

The Woods

By Refr Mud-Boot

This ancient tale has been passed down from the First Era through oral tradition, beginning with the Mad Reachman Yll. Its tether to truth may be tenuous, but it stands as a harsh expression of the struggles of mortal man against the lurking beings of the woods.

1. Eyes

Runa's torch died. Between the biting cold and the night's ceaseless wind, it was a wonder the feeble flame survived as long as it had. The fear that took her then was not of the cold, nor of having lost her way, but of the six glinting amber sparks that had trailed her between the pines for the past hour, and now rejoined the darkness.

Runa had seen wolves hunt only once before, when as a young girl she had strayed too far from camp. They had crouched low, trailing an injured elk for minutes before leaping into violence as one. They would be approaching her now, silent and hidden in the darkness.

The young mage knelt, dropping the useless torch in the snow, and cupped her fur-gloved hands before her. Her breaths came in short and violent gasps, and the frozen air stuck in her lungs. She forced her mind to conjure a memory.

Runa was five, crouched before the stone hearth of her family home beside her mother. Her mother struck flint into a small structure of wood in the hearth's ashen center, casting down crimson and orange sparks. She always required three strikes – no more, no less. Runa leaned forward, paying close attention.

One-two-three!

The fire caught hold, then roared to life.

And in Runa's cupped hands, a teardrop of flame bloomed, then flourished into a blazing orb.

The wolves, now mere feet from her, sprang back with angry snarls. She drew her only physical weapon – a thin steel shortsword with inlaid silver runes of ancient Nordic. Runa passed its blade through her flame, and the enchantment took root. She swung the flaming sword at the snapping jaws with more panic than technique, but two of the wolves backed up warily. A third, too hungry or enraged to be frightened, lunged forward. Runa gifted it with a deep cut across the nose and it backed away, but its attack had rallied the others.

Another wolf caught hold of her left forearm, and the hovering flame sputtered. Runa cried out in shock and pain, then slashed at the beast. Her blade traced a path of black blood and singed fur, and the jaws released her. She swung again, more wildly this time, then tripped over her own feet in her haste to back away.

The flames went out. The wolves bore down on her, their forms now dark but for bristling silhouettes gleaming beneath the moons. Her mind blurred with fear, and she closed her eyes.

But fangs never came. Slowly, Runa became aware of the sudden silence, and opened her eyes again. The wolves stood upright and still, frozen in place by something that was neither fear nor obedience. Their vacant eyes had fixed on a point beyond Runa, reflecting a pale viridian light which had filled the clearing in place of her fire.

Carefully, uncertainly, the young mage recovered her blade from the snow and stood. Turning toward the light source, her eyes met a solitary figure cloaked in sealskin and bearing aloft an old lantern of darkened steel that would not have been out of place on a longboat out of Windhelm. Within the lantern, a soft green flame perched atop blackening wick. Runa did not raise her blade, but neither did she sheathe it.

“Who are you?” she asked.

A pause. Then –

“Hm...hm hm hm...hah!”

A man’s laugh shook from the hooded sealskin, low and gravelling and creaking, like the swaying of the pines.

“Is that the thanks an old man gets, for rescuing a helpless traveler who blundered into his woods?”

Runa stiffened at the unexpected laughter, and the rebuke shocked her out of the haze of pain-fueled adrenaline.

“Right...sorry. Thank you for your help, stranger.” She glanced back at the wolves, still rooted in place. “What did you do to them?”

“I kept them from eating you,” the man said with a sly grin.

“What is that lantern? Is that what you use to control them?” Runa eyed the green flame cautiously.

“Very astute,” the man said with a chuckle. “Yes, it keeps the beasts calm. It also keeps...fouler things at bay.” He did not explain further, and instead turned and set off the way he came. “My name is Volk. Come with me. I have questions for you as well.”

The stranger, Volk, questioned Runa as they walked. Runa had nothing to hide – her life had been a simple one – and so she told the truth.

After the death of her parents, she had been adopted by a roving hedge wizard, Roggi the Wild, and had spent the remainder of her early life traveling from town to town – utilizing rudimentary alchemy and magicka to heal, to banish interloping spirits or pests, and generally to provide services that earned coin for herself and her teacher.

Absentmindedly, she rested a hand over her blade’s pommel as she spoke of Roggi.

In her travels, Runa had discovered a casting technique unknown to the other roving mages of Skyrim. “Memory magic,” she had named it – a method of calling forth especially powerful memories to augment spells, or to conjure a recreation of the memory itself.

“Healing, for instance,” she explained as she stepped over a fallen branch in her path, “can be cast by recalling the memory of an old injury – the pain and fear, then slow recovery – strong emotional instincts that can drive healing magic beyond the knowledge of anatomy and flesh. Magicka is pure creation, and our memories are powerful creative sources.”

“Fascinating,” was all Volk said, though not from lack of interest. He seemed lost in thought.

For a moment, Runa let the background noise of the crunching snow fill their silence.

“My teacher passed on last year, and I sent him off on a pyre at the foot of High Hrothgar. I wandered for a while after that, but it wasn’t the same. So, I’m going to the College of Winterhold – to undergo their trials and become a true sorcerer.”

Runa saw Volk nod beneath the hood. “Ahh, Winterhold. What a sight the College must be...the grandest structure rising from this frozen land. What secrets it must guard...”

Dawn had begun to break when they reached Volk’s home – a small log cabin at the center of a clearing in the trees. Lanterns hung from curved iron posts encircling the wooden nest, each lighting their surroundings with a tiny green flame.

Volk sat on a stout tree stump in its garden, withdrew a pipe of opalescent onyx, and threw back his hood. His face was weathered, hardened into stone by sun and snow, fractured into innumerable islands by the deep lines of age.

“The path ahead of you is cut off by thick snow and ice. Even your magic fire may not pierce it.” He packed the pipe with some unknown substance from deep within his cloak.

“To either side, there are sheer mountain walls, and turning back would add weeks to your journey. Your only path is ahead.” He lit the pipe with a flame that Runa had not seen him produce, then drew on its mouthpiece. An acrid odor of dry vegetation and brine stung her nostrils, waking them from a frozen stupor. He continued.

“So, I offer a trade. In a month, the snows will thaw and I will see you to Winterhold safely.” He puffed. Runa was unsure whether the smoke’s jade glow was reflected from the surrounding lanterns, or rather an internal and inherent glow of its own.

“In exchange, you will teach me all you know. You will instruct me in your memory magic.”

The request caught Runa off guard. She had never taken an apprentice of her own, and to be asked by a man whose face was so teeming with a full life of experience was curious. Still, she had done worse to survive.

“Deal,” Runa said with a nod.

A toothy grin broke across the man’s ancient face.

“Wonderful!” He stood and made for the cabin. “We will have tea, then you may take your rest.”

Runa lingered in the garden. The slate-gray rifts in the clouds had lightened to a soft pink, which grew steadily westward to force twilight over the far horizons. But nestled in this frozen wood, the spaces between frosted trunks were deep and dark.

Lambent eyes dilated to life, then, out of the cold darkness of the woods. Unpaired eyes, not of wolf amber, but of a pale and alien green. The wood filled with them, fading in and out like fireflies over a marsh. Hundreds of the glowing organs roved about her, partially obscured by the tree line and seemingly held at bay only by the ring of tiny flames.

An ancient fear awoke in Runa, as if passed to her across ages by those who had traversed the woods of Skyrim in time immemorial. She gazed at the flickering radiance a while longer, allowing the fear to grip her, committing the terrible sight to memory.

2. Keys

Days in Volk's wooded home blurred into an unbroken stretch of time. The forest was stubbornly dark, even with the sun directly overhead. Heavy gray clouds often veiled what little sky the clearing offered. At night, the sky writhed with distorted and sickly auroras. The light wavered at a middle point between day and night, as though unaffected by Nirn's passage through the Aurbis.

Volk and Runa gathered kindling, herbs, and berries in much of their waking time, always accompanied by one of the emerald-flamed lanterns. Volk would keep it high on its curved post, as would a mariner beating back oppressive fog.

The eyes were ever present, yet less numerous than on Runa's arrival. Volk was not keen to answer her questions about them, giving her only their name – "the woodland spirits." He averted his gaze when they were near, instead fixating on the unbeaten ground before them. They faded in and out as the two passed, restricted from their presence by the lantern's halo. As the days passed, they began to feel normal to Runa, even natural.

Volk's home was simple – a single communal area with hearth and kitchen, alongside a small bedroom with a narrow bed and wardrobe. Runa slept in her weathered bedroll atop an elk hide rug before the hearth. It was before this hearth where she taught her discoveries to the stranger of the woods.

Runa began with a demonstration – opening her clenched hand to reveal her mother's Amulet of Hircine. She had replicated every detail of the necklace, down to the uneven polish on its dulled antler tip pendant. As Volk held the conjured symbol of betrothal, evaluating its weight and feel, Runa recounted the memories she had of her parents – the moments and emotions she called upon to summon the image of the necklace. As it faded in his hands, she emphasized that the illusions – much like memory itself – were transitory and subjective, but no less real.

The old man's eyes glinted in the hearth's fire. He raised a withered and empty fist, then opened it. A strange, bent form rested in his palm. Runa looked closer. The object was carefully chiseled from pale bone. It resembled a key. No...

"A lockpick?" asked Runa.

Volk nodded. "It belonged to my sister. Her path was...darker than my own. Where she walks now is unknown to me."

"I didn't know you had a family," said Runa, not bothering to hide her surprise.

"I had many siblings," he mused, then looked back to the pick in his hand. "She and I always argued over who was older," he laughed. "Now we are scattered across this land, and I fear she is alone."

The bone lockpick crumbled to dust in his palm.

“What was her name?” Runa asked.

The old man’s face had fallen. He stood, wrapping the worn sealskin tighter around his frail form.

“I am weary. Thank you for this knowledge, Sorceress Runa.” He turned and retreated to his room.

Runa sat awake for many hours, contemplating the strange wood and its stranger denizens. Volk had achieved in a single attempt an act that had demanded years of practice from Runa. She could sense his power in the act – rippling from his glinting eyes and into her unguarded mind. The display had frightened her, yet she could not find an answer as to why.

As the fire faded to the soft glow of embers, she stretched out her hand to conjure her mother’s amulet once more. Nothing came. And in place of her parents, she found in her mind only the lockpick of pale bone, the flickering green flames of the forest, and dark eyes reflecting them from an ancient wooden face.

And in a crashing instant of dreadful realization, she understood that the old man had not simply learned her power, had not only absorbed her memories, and thoughts, and ambitions.

He had stolen them.

Days passed, then weeks, and then – at a point which Runa could not define – she stopped keeping track of the passage of time.

Her mind grew sluggish. She continued her lessons with Volk, each time divulging more memories, sharing more of her unique gift. As she did so, she felt those memories slip away, felt her power fade like starlight into aether. But weak as she had become, she could not bring herself to escape the winter prison. Each memory taken was as venom extracted from a wound – a pain that no longer ate her away.

Volk spent more time away now, leaving Runa alone in the log cabin. At times, she mistook it for her mentor Roggi’s rickety hut, wedged beneath a heavy stone overhang at the borders of Falkreath. When she heard Volk’s approaching footsteps, her heart leapt at the memory of Roggi the Wild, returning with a freshly captured rabbit.

At night, she dreamed of gliding down shadowed labyrinthine hallways, of climbing impossibly angled stone spires to look out on an endless and dreary ocean. The dreams were visceral, at times invading even her waking moments. When she awoke, she could still feel the stinging fumes of brine.

In rare moments of lucidity, Runa knew that Volk was dissolving her piece by piece, and that salvation lay only in escape or resistance. She hated the old man, hated him enough to take her blade to him. But now, too late, she understood that his potential far eclipsed her own. Was he possessed by the woodland spirits? Was he using her against them? He offered no answers, and spoke little to her now. Slowly but inevitably, the young mage felt even this shred of impassioned defiance begin to melt away.

Volk had gone, receding into the shadows beyond the pines as a viper to its nest. When his form dissolved, Runa gently straightened from her stupor. Months seemed to have passed since her arrival, yet the snow outside showed no signs of thaw. More lies.

Runa pushed the haze to the fringes of her mind, clinging to a stubborn spark of humanity. There was no telling for how long Volk would be gone, but this may be her last chance to fight back.

The door to Volk's room opened with a heavy groan, and Runa stumbled inside. She had searched beneath the bed and rug, unbolted the heavy mirror opposite the lone window, and cast clairvoyant charms to peer beyond the physical into tides of energy, scrying the room for cloaked sources of power. All failures. Now, she faced the locked wardrobe of carved ashen wood.

The wardrobe was the final piece of the room that remained veiled to her. Sluggishly, she grasped the wardrobe's black stone handle and pushed. Nothing.

She ran a thumb across its keyhole, turning over the solution in her mind. Runa suspended the mental image, focusing on each minute detail in sequence. Still, the young mage held doubts. She had never summoned an artifact from another's memories. Could she steal one from Volk? She closed her eyes and lifted a closed hand.

Runa was afraid, and awed. In a shattering instant she discovered that the strange man before her had not only mastered her power but stolen it. His deep-set eyes blazed, their details shrouded beneath the reflection of hearthfire. Volk extended a balled fist, coarse and sinewy as the roots of the pines, and opened it.

Runa exposed her own palm. A slender and angled twig of whittled bone rested there, shining mutedly in the light of the auroras twisting beyond the room's window. Against the terror and anxiety that gripped her mind, Runa felt goosebumps spread over her in a flood of relief.

She knew little of the clandestine arts, yet when she inserted the lockpick into the wardrobe's small keyhole, the door clicked open with no resistance. Even as a conjured memory, the pick seemed to wield some ineffable power. Runa wondered if Volk had lost the lockpick for good, much like she had lost powers of her own, and felt an unusually vindictive sting of satisfaction.

Runa gripped the wardrobe's knob once more and pulled. It opened silently, then swung outward with a sudden torrent of freezing wind. Had she been better versed in the arts of ancient magicka and liminal bridges, she may have met the sight without shock, without an instinctive cry, or without a deep and primordial churning of her insides. Or perhaps it wouldn't have mattered.

When the door rushed outward to release the icy gale of damp, salty air and to reveal a steep staircase of black stone, winding downward into darkness, Runa stumbled back with a shout and dropped the already crumbling lockpick. Her fall rocked the wardrobe on its four freestanding feet, yet the vision of the staircase inside remained stable. The vertiginous motion gave her the uncanny impression of looking through a longboat's porthole as it swayed in a storm.

Runa stood, allowing the momentary shock to wash over and past her, then resolved herself not to turn back. She drew her blade, feeling a flicker of lost strength return to her depleted body and mind. She stepped through the portal and began her descent.

3. Doors

The stone of the spiraling staircase was slick with whatever moisture saturated the air, and every so often Runa had to brace herself against its cramped walls to keep from slipping. She held her blade aloft,

wreathed in conjured starlight to reveal the path. Around each bend, her mind was assailed by hideous fantasies of creatures entirely nameless in the world above, yet she was met only by the prismatic dispersion of her light off the sweating black mineral.

Her abyssal plunge stretched for minutes, then for what felt like hours, until her mind numbed to the unending spiral. At various points, Runa struggled to make sense of the motion – perceiving the twisting as both descending and ascending simultaneously. Her stomach churned in a mixture of disorientation at the staircase’s illusion and dread at the cavernous vacancies in her mind.

Runa kept herself sane by clinging to the last shreds of her memory – of her mentor Roggi. Roggi, who had rescued her from the rampaging hordes of the tyrant Olaf One-Eye, who had gifted her with power and purpose. Who, in his last breaths, had implored her to seek out the College of Winterhold to complete her training – had sent her to the very institution that had banished him. Perhaps he knew something of the evil that lurked at the fringes of this world.

At last, the staircase deposited Runa into a short hallway ending in an arched stone door. The door was divided down the middle, the halves connected by a circular plate with an eye at its center. As Runa approached, blade outstretched, the roiling in her gut peaked and she doubled over to retch. After a moment, she rose and continued forward. There was no other path. No returning.

The door split and swung outward before she could touch it, and against every instinct she stepped through. The first sight to meet her was Volk’s garden, sprouting from murky soil and ringed by a low wall of stone. Except, it *wasn’t* Volk’s garden. The forms that rose from the tilled earth were not potatoes, carrot leaves, cabbage, or onions, but human nervous systems – complete with gray thought organs and pale clouded eyes.

Behind Runa, Volk’s cabin leaned against the bitter wind that had resisted her descent. But, again, it *wasn’t* Volk’s cabin – rather a crude inversion of it. The structure mirrored every detail, and yet was tangled, contorted, weathered to match its hellish landscape.

Beyond the cabin was uneven gray stone, sloping in all directions until it dropped off steeply. Surrounding the slender onyx peak, embracing the shaded horizons, was a gray-green ocean that shifted and convulsed with unknowable tides of fate.

Volk sat on a stone stump in the garden, sealskin cloak wrapped tight against the wind and hood raised to obscure his face. As Runa’s eyes fell upon him, he stirred to life.

“I wondered when you would figure it out,” said the old man, in a voice not entirely his own.

Runa’s anger flared, and she gripped the blade tighter. “You meant to give me that lockpick?”

“I meant everything that I did. My story, my home, even those eyes I planted in the woods. I needed to earn your trust before you would share your secrets with me.” The hood shifted slightly, angling towards her. His face was still hidden. “But it was easier than even I had expected.”

“You...” Runa pointed the blade. “...you stole everything from me!”

“I transformed you,” said Volk. “And what a wonderful seeker of knowledge you will become. One of my best, I have no doubt.”

Runa fell silent then, finally understanding what the old man truly wanted from her. Volk rose and moved to stand in the aisle dividing the garden of brains.

“You recognize this place from your dreams,” he said softly. It wasn’t a question.

Runa nodded, feeling hot tears blaze wind-warped trails across her face.

“Then you know my name.”

“Yes.” Runa had known him from the moment they had met – had heard his many names in the folktales she heard from her mother, and father, and Roggi. And yet, she had denied the truth of it.

“Then say it.”

The young mage remained defiantly silent.

SAY IT.

The voice came from within her – from a festering seed which had grown tendrils into the corners of her mind. The voice, now indistinguishable from her own, willed her to speak.

“You are the Woodland Man. The Demon of Knowledge and Gardener of Men. You are Hermaeus Mora.”

The cloaked figure laughed then, a long and quaking laugh that was the swaying of pines and the shifting of ocean tides. The figure unclasped the sealskin, allowing it to fall away. What lay beneath was a writhing mass of feelers, an infinite vortex of whirling shadow, and a swarm of lambent green eyes.

The thing spoke, and it was perhaps then that Runa lost her mind.

YOU ARE TO BECOME MY SEEKER, YOUNG DOOM-DRIVEN SORCERESS.

Runa clutched at her head, screaming to drown out the madness that had engulfed her senses. She grasped at a final tenuous thread of sanity, of defiance, then spoke through gritted teeth.

“You’ll have to kill me.”

Runa was five, kneeling beside her mother at the hearth. Runa willed her to act, but her mother’s motions were slowed, dulled, as though underwater. Still, she struck the flint.

One...

Two...

Nothing. The memory faded, trickling from Runa’s mind as water through a cracked pitcher. In a moment, she had forgotten her mother, and the crimson flame growing in her palm was whisked away by the wind. As her hope died, the thing spoke again.

YOU WILL GIVE YOUR HUMANITY FOR KNOWLEDGE EVERLASTING.

The thing extended its tentacles toward her, filling the garden of brains and obscuring the pale, lightless sky. Runa closed her eyes.

She was nine, sprinting through brush and stream, feeling low branches draw scarlet tattoos across her cheeks. She was pursued by painted warriors who spread flame and death. Behind her were the shattered forms of her nameless parents, friends, and home – and her heart was cleaved in two.

Then, before her, was Roggi the Wild, bearing wind and lightning and an army of spellbound beasts. And she ran past him as he shielded her, laying low the barbarians. She ran through cold and gentle forest to his ramshackle hut leaning on its foundation below the precarious stone overhang, and reached for its door.

And there, at the stone peak of the ancient ocean of forbidden knowledge that lurked in the dark corners of all mortal thought, Runa's hand met rough and splintered wood. The countless twisting arms were nearly upon her. She flung open Roggi's door and threw herself within.

Runa fell through a vast and lightless expanse of rushing void. The place was like night without the moons or stars. Her traveler's hood was blown back, releasing her loose hair in a red tumbling streak. She clung to her blade and bag, noting the absurdity of trying not to lose her things while plummeting through infinite vacuum.

The young mage closed her eyes, trying not to panic. She had never performed this feat and hadn't the faintest idea where she might land – *if* she might land. She tried to adapt to the momentum, opening her eyes to a squint.

A faint white spark flickered to life in the far distance. Or perhaps it was miniscule and very close to her – in the dimensionless dark, it was impossible to tell. The pinprick spread, arching up and down simultaneously until it formed a tower of light that split the void. The bead rushed towards her, growing to a vast tower of light. Runa took a deep breath and plunged into its radiance.

An earthen, overgrown floor greeted Runa upon awakening. The blinding tower had faded to softer sunlight, interrupted by the shadows of splintering boards and swaying verdant branches. The deafening rush of void had been conquered by a light afternoon breeze through leaves and the distant calls of birds and foxes. Slowly, she rose to a sitting position and looked around.

It was falling in, rotting, and quickly returning to nature, but Roggi's hut was unmistakable. Runa gazed at the image for a long moment, felt a rush of relief, and was overcome by emotion. She lowered her head to her knees and wept – for the life that had been ripped from her mind, and for the teacher who had gifted her one final salvation. After some time, she steadied her breath and gazed at the room once more.

Runa felt a pale green light at the back of her eyes, and knew that the Woodland Man had not truly released her. She knew that when she next dreamed she would see through the eyes of her other half – an eternal seeker, winding through a maze of stolen and forbidden knowledge, gliding along on abyssal tendrils reeking of brine, hungry for revelations that would forever elude her.

She rose and thanked the memory of Roggi for everything he had done to prepare her for this world. Then, she carefully and securely blindfolded herself with a spare strip of red-brown cloth from her bag. Hermaeus Mora would forever try to claim what little of her had evaded his grasp, but now he would be blind to her.

Sorceress Runa, doom-driven mage and defiant servant to the Woodland Man, stepped out from her teacher's home and down the forest path. She could smell the spring-bloom of new life, could feel the warm gust of winter's fading, could hear the whispered secrets of the woodland beasts. She could not see, but she knew the way.