esethelia, Yæspirithe, Bennese, Ardu, and others whose names were never told me or I have forgotten. She told him too what a great këdu it would be for them all to meet a master-smith of the elder days. Thus it came to pass that Alían became a frequent (well, frequent as the elves reckon it!) visitor to Këdu where he delighted in seeing the young smiths following in the footsteps of their fathers. And, more to the point, you now know why it was that one morning Annëthelia greeted her class with important news.

“We have had word from Alían, forest-keeper of Illisbarrow”, she announced. “He has great need of iron-smiths and masons to repair the weir at Rillesvale. Which among you will undertake this charge? “

The young smiths stepped forward as one. “We accept the call, Lore-master.” answered Illiam. “When do we depart for Rillesvale?”

Inwardly proud of their heartfelt response, Annëthelia knew the journey would be long and the work difficult. “Consider carefully before you accept this charge”, she said. “Alían will be journeying apace, farther than many of you have traveled before. You will have to carry your tools, and when you arrive there will be many days of craft-work”. Annëthelia paused, wondering if she should retell what she and Alían had discussed, but she decided her apprentices should be prepared for all that they might face.

“Then there is this”, she said somberly. “The Rillesvale weir was built by elf-smiths of old. It has stood through ice and flood, fire and storm for many thousands of years. But men have come. They have been harvesting the ancient trees of the mountains. The land cannot check the floods and the weir has begun to weaken. Worse, men are quarrying the weir itself, enthralled by the beauty of the old stones. The Forest-Keeper fears a breach could happen soon that would lay the valley below to waste.

Despite her warnings, the apprentices all remained steadfast. She dismissed them to their homes to gather supplies and sustenance for the morrow, and when it dawned, she traveled with them as far as Illesbarrow to meet Alían and begin the real journey. Each carried the minimum of tools for their craft, knowing that many would have to be fashioned as the work progressed, but even so they were hard-pressed to keep pace with the old smith. You know, of course, that elves travel by foot, which is slower than the ways men generally travel, but faster than you might think. They are (compared to men) tireless, light-footed, and can travel the shortest distance to a place because they do not have to follow roads. So, it really should not surprise you that by

the second evening they were encamped at the top of the great weir at Rillesville, some 40 leagues from Kēdu. Alían brought them together after the evening meal. "Tonight we shall keep the fires low and keep watch", he said. "I do not want us to be surprised by either friend or foe. Rest well so that you keep your watch when your turn comes".

The work began in earnest the next day. The weir had been cunningly made from rock and iron, each strengthening the other so that to any but the practiced eye it looked like a great heap of boulders forming a natural dam to the lake above. But to the forest-keeper of these lands, it had a very different look. Much of the covering earth and smaller stonework had been loosened or washed away entirely. The great steel supports were exposed in places with cracks starting to appear. Worst of all, it looked as if men had started quarrying stone near the weir-face, removing the very bedrock that founded the weir. There was so much work to be done.

The apprentices quickly set about their work. The iron-smiths had first to gather huge supplies of dead wood to build and fuel their charcoal kilns. While the charcoal was firing they gathered the iron-rich rocks to smelt into the iron-blooms they would work into steel, and thence into new support bars. The masons began gathering and cutting the stones they would use to repair the weir-work, shaping them to fit together so tightly that mortar – which they had none of – was not needed. Slowly but surely the work progressed and the weir-face was restored to its original state. As each section of the work was completed, gardeners spread soil and hardy plants with strong roots into the weir-face to hold the stonework firm. Alían and the Rillesvale Forest-Keeper were very proud.

But no one had forgotten that men had wrought this damage and could do so again. Most of the work was done: the kilns were scattered, the smelters demolished, and the area scoured for leftover tools and scraps, when Yæspirithé (known for her very sharp ears) suddenly said, "Hold! There are men coming this way with many of their machines!"

As they listened, the other apprentices could now hear the sounds. (Before you get too worried, remember please that elves hear a great deal more than we do, partly because they nourish their ears with quietness, and also because they are very good listeners. So, the sounds they were hearing were still many miles away) They all looked to the old elf and the forest-keeper. "What should we do if they are coming here to quarry?" Elían asked.

"We must make sure they cannot find it", Alían said. "We shall hide their path!" You are probably wondering how a group of elves, even hard-working elven smiths, could hide an entire road, but really, all they had to do was hide the place where the main forest road turned off to the place where the men were quarrying. All the young smiths set out down the valley to this junction and quickly began to erase any sign of the turn-off. In no time at all the turn-off was completely camouflaged with trees, brush, and grass so cleverly knit into place that only an elf would see the breach. They had barely finished when the trucks drove by, completely fooled by the elves' artistry. The men continued to search for several hours, but finally gave up and headed back down the mountain.

The apprentices, all tired but proud of their work, gathered up their tools and headed back to the great halls of Kedu, where Annathelia arranged for the Friends of Kedu among men to secure the Rillesvale Weir as a forest preserve, forever protected

from despoiling by the short-sighted among men. And what of the smiths of Kedu? It is rumored that they had many more adventures in the mountains and forests of Arcolina, but those stories will have to be told some other day. What is known is that they all became craft-masters in their own time, respected and beloved in their generation.