

THE AUTOPILOT DOJO®

The Rorik Runestone

The Rorik Runestone is an anthology of runic inscriptions upon twelve stones that tells the origin of Rorik. A second set of inscriptions was subsequently discovered, telling the origin of another of the Child Three. Collectively, these inscriptions are referred to as the Synoptic Stones, and they offer a fragment of the history of The Autopilot Dojo. A third site is rumored to exist, but has yet to be uncovered. The author of the stones is unknown. The inscriptions of the Rorik Runestone are translated on the following pages.

The earth here used to be a rolling upland of fields and pastures, dotted with cottages. In the afternoons, I would play in their yards; one after another until the grasses of every pen had been played. At night, I would look out at them from my window, watching each of their windows flicker with the soft light of a hearth fire. And the mornings offered their chimneys no rest. Welters of smoke and steam from the cook fires billowed out the misty clocks on which I timed all my breakfasts.

In those days, even when the summer flowers had passed, Sprigs of Rowan lined the walkways, fields of cloves still grew along the folds of every meadow, and clouds of thistledown took to the air with every breath of wind. Each puff carried a wish of its own, wisped away to some far-off granting realm until the wind breathed no more. Then we'd wish on something else.

When winter came, the last of the autumn leaves would rattle down from their branches, collecting like tiny bonnets on the grass below, which was stiffened to its full height with a thin layer of frost. And the greens of holly and ivy, blazing red against the pale landscape, glinted a blush so bright that no chill could ever quell.

It was an age when nature still held sway; when every season would arrive and depart on its own accord. Spring, never once needing an invocation, would return to the air in perfect time, gilding the figs and lilacs, covering the cottage roofs in houseleeks, and dusting the walkways with the pollens of every shade of bloom.



In what felt like the interstice between two glances out of my window, this world was taken from me. When I look out on that same stretch of land now, hoping for a familiar sight, I find nothing to sate that hope.

Whatever vegetation that managed to survive the chill of the first winter now grows like relics of a time when the sun still appointed morning. The wind that used to carry away our wishes now breathes an icy chill, no longer remembering the field where it began. And the countryside, having long been laced with footpaths and winding, cobbled streets, has become little more than funeral barrows, like rolling hills beneath a thickening skin of ice.

Every new day here opens and closes without pity for its tenants. In this world, the sleeping calendar turns slowly, having turned over once since the first snowfall, when the green rushes along the riverbank quickly gave way to its shades, with every other floor of the earth to follow. And here, the first light of today, cast out of the cold depths of the clouds, marks the eve of the second of the three winters, the Season of the Prince.



Each morning, I still stand in the yards where I used to play. The yards themselves are no longer here - the geography I remember is gone - but if I close my eyes, I know where they were. And I stand where they once stood, waiting beneath the low winter roof, hopeful that the darkness above me might lean back so I can catch the familiar sun hold still in the afternoon sky.

Once in a while I'm tempted by almosts, which is why I keep returning, like the spurned fisherman whose great fish nibbles on the line before swimming back into the deep.

Here, the sun begins to peak out and inspect the ground, looking for a home to rest her beams. But before she's found a site to call her own, or issue any warmth, the dark sheet of clouds has already swept in front, blotting out her light like a curtain's close at the end of a show.

And on this show's stage, Rorik was just a player. The master of the show, unknown by so few and feared by the many, has long since departed. But the stain of his arrival will linger for generations still to come.

As for today, the faint light from this sky's hiding sun, dimly glinting on the mantle of frost at my feet, is more quickly thawing my memory of Rorik.

Many timepieces have passed since his birth with no record of his life. I'm not aware if he survived - whether he was swallowed by Thorn or by the cold - but I bear the only living remembrance of his entry into this world.

It happened on a strong morning, on the eve of the first of the three winters, the Season of the Wraith, where the cold was just as deeply wed to shadow in the day as in the night. But even here, a hope still flowered in the dark.



Among all the ornaments of the night's sky, the loosely fastened moon had long rested just above Firth, its beams painting the thatched roofs of the market.

One of these roofs was covered in blooming houseleeks that no season stifled and no hand ever dared to pluck. Beneath that roof, in a home warmed only by the breath of those it housed, lived a lily maid. She spent her nights alone but for the guests she served, who spent that time feasting on porridges, ciders, breads, and sometimes a dole of meat, should luck be so charitable.

Every evening, as she set the table, she would take a single piece of their bread, tear it in two, and stuff its halves into the pockets of her gown. After supper, as night began to settle itself into the sky, she would remove the crumbling halves from her pockets and place them into the heels of her slippers as an offering to the darkness, asking that its feet take their trample abroad, letting sunlight shine again in the coming morrow.

Then she would lay her body into the center of her bed, gaze up at the moon, and hum herself to sleep, lifting each melody from a lullaby once sung by the Abbot of Firth, who had long since passed.

In the age of the Abbot, Firth was home to more than one of the great music cobblers. But in the age of the lily maid, it was a land peopled by stablehands and fisherfolk. Few of them ever bore witness to the lily maid's customs and fewer could have identified their origins. But like many of Firth's old traditions, their wrapping often concealed ancient secrets. And the reward for this custom, so the lily maid had learned as a child, was the bloom of the new day.

Every morning when she woke, the bread in her shoes had vanished and been replaced by the first beams of sunlight. The beams that would thereafter light the village would always arrive first at her cottage, as if to clock in for work before beginning their day.

On no morning did the lily maid question her cashier or the payment she offered.



As one of the old winters donned its first coat upon the larches, gilding the pitched flanks of the pastures beneath the moonlight, a man from Lir arrived. The scent of a cook fire drew him to the lily maid's cottage. Although he came for supper, by the time he arrived, all she had left was the bread in her pockets and a cup of white cider.

Every year at this time, when the bloom of all other fruits grew scarce, the lamb's apple would still grow full, their ivory skins shining as brightly as the winter sun. In the mornings, the lily maid would collect them. In the afternoons, she would press them. And in the evenings, she would begin to boil them for nighttime's cider.

The man from Lir was so charmed by the girl and her cider, he returned the next night. And the night after that. And he continued to return until he no longer left. By the first color of spring, he was already helping her collect food and attend to her other guests.

Every morning, before daylight's first beams had shined upon the lily maid's slippers, he rose from bed, filled with excitement to milk animals like ewes, which were bleating for a milking. Every udder was teeming with milk. And he was eager to collect as much of it as he could for the lily maid.

After drying up all the udders, he left for the fields to collect supper's grains and berries. Here, fruit and clover bloomed in the same season, all now shining in the slanting beams of springtime's newborn sun.

He gathered up these grains and berries beneath the flutter of Firth's birds. Their endless songs, like tinkling harps, rinsed off any grief from his day. Whatever cherries and seeds grew there were left for those birds as payment for their melodies.

As soon as the man from Lir had returned with all the day's food, he and the lily maid would walk to the River Glass together. They spent each of their noons at the water's edge, listening to the sound of the shore lapped by its gentle waves, the caroling of the crickets, and the oars rapping against their oarlocks. They would sit still for three full timepieces, watching the river: its shoaling fish, the sun swimming on the surface, the water laboring around its stones. And then, at the same time every day, the east wind came rustling through the river reeds, shushing all of their crickets.

Behind the east wind was a wooded plot where the waterfowl from the River Glass grew up to be the guardians of the nothing. Beyond those woods were the fields of plowland where the east wind makes berth at the end of every noontide.

The first touch of this wind was their sign to return to the cottage so that supper could be ready for the diners by nightfall.

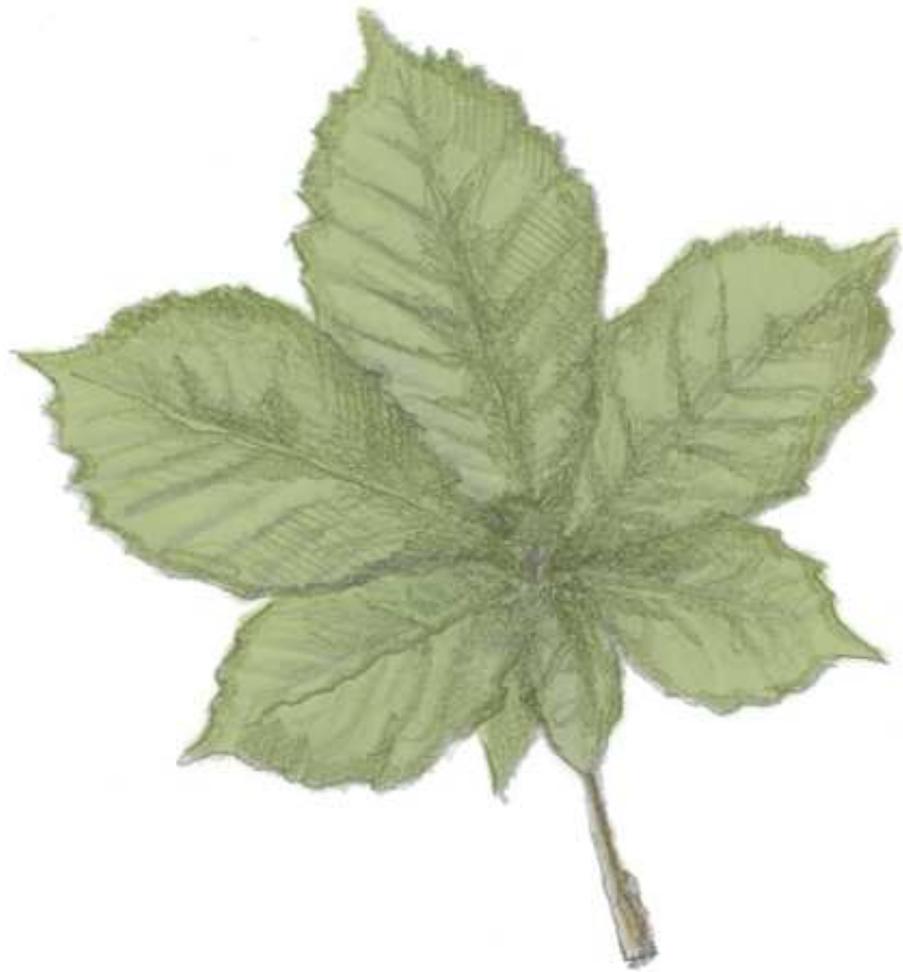


In the limbo dividing winter's close and the full opening of spring, the lily maid had become with child.

As she passed from child to maiden, and now toward mother, her diners and her suitor were not her only guests.

Fate also aged beside her as a silent companion. But soon that companion would gain a voice, stitching its threads into a web of despair that would snag nearly every soul who had ever walked the grasses of Firth.

(The remainder of this stone is not legible.)



As timepieces tumbled onward in their intractable march, and the lily maid's second winter spent with the man from Lir was drawing near, she entered into a long labor.

The child, wrapped inside of his mother's hide, was writhing toward his birth as if racing the coming of winter.

For the first time since she herself was a child, she did not collect the daily bread for her slippers. She just lied in bed, squinting, while sucking air in through her teeth and then exhaling as if blowing out candles. This is how she endured her pain.

That night, moments before winter arrived, baby Rorik Seehorn was born.

The next morning, the man from Lir rose early so that he might have time enough to gather the food, cook all the meals, and serve their guests while the lily maid rested and attended to baby Rorik.

As he walked outside, he saw the first coat of winter's frost and the shades of autumn's flowers beginning to pass. But the lily maid's cottage was still tempered by the blush and rich perfume of its blooming houseleeks.

He reached up, plucked a single flower from the leeks, and returned to his lily maid. He set the flower on the pillow beside her and waited for her to wake up.

Before she woke, a stablehand could be heard from the square, crying out about the cows issuing bloody milk.



When the lily maid woke and saw the flower beside her, she knew where it had grown. She did not look at her slippers; she just smiled at the man from Lir. Rorik was still asleep.

When the man from Lir stood up to leave for work, she asked that he stay; that he recover his strength. They'll return to work tomorrow.

He sat down on the bed beside her, brushed her hair from her face, and she began telling him about her life.

She told him about the line from which she descended; how her ancestors had crossed the River Glass in their third generation. To the north, at the river's start, was Sorrow's Woods. To the south, lie the black woods of Thorn. Her ancestors had come from both and she had ever seen neither.

She was still telling her story when afternoon began to settle itself into the sky. An early dusk was already hanging low over the village. She paused for a moment, appearing troubled by the sight of this.

When the man from Lir asked if she was okay, she suggested they wrap Rorik in swaddling bands, take the flower from the leeks, and go spend the night among the waterfowl in the wooded plot.

The man from Lir, realizing his face had adopted a puzzled look, attempted to camouflage it with "okay."

He stepped out of her room, gathered up several cornhusks, fashioned them into swaddling bands, and returned to her within two timepieces, his face now stamped with an artist's pride.

Then they left.

As they walked toward the woods, the curfew bells sounded across the fields, echoing against the dark slopes at the village rim.

The lily maid stopped moving. After asking for a moment to rest, she looked up. Evening was already deepening into an early night. And in the night's sky, Thorn's dark star shone brightly. Even as the clouds passed in front, it never left its post in the heavens.

Sensing unease, the man from Lir scooped her up and began to carry her as she carried baby Rorik, who was too tiny and swaddled too tightly to carry anything of his own.

Eventually, having reached the wooded plot, the man from Lir set the lily maid and Rorik at its rim and entered the woods to gather sticks for a fire. The moon's beams slanted in through the trees, easing his search by lighting the sticks and vines with different sheens of glitter.

After he returned with his sticks and built their fire, they sat and watched the night's sky fall asleep. Its darkness soon swallowed the moon and set and their campfire trembling against the black slope.



As nighttime extended its residence in the sky, their campfire slowly lost its breath. Soon the glow of its quietly hissing embers became dimmer than Thorn's star, the only other observable light in the darkness.

Halfway between the close of their sunlit yesterday and the thrust of tomorrow's dawn into the air, the lily maid heard an unusual scratching at the earth. She quietly woke up the man from Lir and they sat still to listen.

It sounded like sticks grinding themselves into dust trying to claw their way into the trunks from which they were born. And the sound was growing louder. Whatever was making it was headed directly toward them.

The lily maid scooped up baby Rorik and tightened his swaddling bands as the man from Lir pushed dirt onto their fire. Then the three of them moved into the woods; just far enough to be covered by the low overstory of the border trees.

Braking the pace of their breath into silence, they turned around and peered out toward the ridge, where the geography was now lit only by the pale glow of Thorn's star.

Before long, they saw one of Thorn's crows, bandy-legged, come hobbling along the rim of the slope, headed toward the village.

Its claws were scraping the dry ground as it moved with a gait so awkward it appeared as though its bones were splintering with every step. But however sad and feeble it looked, it was somehow even more forbidding.

Several timepieces later, before the darkness had let go of its moon, the hunter of Thorn itself showed up.

This was a creature outside of the common realm; a nameless heap of shadow uprooted from the black woods. It was as broad as the River Glass and as tall as the black woods whence it came. And it came like a fury loosed from the bowels of the netherworld.

Before the bells had tolled dawn, the village was afire with screams of war.



The lily maid and the man from Lir emerged from the depth of their recess and stood between the border trees of the wooded plot, looking down onto the valley.

Under the light of Thorn's star, now shining more brightly, the stablehands and fisherfolk could be seen scattering from their cottages.

The Thorn King would reach its arms up as if to snatch its lamp from the vault of the heavens, and then drive them down, mowing through Firth's men like a harvester upon his field.

From the edge of the woods, the lily maid and the man from Lir could hear the cries of the dying carried along the wind, their piercing chorus twisting around the trunks of the trees beside them.

The courageous among Firth's men offered no challenge, but they did not surrender, and the grass and dirt were reddened with their courage. Every body was soon dressed in the colors of its own mortality.

No one would ever dare avenge any of them. Only the wind, when the killing was done, would mourn their loss with a lull.

At dark's end, the newly dead now lied in a terrifying stillness.

The haunter of Thorn, having purged the town of all its life, walked among the harvest of its victims inspectingly, as if salting rows of slaughtered animals.

Their open wounds, growing cold, would soon be a feast for Thorn's crows.

And through this, the child Rorik lied still.



The lily maid and the man from Lir stared down at the village in near-disbelief and complete despair, watching it slowly fade from sight as the star overhead dimmed to its former glow.

The only thought that diluted their despair was a shared faith that the three of them might survive the night. Although they wore that faith lighter than a patch of summer shade, they clung to it as a mollusk clings to its shell. And they stood at the edge of the wooded plot, motionless, bound by the stirring of those thoughts.

After what felt like several timepieces, but must have been quite suddenly, a scratching sound broke the silence.

During the violence, muted beneath its cries, one of Thorn's crows had apparently staggered to the forest rim.

Without any time to react, it emitted a grating shriek that pierced the air, rising into the night's sky like an invocation on the witch's Sabbath.

The nameless hunk of shadow, still lurking in the valley below, spun to face the sound and lurched into pace, its galloping stride beating to an unnatural measure.

The air was immediately thickened with dread.

Whatever fragile faith the lily maid had previously held was replaced in its entirety with paralyzing terror, assured by the noise that her son would soon be taken from swaddling bands to winding sheet.

But in this darkness, her panic was offered a hope.

The waterfowl, which they had not seen or heard all night, began slinking toward the River Glass, quite quickly, leading a path through the understory of the wooded plot that could only be heard if trailing close behind.

And in the sky above the woods, the moon held its return and the sun waited to shine, blinding any who might follow as the shadows of a darkness deeper than night laid claim on the path between the plot and the river.

With this help, the lily maid realized she might be able to reach the River Glass quickly enough to put Rorik aboard the ferryman's raft while their course could still be concealed by those shadows. But there was no time to tarry; with every tremor, the Thorn King was growing nearer.

She looked at the man from Lir, who already knew where she was going. He handed her a piece of parchment, asked that it go with Rorik, and then turned his back on her. Without questioning, she snatched the parchment from his hand and set stride, making haste for the river.

As the lily maid's feet hurried after the sound of the waterfowl, the man from Lir stepped out onto the ridge, erecting himself as a statue but for the lonely bead of sweat soldiering its way down his brow. And there he stood, watching the Thorn King approach, waiting to meet it out in the open, hanging on the impossible hope that he might thwart destiny and slow the baleful creature enough to prevent it from catching the lily maid and their son.



When the lily maid had finished chasing her way to the water's edge, her invisible guides of the understory went still, retiring into their usual silence.

Although she was now standing ankle deep in the River Glass, hearing its waves lapping against the planks of the ferryman's dock, she was still wading through the unknown.

Of all the crooks in the river's wind, this was not one she remembered well. It was several bends past the shore where she had spent her earlier noons with the man from Lir. And she had only traveled those bends once before.

As a child, she once chased a puff of thistledown from her yard in Firth to the ferryman's dock upon a single exhale of the long west wind. And she would have continued her pursuit until that wind lost its breath had its course not found an early end at the snatch of the ferryman's hand.

As she trailed her puff toward his raft, he set down his pole, reached out, and plucked it from the air. Then he looked down at her with a smile, tucked the puff into the pocket of his coat, and said he would take it beyond the waves.

Without returning his smile, or a word, the lily child spun around and ran home faster than her feet had carried her on the trail of her wish.

She didn't anticipate then that her first reunion with the ferryman would be in the blackest night, as a mother, with speeding death aimed in her direction.

Still piloting her course by sound, she made her way to the dock, hoping his raft would be stationed off the end. But when she reached the dock, she found its planks covered in moss and leaves as if it hadn't been walked in several seasons.

Her pulse began to flutter itself into a sickening panic. She wanted to call out to the ferryman, but she knew that would only let Thorn gain her position. So she closed her eyes against the darkness, collected her thoughts, and tried to quiet her breathing. If she could mimic the stillness of the waterfowl, she could listen for any sound of the ferryman.

In this silence she waited, but no ferryman ever came.

All she could hear were the distant cries of Thorn's crows. And she knew Rorik must be set adrift before the last cry, when the next dawn would be born and its glow would give him away.

So she laid him down on the dock, placed the parchment beside him, and set out to build a raft of her own, using the sticks and brambles along the water's edge.

She waded out a few steps, stretched her arms into the black, clawing for reeds, and felt nothing. She took another step, then again reached out her arms, and again her hands closed on nothing.

Just as her pulse was considering its earlier panic, she heard the familiar sound of the waterfowl.

After inching toward it, she reached out her hand one last time, and touched what felt like reeds weaving themselves. She could feel the forest's pitch seeping from the strands.

Before relief had gained its seat in her spirit, the lily maid was already holding a woven basket, large enough to float beneath an infant.

She hurried it to the dock and placed Rorik inside of it. She then loosened his bands, tucked the parchment inside of them, and let the basket go.

For a moment, it bobbed at her feet as if unwilling to leave. But then, with a frightening swiftness, the river claimed it.

The lily maid stood motionless for several timepieces, silence gripping the landscape, feeling the current gently pulling at her feet.

Then, as the night's sky began its ebb and the darkness was broken by the first light, the river ripples glinted of the faintest silver.

The river had already carried Rorik beyond the edge of her sight. And the haunter of Thorn was gone, its departure as strange as its advent.

