

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

Karli knelt before the large wooden chest at the end of her small bed and pushed back the heavy lid. She removed a faded horse blanket that had once belonged to her father, setting it aside. She then gingerly held up a simple but elegant dress that had belonged to her late mother. She laid the dress out on the bed with a smile that did not quite reach her eyes.

She paused as she picked up the horse blanket and moved to replace it in the chest. Setting the blanket down once again, she knelt and removed a small curved knife in a steel sheath. The sheath was wrapped in blue cloth and silver wire, matching the design of the hilt. Drawing the blade partially from the sheath, Karli observed its faint silvery glow in the shadows of the chest.

She remembered the day Piper had given her this blade the last time he was in the village. Poric a'Kieranon was a minstrel by trade, traveling the land and singing for his supper. He would occasionally return and bring news of the outlying baronies as well as entertain the village with his songs and magic tricks. His voice was strong and high, a clear tenor that could mimic the sound of his flute. But when he played his namesake pipes, he could break the heart of the hardest mountain-bred men in the Dordanni.

No one knew who his father was. His mother, a poor Tumari woman, arrived in the village with an infant son, no husband, and no means of support. Though poor, Kiera possessed an uncommon sense of dignity; she offered no explanation for her plight and accepted no charity, insisting on working hard as a washer woman to earn her place in the village. The village respected Kiera's work ethic and fell in love with her adorable child. Attis banded together and gave the foundlings a home.

It was said that Piper was born with a song in his heart that his body simply could not contain. He constantly sang, hummed, whistled, and drummed as he worked and played in the village. Though a friendly, handsome, and talented boy, Piper always possessed a quality that set him apart from others in Attis. It was not his Tumari heritage, or the questions regarding his ancestry—though these issues did arise from time to time as the boy came of age. He seemed to perceive the world around him in an entirely different way—a way which made the simple folk of Attis uncomfortable.

When young Poric finally reached manhood, he struck out to make his fortune as a bard. At first he would return periodically and bring news and new songs. As he made his way, he would travel farther and farther and his returns became less and less frequent. When he did return, he told tales of his visits to the noble courts throughout the realm of Darchan and the adventures he encountered in some of the wilder places, places far removed from the relative safety of the King's Roads. People forgot the discomfort they had felt in his presence and hailed him as a local hero for his success in his trade and his adventuresome life.

Piper's last return had been some eight years past. Karli was only a girl then, no more than twelve years old. He had come home once again to bury his mother, Kiera. He stayed at the Blue Wyvern Inn, and, despite the occasion, sang and told tales over a long

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summer night. Though tinged with melancholy, his songs still brought a sense of wonder and adventure to the grindingly ordinary lives within Attis.

The girls of the village swooned, gawked, and giggled during the entirety of Piper's visit. This irritated Karli to no end. Her temper seemed to worsen the longer the bard was in town. How could she get any work done with the guffaws of drunken laughter coming from the Wyvern—in the middle of the afternoon, mind you! And everywhere she went, she seemed to trip over simpering girls, gathered in groups of three or more, giggling and fanning themselves in the late summer heat, barely paying attention to where they were going as they sighed over "the minstrel-fair". Had the whole town gone feverish?

Sure, from what she had briefly seen of the lad he was handsome enough. He was tall and thin, but hardened and weathered by the road. His red-brown hair, inherited from his Tumari mother, was wavy and flowed down to his shoulders. He sang in a beautiful voice, quite unlike the low groan that usually passed for singing in the Wyvern. His green eyes tended to crinkle nicely when he smiled... But that was no reason for the entire village to take leave of its good sense.

Whenever she caught a glimpse of the bard, or heard his high voice carried on the late summer breeze, Karli got an odd feeling in her stomach and she felt even warmer than was normal for the season. It was not an altogether unpleasant feeling, but she was not convinced that it was not the beginning stages of sort of foreign pox that the minstrel had brought from parts unknown. She would have to borrow Master Sirac's scrolls to investigate the symptoms further.

That night, Master Sirac brought her to the Wyvern. Earlier in the day, Piper and Father Kariot buried Piper's mother in the village cemetery. Father Kariot performed the rites as appropriate to send Kiera's soul to Gaal's Chamber atop fabled Mount Valaar to atone to the Wyrm-Enslaver for the choices she made in life. If found worthy, her soul would reside forever in the Hall of Kings. If not, her soul would be devoured by the Wyrm chained to Gaal's golden throne.

Despite the sad occasion, Piper was in fine form. Karli, often insightful for a girl her age, saw that he was frantically singing and playing a series of raucous, joyous tunes in order to drive away the pain of his mother's passing. He seemed to feed on the clapping, whooping joy of his audience. She could understand the need to fill the hole that his mother's passing tore from his heart. He filled his with song, while she had filled hers with her passion to become a Healer. She felt a kinship with the singer and set aside her current "grump" and lost herself in the evening's festivities.

Occasionally during his performances, Piper would catch Karli's eye and smile at her, almost shyly. But even these quick gazes held some intense, undefined quality that confused Karli mightily. She had always been a very practical girl and ill-disposed toward flights of fancy. However, the only way she could describe that look was to say that Piper had somehow gazed beyond her, within her. Flustered, Karli began to get irritated again, feeling those "poxy" twinges flutter in her stomach. As the evening wore

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on, most of the village began to trickle away back to their homes to rest for the coming day. A night in the company of a skilled bard was rare, but there was still work to be done in the morning. While she enjoyed the singing, her discomfort made her hope that she and Master Sirac would be returning home as well.

Finishing what was to Karli's mind a particularly sappy ballad, Piper waved to Rolgrad Bowstock, also known as Rolgrad the Elder, keeper of the Blue Wyvern Inn. Behind the great oak counter, Keeper Bowstock poured the bard a tankard of ale. Piper, accepting many claps to the shoulder along the way, bounded to the bar to take a rest. He turned to sit upon a stool, not noticing that Karli was currently perched upon it. Karli loudly cleared her throat, and with as much indignity as a twelve-year-old could muster, declared "I am sitting here, minstrel. I am not a cushion!"

Caught by surprise, Piper turned looked down upon her. Smiling, the bard bowed low in a courtly manner. "My apologies, my lady Rowantree. If I did not see you there, it was because of the shining of the sun reflecting across the freckles of your countenance."

Nearby bar patrons laughed at the minstrel's affected airs and at the embarrassed flush that coated Karli's face red. Pursing her lips in a fearsome scowl, similar in nature to the one she employed when the local boys were in for a good chase-and-thrash, she retorted "You might fool these silly farm girls with your mockery, Poric a'Kieranon, but you don't fool me. Not for minute." She instantly regretted using his full name, including the Tumari matronymic that brought a gray pall across his previously jovial expression.

He locked eyes with her with that strange intense stare and took her hand in apology. "You are wise, Miss Rowantree, and see through the false flattery of minstrels. I am in the wrong. I meant no disrespect or mockery. I was merely caught up in the moment."

He reached into his road-worn boot and pulled out a small curved knife in a blue sheath. Placing it in her hand and ignoring her shocked expression, he said in a low voice "Your birthing day is soon, is it not? In Leafmark? Take this in apology and in celebration."

"Another song, Piper, before the road again claims ye!" With a brief, sincere bow, he turned and made his way back to the stage accompanied by the cheers of his admirers for his tact, talent, and generosity.

Smiling at the memory, Karli took the knife and placed in on the bed with her mother's dress. She had not seen Piper since that night so long ago. His generosity and attention thoroughly mystified her. His gift confused her even more so now, as she had discovered that the blade he had given her was enchanted. It glowed with the soft sheen of moonlight that would wax and wane with the cycles of the twin moons. Surely he knew the value of such a gift...and the risk that it contained.

The Church of Gaal was suspicious of all sorcery. Should a Ringlord, one of the Holy Knights of the Church who served as judges in religious matters, find that she had such an item, it could have gone very badly for her and for Master Sirac. She could have been

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placed on trial for witchcraft. She and Master Sirac's reputations would be ruined. It could have even meant her death. At the very least, Father Kariot would have taken the blade from her to be disposed of by the Church. Despite the confusion, the risk, and the memories it conjured, she found that she could not bear to part with it. So she had kept it hidden all these years, only taking it out on rare occasions to wonder at its shimmering.

It seemed that the bard still brought that "poxy" feeling with him on his travels. Karli was older now and understood at least part of the strange feelings that even the memory of Piper awoke in her. She had been courted by some boys and recognized the symptoms for what they were. But no one had ever gazed at her in such a disarming way. Though the memory was still fresh, she wondered if the intervening years had dampened that gaze. She might also get an answer to her questions about the eldritch blade that the minstrel had so nonchalantly left in her care. Gazing down at the dress and the blade beside it, she decided that perhaps she would enjoy herself at the Wyvern tonight after all.