

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

The next two days passed quickly as Lady Whitheron prepared for the journey to her new home. His Lordship bid his guests farewell after the first day as he and a small retinue set out for the Baron's monthly tour of his holdings and referred them to his chamberlain to ensure that their needs were met. Karli, Piper, and Thorgrin took full advantage of the Baron's generous hospitality. They explored the private gardens, the "modest" library, and dined often and well. Each evening, at dinner, Lady Flameblade entertained her guests in the main hall. On the second night, the evening before Karli and her companions would bid Glassrock farewell, the Baroness introduced them to Lady Whitheron.

Verona Whitheron possessed a delicate beauty. Her fine-boned features and pale, luminescent skin granted her an ethereal appearance, like a fine doll made of silk stretched over a skeleton of fine-spun glass. Her hair was dark and wavy, complementing sparkling blue eyes that she often hid beneath half-turned lids in the modesty expected of a noble maid. Her voice was soft, but confident, and her chuckle, like her other aspects, was delicate, a gentle spring tumbling over rocks. The dinner conversation revealed that while she demurred to the Baroness in all things, she was possessed of a subtle and gentle wit. There was no wonder why the Baroness treasured her maid and why the Duchess of Southlund would send for her to attend the court at Newcastle.

The maid implored Thorgrin and Piper to describe the life that would await her at the court in Newcastle and on the characters of her new patrons, the Duke and Duchess of Southlund. Thorgrin's descriptions presented the facts of the court, a catalog of courtiers and their relationships, while Piper's anecdotes were far more entertaining. The bard presented his impressions as those of "a man of the common folk who has glimpsed the fabled halls and gazed upon the subtle dances from the shadows of the court." The Lady expressed her appreciation for their insights with the practiced, but sincere, politeness of a young noblewoman avoiding an unseemly familiarity with young men.

Karli drank in the conversation, clearly as curious as the lady. The world of the court, even the small court of this rural holding, fascinated her. She said little as she imagined the balls at the ducal court, the machinations of the courtiers, and the glamorous yet mundane life of a lady-in-waiting. The young Healer wasn't quite sure what to make of Lady Whitheron herself. Karli felt that her manner was so polished that it was difficult to tell how much pleasure was genuine or merely courtly manners. In the end, she concluded that the life of a lady must be a lonely one, where one can never be oneself or drop their guard, even in the presence of friends and family.

The Baroness revealed that six of the baron's soldiers, led by Sergeant Garvis, would attend the lady-in-waiting on her journey. Lady Whitheron would ride on horseback while the soldiers marched and guarded the maiden from any dangers along the road. A cart with provisions, driven by one of Baron Flameblade's serfs, would also accompany the band to Newcastle with orders to resupply and then return to Glassrock. The Baroness and Lady Whitheron bid the companions a good night of rest before setting out at dawn the following day.

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The morning was brisk as the sun rose into a cloudless sky and the companions met the lady's retinue in the central court of the keep. Garvis was a stout man with a barrel torso, hairy arms, and a face that seemed perpetually to be covered in stubble despite his best efforts. His dark eyes scrutinized his men, ferreting out complacency and laziness with an ease born of much practice. He and the other soldiers wore the orange and black overlay of House Flameblade while the sergeant bore a black sash with a red triangle sewn onto its face to denote his rank. Garvis was armed with the traditional broad-tipped spear of the soldiering class as well as an iron-banded cudgel that he tucked into his broad leather belt. The other troops bore long knives, spears, and small shields bearing the Flameblade crest upon their faces.

Lady Flameblade introduced the companions to the stern-faced sergeant. Garvis politely bowed his head to Mistress Rowantree, clasped hands with Herald Redthorn, and nodded with an obviously dismissive grunt to Master Poric a'Kieranon. Her Ladyship coolly dismissed the sergeant to complete his preparations and apologized to Piper.

"I'm afraid that the sergeant may bear some ill feelings toward your...ancestors, Master Piper. It does him no service. However, my husband assures me that he is a fine soldier and the best man to lead the protection detail for Lady Whitheron. Please accept my apologies, friend of Glassrock."

Piper smiled and dismissed the Baroness' apology with a wave. "It troubles me not; do not allow it to trouble you. I have traveled in many quarters and grunting is one of the more polite reactions I've had to my heritage." After Lady Flameblade departed, Piper added that the Baron probably seized the opportunity to send the gruff the old soldier to trouble some other court.

After bidding Lady Flameblade farewell, the companions returned to Karli's mule and made ready to depart. Confident that Ginger's burden was secure, the three led the patient beast to rejoin Lady Whitheron's retinue. The lady greeted them with a nod and a cool smile from atop her well-bred steed. Sergeant Garvis gave the order to begin the march and the gates of the keep opened quietly on their oiled hinges. The three travelers from Attis fell in behind the serf, a man called Hoplin, and his cart. Karli looked back upon the keep smiling to herself, willing the memory of it and her stay there to burn itself into her mind.

The travelers made their way out of the mountains and onto the King's Road in silence. The road, built in the ancient Imperial style, was wide and sturdy, braced with wooden rails that supported a bed of cobbles and clay. As all of the vassals of the King were required to maintain the roads, the troupe found it to be smooth and in good repair. The tall trees were alight with fall colors and formed a natural wall along the sides of the road. The soldiers marched quietly to the cadence set by the sergeant, who was quick to correct any lapses in step and in discipline. Lady Whitheron and the serf kept their own council.

The silence of the retinue was infectious, stifling conversation between the three companions. Piper even attempted to strike up a traveling song, a call-and-response that

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Karli and Thorgrin gamely participated in. Lady Whitheron declined to sing but smiled graciously at the proceedings. Garvis gave the minstrel a withering glare and maintained a marching tempo. The party would stop for rest and to take food periodically, though true to form, the sergeant maintained strict control on the pace of travel. At night the soldiers rotated a watch while the lady-in-waiting, Hoplin, Karli, Piper, and Thorgrin slept. At dawn the sergeant would rouse everyone to begin the cycle again.

Travel along the road increased the troupe's pace considerably. Hoplin's cart was less apt to get slowed by rocks or narrow passes and the animals were better able to mind their footing. The way was also easier for the steadily marching soldiers and the three companions who continued to follow the cart on foot as it trundled merrily down the path.

"I've never felt so completely useless in all my life," complained the bard.

Thorgrin nodded ruefully. "It seems the lady is not overly fond of traveling music."

Karli patted Ginger's neck. "I think she's fine with it. It's that sergeant. He certainly seems afraid that some merry tunes would ruin his troops for marching."

Piper shook his head. "It's not the music; it's the singer. I'll not waste my gifts on the likes of him."

Karli laughed. "That's the spirit, Piper. You show him."

Piper turned and stuck his tongue out at the young Healer. "Anyway, it's going to be a long trip. At least we'll hit Dungran's Waymeet in a few days. A warm bed, good food, and perhaps a chance to make some coin."

Thorgrin sighed contentedly. "Ah, and the dark. Don't forget the dark..."

Karli cocked her head quizzically.

"Dungran's is known for the proprietor's dark lager," Thorgrin explained. "He comes from a long line of brewers. People have been known to strike out on the road specifically to have a nice tankard of Dungran's Dark to meet them at the end."

Karli nodded and craned her neck to look down the dusty cobbled path, taking in the sights of the forest around her and imagining the Waymeet her friends described. Waymeets were small compounds that catered to travelers along the roads. They combined the services of hostlers, innkeepers, taverners, seamstresses, and other artisans that may be needed by those that sought trade or adventure away from cities. Mercenaries, minstrels, and other adventurers often frequented Waymeets to establish contacts or to rest from their journeys. Karli had never seen the inside of one and was looking forward to doing so before the trip was done. She could almost smell the ale and hear the music as she stared down the road ahead.

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Three days later, the troupe arrived at Dungran's Waymeet. The compound centered on a large hall with guest rooms situated on the second floor. Across a wide courtyard from the hall were the stables and a small barn. Various work sheds dotted the property, which was surrounded by a wooden palisade. A large gate could be moved into place to protect the occupants should the need arise, as Waymeets were often the targets of outlaws and bandits. Aromatic smoke rose from the kitchens and spurred the party to quicken their pace until they arrived at the courtyard. After the sergeant hailed the keeper, they were met by young Talen, Dungran's son and stableman.

Sergeant Garvis made room arrangements for the soldiers and for Lady Whitheron. Hoplin made ready to stay in the stables. Karli, Thorgrin and Piper were left to make their own arrangements. After a brief discussion the young men decided to share a space for economy's sake while Karli secured her own room. After stowing their gear in the guest rooms, the three met in the common area for a tankard of the Waymeet's famed ale and some hot food.

While Piper had a few words with the keeper regarding the possibility of a discount on lodging in exchange for an evening's entertainment, Karli and Thorgrin were hailed by one of Garvis' soldiers to join them at their table. The soldier, Hronthar, pulled out the seat next to his own for the young Healer while Thorgrin sat himself next to the sergeant. As the bread was being passed about, the minstrel made his way toward the table and pulled out a chair.

"Great news! Mine and Throgrin's room will be on the house tonight in exchange for a few ale songs and the 'Ballad of Cor'. Easy enough..."

The sergeant stood and interrupted him. "What do you think you're doing, dirt-chewer?" The soldiers looked about nervously while Thorgrin shook his head and Karli looked a question toward Garvis.

The bard cocked an eyebrow and stopped pulling out the chair. "Taking a seat, Sergeant?"

"I'll travel with your like for the sake of duty. I'm under no obligation to share a table with you now."

The soldiers looked ahead of them, refusing to make eye contact with either end of the table. Thorgrin started to rise. "Hear now, Sergeant Garvis. There is no need for..."

Piper raised his hands. "No, Thorgrin. The sergeant's right. He's under no obligation to enjoy my company. I certainly have no desire to force it upon him. There are plenty of tables in the room. I find it a pity that someone of his rank knows so little of the customs of hospitality among travelers. Good evening, all." The minstrel bowed with a flourish, turned briskly on his heel, and strode, head high, toward a smaller table.

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Karli rose from her seat. “Excuse me, Hronthar, gentlemen. I wish to share a table with my friend.” The Healer carefully placed her chair closer to the table. After smiling at the soldiery and giving a curt nod and a frown to Garvis, she followed Piper to his table. Thorgrin rose and followed suit, turning back as he left. “Truly bad form, Sergeant Garvis. I know that His Lordship has trained you better than this.” Shaking his head, face red with suppressed outrage, he rejoined his friends as Piper ordered a pitcher of Dungran’s Dark.

Piper broke the awkward silence that followed. “So, anyway, as I was saying, I’ll be taking the stage after this fine repast and our room will be on Master Dungran. Seems my fame has preceded me.” Piper leaned back in his chair with a satisfied grin.

Thorgrin was still frowning. “Look, Piper, I’m sorry about what that Garvis said...”

Piper waved the Herald’s sentiments away. “Bah. Don’t apologize for him...in the first place he’s not at all sorry and in the second place it wasn’t your fault.”

Karli placed her hand on the bard’s arm. “Still, it was hurtful and if we can’t be sorry for him, at least we can be ashamed for him.”

The minstrel patted her hand and smiled. “That’s his job, not yours, Healer. No injuries here. He hurt me about as much as a child with a butter knife could do in an alley brawl.” His voice took on an overly dramatic tone. “I’ve been to the greatest courts of the realm...save one. That cur,” he pointed to the soldier’s table where the sergeant was digging into his meal, “is a rank amateur.” Piper chuckled as Dungran’s daughter, Inaid, brought them a pitcher and three wooden tankards.

Karli and Thorgrin grinned at each other as Piper poured them a draught and continued. “In all earnestness, my friends, it is nothing. I am a bard. If I am not insulted for my heritage I am insulted for my shiftless, vagabond profession. His ire is not deserved but it is his burden to bear, not mine. Perhaps he served in the north and some friend of his met a bad end at the blade of one of my kinsmen. Maybe his wife jilted him for some red-headed slugabout.” He shrugged. “I neither know nor care. And if his boots some morning reek of cat’s piss or polecat musk, I know nothing about it.” He raised his mug. “To friends!”

The Healer and the Herald raised their tankards, laughing. “To friends!”

Piper’s performance that night was the finest Karli had seen. She thought that perhaps travel invigorated him, infused him with the restlessness of the road and energized his voice. Perhaps it was simply that he was in his element and he was with friends. She and Thorgrin laughed and clapped at his bawdy ale songs, singing along to those that were familiar—Karli blushed at Thorgrin’s surprise that she knew so many. The minstrel’s rendition of the Ballad of Cor struck Karli with awe at her friend’s ability to tell a tale. She could hear the clang of metal and smell the blood in the air as he sang of the battles the ancient hero fought against the Tumari barbarians and their demonic Druids, as well

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as against his own treacherous kinsman, to forge the duchy of Corlund to the far east. She shared the hero's sorrow at losing his lady, the Duchess Amalrya, to raiders from Vänenmaar. Her heart sang with triumph as the Duke ascended to Mount Valaar and stood before Gaal himself to be accepted into the Halls of Judgment. When Piper finished the ballad, the entire common room, with one exception, erupted into clapping and cheers. Sergeant Garvis stared at the floor and made his way upstairs to his room.

Amidst much back-slapping and congratulations, Piper made his way to his companions' table. Many of the patrons tossed him bronze triads, iron commons, and even a few silver talons in appreciation. Karli, impulsive with the spirit of the moment and the spirits in her cup, kissed his cheek as Thorgrin shook his hand. She grinned sheepishly as he smiled in surprise. The bard turned to see Lady Whitheron standing at his elbow, smiling at him. Two of Garvis' men escorted her.

“Your performance was magnificent tonight, Master a’Kieranon.”

Piper bowed low to the lady. She paused and offered him her hand. He nodded in acknowledgment of the respect such an act bestowed as she allowed him to kiss the top of her hand. Smiling she turned and lead her escort upstairs.

Thorgrin ordered another round of the dark. It did not take long for the festive air of the common room to subside as travelers took to their beds. Piper, buoyed by the reception of his performance, knew that he would not be able to sleep. Thorgrin and the bard entertained each other with tales of their respective travels as Karli absorbed the stories in satisfied silence. Soon she started to doze, the warmth of the room and the heavy ale working their spell upon her. Smiling, the two men helped their friend to her room and bid her goodnight.

Karli found the next few days of travel to be a curious mix of adventure and frustration. After the night at the Waymeet she felt closer than ever to her companions from Attis. Piper commented that such was the way of the road; people often forged bonds over the course of a journey that would change their lives. He joked that they had made a sacred ale-bond that no man could put asunder. However, the events at the alehouse seemed to darken Garvis' mood even further. If he spoke at all it was only to bark at the soldiers or to gruffly acknowledge the Lady Whitheron's presence. He made no effort to hide the glares he sent to Piper; further, the sergeant clearly included the bard's companions in his glowering.

Fortunately they traveled in good weather. The early autumn breezes were cool, but lacked the bite of winter. The clear and sunny skies of the day made way for chilly, yet bearable, nights. It did not take long for the troupe to settle into their previous rhythm. The journey was silent as before, broken only once when the lady asked the minstrel to entertain them as they marched. After a withering glance from the sergeant, Piper took up an old military march, matching the cadence the sergeant had set. As he was singing in the original Tumari, only Thorgrin seemed to notice that the bard had changed the lyrics to put sergeants in a bad light.

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The sergeant called a halt near sundown and directed the troupe into a clearing one of the soldiers had scouted about a hundred yards from the side of the road. As usual Karli saw to Ginger's needs, making sure the sturdy mule was brushed down and fed, while Thorgrin and Piper set up their small site on the periphery of the circle of soldiers camped around Lady Whitheron's tent. The three exchanged a chuckle as they listened to one of the soldiers humming Piper's march to himself as he set up the lady's tent. The young trooper caught them staring and smiled at them, nodding toward the glowering sergeant who was reviewing the duty roster with another of the men.

The next morning was brisk and slightly foggy. Karli figured that they would probably have rain tonight or by the next morning. Sighing, she began to gather her bedroll and other gear, contenting herself that at least they'd had good weather up until now. As she finished, Thorgrin offered her a honeyed biscuit to break her fast. Thanking him, she looked about the breaking camp.

"Where's Piper?"

Frowning, Thorgrin looked about the site. "I don't know. I haven't seen him this morning. Look, his bedroll is unmade. Perhaps he went to go make water." The Herald secured his dagger to his belt and started walking toward the woods. "I'll see if I can find him."

Thorgrin returned as Karli finished securing her and her companions' gear to the mule. He placed his hand gently upon her shoulder and shook his head. The sergeant called the soldiers to fall in for the march.

"Hold a moment, Sergeant!" Karli walked toward the gathered troops that surround Lady Whitheron and her steed. "Piper is missing!"

Garvis shrugged. "One of my men said he left the campsite during his watch."

Thorgrin narrowed his eyes at the sergeant. "And which watch was that?"

Garvis' lips pursed. "Third watch, Herald. About two hours before dawn."

Karli gasped. Thorgrin stepped forward, his face red. "Then he's been missing for over three hours and no one thought to see about that?"

Again the shrug. "The wanderings of a vagabond dirt-biter are no concern of mine."

Karli recovered her composure and stepped forward. "Sergeant. We cannot leave without Piper."

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. "We can and we will. My duty is to protect the Lady Whitheron, not to babysit a shiftless Tumari and his uppity friends. If you wish to travel

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with us and enjoy our protection, you will rise with us, stop with us, and follow us. I will not spare men to seek the wilds on a fool's errand."

Karli turned and looked up at Lady Whitheron who witnessed the proceedings from atop her horse. "My lady. Please. Let Thorgrin and I look for Piper. Sergeant Garvis need not spare his men from your protection and we can be sure our friend, *your* friend, is not in harm's way. All I ask for is time."

The lady frowned in thought for a moment and then leveled her gaze at the sergeant. "Sergeant Garvis. Please do me the service of postponing our departure until noon."

Garvis faced the lady. "M'lady, the minstrel is not our concern. My lord the baron..."

Lady Whitheron raised her delicate hand. "Your lord the baron has deemed the minstrel and his companions as friends of his court. You perform your duties to me well, Sergeant Garvis and you can be sure that Her Grace will hear of it. However, I fear that allowing the baron's friend to come to harm would besmirch your reputation irreparably."

The sergeant turned to stare, red-faced, at Karli and Thorgrin. "As you wish, m'lady."

Karli bowed. "Thank you m'lady."

Lady Whitheron waved the Herald and the Healer away. "Do not thank me. Find our friend."