

## **Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)**

The grove of the Fey was nestled in a small rocky valley far too close to Attis for Karli's liking. A green swath carpeted the valley floor. Tall, slender evergreens and rowans, golden with autumn color, made up a small copse toward the center of the glade. The air was cold and smelled of pine, grass, and spices. The gurgle of a robust mountain spring bounced off the vale's walls, completing the pleasant scene.

The Healer and the bard arrived while the moons hung low in the sky, early in their journey towards midnight. Piper and Karli said little as they made their way down the narrow paths to the grove. Piper led the way carrying a small oil lamp to light the way. Karli barely noticed the terrain, so deep was she in thought and questions. Several times the bard reached back and steadied the Healer as she slipped on loose stones or an exposed root.

What if what Myshalla implied was true, that she was seeking the help of the very beings that caused the Herald's affliction? What could they want? What could she possibly offer them in exchange for the young man's life? The Fey were notoriously capricious in their whims. There was no possible way that she could begin to guess their motives, much less negotiate for their mercy. She was glad to have Piper with her and that she did not have to face them alone.

Throughout her childhood Karli and the other children of Attis heard tales of the Fey, the Shining Ones who lived beneath the earth and in the trees and preyed upon the unwary. These clever tempters would bend good Gaalite men and women from the path of the god and take them from their families with songs and dances and hedonistic abandon. The concept of good or evil seemed to barely apply to their nature. They simply reacted to their own mercurial whims without any sense of rhyme or reason. But now a young man in Karli's care had fallen prey to these whims and she must try to call upon their compassion to save his life. Such selflessness could well be beyond the capacity of the Fair Folk.

Karli looked about her as Piper led them toward the trees in the center of the valley. She took in the beauty of the idyllic scene, gazing about as if waking from a dream.

"Is this...an enchantment? Do you think?"

The bard chuckled and shook his head.

"Enchanting, yes. An enchantment? I don't think so. It is peaceful though."

When they picked their way to the grove, Piper cleared out a space beneath one of the evergreens, brushing away the fallen bristles and small stones. He then unrolled his blanket and presented the space to the Karli with a flourish.

"M'lady."

Karli rolled her eyes and sat upon the pallet. Piper then unrolled Karli's blanket and settled in beside her, leaning his back upon the tree's trunk and wrapped the blanket

## Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)

about them both. The harsher winds seemed to blow over and away from the valley but the day's warmth quickly faded as night settled more heavily over the tranquil vale. Minstrel and Healer waited quietly and watched the Burning Brothers climb higher into the clear night sky.

Karli was drawn from her light dozing by the tinkling of bells. She opened her eyes slowly and gazed upon a grove transformed by light and sound. The tinkling sprang from pale dancing forms that cavorted about the grove. Neither man nor woman wore anything but braces of small silvery bells upon their wrists and ankles. Looking closer, she could see that the pale, thin dancers were not human. Their ears were long and came to sharp points above the tops of their heads. Wide, almond shaped eyes dominated their thin, angular faces. As Karli watched them dance to a tune of their own making, she felt herself grow warm beneath her skirt, her mind wandering to places she knew she should not as she followed the thin, graceful forms undulating in the moonlight.

Shaking her head to break her train of thought, she saw wisps of multicolored light darting about the clearing and, listening closely, heard tiny voices speaking in a tongue she could not comprehend. Peals of laughter would erupt from the lights as well as rapturous squeals and sobs. Looking about, her jaws open wide in an expression of both awe and fear, she saw other forms nestled about the grove coupling vigorously in the moonlight, shamelessly heaving and groaning amongst the otherworldly revelry.

Appalled at the scene and bracing herself on the tree she and Piper had been leaning upon, she slowly rose, pulling Piper's blanket. Looking down at his still sleeping form, she could see a strange sigil seemingly etched upon his forehead, shimmering in a strange iridescent light. She reached down, her brow furrowed, to touch to the shining rune.

“Who art thou, maiden? I extended no invitation to thee to join our revels.”

The voice was soft, entirely feminine but edged in steel. It was, to Karli's mind, the voice of a queen displaying her patience. Looking up from her friend, she gazed upon the most beautiful being she had ever set eyes upon.

Like the revelers, she was clearly not human. Long slender ears emerged from her long black hair and met at sharp points above the crown of her head. Her straight hair was held back from her face by a thin gold circlet worn on her delicate brow. She was clothed in a diaphanous gown that allowed the moonlight to create a silhouette of her long limbed beauty within the thin material. The fragile bones of her face framed wide almond eyes that seemed to glow with a faint violet light. Karli felt her mouth grow dry with both fear and a strange desire. Whatever response had started to form in her mind floundered at the force of her competing emotions.

The Lady, as Karli began to think of her, narrowed her thin brows.

## Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)

“Art thou a simpleton, mortal? Canst thou not speak?” Her words were familiar but they were spoken with a strange twist of sound, as if the tongue of Darchan did not come easily to her.

Karli nodded. “A...Aye, m’lady. I can speak.” Now that she had managed to form a complete sentence, her mind seemed to unlock a little. “I seek a boon of you, m’lady.”

The Lady arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms below her well-shaped breasts, as if consciously emphasizing their charms. “I do not welcome beggars to my grove, mortal.”

Karli vigorously shook her head. “No, of course not, m’lady. No, we wish your aid in helping a friend. We seek it not for ourselves, but for one who cannot place himself at your mercy on his own behalf.”

The Lady smiled sardonically and gazed down at the sleeping bard. “A bumpkin maiden and a dozing singer come to ask me for a boon? It is almost...offensive.” Her nose wrinkled delicately as she made her pronouncement.

Karli raised her hands in alarm. “Oh, no. No my Lady. We wish no offense. I do not know why he sleeps so. Please do not harm...”

The Lady sighed deeply and placed her thin-boned hand upon Karli’s cheek and lightly stroked it. “Fear not, maiden, I only jest a little. That one...” She nodded toward the bard “...need fear no reprisals from my kind. Thou, little rabbit mine, begin to try my patience.” She removed her hand and Karli could feel her cheeks flush. The Lady reached down and took one of Karli’s limp hands. “Come. Let us dance a while and then speak of boons and debts.”

Karli gulped hard. Her senses drowned in the smell of the grove, the clean yet musky scent of the Lady, the sounds of the revelry and the music of the bells. It was hard to concentrate on what was passing between her and the majestic being before her. She knew that she must keep her wits about her, not only for the sake of her charge but for herself and for the dormant minstrel.

“I regret, m’lady, that my friend’s time is short and we must not tarry. I cannot dance with you.” Karli held her breath as she looked up into the Lady’s violet eyes.

For a split second, Karli saw a wave of anger pass across the Lady’s countenance. Quick as a dart, it faded and the Lady smiled. “Very well, maiden. Thou wilt not join us. Then wilt thou take wine with me as we bargain?” Karli swallowed hard, shaking her head, though her eyes never left the deep glow of the Lady’s. “No, m’lady. I will not.”

The majestic Fey narrowed her eyes at the Healer. “Twice thou hast denied my hospitality. Yet thou dost ask a boon of me.” The Lady’s voice dropped to a tight whisper. “Mortals have no sense of manners. None. Deny me again, rabbit, and I will deny thy boon and thy sanctuary. Not all of my revelers are as...pretty...as the ones thou

## Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)

dost see within this grove.” She reached down and smoothed her gown with her long fingers as her face regained composure.

Karli nodded and kneeled before the Fair One. The Lady smiled indulgently down upon the Healer, seemingly pleased with her display. “M’lady. A Herald of the Realm was traveling in the area but a few days past. You would know him by the red cap he wore upon his head. He has been poisoned by an Ironthorn.”

Karli realized that she had been gazing at the ground during her recitation, averting her eyes from the Fair One. As she raised her head, the Lady raised a bored eyebrow and cocked her head to the side, prompting Karli to continue.

“I sought the wisdom of the Crone of the Mountain and she said that Fey Folk would be my only chance to save this man. I am a Healer, dedicated to the preservation of life. Thus I came, with my friend, to seek you out and beg your aid.” Karli exhaled slowly and bowed her head. Her head rose slowly as rich high-pitched laughter erupted from the Lady.

Her hand resting lightly on her stomach, the Lady laughed and then clapped her hands. “Too droll. Too droll. It sounds like one of that one’s sad little ballads.” The Lady nodded toward the still sleeping Piper. “I know of the one of which you speak. He was impertinent and disrespectful. He was punished for his impudence. Why would I seek to help such a creature?” The motes of light about the regal Fey erupted into squeaky peals of appreciative mirth.

“But how?” Karli stammered, her ire finally starting to rise. “How could he have offended? Did he deny you as well? Am I to share his fate?” The Lady shook her head in a mockery of pity. “No, rabbit. I know not what to do with thee yet. He came to my grove, stomped about it in his great muddy boots, washing himself in my favorite spring.” She pointed to the stream of clear water burbling from the valley wall. “And did he leave one word of thanks? An offering to my generosity? No. He merely stomps off again with nary a word or gesture of gratitude. Impertinent. Rude. Unbearable.” She huffed in girlish pique and then sighed. “But, mercy is the mark of a true noble. Though he was rude and ungrateful, I made his stomping feet much lighter. I granted him a dance. A very special dance.” She smiled wickedly. “Justice is so very satisfying, is it not, my rabbit?”

Karli bowed her head, but said in a clear voice. “That is not justice. That is cruelty. And I am not your rabbit.” She gasped as she felt the Lady’s thin finger turn her chin up to bring her eyes up into the Fair One’s regal gaze. “Art thou not, maiden? Art thou not scared and snared and fit for the spit?” Karli stared hard into the Lady’s eyes, trying with all her might to keep her expression neutral. All trace of desire was gone as she gazed into the ancient depths of the Fey’s unnatural eyes.

“No.” The Lady released Karli’s chin and stepped back. “Not a rabbit. There is more to thee, isn’t there? That pleases me.”

## Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)

“Then you’ll help my friend?”

“Perhaps. Why dost thou care so about a stranger? An impertinent one at that?”

“I am a Healer. He is in need of healing. It is what I do, who I am. I am pledged to it.”

“And if the boy is a lascivious scoundrel? A thief? A foresworn oath-breaker? Thou canst know who it is thou dost set free. What of that?”

“And if he is a prince among men? A hero of a bardic tale? A kind, simple, hard working man with a family to go home to? I know not what my inaction will take from world. What of that?”

The Lady shook her head in disbelief. Karli looked up into the night sky. “I cannot know what this man will do with the life I hope to restore to him. That is his own decision. I only know what I choose to do with mine.”

Smiling, the Lady took Karli’s hands in her own. “Well then. Thou dost ask a boon of me. Then I will ask a boon of thee. That is fair, is it not?”

Her suspicions rising, Karli nodded. “I will grant thou the means to save thy charge from my most fitting punishment.” The Lady’s eyebrow rose as if to dare Karli to contradict her assessment. “In return, thou wilt then seek out and bring back to me the Tears of Vriannon. If thou dost fail to do so in seven Turns, I will have my dance with thee. I will have my wine with thee. Thou wilt stay with me until I release thee.”

Karli’s eyes widened at the implications of what her failure would mean. The Lady smiled slyly. “Thou dost understand. These are my terms. Deny me again and the stomping boy will surely die. Dost thou accept the terms?”

Numbly, Karli nodded.

The Lady nodded and motioned behind her. From the darkness emerged another nude inhuman form of indeterminate sex who placed a small earthen jar upon the Lady’s outstretched hand. This she held out toward the Healer, smiling benevolently. Karli swallowed and took the jar.

“I take it thou hast removed the barb?”

Karli nodded.

“Then place this salve upon the wound and he should recover nicely. It may have other...properties...you may find useful in your quest. Take it with my compliments, Healer.”

## Tears of Vriannon : Dance of the Fey (Part XI)

Karli nodded and murmured, “Many thanks, m’lady.”

The Fair One stepped forward and placed her hands on either side of Karli’s face, brought her face closer, almost as if to kiss the dumbstruck Healer. Smiling wickedly, the Lady inclined her head and kissed Karli’s clammy forehead.

“Now rest easy in my grove, Karli Rowantree. You are under *my* protection now.”

Karli woke to a cold wind stinging her face. The sun crept up the horizon, burning away the early morning fog. The blanket had dropped away from her and somehow wound its way beneath the bard, cocooning him in its warmth. Frowning, she reached down to shake the dozing minstrel and started as she ran her hand across the top of a small earthen jar. Slowly, memories of the previous night filled her with the same maelstrom of emotions: desire, fear, anger, more fear, and finally wary relief. Her mouth a thin line of determination, she reached down and jostled Piper awake.

Drowsily, the bard stirred. “Wha...I...oh gods. Karli. I’m so sorry. I don’t understand...”

Karli smiled at his confusion and befuddled expression. It seemed to take years off his face. “Not to worry, cheesebrain.” She held out her hand with the jar of salve on it. “I muddled my way through just fine.”