

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

Karli rose the next morning stiff with cold and sore from the previous day's journey. Rising slowly, she grimly set about the tasks of breaking camp and repacking Ginger for the day's travel. Piper, too, was quiet but smiled at Karli as he took his part in the morning's work. The winds had subsided during the night and the sun rose high and red over the horizon. It promised to be a warm autumn day, though the breeze blowing down from the peaks of the Dordanni was brisk. After a cold breakfast of hard biscuits and water, they set off again on the path Piper indicated led to the Crone's abode.

After about an hour, Piper stopped and pointed down into a wide, but shallow, valley at which the path ended. Coming closer, Karli gazed down into the small vale at a simple cottage built of wood and stone that seemed to jut out from the side of the mountain. She could see a sizable herb garden to the side of the house as a goat grazed in a small grassy patch outside the front door.

Piper bowed and waved his arm in the direction of the cottage. "The abode of Mistress Myshalla. As promised, milady."

Smiling, Karli curtsied. "My thanks, Master a'Kieranon."

Piper gazed down at the valley again, shading his eyes against the rising sun. "I'll approach and call her out. You might want to hang back just a bit. She doesn't like surprises."

Karli nodded, the realization of the potential danger of such an encounter returning with the minstrel's warning.

Piper smiled. "Don't worry. She won't turn you into a newt or anything. She would just consider it rude and I'll have to hear about it for far too long."

Karli returned his smile and watched as he made his way nimbly down into the valley. Piper approached about halfway across the vale and stopped and called out in what Karli assumed was Tumari, the language of the native tribes of Darchan. The Tumari ruled these lands when Karli's Thâeric ancestors crossed the seas in flight from the decadent Thûrian Empire. After many years of war, the kingdoms of the Tumari and the ancient Thâerics came together under the united rule of the High King of Darchan. Some of the northern regions of the realm still spoke the tongue of the Tumari, as did others who came from old Tumari families, such as Piper.

At Piper's call, the goat turned to gaze at the intruder, bleated loudly, and returned to his grazing. The door to the cottage opened and a squat old woman in plain linen robes emerged, scowling. She shook her fist in Piper's direction and responded in the musical tones of the Tumari language. Piper, for his part laughed in genuine amusement and approached the old woman with his arms outstretched, anticipating an embrace. When he arrived at the stoop and reached down for the old woman, she reached up, quick as a snake, and grabbed the minstrel's left ear lobe, dragging it down to the level of her mouth. After whispering emphatically into Piper's captive ear, she released him with a

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

satisfied grunt. Piper rose, rubbing his ear, and spoke softly with the crone as he pointed up to the lip of the valley where Karli waited with Ginger. Following his motion, the old woman nodded to Karli and absently reached up and cuffed the bard on the arm. She then hobbled out to where Piper had first called her and shouted up to the Karli.

”Come on down, Healer. I’ve had my breakfast already. I’m not hungry enough to eat a mule or a village lass this morning.” Her voice was strong and clear, with a lilting northern accent. Karli, still chuckling at the comic tableau of Piper’s greeting, smiled and began leading Ginger down into the valley. Though there was no path, the way was easy and Karli found herself in the small grassy patch with the goat in short order. Here she left Ginger, who regarded the goat with a snort, and proceeded to the stoop of the cottage where she met Piper and Myshalla.

Myshalla was a short round woman of some sixty summers. Her mane of curly grey and white hair fell halfway down her back. She stood at about Karli’s shoulder, and Karli was not known in Attis for her height. Her face was weatherworn and sour, but her green eyes were sharp and seemed full of the amusement that was absent in her visage. As Karli approached, Myshalla took both of her hands and stared straight into Karli’s eyes. After a moment, Myshalla nodded and led them inside the cottage.

The cottage was small, but neat. It consisted of a single room with a hearth, a sturdy wooden table with four equally sturdy, but simply wrought, chairs, and a small cot with heavy blankets neatly arranged upon it. Several shelves were built into the walls holding various tinctures and bottles of what Karli assumed were dried herbs, the smell of which filled the room. A curtain had been erected along the back wall, which consisted of the actual mountainside. From beyond the curtain, Karli heard the faint trickling of a spring.

Myshalla motioned her two guests toward the cot while she perched upon a low stool near the hearth. Her lack of height, her ample girth, and her voluminous robe caused the stool to disappear as she settled herself. Piper and Karli shared the cot, sitting upon it as a bench.

“So. You,” she indicated Piper with a gnarled finger, “come bounding out of the rocks after months of travel without the she-goat you promised me. Instead, you bring me a village Healer with a problem.” She flicked her hand in Karli’s direction and pursed her lips at the minstrel.

“Well, now, Myshalla,” The bard corrected himself as the old crone bristled. “That is, Mistress Myshalla, I told you that I would have to bring old Ewan a mate some day. That day just isn’t today...” The old woman harrumphed. She then turned her piercing gaze to Karli.

“You. Girl. Why do you come to brave the terrors of the Old Crone of the Mountain?” She smirked as she made her pronouncement, but her flashing green eyes caught Karli’s in their grasp.

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

Karli cleared her suddenly full throat. “Well, Mistress. My reason is simple, though my problem is not. I am a Healer in Attis and there is a man dying in my home as we speak. He suffers from a malady I, nor my Master, have ever encountered. Piper,” she indicated the minstrel at her side, “believes that you may possess some knowledge that will allow me to save this man’s life. I come to ask for your aid.”

The old woman grunted and crossed her sturdy arms. “Do the Old Fools of the Village know you have come here?” Her eyebrows rose imperiously, clearly anticipating the answer to be the negative.

“Yes,” Karli nodded. “I am here in the name of the Council of Attis to implore you to help me save the man, the Herald, in my care.”

Myshalla blinked at the Healer’s answer. Then she nodded, smiling. “Ah. A Herald. So it’s politics, is it?” She shook her head, disgusted. “Typical.”

Piper leaned forward. “Politics may have gotten Karli permission to...”

The old woman cut the bard off with a curt motion of her hand, her gaze never leaving Karli’s face. “I’m talking to the girl, prattler.”

Piper raised his hands in surrender and leaned back against the rock wall. Karli swallowed, sensing that this conversation was not going as well as she hoped. “The elders did give me permission to speak for them, if grudgingly. The truth is I would have come anyway. All I want to do is heal this man. I could not let an opportunity pass that I would regret for the rest of my days.”

Myshalla narrowed her crinkled eyes and pursed her lips. After a moment, she nodded. “I believe you. I can feel the Truth in your words.” Karli puzzled at the implied capitalization of the term. The crone continued. “What of young Sirac. Why did he not come?”

Karli blinked in puzzlement. Piper rose, raising an eyebrow at the old woman. “Master Sirac gave me leave, though he feels that it is already too late for the Herald. He is too old to make the journey.”

The old woman grinned and nodded to herself. “Yes...it has been a long while since I set foot in the village. Must have been longer than I thought. Sirac still looks a young man in my mind. No matter. Sirac is a stubborn man, set in his ways, but a true Healer. I can see his stubbornness and his Truth in your need to go to such lengths to help this stranger. The Wheel doth turn. I wager he learns from you as much as you learn from him now.”

Karli felt the tension in the room break as the crone rose from her stool with a sigh. The old woman motioned to the reclining bard. “Get up, Tanglebones. Fetch the pot from the hearth for tea. I’ll set the cups at the table. Tell me of your Herald.”

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

The three sipped pungent herbal tea as Karli related to Myshalla the details of the Herald's ailment. The crone closed her eyes and absorbed Karli's story without question or comment until the Healer finished. When Karli was done, the old woman nodded to herself and finished her cup.

Pursing her lips, she asked Karli, "Did you try to put any iron near the wound?" Her brow furrowed in puzzlement, Karli shook her head. "No, the thought didn't occur to me..."

The crone waved the response away. "No, you wouldn't have, would you?" She heaved a great sigh and refilled her cup with hot water. "Your people never stopped to think that there might be reason for the Old Ways other than the pursuit of power. Always afraid of what didn't fit in your churchman's scrolls." Her face clouded. "But, it always comes back again to give you chance to make it right." She looked up at Karli's frown. Myshalla smiled. "Don't mind me, girl. I'm just a sour old woman with too many memories. You've taken the first step on a long circle. I can tell that you are willing to see when others wish to turn their heads. A first step, but the most important."

She rose from the table and removed an old sack from a peg near the door. "I will help you with this Herald, lass. But I'll have to see him for myself to do so." She began to bustle about the place, lightly swatting the minstrel to move him as she began gathering various belongings and filling her sack. When her sack was filled, she took an old shawl from the foot of the cot and wrapped it about her squat frame. She motioned Karli to come to her with a somber expression.

"I don't know for certain what ails your Herald. I don't want to say too much until I see him for myself. In cases like this, sometimes the culprits hear their names carried upon the wind and take power from it. No sense in courting danger if we don't know anything for certain." She rested a gnarled, but surprising soft, hand on Karli's arm. "I will tell you this. That scoundrel Poric was right in bringing you to me. I suspect that the Fey have some hand in this." She looked about her as if one of the Fair Folk might appear from nowhere. It struck Karli as comical, until she saw the deadly earnestness of Myshalla's suspicions in her flashing green eyes. "If this is so, then there will be a price to be paid for this Herald. You are the binding of this circle, the meeting of the ways. The burden will fall to you to pay it. Will you accept this?"

Karli looked into the crone's eyes and saw the Truth of her statement, the sudden knowledge making her gasp. There was no compulsion, no enchantment in the old woman's gaze. Karli simply witnessed the fundamental Truth of the situation; that the path that sprung from the cause of the malady and the life-path of the Herald came together and met at her accepted responsibility for the Herald's future. With this knowledge, she met the crone's full gaze. "I will."

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

Satisfied, Myshalla nodded and squeezed Karli's arm. She waved her hand at the slack-jawed bard. "Come, Addlepate. We'd best set off if we're to reach Attis by nightfall. Quit lazing about catching moths with your tongue and lead the way. Did you learn no manners in those fancy courts at which you play?"

Piper ruefully shook his head as he left the cottage, followed by Karli and Myshalla. Karli gathered the mule's leads and followed as Piper led the way, the crone's arm in his, out of the valley. The late-morning sun shone through the crags, warming their necks as they made their way toward the pass that would take them back to Attis.

As they left her vale, Myshalla spoke softly in Tumari to the bard. "I like her, Poric. She's a good girl. I hope that her path is not too hard."

Piper frowned down at the old woman. "What did you See, Old Mother?"

Myshalla looked down at the worn path. "I dare not speak of all I See, young Poric. But I will tell you this; she brings me a hope that I have not had since I was a lass myself. I do know that she will not stay long in these mountains and that she will return to me one day, once again seeking knowledge, though she will have gained some for herself through pain and strife. Her path is long, but true and fine like spun gold."

Piper nodded, patting the crone's hand. "I like her as well. I hope that our paths intertwine like this for a long time." He smiled, gazing into the distance, looking at the future summoned by this image. He didn't notice Myshalla's sad smile as she murmured "Oh yes. I'm sure they will. For the rest of your life."