

Led Astray

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Led Astray

by [ancarett](#)

Summary

From his first day at Caithnard, Rood always led Morgon off the beaten path.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

In the great wastelands of the north, all was quiet except for the wail of the wind. The dim light of perpetual evening softened the colours around Morgon. The stark white of ice and snow softened in the gloom to ghostly greys but either brought Deth to mind and there was no peace in those thoughts for him.

He lay back in the crackling snow, instead, and looked upward. Ghost lights danced across the northern sky, washing it in colours of unearthly beauty and unpredictable movement. The green tones brought to mind the fertile fields of Hed: yet more pain. But a wave of orange-red flared bright across his vision: Raederle's hair wiping out that longing with another just as painful and Morgon closed his eyes.

There, behind his lids, he was left with only black: deep and dark like the inside of Erlenstar Mountain. Heart racing, he sat up and focused instead on the fading northern lights. As they settled down to an almost imperceptible murmur of colour, Morgon was left with the dark of the winter night sky but nothing as threatening as the interior of Erlenstar where Ohm had held him captive, seeking to wrest away the secrets of the stars on his forehead.

No, laced into the darkness of night through the aurora's waning glow were a hundred colours and shades. This was not the black of the mountain that terrified him utterly, Morgon realized, but the black of a crow's wing or of a lock of Rood of An's hair.

At the last thought, he smiled as the reality of the cold north faded around him. . . .

Caithnard's smells and noise couldn't reach the rocky heights where the Masters reigned, with their library full of books and their teaching full of riddles. The hubbub of the port city was barely even noticeable to the students who manned the great wooden doors, except on a day like today when the arriving party carried the cacophony of the port with it.

Morgon sighed as he carefully set the book he was reading on a shelf. Every student took turns acting as porter for the college and, for Morgon, it was normally an enjoyable duty in the predictable regularity of routine entrances and exits interrupted only occasionally by the late evening return of drunken students from the portside taverns.

Although this was broad daylight, the confusion of noise rising up the curve of the roadway sounded rather as if someone had brought the inhabitants of one, perhaps two such taverns, along with all the musicians that Caithnard could muster. It wasn't precisely a riddle but an intriguing enough proposition that Morgon was convinced to put aside his annoyance at the interruption in his reading to see who had brought a veritable circus to the Riddle-masters' school. Smoothing out the wrinkles in his white robe, he rose to his feet and stepped out into the snapping wind that danced along the cliff's edge.

The dark-haired young man riding at the head of the makeshift procession wore the colourful robes of a lordling of An and an attitude to go with it. Merrily he gestured with his wine-flask to the silent porter. "Get on with it," he advised cheekily while the long silk daggings on his sleeve twisted crazily in the salty breeze.

Morgon raised one eyebrow at the directive but nevertheless pronounced the formal phrases of welcome mandated centuries ago by the founders of the college. "Ask and it shall be answered here. If you have come seeking knowledge, you shall be received. Abandon your name to me."

The horseman in front of him turned a delighted face back to the sober trader who seemed to be his escort. "They really do say all that. How wonderful!"

"They do indeed," the older man responded with a droll tone that suggested this was just the latest in a series of outrageous antics pulled by the youth. "But, my lord, perhaps you'd best get on with it?" Behind him, the musicians and hangers-on shivered slightly in the brisk winds that chased around the promontory on which the college perched.

"Oh, all right, Bri," the younger man said with a pursing of his lips that appeared more affectation than genuine pique, then turned back to face Morgon. "My name is Rood of An and I am come seeking knowledge from the masters of Caithnard." With a slightly smug smile, he waited for the exclamation of interest and surprise sure to come from the quiet porter.

Wordlessly, Morgon pushed open the double doors then turned to regard the expectant face of the college's newest student, presuming, of course, that the masters chose to admit him. It was likely, he thought to himself, that they would. Mathom's wisdom was much admired at the college; his child, however flighty he appeared at first meeting, would be given a chance to try himself against the relentless rules of riddle-mastery.

As these thoughts flew through his mind, Morgon turned back toward the porter's alcove and his book, leaving the second son of the King of An to make his entrance as he wished, or not. Although intrigued by the insouciant youth, Morgon had but a few more days before he would be examined by the masters in hopes of achieving the next rank of mastery and could spare little more time for idle conversation.

With a barked laugh, Rood dismissed the musicians and revellers that had followed him up from the town with a generous purse to be shared amongst them. They made their noisy way back down the road toward the inns of Caithnard, leaving the newest student at the gates with only the older trader by his side.

"This is where we part ways, then," Rood said to his escort. "Accept my thanks for the company, Bri. Be sure to give the old crow a full report."

With that, Rood of An dismounted with a flourish, hoisting two saddlebags that seemed as big as he was. The older trader laughed at Rood's command but accepted his horse's reins with good grace, turning the animals to make his own way down toward the harbour.

Morgon glanced up from his reading at the sudden quiet to see a pair of dark eyes regarding him with amusement. "I have a reputation to establish, you know. You could have played along a bit more," the elegantly-dressed younger man said in a tone that burbled with self-mockery.

Morgon closed his book the book in his hands and stood, towering a good hands-span above Rood's slim form. Morgon's pale face lit up as a genuine smile flickered across his face. "It seemed you were doing well enough on your own," he observed mildly.

Glancing up at the dour, grey stones of the college, Rood nodded. "Yes, I see a few faces pressed against the window, there. I have hopes of being a legend by nightfall," he said with a sly look sideways.

Morgon suppressed a chuckle. "You'd better hurry then, and get settled before dinner. Go through the door on the other side of the courtyard and turn right, you can't miss Master Tel's office. Good luck, Rood of An."

Returning to the porter's shelter, Morgon had to work in order to focus on the history of the kingdom of Herun he had earlier found so fascinating. At dinner time, his relief came, full of further news about the outrageous Rood and his antics – switching rooms three times until he found one "with enough light to read by and not go blind", having more books in his bags than some of the masters' in their rooms. Morgon relished the fact that, after six months as the oddity, being the only student from Hed with the additional notoriety of being its land-heir, he was no longer the focus of the college's furtive whispers. For bringing relief from the relentless scrutiny of his classmates, Morgon knew he would be in Rood's debt.

For the rest, however, he rather suspected that Rood would be in *his* debt.

"My hero," Rood shouted cheerily as Morgon entered the hall full of students clustered at tables, eating their meals. The prince of An, now robed in the grey of newly admitted students but somehow making the drab cloth appear as the finest courtly garb, gestured Morgon over to the dining table he was sharing with at least a dozen other students, all happy to have a reason to ignore their studies and bask in the glow of the college's newest star student.

Morgon sighed and laid his book on the table.

"You'll join us for dinner," Rood all but ordered and pointed at one of the other students, a rambunctious young nobleman from Aum, who went to fetch a plate of food for the chilled porter.

"Sit down," Rood said, gesturing genially. "I understand that I not only have you to thank for my entrance, but for my status in the college." Morgon raised an eyebrow in silent enquiry at the statement.

"Thanks to your rank as land-heir of Hed, I have no fear of being the ranking student at Caithnard. I can simply be a simple, humble scholar, devoted to his lady, Knowledge," Rood said impishly.

Morgon couldn't help but laugh at the image that extravagant phrasing conjured. He accepted the plate of steaming stewed meat ladled over roots from Aodh's eager hands and sat down with a little bit more ease than he normally felt among the many young men who crowded the college halls.

"Actually," Morgon confessed, "I was hoping that your arrival would work to my advantage. A prince of An is certainly far more worthy of discussion here at Caithnard than a humble farmer from Hed."

Rood leaned back precariously on his bench, snatching a bottle of wine from the table behind him and pouring the contents carelessly into the goblet he held. "If you are in truth a humble farmer, then you will never be a Riddle-master."

Morgon cocked his head to one side as he made short work of his dinner. "Perhaps not," he finally acknowledged

The other students laughed at that. Dubhaganuallas, a quiet Herun youth, explained when Rood looked around at the merriment with evident curiosity. "Morgon's the best student in our group. He knows riddles that even the masters don't."

"Really," Rood drawled. "Hed has obviously been keeping secrets."

Morgon fought to control the blush that had risen at the unexpected praise. "It is only that there is nothing else to do of an evening in Hed than drink or read. I simply chose to read more often than to drink."

"That is not an either/or proposition," Rood said in a challenging tone, gulping back a mouthful of wine as he reached for Morgon's book. "Atenry's *History of the Provinces of Herun*? You really ought to have a drink or two with this book. Rather dry, to say the least."

Morgon's eyes narrowed slightly. "You think so? I've found it fairly interesting." Dubhaganuallas added in his own annoyed defense of his homeland's history.

Rood chuckled over the rim of his goblet, ignoring the Herun youth. "To a prince of Hed, anything would seem interesting, I suppose."

Morgon flushed in annoyance at the sharp taste of Rood's wit, and then pushed back from the table as the others around them entered into a heated discussion of how fascinating, or not, Herun's history could be considered.

Before Morgon could rise, Rood reached out a hand with what seemed to be genuine remorse. "Sorry about that. My tongue gets away from me on occasion. But if we are to be friends, and I feel that is true, I hope you can forgive me for the first of many outbursts."

At the feel of Rood's hand lightly resting on his own, Morgon could only smile helplessly. There was something compelling about the dark-haired youth whose moods changed constantly and who exuded such a lively interest that made his apology irresistible.

Morgon relaxed back into the company of his fellow students, accepting a freshly drawn mug of beer from Arn, a slim, sober apprentice who hailed from Ymris and who was usually equally uncomfortable with the boisterous hubbub of the college crowd. Tonight, however, even Arn was drawn into the to-and-fro of table talk, barking out a laugh as students shared the most bawdy readings of riddles that they knew.

Morgon nursed his beer and fixed Rood with a considering eye. As was his custom, the land-heir of Hed sat on the edge of the group, pale and reserved, occasionally contributing a brief observation while the talk eddied around him.

Rood, on the other hand, seemed to revel in the confusion of conversations weltering around him. Although one of the shortest students in the group, he loomed large at the centre of the group's raucous moods, although Morgon noticed that the younger prince was hardly dominating the conversation. Rood appeared as interested in observing the others around him as he was in putting away what was a surely unhealthy amount of wine.

As the evening wore on, other students came and went. A few of the masters even stopped by the lively group. Morgon was able to get himself a tankard of beer without feeling as if he was an object of curiosity, as the crowd ebbed and flowed around the college's newest student.

For that alone, Morgon decided, he would be forever grateful that the Mathom of An had sent his second son to Caithnard and into Morgon's orbit. With a smile, he put aside his book until tomorrow and let himself revel in the pure and simple pleasure of the moment.

"The night is young," advised Rood with his eyes owlishly focusing on Morgon's, "and my friend here," said with a nudge toward Dubhaganuallas draped almost horizontally across the trestle table's rough wood surface, "tells me that the masters lock up the wine cellar when the kitchen closes. Do they really?"

Morgon laughed. "Yes, or we'd have students drunk before morning classes could begin."

Rood sighed dramatically. "How uncivilized! Well, there's nothing for it. Let's head down to Caithnard!"

At Rood's shouted command, the hall rose in a clamour of purpose. Morgon's stammered protests went unheard. Shrugging helplessly, Rood grabbed Morgon's forearm and pulled the older student through the crowd toward the courtyard.

"I have to study for my examination," Morgon objected over the bustle of students milling around them in the courtyard, several babbling excitedly to Tern, the suddenly-sullen night porter put out that his turn at gate duties meant that he couldn't join in on the fun.

Rood nonchalantly waved a hand. "It isn't tomorrow, is it?"

Arn helpfully confirmed that it wouldn't be for at least three more days so Morgon abandoned the excuses and laughingly joined his fellow students in their shambling stroll down the hill toward the still-lively port town.

Within a surprisingly short period of time, they were ensconced in a tavern that smelled distinctly of smoked fish and stale wine. But whatever they poured seemed reasonably fresh, so Rood pronounced himself satisfied and settled down on a bench near the fireplace, encouraging the more senior students to expound on the many good and bad taverns they'd visited and their experience with the other charms of the port town.

"It's good fun, isn't it?" Rood asked Morgon with just enough irony to let the older student know he understood that for Morgon, drinking in the smoky, dim establishment wasn't truly that enjoyable.

The tawny-haired apprentice simply rolled his eyes at the ridiculous question. Truth be told, he felt more out of place when his classmates were down in the city, focused on wine, women and whatever. Arn shouted in merriment as another young man from Ymris pulled out dice and a cup, casting the carved bone cubes down the table to the excited calls of other students eager to join in the game.

As the evening wore on, a half-dozen or more men, sailors by dress, entered the tavern. Their quiet demeanour seemed a restful contrast to the rowdiness of Morgon's fellow students whose shouts made the land-heir of Hed put one hand to his aching head. When Morgon went to the bar to refill his mug of beer, one of the sailors came up beside him.

"Student?" he asked, indicating Morgon's white apprentice robe.

"Yes," Morgon answered shortly.

The colourfully-dressed sailor chuckled. "Noisy lot, they can be. We're going to head up and out of here to somewhere a man can think. You're welcome to join us, of course."

Before Morgon could answer, Rood was there at his elbow. "Go impressing elsewhere," he spat.

The sailor stepped back at Rood's aggressive stance and a glint of anger appeared in his eyes. "Why don't you be minding your own business, boy?," he sneered.

"I am," Rood insisted, putting his stoneware goblet down on the bar counter. Then, faster than Morgon thought humanly possible, his fist lashed out and caught the sailor square on the chin.

At that, a general melee ensued as fellow students flew to Rood's defense while the other sailors mounted a valiant counter-attack, supported by one or two confused patrons who seemed willing to fight with the college students on general principles.

Morgon stood aloof for a moment before he flung a punch at the tallest of the sailors who seemed intent on milling the prince of An down into his component parts. Rood called his thanks as Morgon then economically tripped his opponent who crashed to the floor in pain and confusion.

The makeshift door of the tavern slammed open and the older trader who'd accompanied Rood to the college stood in the doorway. "Rood," he bellowed. "I can't leave you alone for a day, can I?"

"Bri," Rood shouted in welcome as he precisely twisted one burly sailor's arm behind his back and drove the heavy-set man to his knees while Arn delivered a knock-out blow.

The sailors, realizing they were outnumbered and outmanned, shoved past Bri, out the tavern door and into the dark alleys of Caithnard.

At the roaring cheer of triumph from the students, Rood smiled. He grabbed another purse from his belt and shook out a dozen coins that he then laid on the counter. "Another round, good man," he advised the tavern-keeper. "The rest is for your troubles."

"Bri," Rood continued, as his fellow students righted benches and stools around them and the tavern staff set to pouring drinks, "I'd like you to meet Morgon of Hed. He's a student at the college and the land-heir of Hed, of course."

Eying the fair-haired and quiet young man clad all in white, Bri grinned. He offered Morgon a hand to shake which the young land-heir of Hed comfortably clasped. "Well met, Morgon of Hed. I've sailed a time or two to Tol and Akren. Hed's a rich and peaceful land."

"Thank you," Morgon said and then looked around him at the chaotic mayhem still lingering from the fight.

He shook his head in utter bemusement as he watched order slowly being re-established around him. From the calm way that the students and others went back to their drinking, it seemed as if such uproars were fairly common occurrences. But it didn't sit well with Morgon that the fight had just started out of what seemed to be nothing. He didn't like riddles without answers. "What was that all about?" he asked as he accepted a refill of his beer. "Why did you start that fight?"

"That was a press-gang, Morgon," Rood advised soberly. "If you'd gone off with them, you'd be in the hold of a boat sailing north on the tradewinds before first light. Even if you'd not wanted, they're desperate, seeking sailors. They'd have probably put sleep-herbs in your drink, not that you could tell with this beer you prefer."

Beside him, Bri Corbett nodded. "Nasty truth about port towns is that the ships are always short of sailors. Once they get you on the high seas, you've got nowhere to go, so they have you until at least the next port of call.

Morgon raised his eyebrows in shock as he took a refreshing pull at his drink. "I'm in your debt, then, Rood," he managed, finally.

"Don't start counting," Rood said. "I'm sure this will be but the first of many. It's a good thing that a country boy like you has a man of experience to show him the ropes."

Morgon choked on his drink at that outlandish claim. Beside him, Bri laughed sharply. "Rood, I expect he'll be saving your life a time or two. You're game but you pick too many fights."

"True," Rood agreed, "but now that I have a friend like Morgon, I won't have to worry about that, will I?"

Bri simply shook his head in patent disbelief. "Well, if you think you can keep out of trouble for the rest of the night, young Rood, I'll be off with my own sailors to the safety of my own

ship. I'll be sure to tell your father all about how you're settling in at the college." Chuckling, the captain left the tavern full of students for the relative peace and quiet of the maze of streets leading back to the docks.

Clapping a companionable arm on Morgon's shoulder, Rood led the older student back over to the fireside bench. "You really should meet Deth," Rood proclaimed soberly.

"The High One's harpist?" Morgon asked.

"Yes. You remind me of him," Rood said. "Quiet but dangerous."

Morgon stopped in his tracks while Rood settled happily on the wooden seat. "Dangerous?"

"That punch," Rood explained with an enthusiastic recreation of Morgon's earlier punch. With that, Rood almost took out poor Dubhaganuallas, leaning woefully on the table and cradling a cool goblet of wine against a split and bleeding lip.

"Oh," Morgon said doubtfully. "The High One's Harpist fights a lot?"

Rood pondered the point before doubtfully shaking his head. "Not that I know of, it's just, well, something about him. And you. You're different, Morgon."

Morgon let out a full-bodied laugh before collapsing on the bench beside Rood. "Me? I don't think so. It's just that you mainlanders rarely see a man from Hed."

"Perhaps that's it," Rood agreed reluctantly, "but somehow I don't think that's everything."

His eyes seemed to dance across the stars suddenly visible beneath Morgon's shaggy shock of hair. "But if there's one place to start pursuing the riddle of Morgon of Hed, I expect it's here at Caithnard."

It was Morgon's turn to shake his head in amusement. "Not many riddles come out of Hed," he advised gravely.

Rood grinned. "Oh, I don't know about that. I can see there's at least one that appears worth pursuing," he said.

End Notes

Thanks to my helpful and insightful beta-reader, indigo419 from lj, for inspiring a lot more of the development and detail in what finally emerged.

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