

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

The man dropped easily to the floor of the cavern from the outcropping, landing in a low crouch. He set the torch down and, rising, drew a large hand-and-a-half sword from his back, its dull iron blade glinting in the torchlight.

Bellower rushed the stranger as he drew his weapon, the draw quickly shifting to a wicked slash of the long blade. Bellower dodged the swordsman's attack and backed up a step, realizing that this opponent was not easy prey. Whiner leapt to its companion's side and raised its club, hatred burning in its gaze. The stranger, both hands gripping the sword's long handle, grinned wickedly at the goblins as the tip of his blade wove a pattern before him.

"Goblins, huh. Faerie-spawn. Good thing I brought cold iron." The stranger turned his head, keeping his eyes on his foes, and spat on the ground. His voice was not deep, but it was rough and grim. In the torchlight, Karli could see he was a huge man, broad of chest, thick-limbed, and standing well over six feet. He was clad in a patchwork of leather and mail. A short sword hung from a sheath at his side. Hardened features marred an otherwise youthful face. His hair was cut short, like a soldier's, though he wore no overlay or insignia. Karli concluded he was probably a mercenary of some sort. She concentrated on the stranger instead of the pain of her crushed hand; she was afraid she might pass out if she thought about the probable broken bones and would be no good to Thorgrin should the stranger fall to the goblins. She also wasn't completely confident that the stranger wouldn't do her and the Herald harm after he prevailed against the beasts.

Whiner sidestepped, moving to get behind the swordsman, careful to stay just out of reach of the long iron blade. Bellower also began circling the stranger, forcing him to move and adjust to keep both goblins in sight. The goblin leader leered as he waved his own jagged-edged weapon menacingly. Both goblins squinted in the torchlight, their red eyes barely visible from between slitted lids.

With a bark of laughter, the stranger lunged at Bellower. The goblin was quick, but was hampered by the bright light of the torch. It twisted to avoid the sword's point, but the stranger expertly shifted the weapon and slashed the beast across its shoulder with the edge of the blade. Bellower howled as the sharp iron sliced neatly through its scales, causing black blood to flow thickly down its arm. The horned goblin jumped back with a cat-like hiss.

Whiner had not sat idle while during the exchange. As the stranger engaged Bellower, the beast raised its club high and shrieked as it swung two-handed at the stranger's torso. The stranger spun with an agility belied by his size, avoiding the clumsy, but powerful, blow and struck Whiner with the follow-through of his initial attack. The blade bit deep into the smaller goblin's abdomen. Black blood spurted as the swordsman pulled his massive weapon free from the goblin's flesh. Whiner fell with a heavy thud to the cavern floor, a puddle of ichor spreading around its prone form.

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Beller lunged at the stranger as its companion fell. The point of its broken sword turned as it met a patch of mail covering the stranger's ribs. The man's sword never stopped moving. As the goblin's blade was deflected by his piecemeal armor, the swordsman swung the massive sword low, chopping at the goblin's legs. Beller managed to leap away from the low attack, but miscalculated as the swordsman deftly reversed direction in mid-swing and sliced it across its gut. Beller gasped and staggered back as black blood and sickly green viscera oozed slowly from the gaping wound. The stranger grinned viciously and cried "Ha-ha!" as he swung his great iron blade once more and severed Beller's head from its shoulders. It landed at Karli's feet with a wet thud.

With two quick strides, the swordsman stood over Whiner's body and removed its head as well. He cleaned his blade on the goblin's corpse and resheathed it on his back. Then he patted down their bodies, liberating a pair of tattered pouches. These he placed on his belt. He retrieved his torch from the floor and held it aloft, taking a look around the cavern. He seemed content to ignore the girl and the unconscious man now that the threat was eliminated. "The crone was right when she told me to bring iron," he murmured to himself as he took in his surroundings. As he spoke, he absently reached into one of his belt pouches and then threw salt over his left shoulder.

Karli looked about the room as well. The floor, much like the other areas that the goblins occupied, was littered with trash and debris. Hides covered a rock formation that vaguely resembled a throne. She saw no sign of Piper anywhere.

The Healer slowly raised herself from the ground, using her good hand to prop herself up as she got her shaking legs beneath her. She turned and saw Thorgrin lying prone, a small wound bleeding from the side of his head. Wincing in sympathy, she made her way to the Herald and examined him. He was alive but unconscious; he would probably recover but with a great deal of bruises. She sighed as she tried to dig the cleaning salve from her kit with one hand, willfully ignoring the throbbing pain of her injury until she could tend to her friend.

The stranger turned to the struggling Healer and asked, "So where's the treasure?"

Karli glanced over at the huge warrior and cocked her head. "Treasure?"

"Yeah, treasure. The old woman said I'd find what I was looking for here. I'm looking for treasure but all I've found were goblins. Poor ones at that."

Karli turned back to the injured Herald. "We've found no treasure here, other than a few scraps and some coins. In fact, we haven't found what we're looking for, either." She didn't want to say too much of what they had found in case the stranger proved willing to take it by force. She held a simple poultice to Thorgrin's wound and turned back to the warrior. "Could you help me, please? I seem to have injured my hand."

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The swordsman shrugged and knelt beside the Healer. Karli motioned with her head to a strip of cloth she had laid on the ground. "Use that to bind this to the side of his head. It will keep his wound from festering until he wakes." The stranger followed her instructions.

"Who're you?" he asked as he worked. Suddenly his eyes brightened a bit. "You wouldn't be a princess or some such would you? Maybe its glory I'm supposed to find here. Or a big reward!"

Karli shook her head sadly. "No, I'm merely a simple Healer from the mountains." She nodded as the stranger tightened the binding and finished it off with a knot. "This man, though, is a Herald in service to the Duke of Southlund."

The man grunted, dissatisfied. "Not much glory in saving Heralds, especially ones who don't have the sense to stand up during a fight." He sighed. "Just goes to show you can't trust magic." He turned his head and spat, holding his fingers in a ring around his eye as he did it. "But those traveling women usually know what they're talking about. There's got to be something around here." He sat down, resting his hands on his knees. "Is he going to be alright?"

Karli nodded. "Yes, he's been through much worse."

He motioned toward her limp hand. "What about you?"

Karli looked down at the crushed mess at the end of her wrist. It looked like a sack full of wet sticks that throbbed in time to her heart. There was nothing she could do for it; she may never be able to use it again. Nevertheless, she turned away from the stranger and said, "I'll be fine." She reached down and tried to tear a portion of her skirt away; it was already dirty and torn. She called over her shoulder at the stranger. "Could you help me with this, please?"

The swordsman ambled over and tore the portion away and tied it as she settled her forearm into the makeshift sling. "I'm Karli. Karli Rowantree of Attis."

"I'm Lars. Lars...of the Road." As he said his epitaph, he gazed into the distance as if he could see his namesake stretching out before him.

Karli smiled. "Well, I thank you, Lars of the Road, for saving our lives."

The warrior beamed, the wide smile temporarily dispelling his gruff demeanor. Karli started digging in her pouch for a salve she could use to dull the pain of her hand. She pulled it out and waved it at Lars, who shrugged and held the small earthenware pot as Karli applied its pungent contents to her injured hand. Tears squeezed quietly from her eyes as she worked.

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Thorgrin moaned and rose slowly, holding his bound head. He blinked at Karli and then nodded at the large warrior standing beside her.

“Who’s this?” His voice was rough and dry.

Karli returned her salve to her belt pouch. “Lars of the Road. He saved us from the goblins.”

Lars smiled. “That’s right, Herald. I’m a hero.” He frowned at the groggy young man. “You’re not a very good protector of the girl, I must say.”

Thorgrin frowned. “I’m not her protector...”

“Obviously,” the warrior interrupted.

The Herald sighed. “I was going to say that I am not her protector, I am her friend. Thank you for your aid.”

Lars shrugged. “No trouble. I hate those faerie-spawn bastards anyway.”

Thorgrin rose slowly, using the cavern wall as support. “So what brings you here, Lars of the Road?”

“Adventure. Glory. Treasure. The usual things. You two?”

Karli sighed as the salve began to numb the pain of her broken hand. “We are looking for our friend. A minstrel. He fell through a tunnel in the woods near the ruined tower. We think the goblins found him and have done something with him.” Karli retrieved the longsword that now lay on the ground near them, its runes now as dark as the blood of its prey. “This is his sword. It’s a goblin-slayer.”

Lars’ eyebrows shot up with interest. “May I?” he asked, reaching for the blade. Karli nodded and handed the weapon to him. Lars examined the carved blade and tested its balance. “A fine weapon. Though I wouldn’t trust the magic in it.” He turned his head and spat again. “Nope. Trust the blade, not the magic. That’s what I always say. Or will, at any rate.” He swung the blade a couple of times, the metal slicing through the air with a high whine. “Apparently your friend doesn’t know how to use it properly if he let goblins shove him in a hole somewhere.”

Thorgrin frowned at the insult to his friend. “We think he was taken by surprise when he fell.”

Lars shrugged and laid the blade of the weapon casually against his shoulder. “So where do we go from here?”

Karli blinked. “We?”

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Lars snorted. “You don’t think I’m leaving you in *his* protection, do you? He’s injured and couldn’t do a proper job when he wasn’t. And your other friend is missing. I got nowhere else to go, this treasure hunt being a bust and all.” He motioned to the outcropping from which entered the room. “My pack’s up there. How did you get here?”

Karli looked at Thorgrin, who shrugged and picked up his staff. Karli then described to Lars the events of the past couple of hours, from the time they left Lady Verona’s camp.

When they finished telling the tale, Lars sat and rubbed his chin. “A lady in waiting, huh? Could be a reward in that...”

Thorgrin shook his head. “Doubtful. We’re not really part of her retinue. We just happen to be going to the same place at the behest of Her Grace, the Duchess.”

Lars sighed. “Still, you never know. She could be persuaded.”

Thorgrin turned to hide a smirk. “Perhaps. However, as you clearly saved my life, I can do no less than what I’m doing for Mistress Rowantree and Piper. I could present you to His Grace, Duke Newcastle, before his court.”

Lars smiled. “Yes, of course! Then he’ll probably offer me a plot of land and a title. Lord Lars. I like the sound of that!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves just yet, Master Lars.”

As the two discussed the possibilities of a peerage for the mercenary, Karli fumbled in her pouches for the small clay pot that the Lady had given her. *She gave us more than we needed for Thorgrin. And I can’t complete her task with my hand ruined so. Perhaps it can help?* As she contemplated the salve, she thought she could smell the grass of the clearing on which she had witnessed the faerie revels and could hear an echo of the sweet music of the Fair Ones’ voices. She heard the Lady’s command floating through her thoughts, *Place this salve upon the wound...it may have other properties that may be useful on your quest.* Then she heard Mistress Myshalla’s warning, *They will seek to bargain with you. Do not take their food. Do not take their gold. Do not dance or join in their cavorting. For all else they may offer, use your judgment. In that, I have faith.* The fact remained that she needed to be able to use her hands if she were to continue her journey and not be a burden to her friends. If the salve could heal her, she would have to take the risk.

As Thorgrin raised his voice, insisting that he promised the warrior no reward for his actions, much less lands and titles that he didn’t even have to give, Karli clumsily removed the lid of the pot. The flowery smell of the paste filled her nostrils. She took a deep breath and started applying the salve to her ruined hand. As soon as the salve touched her skin, she felt her hair rise as a spark ran down her spine. The skin of her

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hand started to tingle with a slight burning sensation; not unpleasant, but soothing and intense.

“Are you alright, Karli?” The Healer looked up to find both Lars’ and Thorgrin’s eyes upon her in concern. Thorgrin rubbed his neck where the Ironthorn had been embedded so many days ago.

“Yes, I am. Why?”

Thorgrin shook his head. “You looked dazed there for moment.”

Karli rose and blinked as she felt her numbed fingers twitch within the sling. “I’ll be fine. I’m a bit tired and my hand pains me.” She gathered her things. “Do we have a plan?”

Lars pointed to the outcropping. “There’s a tunnel up there that I haven’t followed to the end. It heads in the general direction of the tower. From what the Herald has said, it sounds like it’s probably the only tunnel that neither of us has traveled yet. It’s the only place left to go.”

Karli nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me.” She studied the outcropping. “Do you have any rope?”

Lars pointed up to the outcropping. “In my pack, up there. Where’s your rope?”

Thorgrin held out his empty hands. “We didn’t bring any.”

The warrior looked pained. “Why would go into a cave without any rope? No wonder you got into so much trouble; no planning.”

Karli sighed. “We didn’t know we were going to be in a cave when we set out.”

Lars shook his head, ruefully. “Amateurs. Well, nothing for it. Lars will just have to save the day again. I can probably climb back up and then lower my rope down.” He gave his torch to Thorgrin. “Hold this. I can’t climb and carry that.” He also secured the runic longsword to his belt. Finally, the large warrior made his way to the wall of jutting stone and started pulling his way up to the shelf.

As Lars climbed, Karli walked to a group of rocks near the make-shift throne and retrieved her moonblade. Its small edge glowed silver away from the light of the torch. She sheathed it and then returned to where the Herald was lighting the warrior’s way. She leaned close to him as she whispered, “I used the salve on my hand, the one that the Lady gave to me to help you.”

Thorgrin’s eyes widened. “Why would you do that? Are you alright?”

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Karli nodded. “So far, so good. I thought it might heal me as well as it healed you. Otherwise, I’d have lost my hand. I can already feel it...reviving.” Thorgrin shook his head as Karli continued. “Look, I just wanted you to know in case something...unexpected...happens.”

Thorgrin sighed and nodded. “Very well. We may need to be discreet about this around Lars. He doesn’t appear to have much love of magic.”

Karli smiled. “Who does? It seldom gives us a reason to.”

The two turned and watched as Lars pulled himself up onto the outcropping and disappeared into a tunnel. After a minute he returned and lowered the end of a rope to the two companions while wrapping the other end securely about his massive arm.

“You two coming or what? I’ve got to go save your other friend, right?”