

Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part 1)

A cool autumn breeze blew through the open windows of the small wooden shack, carrying the baby's hoarse cries into the narrow street. Inside, a sturdy young woman wiped her fingers on the apron that covered her homespun floor-length skirt as she dipped a tiny wooden spoon into a small pot containing a pungent pulpy substance the color of summer squash. Holding out the spoon, she turned to another young woman in simple peasant dress who was holding the screaming infant and appeared to be on the verge of tears herself.

"All right, Dorlindra, let's see if we can settle you down a bit."

The child's mother leaned toward the young woman with the spoon, allowing her to try to feed the child the paste she had spent this morning preparing. After a few messy passes, the child finally started gumming the concoction, which at least seemed to divert its attention from the need to scream. After a few moments, it began to doze on its mother's shoulder, sniffing.

"Thank Gaal for that! And thank you, Mistress Rowantree, for coming," gasped the young mother in gratitude as she settled her daughter into a small wooden crib.

The other young woman removed her apron and handed her friend the pot of paste.

"Think nothing of it, Hermia. And I'm still just Karli, Herm."

"You earned that title, bringing my little howler into the world! You might as well use it!" Hermia exclaimed, laughingly drawing Karli into a quick embrace.

"Now, remember. Only use it once per day, if that often, and only feed her enough to fill that tiny spoon. It could hurt her if you use more. It'll calm her for a bit and there are also some herbs in there that should help settle whatever humors are fighting in that tummy hers. It'll take time, but she should start settling down soon."

Hermia nodded and reached down to touch her sleeping daughter's cheek. "Dorry's been keeping me and Lakin up at all hours of the night. We've been thinking she's possessed or something. He's threatened to send her to a convent if she don't calm herself soon." Hermia chuckled half-heartedly.

"Don't be silly, Herm. Babies sometimes just get afflicted by bad humors. The wee ones are small and can't fight them off. According to Master Sirac, you were quite a howler yourself! If you're still worried, have Father Kariot take a look at her. A prayer can't hurt at any rate. Just do as I've told you and you'll be fine." Karli gathered her tools and herb packets into a sack with a sympathetic smile.

As Karli made her way toward the door, Hermia asked her "Will you be at the Wyvern tonight? I heard that Conlon Longshanks has a fever he may need your help with..." Hermia looked at her friend with a sly smile.

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Karli returned her friend's smile tightly. "I'm sure Conlon can figure out how to cure his fever by himself."

Hermia raised her hands in mock surrender. "All right, Karli. Can't blame a friend for trying. Thanks again and say hello to Master Sirac for us."

"I will."

After a final hug, Karli hitched up her bag and left her friend's small home. As she walked down Farm Road toward the center of Attis, she gazed up into the clear violet sky and let the cool breeze ruffle her dark brown hair. She smelled the wood smoke carried from various hearths throughout the small village and smiled. Women throughout Attis were working hard to warm their homes and prepare meals for their families, constantly battling the harsh mountain winds that swept down from the Dordanni during the autumn and winter months. Their husbands, sons, and fathers would be herding, farming, or working in the nearby iron mines that were owned by their lord, the Baron of Glassrock. This was the cycle of life in Attis for as long as anyone ever knew and would remain so for generations to come.

As usual, Karli wondered where she would fit in this cycle. Unlike the other women of this small village, she had a trade of her own. She had completed her apprenticeship as a Healer under Master Sirac almost a year ago. While she had concentrated on her training, her friends had embraced marriage and motherhood. Now, having seen just over twenty summers, she was well-past marriageable age. Furthermore, she was an orphan and could provide no dowry to any prospective suitor. Though she was well-liked by all in the village and had a reputation for being wise beyond her years in the ways of healing, the young men of the village were often intimidated by her skills and her ability to see past the surface of things. She, in turn, often felt constricted by the 'smallness' of their conversation. She loved the people of Attis and knew that they cared for her, but she was becoming a spinster in a small rural village and could feel the dirt roads of the town grow smaller with each passing year.

With a sigh, Karli turned down Bridge Road toward the house she shared with Master Sirac. Sirac Redhand had trained her in the arts of Healing, an art he had practiced in Attis for nearly thirty years. He had also adopted young Karli after her parents had succumbed to a pox that had swept through the village and surrounding farmlands when Karli was a young girl. Now both practiced their art for the village—a fact which further constricted the world in which Karli lived. The village simply did not need two Healers. She knew, deep down, that she would need to leave Attis in order to shake the confinement of her current life.

But that day was in the future. In the meantime, there was work to be done and cool autumn days to enjoy. Karli opened the solid wooden door of her home. She was met with a pungent, but familiar, odor. Setting down her bag, she wrinkled her nose and walked to the work table at the rear of the room where a short barrel-shaped man with a

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luxurious mane of bright white hair was crushing pellets in a stone mortar. She rested her hand on the old man's shoulder and gazed over it into the mortar.

"Lazron's foot painin' him still?"

"Aye. For the sake of my nostrils alone, I hope the ointment takes this time."

Karli chuckled. "I think Dorry'll be alright. I gave her mother the paste and stern instructions. Herm acts silly around the boys, but she'll have sense enough to do as I told her." She turned and settled into the plush chair near the hearth.

"Good. Then you'll have time to go to the Wyvern tonight. Untie that braid of yours..."

Karli rolled her eyes and set her mouth in a line.

Master Sirac continued to grind the pellets into powder. "I can hear you frowning, lass. It's like ice cracking."

Karli's mouth turned up in a grin. "You and Hermia seem set on me going to the Wyvern tonight. Perhaps the two of you should meet there."

The old man grunted, setting the pestle down on the work desk. "Hermia may play silly with the boys but she knows an old goat when she sees one." He turned around and rested his elbows on the old wooden table, leaning back and smiling at his foster daughter. "But you...you don't play silly with the boys at all. That's my fault, I suppose. Living with a cantankerous old bachelor doesn't exactly instill refinement." His deep blue eyes locked with her brown ones. "I just worry about you."

Karli rose and placed her hands on the old man's shoulders, smiling into his intense blue eyes. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm fine."

Sirac nodded ruefully. "I know. I think I kept you so hard at your studies in hopes that you'd stay with me longer. I'm kind of glad that none of these boys caught your fancy. But I see the way you look toward the horizon. I think we both know that you'll find a road to take you away from here. You need to."

Karli caught the old man in firm hug. "Maybe. Maybe not. I won't be wandering off anytime soon at any rate. In the meantime, stop playing matchmaker."

Sirac returned the embrace chuckling. "Good enough, lass."

Karli kissed Master Sirac on his broad, weathered forehead and sat down in the chair once again. "Must be this autumn wind. It's making everyone maudlin."

"Aye. It settles into the joints and reminds you of your age."

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A firm rap rattled the hinges of the cottage door. Master Sirac wiped his hands on his apron, strode across the room, and opened the door. The old Healer was greeted by a young man, barely of age, with a ruddy beardless face and a shock of brown hair that seemed unable to lie flat. He smiled broadly, his rabbit-like front teeth protruding slightly over his bottom lip.

“Master Sirac! Pa sent me to tell you!” He was panting as if he had run a long distance.

With a sigh of long suffering patience, Sirac replied “Well, catch your wind, young Rolgrad, and tell me what Keeper Bowstock sent you to tell me.”

After a couple of deep breaths, young Rolgrad leaned against the doorway of the tidy cottage. “Piper’s back! He’s just arrived and got a room! He’ll be playing tonight!”

Karli felt a slight flutter in her stomach as Rolgrad related this development. She felt a slight blush warm her cheeks.

Master Sirac merely nodded, his tone patient with the excited young man. “Good, good. It seems we’ll have some real entertainment and perhaps some news. Tell your father to set aside a bottle of his Pellinor stock for Mistress Rowantree and I.”

“Mistress Rowantree?” squeaked Rolgrad. “Yessir!” He quickly reached up and tried to flatten his recalcitrant forelock. Nodding quickly, he started running again back across the bridge into the village. Karli, hidden in the shadows of the cottage and by Master Sirac in the doorway smiled and shook her head. Her blush faded and she had caught her breath again.

Sirac shut the door, walked to the sideboard, and poured himself a cup of water from a pitcher. “So the Piper has returned. How long has it been, eight or nine years?”

“Something like that,” Karli replied, forcing a note of indifference into her tone.

Sirac cocked a bushy white eyebrow and nodded sagely.