

Tears of Vriannon : A Torch in the Darkness (Part II)

The three-day journey to Glassrock was pleasant and uneventful. Piper, Thorgrin, Karli, and her mule Ginger made their way along the wagon track that led from Attis to the baronial seat. Piper entertained them with stories and songs and Thorgrin proved to be an adaptive campsite cook. The days were short and the nights were chill but quiet.

Karli had never visited the keep of her liege-lord. Occasionally she and Master Sirac would journey to the nearby mining grounds to tend to the wounds of the indentured laborers that worked the mine for His Lordship. Mining was hard and sometimes dangerous work and the two Healers saw more than their share of fractures and lung-sickness during their brief forays beneath the earth. Karli's only expectations of the Baron himself came from reputation and by stories told by the Councilmen--men who had not visited with the Baron in years.

Lord Tyrnal Flameblade, Baron of Glassrock and Knight of the Crown, enjoyed a reputation as a fair and just man. So long as taxes were paid on time, he seldom ventured into his outer holdings. Those who came to his court to seek redress of wrongs never complained of favoritism or malice. In battle, Lord Flameblade's nature matched his name; quick, fierce, and not easily quelled. He earned the favor of the High King during some past border dispute and was inducted into the Order of the Crown, the King's elite brotherhood of knights.

The baronial seat, Glassrock, took its name from a unique crystal formation thrusting forth from the earth at the site of the keep. It was said that in ancient times, before the enlightenment brought by the Gaalite priests, sorcerers would take splinters from the stone to make powerful talismans with which they could guard themselves against the Void-spawn minions they brought screaming into this world. Now the stone stood only as a curiosity, a landmark, guarded from desecration by soldiers in the orange and silver livery of the baron.

The sun had begun to sink behind the mountains as the three travelers approached the outer wall of the town that shared its name with the keep that protected it. Two guards in the colors of Glassrock peered down at them as they waited before the great wooden gate. The older of the two, a grizzled man with a shaggy, peppery beard, spoke first.

“Halt, travelers. What business brings you to the seat of His Lordship, the Baron of Glassrock?”

Thorgrin stepped forward, reaching up to dust off the red cap of his office.

“I am Thorgrin Redthorn, Herald of the Realm in service to His Grace the Duke of Newcastle, cousin to Lady Glassrock. I have a royal missive to deliver to His Lordship. These are my companions, Mistress Karli Rowantree and Master Poric a’Kieranon, both of Attis. I wish to present them to His Lordship with my complements.”

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The old soldier leaned back and said something to the younger, who disappeared behind the wall. “Welcome, Herald. And you as well, Piper. Bide a bit and you’ll be accommodated.”

After a few moments the great gate opened, straining against the ropes employed for that purpose. The three entered the main boulevard of the township, Thorgrin leading the way followed by Piper, Karli, and the mule. It did not take long for the baron’s servants to take Ginger away with a promise of fresh fodder and to escort the travelers to a comfortable parlor in which to await audience with the baron.

Piper propped himself comfortably on a settee, removing and arranging the cushions to his liking. Karli cut the bread and strong cheese provided by the servants and distributed it to her friends.

“This is a nice room. I usually enter through the kitchens. It’s warm and dry, but has far fewer cushions.” Piper stretched his long legs along the upholstered seat.

“Didn’t you stay here recently, Piper, recovering from an illness?” Karli passed him the pitcher of water and a cup.

The bard nodded. “Yes. The Baron and his Lady were very gracious and allowed me to stay in one of their guestrooms until I was able to stay on my feet. Unfortunately I wasn’t feeling well enough to enjoy it.” Piper closed his eyes as he bit into the cheese. “Not even a hint of mold. Divine.”

Thorgrin smiled at the bard as he enjoyed his bread. “Far better than the hard biscuits of the past three days. Simple fare, but welcome. Much like our host.”

“Have you visited Glassrock before, Thorgrin?”

The Herald shook his head at Karli. “No. I only know His Lordship by reputation. He is not known to be courtly or elegant, at least not by urban standards. But he knows how to treat a friend...and how to treat an enemy, if it comes to it.”

Karli slowly drank in all the details of the parlor. “This is unlike anyplace I’ve ever seen.”

Thorgrin chuckled. “Then you’ll really love Newcastle. Glassrock has its charms, but the ducal court is another world entirely.”

Piper sucked air through his teeth. “Too many courtiers in Newcastle for my taste. Sycophants and popinjays. I’d take Baron Glassrock’s company over Newcastle’s any day.”

An elegant deep voice purred through the doorway. “His Lordship will be glad to hear it, Master a’Kieranon.”

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Piper beamed. “Master Twilling!”

A thin man wrapped in a black robe, trimmed in the Glassrock orange and silver, bowed from the doorway. “At your service. His Lordship will see you now. If you’ll follow me...” The chamberlain motioned bowed once more and started walking down the hall. The three visitors dutifully followed.

Master Twilling lead them to a large hall, about twice the size of the common room at the Blue Wyvern. The walls were decorated with tapestries depicting battles, religious motifs, and crests of both Glassrock and the High King. A large banner, orange trimmed in black with a silver sword surrounded in red flames, hung behind the ornate seat that sat upon a dais at the end of the room. Upon the seat sat His Lordship, the Baron of Glassrock.

Baron Flameblade filled the baronial seat to overflowing. His broad shoulders strained against the simply cut silk shirt he wore beneath his tabard. His large bald head met his torso with little to no intervening support. He wore a simple iron circlet on his knobby brow to denote his royal station. A red-orange chin beard that hung to his sternum and bushy eyebrows of the same bright hue appeared to be the only hair able to grow from the crags of the man’s head. As his guests arrived, his hardened face broke into a broad smile.

“Twilling! I hope my guests were well-cared for while I attended to other business...”

The chamberlain stopped before the dais and bowed low, the others following his lead. “Of course, my lord. May I present Master Redthorn, Herald in service to His Grace the Duke of Newcastle and his companions, Mistress Karli Rowantree and Master Poric a’Kieranon of Attis.”

The baron waved his hand dismissively at the final introduction. “Bah. I know Piper already. Don’t give me that ‘Master ah-keer-a-whatever’ rubbish.” Baron Glassrock turned to the others. “Master Redthorn, you are welcome. We hear too little from our cousin at Newcastle. I understand you have a missive.”

Thorgin gave the baron a short bow. “Yes, m’lord.” The Herald reached into his satchel and produced a sealed parchment. The chamberlain took the parchment and handed it to the baron. His Lordship then turned toward Karli.

“Mistress Rowantree. What is your trade, Mistress?” The baron’s gaze was intense, but not unkind. He devoted his full attention to those he addressed.

Karli swallowed hard, her gaze dropping to the baron’s chest. “I am a Healer, m’lord. I was apprenticed to Master Sirac Redhand who bestowed my mastery.”

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Glassrock snapped his fingers and smiled. “Yes! That’s it! You and Redhand have helped my miners when they run into a spot of trouble. I knew I had heard the name.” He turned to Twilling. “I told you I knew that name.”

The chamberlain nodded sagely, not quite able to hide the wink in his eye. “You did my lord. Your memory is prodigious.” The baron waved his hand dismissively before breaking the seal on his message.

His Lordship held the missive at arm’s length as he read it, frowning. “Well, it is always good to hear to from our cousin, but I fear that this is really more for Her Ladyship.” He handed the open letter to Twilling. “Take this my wife, Twilling. Alas, it appears the Duchy is at peace and no need for a muster.” The baron sighed heavily. “This is just court gossip and request that is better filled by Lady Glassrock than by her lowly husband.” He turned his attention to Thorgrin as Twilling exited the hall with the missive.

“My good Herald, there may be a return message for His Grace. Do you return to Newcastle?”

“Aye m’lord.”

“Good then. You three will be my guests. Twilling is already making dinner arrangements for us in the dining hall. My man at the gate indicated that you wished to present your companions. I take it you mean other than an introduction, which we already covered.” The baron smiled in amusement.

Thorgrin bowed. “Yes, m’lord. I present to you, as a servant of the Court of the High King of All Darchan, my saviors.”

The baron raised his bushy brows and looked at Piper and Karli appraisingly. “Really?”

“Oh yes, m’lord.” The Herald then told the baron of his strange malady, explaining that he was saved only by the extraordinary efforts of the Healer and the bard. He did not mention anything of sorcery, the Fair Folk, or the Crone. “I will be presenting them to the court of His Grace as friends of the realm.”

Glassrock clapped loudly and beamed at Karli and Piper. “Well done, then! Well done! In the north they have a saying: ‘the wheel doth turn’. There you were, minstrel, laid out on your back for a spell and now you have a chance to help another in similar circumstances. Well done indeed! And you, Mistress. I am truly blessed to have such a fine Healer in my province.”

The baron rose from his seat and descended the dais. Following the Herald’s lead, Karli bowed low. Looking sideways, she saw His Lordship take Piper’s hands as the bard rose. The baron clasped his hands in a comradely handshake. “Rise, friend of the realm...and welcome!”

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Piper bowed shortly, beaming. The baron moved to the bowing Healer and took her hands as well, motioning for her to rise. To her surprise, she was able to look the baron in the eye. Glassrock took both her hands and kissed them formally. "A friend indeed. Welcome, Mistress Rowantree."

Karli blushed and smiled. Smiling in turn, the baron released her hands and strode toward an arched doorway leading out of the hall.

"Come, friends. A feast awaits us!"

Thorgrin shrugged and followed the baron, the others trailing behind, grinning.

The dining hall was huge by Attis standards. A long table sat upon a raised platform at the head of the room, lengthwise. The lower portion of the hall housed three long tables that ran vertically from the platform. Karli, Piper, and Thorgrin dined with the Lord Flameblade and the Baroness Glassrock at the upper table. A tray of fresh meat, presented with roasted fruits and vegetables, dominated the center of the table. The guests also enjoyed individual bowls of broth and plates of bread and cheese. The chamberlain poured rich wine into pewter goblets for each of the guests. Karli had no idea of its vintage, only that it was far more powerful than even the stout that the farmer's enjoyed at the Blue Wyvern.

Lord and Lady Flameblade were a study in contrasts. While both were gracious and friendly hosts, the Baroness was cool and demure while her husband was warm and boisterous. Whereas the Baron was broad of build and of gesture, his lady was thin and self-contained. They complimented each other perfectly; what may have started as a marriage of alliance clearly became a marriage of companionship.

Piper had finished an amusing song involving a deaf Duke, his blind lady, and a wily tax-collector when the Baroness turned to Thorgrin. "Sir Herald, do you intend to stay with us long before your return to Newcastle?"

"No, m'lady. We will take to the road tomorrow. I have tarried in the mountains long enough and I wish to make my return before the weather turns."

"I fear that I must delay you for a day or two." The guests turned toward the Baroness with widened eyes. "You see, my cousin, His Grace, has requested that I send one of my ladies-in-waiting to Newcastle to serve the Duchess. It occurs to me that if you are all heading in the same direction that there would be safety to be had in traveling together."

Piper was biting his lip in an effort to keep his reaction in check as Karli looked to Thorgrin. "I see, m'lady. However, we had intended to travel off of the roads for at least part of the journey in order to save time. A lady and her retinue would slow us considerably."

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The Baron looked amused at the exchange. “Nothing to be done, lad. I think her mind is set on it.”

The Baroness smiled apologetically. “I’m afraid I must insist. My cousin indicated in the request that you would be accompanying the Lady Whitheron to Newcastle. Further, it would ease my heart to know that she was in your company as she travels to her new home.”

Thorgrin rose and bowed once toward Lady Flameblade. “As you wish, Baroness.” Piper continued to frown as Karli quietly took in the scene. She felt apprehensive about traveling with a stranger, but was not overly concerned with the change in plans. All of this was too new, too strange, to react in anyway other than with quiet acceptance.

The Baron laughed. “Come friends. A toast. To new companions and new adventures. Gaal’s blessings upon you all!” The noble couple and their guests raised their glasses in acknowledgement of the Baron’s blessing and drank. “Now, let’s have another song, young Poric!”

The feast lasted long enough for two more songs before Lady Flameblade called for the trays to be pulled away and for her guests to be escorted to their bedchambers. Bidding the Flameblades goodnight, the three travelers allowed Master Twilling to lead them to the guest wing of the keep. In her small but well-apportioned bedchamber, Karli found that her belongings had been unloaded from the mule and placed at the foot of the bed. As she began undressing, a knock sounded from the door.

Clasping her bodice back together she called, “Yes?”

“It’s Thorgrin and Piper.”

“Come in.”

The bard and the Herald entered with sheepish expressions, glancing at Karli’s unbound hair and disheveled bodice. She sat on the bed while Thorgrin took the lone chair. Piper found a wall and leaned against it with a rueful expression.

“Nice change of plans of His Grace to burden us with this, eh Thorgrin?”

The Herald looked at his hands and nodded. “Nothing to be done for it. His Grace could not have known that I would have other companions or plans on my return trip.”

Karli looked puzzled. “I guess I don’t understand why you’re both so upset.”

Thorgrin smiled at her. “Lady Verona Whitheron will not be the only addition to our company. She will probably be accompanied by a small retinue of soldiers for her protection. These soldiers will later become part of the Duke’s army when they arrive at Newcastle. Because of the size of the troupe, and the fact that a member of the lower

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nobility is traveling with us, we are forced to stick to road. This will take us several hundred leagues out of our way.”

Piper broke in. “Plus, we’ll have to be careful with what we discuss along the way. No talk of our real quest or what we encountered back in Attis. We’ll have to be on our best behavior at all times.” He sighed deeply. “This is why I usually travel alone.”

Thorgrin nodded and patted the bard’s knee. “Well, as I said there’s nothing to be done for it.”

Karli shook her head in amusement. “Is it really so dire? We’ll have more people with us in case of brigands.” She pointed at Piper. “You’ll have an audience that hasn’t tired of what passes for wit for you.” The minstrel stuck his tongue out at her. Returning the gesture, Karli turned to the Herald. “And you will fulfill this last request for the Duke before possibly offending him by resigning. All we trade is a little privacy and a little decorum.” The Healer shrugged. “If it can’t be helped, we may as well enjoy it.”

Piper sighed and raised his eyes to the heavens. “I still don’t like it. It makes my skin itch.” He chuckled the Herald on the shoulder and did a fair imitation of Thorgrin’s voice “But there’s nothing to be done for it.” Thorgrin’s jaw dropped at the bard’s adept mimicry while Karli giggled. “Come on, Thorgrin. Let’s get some sleep in privacy while we still can.”

After they left Karli finished getting ready for bed. As she drew the ample blankets up against the chill emanating from the stone walls, she muttered to herself. “Boys.”