

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

The Herald slept peacefully in Master Sirac's bed as the smell of herbal tea and fresh bread filled the small cottage. Karli dozed lightly in Master Sirac's favorite chair while the old Healer bustled about the hearth. Sirac opened the cast iron "oven", a long shallow pot, and checked the status of the bread, breathing deep and inhaling the cleansing aroma of the sweet baked dough. It was a ritual he had maintained since he was a young man, starting as a reward to himself for a job well-done that had now become an exercise to calm his mind when agitated about a particularly hard Healing.

Karli and Piper said little when they returned from the grove. The younger Healer bore a small earthen jar with some sort of purple unguent that she would not let the old man touch. She firmly shook her head and told him there was a price paid and work to be done and not much time to do it. Alarmed, he followed her into the room where the young Herald still writhed, but weakly, against his bonds. The Minstrel just followed and watched the girl intently, as if something would jump from the shadows at any moment to take her. Sirac calmed his agitation by concentrating on the patient, helping to settle him down as she placed a dollop of the flowery-scented goo on the festering wound that marred the lad's neck.

As soon as the salve hit the wound, Sirac felt the hairs on his arms and head rise as if a storm was approaching. In a blink, the wound *disappeared*. Neither scab nor scar marked the flesh of the boy's neck. His legs ceased to twitch and his breathing began to slow to a tired, but normal rate. He began to sweat as if a fever had finally broken and soon began to sleep. Sirac and the bard hefted the lad up and took him to Sirac's room to rest. As soon as he left the sleeping Herald, he turned to the two young ones and began to demand an explanation. Piper raised his hand to stop Sirac's bluster.

"Karli should explain. In all truth, I slept through most of it and it is her tale to tell. But let her rest first. Please. The worse is over, I hope." The minstrel then took his leave with word that he could be found at the Blue Wyvern should Karli need him.

As his foster-daughter dozed and the patient rested, he set about making tea and sweet bread to busy his hands while his mind raced. What does that bard mean he slept through most of it? Wasn't he there to protect her? And that salve. Obviously some sort of sorcery was involved there; he supposed it stood to reason that sorcery would cure what sorcery had caused. That didn't mean he had to like it. But what he kept bothering at, picking at in his mind, was the price that Karli mentioned. What had those things extracted from her to save this poor bedeviled young Herald. And would it be worth it?

"Is that your sweet biscuits I smell, Father?"

Smiling, Sirac came and kissed Karli's forehead, smoothing the wrinkles with his weathered hand. "Aye, lass. And tea. I figured you might be hungry for a treat after the days you've had."

"You as well I'm sure." Karli smiled up at Master Sirac, a memory of the young girl that had first come to him as an apprentice making the old man smile in return.

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Sirac extracted the “oven” and set it aside to cool as he poured two cups of tea, handing one to Karli as he sat across from her at the hearth. Neither said anything for a few moments, each sipping and thinking, wondering who would start the conversation and how. Sirac’s patience born from experience won out.

“It was strange, Father. They were beautiful but frightening at the same time. They were happy, but twisted and strange. I don’t think I could ever be tempted by them to stay in their realm for its own sake.”

Sirac nodded. “I’m happy to hear that. You won’t have to return there, will you?” The old man looked at his daughter intently, turning the cup in circles in his hands. Karli sighed.

“No. Not if I complete the quest that’s been given to me in return for the Herald’s cure.”

Looking down as if the story were written upon the oaken floor, Karli related the story of the previous night to her father. She told him everything about the Lady, her strange feelings, the circumstances of the Herald’s affliction, and the final arrangement that she had come to with the imperious Fey. She kept to herself the strange sigil upon the bard’s head and the Lady’s strange familiarity with him: Karli wanted to understand that part of the tale herself before she shared it with another. That story belonged to Piper. When she was done, the tea was cold and Master Sirac handed her a slice of sweet bread.

“Seven Turns. Seven years to complete this quest for that monster. Know you anything of these tears?”

Karli shook her head. “No. They could be jewels, an elixir, even real tears for all I know.”

The old man nodded. “Seven years seems like a long time, but it can pass before you realize it.” He sighed heavily as he returned to his seat. “And you won’t find those tears here in Attis.”

Karli nodded slowly...and then stopped. She knew that she would have to leave the village someday. Attis could not really support two Master Healers. But now she would have to leave and seek out answers to save herself from a fate that she didn’t really want to understand. Sirac would not be with her. Her home would be far away from her, as would all the familiar but solvable problems. She would be leaving and going...where exactly? She didn’t know. She had no idea where to start or even any idea where she would end up. And she would be alone.

She looked up and felt tears flowing down her face as Sirac smiled and nodded at her from across the hearth. “Aye, lass. Now some of this price comes home. Or, rather, doesn’t. That being the point.”

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Karli chuckled and wiped her face. Sirac smiled. “Do you regret it?”

Karli sighed deeply. “No. No I don’t.”

“Well then. We do as we always do. Prepare the best we can and take things as they come.”

Karli rose and settled down again on the floor in front of her father and put her head in his lap. He set his cup down on the hearth and gently stroked her hair.

The Herald moaned softly as Karli adjusted the curtain to bring in the morning sun. She smiled down on the young man as he opened his eyes, blinking slowly in disorientation. He tried feebly to rise but sank back down into the mattress, groaning and placing his palm to his eyes.

“Here, let me help.” Karli reached and helped prop the young man up on a pillow so that he could sit up. His shoulder-length brown hair was disheveled and a patchy beard had begun to grow on his pale cheeks.

“I have some food, broth, for you if you’re hungry. You haven’t really eaten anything in several days. You’re probably starving.”

The Herald nodded slowly, wincing, and Karli reached for the wooden bowl of broth and the shallow spoon. “Relax. I’ll help you. You’ll be weak for a while. We’ll help you get your strength.” She began doling out spoonfuls of warm liquid to him as he leaned back on the pillow.

When the bowl was empty, Karli smiled. “You must have some questions.”

The young man nodded slightly, smiling. “I do at that, m’lady.” His voice was higher than most men, but not effeminate or reedy. It would be a fine voice for singing. “First and foremost would be the name of my benefactor.”

Karli smiled. “There is no ‘m’lady’ here. I am Mistress Karli Rowantree, a Healer. You rest in the humble home of me and my Master, Sirac Redhand, in the village of Attis.”

“I see. I am Thorgrin Redthorn, Herald to His Grace, the Duke of Southlund. And I am in your debt.” He frowned as he saw a strange look ripple across the Healer’s face.

“Let’s not talk of debts. You need to rest and eat. You gave us all a good scare but you seem to be out of danger now. We’ll speak on what happened later. You just worry about feeling better now.” Karli gave his knee a squeeze and left the room.

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Given time to rest and heal, Thorgrin recovered from his ordeals fairly quickly. Within a week, the young Herald was walking about the small village, slowly but firmly, exchanging pleasantries with the townsfolk as he enjoyed his “health walks”. He and Karli spoke little of the circumstances of his arrival. Piper had come to house only to see to the patient’s progress and leave awkward wishes for a speedy recovery, leaving rather briskly as if caught up in his own thoughts. On the day of Temple the Herald and the two Healers attended Father Kariot’s services where the young man was congratulated on his speedy recovery; a miracle attributed to the grace of Gaal and to the ministrations of the celebrated Healers into whose care he had stumbled.

After the service, the three returned to Sirac’s home for tea and cold mutton. Thorgrin used a small brush to whisk dust from his red cap, the badge of his service, while Karli made herself busy straightening the herb stores in the pantry.

“Mistress Rowantree.”

Karli looked up from behind a pile of earthen jars. “Thorgrin, I’ve told you call me Karli”

Thorgrin looked down at the twirling cap in his hand as he sat in the chair by the hearth. “Karli, then. I will soon need to leave to complete my errand. I have a missive to deliver to your liege, the Baron of Glassrock. It is clear that you have saved my life from some mysterious malady and that I owe you a debt.” He sighed deeply. “But before I leave, I need to know what happened to me.”

Sirac smiled and nodded as he placed a plate of cut meat and cheese on the central table. “’Tis high time, lass. No use putting it off.”

Sighing, Karli made her way to the hearth, took a piece of cheese and sat down. She then proceeded to tell the story of how Thorgrin had stumbled into the Blue Wyvern and the subsequent events that lead to his recovery. Throughout the tale, Thorgrin simply stared at the Healer, as if committing each word to memory. His cheeks turned pink during her description, however tasteful, of the fairy revels. Finally, with the story finished, he leaned back in his seat and made the sign of the Wyrms with his hand.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, the Herald rose from his chair and began to pace the small room. “I don’t remember much of anything. I was traveling with my message to His Lordship at Glassrock and diverted from the road to rest. I do remember a grove and a spring where I took my rest. I don’t remember much beyond that. I dreamed of...dancing.” The young man shook his head vigorously. Suddenly he turned and looked intently at Karli.

“You sold your freedom in exchange for my life.”

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Karli cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. “Not yet, I haven’t. I took a risk, yes. But it is not over yet.”

“But you don’t know me. You...I... It’s extraordinary. I am without words.” He settled back into his chair. “Am I really healed? Will I suffer this affliction again?”

Karli looked to Master Sirac. “As far as I can tell, lad, you’re as good as new. Not even a mark to show for the ordeal.”

Thorgrin shook his head. “But, what will you do? How will you save yourself from this...this daemon? Where will you start?”

Karli rose and poured herself some tea, shrugging as she sipped. “I don’t know. Piper has been thinking on it, I believe. He has seen much in the world. But I don’t know. All I have right now is time.”

Thorgrin continued to shake his head. “I can’t let you do this for me. You must not do this thing alone, not for my sake. I am no longer an invalid and by Gaal and my oath you will not do this without me.” The three sat in silence for a few moments.

“It is clear what I must do.” His eyes took on a steady gleam and he sat straight in his chair. “I must fulfill this delivery to His Lordship, return to Newcastle, and resign my commission with the Corps.”

Karli started to voice her protest but the Herald cut her off. “No. My mind is made up. It is for my sake that you have placed yourself in danger and it is my duty, and my wish, to accompany you down this path. I can’t do that and still fulfill my duties as a Herald.” He nodded and leaned back in his chair. “My path is clear.”

Karli rose. “But won’t you be punished for breaking your oath of service? Will His Grace allow you to resign?”

“It is...rare...for one to give up such an opportunity to serve his lord,” Thorgrin conceded. “But surely, if I explain the circumstances, His Grace is by all accounts a most reasonable man. And my superior, Lord Tallbirch, certainly can be made to see the justice of my decision.”

Master Sirac shook his head and pointed at the young man. “No. No, my lad, you can’t tell them all of what happened here. Even our townsfolk only know the bare-bones of it and it’s scandalous enough as it is.” The old man took a deep breath. “Don’t you see? You can talk all you like of reason, but what they will hear is that a Herald of the Realm wants to give up his commission because he’s been tainted by the Fey and must now follow a country girl, who bargains with such creatures, to find some mysterious bauble to give back to the misbegotten Fair Folk. No. You must be circumspect.”

“My good Master Sirac, I assure you that Lord Tallbirch...”

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“...may be the soul of reason and the lord of understanding. But others are not. And such a tale could put you, and my Karli, in harm’s way.” The old Healer scowled sternly at the young Herald. “And I won’t have that.”

Thorgrin started to protest again when Karli reached across the table and touched his arm. “Father is right, Thorgrin. Gaal knows I have nothing against the Church, but just suggesting that I should consult Mistress Myshalla brought on talk of Ringlords.” She sighed. “I stand behind what I did. I know that it was right. But I also know that the Church may very well disagree with me. Gaal himself may as well...I don’t pretend to know. But that kind of disagreement could set events in motion that would cause me to fail in this quest. And I gave my word that I would complete it or take the consequences.”

Thorgrin nodded, smiled, and clasped Karli’s hand. “And I’ve seen that you see to your word thoroughly and to the end. I...”

The Herald was interrupted by a rapping at the door. Sirac rose and opened it, greeting Piper and stepping aside to let the minstrel in. Piper nodded to everyone in turn.

“Greetings all. I feel it is time to talk of future plans.”

Thorgrin and Karli laughed as the minstrel looked about confused. Sirac, smiling, took his seat. “It seems that we are all of a similar mind this evening, minstrel. Take a stool.”

Karli smiled at Piper as he settled, birdlike, on the stool. “So what conclusion have you come to?”

The bard looked about, his gaze twice settling on the Herald. “Have you explained...”

Karli nodded. Thorgrin motioned toward the young Healer. “Karli has explained all of the circumstances of my...predicament. We were discussing some of the ramifications.”

Piper sat up straight on the stool. “Well, the fact is that Karli won’t be able to find any answers here in Attis. I have racked my brain and cannot recall any tale, song, or snippet of doggerel verse that refers to this Vriannon, teary or otherwise. We’ll have to search out those more knowledgeable than I.”

Karli laughed. “But how can we narrow that down?”

The bard smiled at her indulgently. “We go to a city. I should be able to track down some minstrel or sage that has heard something of this. Then we plot our path from there.”

“Of course!” Thorgrin struck his leg, and then winced in pain. “You can accompany me to Newcastle!”

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“What?” Karli exclaimed.

The Herald leaned forward in his chair as he counted off with his fingers. “Newcastle isn’t the closest city but it is certainly one of the largest in the Duchy. There should be many learned men there. Further, you have saved the life of a Herald in service to the Crown. This is no trifle. Honor demands that you are presented to the ducal court. Both of you.”

Piper grinned broadly as Karli began to look alarmed.

Thorgrin looked triumphant. “With *that* introduction, you may be granted access to some of the resources of Newcastle. Perhaps a clue can be found there.” He sat back, beaming. “It’s perfect. And I could use the company.”

Sirac squinted at the enthusiastic young man. “Are you certain you can arrange such an introduction? I’ll not have my lass embarrassed.”

“Master Sirac, I assure you. I would be remiss if I did not present Karli and Piper to His Grace. Duke Samrod Newcastle is a man who holds his reputation and honor in high esteem. Further, the presentation would satisfy any indebtedness that His Grace may feel. And above all, the Duke hates to be held in another’s debt.”

Piper nodded. “I’ve had the fortune to be able to perform at Newcastle and the Duke’s reputation precedes him. He prides himself on his reputation, that of a hospitable and gracious host, even if is actually a bit aloof.” Thorgrin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “But he does gather honor about him like a Lord Exchequer gathers coins. I like the plan.”

Karli shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve no other option, short of traveling up and down the King’s Roads and asking passing travelers if they’ve seen Vriannon or her tears at any Waymeets along the way.”

Piper chuckled. “It may well come to that. But I think this will be a good start.”

Sirac reached across the hearth and took her hand. “Don’t worry, daughter. You’ve talked hard business with the Old Goats of Attis. You’ll do fine in Newcastle where they’ll welcome you as a hero. We’ll get you a dress before you go.” Karli smiled at her father and squeezed his hand.

“You always see through me, Father.” Sirac nodded and rose.

“Now, lads, preparations will need to be made tomorrow. Tonight, we finally celebrate our victory.” The old Healer shuffled toward his room. Soon he reemerged with an old jug. “This stuff is a mite rough. . .in fact, it can quiet a pained mule. But it’ll do for a toast to that one’s health and a blessing to all our fortunes.”