

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

Karli and Thorgrin left their traveling gear with Ginger in the camp. Lady Verona promised that the troupe would not leave until they returned. Garvis responded that he would give them one day; otherwise he would assume they were not returning. Lady Whitheron smiled indulgently at the old soldier and motioned for the two friends to hurry.

Karli secured her small knife to her belt. She also checked her belt pouch and felt for the small earthen jar that held the remains of the salve she had received, at such a high cost, from the Fair One. In another pouch she packed cleaning ointments, bandages, and other implements of her trade. Thorgrin leaned on his walking staff and frowned at her.

“Do we know where to start?”

Karli shrugged. “We have a direction. The guard that spotted Piper last night gave us that. Do you read tracks?”

Thorgrin shook his head. “Not really. Most of the time, unless we’re offending the Fair Folk, we Heralds stick to the roads.” He smiled ruefully.

Karli tested the pull of the small curved blade from the blue leather sheath. Satisfied, she turned toward the direction that the guard had indicated. “Then we walk and we watch.”

The woods were thick and pungent; the sharp scent of evergreen trees filled their nostrils as they ducked and turned away from their prickly branches. The deciduous trees bore leaves that glowed like autumn flames of red, gold, orange, and yellow. When they encountered a narrow stream, Thorgrin knelt beside it and murmured to the water, his words unheard by Karli. When he rose he winked at her. “Just in case anyone is watching me.” Then he pointed at the muddy bank of the spring. “Besides, I found something.” Karli could see the indentation of a shallow boot heel in the soft earth.

“Piper?” she asked.

Thorgrin shrugged. “Perhaps. Let’s move on.”

As the two trudged further, the woods parted, revealing a small clearing. From here they could see a nearby hill on which a ruined stone tower perched; the tall trees stabbed up at it from the forest below. A pit, its small opening appearing as a thin shadow on the otherwise green landscape, opened near the center of the clearing. Thorgrin led the way and motioned for Karli to follow.

Pebbles trickled into the hole as Thorgrin approached the edge and peered down. The opening was roughly the width of a man’s shoulders. “I see some stone below. Looks like a collapsed tunnel of some sort.”

Karli approached the pit from the opposite side but did not stand at the edge. “Maybe he fell in?”

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

“Could be. We should watch our step as well.” Thorgrin gazed up at the tower in the distance. “Some towers and castles have tunnel systems below them for storage, or to hold prisoners, or even for escape should a lord’s vassals become more ambitious than he originally thought.” Cupping his mouth he called down into the pit, “Piper! Piper, are you down there? Are you hurt?” The only response was a dull echo.

The Herald then gripped his staff by one end and lowered the other into the hole. As he lowered it, he crouched low, eventually laying on the ground at the pit’s edge (dispersing more pebbles in the process) and lowering his arm into the darkness. Once the tip hit the bottom, Thorgrin rose and dusted himself off.

“It’s not terribly deep. I may be able to lower myself down and then help you in.”

Karli frowned. “Shouldn’t we get help? We’re not really that far from the camp.”

Thorgrin shook his head. “I don’t think that sergeant is going to give us any assistance and Lady Whitheron will only push him so far. I think we’re on our own. Besides, we should at least find out if this is where he went before we blundering further into the woods.”

Karli nodded in agreement and moved closer to the edge of the pit. Thorgrin turned around and lowered himself down, gripping the edge. Gravel and dirt rained into the darkness and struck the stone floor. He stretched down as far as he could and hung by his fingers on the edge. Karli jumped as a chunk of packed earth broke free from under Thorgrin’s hand and he fell to the floor of the tunnel.

Karli called down into the dark. “Thorgrin? Are you injured?”

“No, I’m fine. But these trousers will probably need a new seat before we get to Newcastle. Lower yourself along the edge like I did, but be careful; the edge is apparently not as strong as I thought. I’ll be here to catch you.”

The young Healer followed the Herald’s lead, lowering herself into the darkness. Soon she felt strong arms grip her about her waist and set her down on stone floor of the collapsed tunnel. She felt a flush rise to her cheeks and thanked Gaal that her blush was hidden by the gloom of the pit.

As Karli readjusted her gear, Thorgrin chuckled softly. “Maybe we should have gone back and asked for a torch, or at least a candle. I have tinder and flint but nothing to light.” His eyes widened in the amber glow that emanated from the blade of Karli’s newly-drawn blade.

“I have this. It was a gift from Piper many years ago. It glows with the light of the moons.”

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

The Herald smiled nervously in the sorcerous light and made the Wyrmsign against evil. "Very well then." The knife's glow, with the Burning Brothers only just beginning their monthly journey, shone like a small candle. Karli led the way as they moved slowly about the chamber and began to assess their surroundings. Thorgrin gripped his staff and stayed close to the Healer and the light.

The chamber was about ten feet wide in the center and narrowed at either end to about half that width. Worked stone, damp and covered with patches of moss, encased the tunnel. Cracks webbed across the ancient mortar and rubble from the broken roof littered the floor. As they examined the fallen stones, Karli spied some rust-colored spots in the debris. Karli sighed and said a prayer of thanks. "If this is Piper's blood, he hasn't lost a great deal of it."

As Karli waved her glowing blade about the chamber, Thorgrin caught the glint of metal from across the room. The two approached cautiously until they stopped before the source; Piper's longsword. The runes along its tapered blade shimmered with a faint green glow.

"What does that mean?" Thorgrin asked.

Karli pursed her lips. "It means that Piper didn't walk out of this room on his own, or he wouldn't have left the sword. The runes mean that goblins are in the area."

The Herald shook his head. "Runic swords and moonblades. What have I gotten myself into?"

Karli squeezed his shoulder. "The question right now is what has *Piper* gotten himself into."

Karli reached down and picked up *Goblinsbane* from the floor. "Can you use a sword?"

Thorgrin shook his head. "Not really. I know where the pointed end should go and that's about it."

Karli smiled. "Me too."

Thorgrin smacked the side of his staff. "This I can use. Why don't you carry the sword?" Karli nodded in agreement as the Herald looked up at the hole in the ceiling. "We should get help."

Karli shook her head. "There may not be time. Who knows what those...those creatures...are doing to him right now? The stories he told me...they're capable of anything. We have to find him." She turned to each of the tapered ends of the chamber. "I reckon our choice is simple: left or right?"

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

Thorgrin shrugged and pointed. “Left.” Karli turned and led the way, *Goblinsbane* in one hand and the moonblade in the other.

The tunnel began to slope steadily downward as they traveled. Water dripped and oozed from the walls and ceiling, filling the chamber with the smell of damp earth. Both companions were silent, lost in thought over the fate of their fallen friend; a fate that they could very well share before too long. Between their anxiety and their slow, cautious pace, it seemed an eternity before the tunnel finally opened up to form a cross-chamber. Now the companions were presented with the choice of three additional tunnels to follow into darkness.

Thorgrin moaned in despair. “Where to now?”

“Only one way to know...”

Karli approached each of the tunnel entrances with her shimmering knife outstretched, peering into the darkness in hopes of a clue. The first two tunnels revealed nothing more than what they had already seen; stone-covered, damp passageways. As she moved into the third tunnel, Thorgrin gasped in surprise. Karli turned and saw him pointing to the blade of the sword. The runes no longer faintly shimmered but burned with a clear green light. She turned back toward the passageway and saw a face emerge from the gloom. The dim light of the runes and the enchanted knife glinted dully off a set of small red eyes. Thick black lips curled into a vicious snarl around a set of jagged ivory tusks.

Karli squeaked as she jumped back into the cross-chamber. A squat, green-skinned creature bounded from the tunnel with a shriek, a club raised in its small clawed hand. Thorgrin stepped forward and swung his staff toward the creature’s broad, bony head. Despite its squat frame, the goblin nimbly dodged the staff and turned his attention toward its wielder.

As it swung its club towards Thorgrin, the goblin hissed and barked in a strange guttural tongue that neither companion could understand. Thorgrin used the advantage of his height, nearly twice that of the goblin, and the reach of his weapon to avoid the blow. The Herald then attempted to jab at the beast with the end of the staff, but the goblin swatted the weapon away with its club, jarring it from Thorgrin’s grasp. Taking advantage of the young man’s slow recovery, the creature closed with Thorgrin and struck him savagely in the abdomen with the heavy club. Thorgrin’s breath burst from his lungs as he fell to one knee. Howling in murderous glee, the goblin raised the club high to strike the breathless Herald over the head.

Karli recovered from the shock of the hideous creature’s attack and rushed toward the triumphant goblin, sword raised high. Yelling in fear and in anger, she struck the creature’s shoulder with the runic sword. Delivered clumsily with her lesser hand, the blow was weak and barely broke the creature’s skin. Nevertheless, its triumphant howl became a hiss of pain and outrage as it turned to the Healer and bared its pointed, black-gummed teeth. Smoke and slimy black blood dribbled from the wound where the sword

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

had bit the creature's flesh. Karli jumped back and held the sword and knife before her in what she hoped was a threatening manner. It barked again and, leaping forward with a whip-like bend of its long arm, backhanded her across her jaw. Her head rocked back from the blow and she felt claws rake across the wrist of the hand that held the moonblade. The pain opened her fingers and she dropped the knife. Light flickered across all of the walls as it spun on the floor of the chamber. She heard flapping footsteps echoing away from the room and into one of the crossing tunnels. Between the flickering of the light and the pounding of blood in her ears, she could not tell down which tunnel the goblin had chosen to make its escape.

Once Karli caught her breath, she crawled across the floor and recovered her knife. She then made her way to Thorgrin, who was using his staff to rise. He was coughing; which meant that he was able to breathe. She checked his eyes and touched his stomach and decided that he was probably not bleeding inside. She flexed the fingers of her injured hand and was relieved to find that they, too, functioned properly. She drew a small jar of cleansing ointment and dressed the scratches with a bit of bandage.

“Did you see where he went?” Karli asked the Herald once his coughing had abated.

Thorgrin shook his head. “No. I was a bit...occupied...when he made his exit.”

“Do you think we scared him?”

Again, he shook his head. “I think it more likely that he's reporting to his friends. Goblins seldom travel alone.”

Sighing, Karli looked around the chamber. “Well, there's nothing to do but to keep going and be wary of any other visitors. Perhaps we should just continue in the same direction before veering off and getting ourselves lost.” Thorgrin agreed and fell in behind the Healer as she led the way once again down the corridor.

The tunnel began to curve periodically as it continued its downward slope. As it curved, they could occasionally hear the faint sound of running water behind the crumbling stone wall. They had encountered no further crossways before Karli called halt.

“What are these?” She knelt low and brought her glowing blade close to the floor, revealing three holes bored into the stone. Each was about an inch in diameter. Thorgrin knelt and examined the holes.

“I have no idea,” he said.

“Perhaps it's a trigger of some sort? For a hidden door?” Karli thought back to tales she heard as a girl about a miserly lords hiding away their treasures, treasures often gained on the backs of honest folk. Thorgrin smiled.

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

“Perhaps. If there were more I’d say they were made for a portcullis. But with only three, it would have to be an awfully thin portcullis.” The Herald leaned heavily on his staff.

Karli looked at the staff and then at the holes. “You know, those holes are almost the exact width as your staff.”

Thorgrin arched his eyebrows and puffed out a bit of air as he compared the two. “You’re right.” He lifted his staff and let the blunt round end hover over one of the holes. “In for a bit, in for a Common?” Karli nodded. Thorgrin placed his staff inside the hole. The staff sank about three inches before it met the bottom. A grinding sound lightly vibrated the stone tiles in the floor before ending in a metallic click.

“What was that?” asked Karli, her eyes wide.

Thorgrin shrugged and shook his head. He gingerly retrieved his staff. “You may have been right about that trigger. We just don’t know what it opened or if we chose the right hole.”

Karli frowned. “Let’s not choose another until we find out what that one did.”

“Good plan.”

Karli continued to make her way down the corridor as Thorgrin followed. The tunnel began to slope upward slightly and Karli saw that the corridor was about to widen into a cavern. Thorgrin placed a hand upon her shoulder.

“Be careful. We don’t know what we did back there and it could have affected this entryway.”

Nodding, Karli raised her dimly lit blade and examined the area where the worked stone of the tunnel met the cavern wall of the new chamber. As she brought the knife up toward the top of the aperture, moonlight glinted off the head of a steel pin that was lodged into the support beam of an arch that separated the tunnel from the cavern. Upon further examination, she noted a thin, taut, wire connecting the pin to the ceiling of the arch. Gulping, she pointed out her find to Thorgrin.

The Herald nodded. “Trap. I think that Gaal was with us and we chose the proper hole. If we hadn’t, my bet would be that this arch would have collapsed, closing off this end of the tunnel.”

Karli’s eyes widened. “Or maybe it’s still armed and will fall after we enter, trapping us inside until we rot.”

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

Thorgrin smiled. “A grim scenario, but still a possibility. However, I’m ever an optimist. I say we press on. If this area is trapped then it should be of interest and is perhaps where Piper was taken.”

“You don’t think the goblins made that trap?”

The Herald shook his head. “No, they’re generally scavengers, not builders. Whoever made these tunnels and that tower probably fashioned the trap. And whoever that was is long gone, so the goblins probably just use it to their advantage. That’s much more their style.”

“I still don’t trust it.”

Thorgrin turned and looked behind them, back down the corridor from which they had come. Karli turned and looked as well. As she peered into the darkness, the Herald deftly sidestepped behind the Healer and into the next chamber.

“So far, so good,” he called from the gloom.

Karli turned back and shined her blade into the room, revealing Thorgrin’s smirk and the intact archway. “Why did you do that?”

“We need to keep moving and you’re crazy if you think I’d let you take that risk.”

“We could have gone in together.”

“And then we’d both be trapped, or not, as the case may be.”

Karli, her eyes blazing, stepped into the room and punched her friend in the arm. He winced and started rubbing the bruised limb; she had held back the full force of her punch—but only a little.

Now that they were inside they explored the chamber. This room’s walls were the damp grey rock of a natural cavern, devoid of the worked stone of the tunnels. Poorly tanned hides littered the floor, filling the space with their rotten stench. Broken crockery crunched under foot, mixing with the debris of fallen stone from the ceiling. Discarded meat bones and rusted bits of metal--mostly latches and buckles from abandoned gear--were cast about the room. Karli even thought she saw teeth, small and pointed, amongst the detritus. Iron, bronze, and copper coins, from various mints of the realm, glittered in the sorcerous moonlight. Dented iron cooking pots and other looted household implements lay strewn about the floor. Thorgrin found a portrait, its canvas slashed with claw marks, depicting an elderly man with green eyes. The man wore a signet bearing the stylized mark of an elaborately rooted oak tree. As Karli poked through the mess with the tip of Piper’s sword, she found a scrap of parchment. It had rusty stains along three of the edges. One side of the page was a drawing of what looked like a series of islands. A symbol, like an arrow, sat in one corner and was surrounded with a strange

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

script. The back of the page bore lines of text written in that same strange script. She showed it to Thorgrin, who did not recognize the letters. She tucked the map into her pouch to look at later.

Thorgrin began gathering some of the coins. Karli shot him a questioning glance. He smiled tightly. "We may need them in the course of the journey and they are doing no one any good in this cave." Sighing, her conscience only slightly mollified by Thorgrin's pragmatism, she nodded and returned to her searching. She moved one of the smelly hides aside and saw a broken wooden flute.

Karli picked up the broken instrument and showed it to Thorgrin. "It's Piper's."

Spurred to action, the two companions frantically searched the area for more of Piper's belongings. Amongst the debris they found his belt pouches, his torn cloak, and his boots. Thorgrin moved one of the ghastly hides aside and called to Karli.

"Look, it's a crawlspace." Turning the partially rotted skin aside he revealed a narrow tunnel, about a shoulder-span wide and sloping downward.

Karli looked at Thorgrin. "Do you think they could have dragged him through there?"

Thorgrin shrugged. "It's possible. We can either check it out or go follow one of those other tunnels to who knows where. Now we know that those things had him at one point."

The two companions gathered Piper's belongings and wrapped them in the remains of his cloak. Thorgrin attached the bundle to his belt. Both then turned and looked down into the crawlspace.

Karli took a deep breath. "Alright then. Off we go."

Holding both her glowing knife and the runic sword before her, she crawled on her belly into the narrow tunnel. Her shoulders scraped against the edges of the low corridor, giving her traction to wriggle across the stony floor. As she progressed, she heard Thorgrin crawl in behind her. The tunnel's roof occasionally dropped, causing both companions to scrape the tops of their heads on the rough stone. She paused once as the light from her enchanted knife revealed a thin smear of blood across the wall of the tunnel. Just as the oppressive closeness of the space became unbearable, the crawlspace opened into a taller and wider tunnel that continued in the same direction. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Karli rose and helped Thorgrin as he emerged from the crawlspace.

"Let's not do that again," said Thorgrin as he stretched his arms and popped his neck.

"I saw a mark on the wall. Blood. I think we're on the right track."

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

Thorgrin nodded and the two continued down the corridor with Karli leading the way. This tunnel, either unknown or unimportant to the stonecutters who worked on the previous passages, was pure cavern rock. Small stalactites hung from the ceiling like tiny teeth. Water dripped from the ceiling and oozed from the walls, making the uneven floor damp and slick.

The tunnel began to narrow until both companions could scrape their shoulders against the encroaching walls; Thorgrin had to duck his head to keep from cutting it on the protruding stone spikes. It ended at a narrow point covered by a crudely erected furry hide. As the companions approached the hide curtain, both noted that the runes along *Goblinsbane*'s blade shone with a steady green glow.

Karli gulped and nodded to Thorgrin and to the curtain. Thorgrin sighed and nodded in return. When they reached the end of the tunnel, Karli gripped the edge of the hide with her knife hand to pull it back, looking over her shoulder to Thorgrin. He nodded and gripped his staff tight, shifting it forward to jab out with the end into the narrow space. Just as Karli pulled the corner of the curtain back, a guttural bellow, followed by words in that strange barking tongue the goblin had used, echoed from the next chamber. Karli quickly dropped the hide.

Eyes and mouths opened wide, the two companions remained silent as the bellowing was followed by another voice, high-pitched and obviously pleading in the goblin tongue. The first voice bellowed again, not placated. The whining voice lilted with a question which was answered with a laughing response from the bellowing.

Thorgrin held up two fingers and nodded a question at Karli. She nodded and pointed at herself and the Herald and then motioned back down the corridor. Thorgrin nodded and led the way, stopping about a hundred feet from the new chamber.

“What now?” Karli whispered.

Thorgrin pursed his lips. “There are at least two of them in there. The one that we met before is the whiner.”

Karli smiled at him, impressed. He shrugged. “Heraldic training. We often must remember every detail of an encounter for our reports—including whose voice belongs to whom. At any rate, I don't think we can handle them.”

“But Piper may be in there!”

Thorgrin placed a hand on Karli's shoulder. “We're no good to him dead. Maybe we should go get the soldiers. Surely they'd help us if they knew what was going on.”

Karli shook her head. “Even if they could be persuaded to help, it would be too late. It may *already* be too late. Piper used to hunt these things. What if they recognized this sword?”

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

Thorgrin looked down at the blade, its glowing runes more subdued, but still shining in the gloom. “It is memorable, to be sure. At any rate, with the whiner reporting its encounter with us and that blade, they’ll be alerted.”

“We were able to scare the other one off with the blade. Perhaps it will give us an edge.”

Thorgrin smiled at her inadvertent pun. “Perhaps. It’s still dangerous. They’ll be no sneaking about in there...our light will give us away. Goblins are creatures of the dark.”

“Maybe we can use that to our advantage. Go in with the moonblade sheathed and then use it to blind them?”

Thorgrin looked dubious. “I don’t know...”

Karli gripped Thorgrin’s arm. “Look, I know it isn’t the wisest thing to do, or the safest. But I know that if our roles were reversed, Piper would do the same for us. We’re all he has right now, the only chance he’s got.”

Thorgrin shook his head. “I don’t like this so-called plan. But I’ll be damned if I let you go in there by yourself and I certainly can’t drag you back to the others...”

Karli’s eyes narrowed. Thorgrin raised his hands to ward her off. “Not that I would dream of trying!” He chuckled and motioned toward the hide curtain. They could hear occasional barks of conversation from beyond it. “Shall we?”

Karli smiled. “Thanks, Thorgrin.” He smiled in return and motioned forward again.

As they approached the opening once again, the companions listened to Bellow (as Karli had termed him) angrily explain something to Whiner, punctuating his remarks with strange wheezing barks. Karli sheathed the moonblade, causing the darkness of the tunnel to gather around them like a cold damp cloak. The runes along *Goblinsbane*’s blade continued to burn with their eldritch green glow. Karli held the sword in her left hand as she gripped the edge of the curtain once again and pulled it back.

Karli had taken only one step forward when the bellowing stopped, followed by barked orders echoing in what was apparently a much larger chamber than the ones she and Thorgrin had encountered before. Karli froze in fear as she realized that they had been seen by the foul creatures and that they would soon be coming to kill them...or worse.

“Move forward, Karli, so I can help!” Thorgrin nudged Karli with his staff and broke the spell of her fear. She stepped forward just as the glowing runes revealed the tusked jaw line of a goblin closing in on her with a broken sword. Shrieking, she lunged forward with the blade, driving the attacker back and making room for Thorgrin to enter the chamber.

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

Karli heard the sound of Thorgrin's staff thudding into something hard and his grunt of pain as something struck him. The jagged edge of a broken sword redirected her attention as it grazed her forehead. The cut burned and blood began to drip down her face along her nose and over her lip.

As she faced her attacker, she could see some of its features in the eldritch glow of the runic blade. Like the goblin they had encountered before, it had jagged tusks protruding from its wide lower lip. Unlike Whiner, however, Bellower had small twisted horns growing from the sides of its head, protruding through tufts of wiry black hair over its wide flapping ears. Its skin glistened with reptilian scales that shone mottled green and black in the witchlight. Its squat body had wide, muscular shoulders on which sat a broad, nearly flat head; its short neck was hidden beneath its enormous lower jaw.

Bellower swung the jagged sword again and Karli managed to avoid its sting. She jabbed forward with *Goblinsbane*, as if she was stabbing with a knife. Bellower roared and turned away easily from the clumsy blow and struck her hand with the pommel of his sword. Gasping in pain, she dropped the enchanted weapon as the burly goblin quickly backhanded her, knocking her to the ground. She heard Thorgrin scream in rage and heard the swooshing sound of his staff swinging with force. His battle-cry ended with a grunt and she heard the sound of Thorgrin's head thudding against the stone floor of the cavern.

A large clawed foot, still visible in the glowing runes of the dropped sword, stomped down toward Karli's head. She rolled her face out of the way as the goblin's foot struck the floor beside her. Panicked, she gripped the handle of the moonblade and drew it from the sheath on her belt. A thimbleful of moonlight lit the scene. Whiner stood over Thorgrin's unconscious form, hissing at Karli's light. Above her stood Bellower, his muscular body even wider than she had seen in the glow of the runes. His red eyes squinted in the new light. With a derisive grunt he stomped on Karli's hand and held it to the floor beneath his foot. Karli screamed in pain as she dropped the knife and felt the bones in her hand grind against each other and snap. Bellower reached down, took the moonblade from the floor, and threw it hard behind him. The light faded as it fell with the clatter of steel upon stone, hidden somewhere far beyond Karli's reach.

Karli looked up at the brutish creature who continued to crush her hand with its foot; it grinned at her with pointed teeth that looked black in the sorcerous glow of the nearby rune sword. Her heart beat fast and in her mind she recalled the tales that Piper told of the inherent cruelty of goblins. Sobbing in pain and despair, she prayed for a quick death.

Through her tears she saw the orange and yellow glow of torchlight fill the rear of the room behind and above her captor. Her sobbing stopped, which did not escape the notice

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

of Bellow, who turned around to see what had gotten its prisoner's attention. The cavern echoed with a man's voice, high and taunting, that emanated from an outcropping above the main chamber.

“Ha-ha!”