

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

Lars led the way down the cavern corridor, a torch held aloft in one hand and *Goblinsbane* in the other. Karli and Thorgrin followed closely, struggling in their fatigue to keep pace with the swordsman's long strides. Karli's hand tingled uncomfortably; she even thought she glimpsed a pale lavender glow peek out from beneath her makeshift sling. Thorgrin leaned heavily on his staff and rubbed his bandaged head periodically as he limped down the rocky passage.

"So, Lars. What do you do when you're not saving would-be adventurers from themselves?" Thorgrin's voice drawled with fatigue and irony but Karli could hear the genuine curiosity in his question about their new companion.

The big man shrugged. "Like I said, I seek adventure, glory, and treasure. I've done some mercenary work and soldiering, but I don't much care for it. Too many rules and far too much marching. I'm a swordmaster by trade, so I teach sword work when the weather makes travel too difficult. Otherwise, I travel the roads, taking advantage of the opportunities that cross my path." He paused, holding his hand up for silence. After a moment he shook his head and continued down the tunnel.

"A mercenary down in Southport mentioned seeing a ruined tower in the woods on his way down from Dungran's. Ruins sometimes mean treasure, so I asked around. Apparently they belonged to noble line called Greenmantle that died out ages ago. I figured even if the treasure's gone, checking it out beat sitting in the city; all cities do is suck your purse dry."

Lars stopped and turned to his audience, obviously enjoying his tale. "Along the way I came across a band of the 'traveling folk'. You know who I mean. The ones that travel in caravans, selling their wares and telling stories from the Old Country, back in the Empire? Their old ones are wise in the ways of the Fey Folk, and other matters besides—far wiser than priests." The warrior turned his head and spat. "Priests don't know anything practical about faeries and such. They don't tell you about salt and iron and silver, things you can actually use. They think you can pray them to death." He shook his head with disdain and caught his new companions staring at him. Grinning ruefully, he continued. "I like the traveling folk. We have an understanding, you see. We understand the lure, and the dangers, of the road. Huh, I could even *be* one." Lars paused, considering the idea. "Nah. Probably not. Anyhow, their old woman read cards for me. Sometimes they read true, sometimes they just need coin and tell you what you want to hear. This one, I think, read true."

Lars gazed up to the ceiling of the tunnel as if he could see his story written on the moist stone. "She told me that my path was about to split and that I could find what I needed on the path that lead beneath the earth. She showed me the tower card and told me that I would begin to seek Truth and that all I knew before would be changed." He shrugged. "Sounded good to me. What I need is fame and fortune and if it was found underneath some moldy old tower, no problem. She also told me something about a mother protecting her child and showed me something about the High Priest card, but she was really pouring it on for a bit more coin. I had already got what I needed." Lars turned and

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started heading down the tunnel. “At the time I thought I got a true reading. But now I’m here...and still haven’t found what I needed.”

Karli smiled at his back. “We’re still grateful that you came. You were what *we* needed at any rate.” She watched his shoulders shrug as he continued down the corridor.

The young Healer lost herself in thought as she continued following the big man deeper into the cavern. Lars believed the tunnel would lead to the ruined tower. Hopefully they would find Piper somewhere inside, preferably unharmed. No one mentioned that it made little sense for the goblins to drag him so far away from their lair; they each silently decided to hang on to the hope that Piper would be found. Karli grasped that hope firmly, willfully pushing back the images of her friend’s looted corpse that kept threatening to overtake her imagination. As she walked, the tingling in her hand shifted to an inescapable itch. She kept rubbing it against her ribs as she followed behind the large warrior, hoping to quell the irritation. Occasionally she would wiggle her fingers; they responded slowly but definitely. The salve was working.

When Lars stopped, Karli had to put out her hand to stop herself from crashing into his back. The big man turned and whispered, “I hear something up ahead, around the next turn.” Thorgrin nodded. “Me too—footsteps. Look!” The Herald pointed at the runeblade in Lars’ hand. The etched blade burned with a faint green light.

The glow of the blade and the flickering torchlight made Lars’ grin more intimidating than reassuring as his lips peeled back in anticipation of the fight. He motioned for his companions to get against the wall and handed the torch to Thorgrin. “I’m going to creep ahead a little. Keep this back so they don’t see the glow around the corner.” The Herald nodded as he took the torch from him.

Lars gripped *Goblinsbane*’s handle with both hands as he cautiously made his way to the turn. Karli soon heard the footsteps that Thorgrin had warned about; floppy, fleshy sounds of bare feet upon stone with the slight clack of taloned nails striking the cavern floor. She thought she saw movement in the eldritch glow of the runeblade just as Lars sprang forward, swinging the longsword with a cry of “HA-ha!”

A shriek echoed in the tunnel as the blade met the neck of a squat goblin carrying a rough cloth sack. The smell of burnt flesh filled the hall as its head flew from its shoulders, striking the wall of the corridor beside it as its body fell forward to the floor. The shriek came from its companion, an unusually thin example of its race who immediately fell to its knees, shrieking and crying, not even bothering to clean the blood of its companion from its tusked face. Lars brought the longsword high, as if to cleave the beast in two, while the beast continued to blubber and wail. Karli rushed forward and placed a hand on Lars’ arm.

“Wait!” The Healer pointed at the pathetic creature, who sat sobbing in the blood of its companion. “It’s begging for its life!”

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True enough, in between the cries it issued in its own inarticulate, guttural tongue, it hissed an unmistakable word in Darchanese: “Mercy.”

Lars lowered the longsword with one hand and then reached out quickly and snatched a knife from the mewling goblin’s belt. The goblin began bowing to Lars, repeatedly laying face-first on the floor, burbling “Mercy, mercy”.

Thorgrin stepped forward with the torch, causing the beast to wince and hiss at its light when it came up from its fawning tribute to the swordsman. It lowered its head to the floor and continued its litany on the nature of mercy.

The Herald pushed the torch forward. “You there! You speak our language?”

The litany paused, though the creature remained face-down on the floor. “Small,” it hissed.

Thorgrin knelt near the creature’s head. “Have you seen another like us? Dark hair. Thin. He fell in a tunnel.”

The creature sniffled. “Man. Man fell. Sleeping. We take.” It paused and raised its head toward the companions, its beady eyes slitted against the light of the torch. “Tribute. Lord pleased.”

Lars reached down and gripped the goblin by the back of its filthy tunic. “Tribute? What lord?”

The goblin hung its head low causing a combination of drool, snot, and tears, to drip over its tusks and hit the floor. “Lord of tower. Let us live. Let us die. Pleased with tribute.”

Lars dropped the pathetic creature in disgust. It curled into a small goblinoid ball on the cavern floor, whimpering.

Thorgrin stepped forward. “Can you take us to this lord?”

The shivering mass raised its head, its eyes wide despite the glare of the torchlight. “No! Lord angry! Kill Krusk! Change Krusk! No!” It curled itself tighter, tucking its head into its abdomen at the center of the spiral and muttering.

Lars plunged *Goblinsbane* into the creature’s skull. The goblin shuddered once and lay quiet.

Karli had watched the proceedings with shock and fascination. Now she turned to Lars with a look of horror. “How could you? He was no threat!”

The grim warrior looked the Healer in the eye, his rough features hard and unforgiving. “That thing was nothing but a murderous faerie-spawn piece of dung that wanted to live a

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little longer. We weren't going to let it go; it'd just come back and slit our throats in the darkness and raid our belongings for its 'tribute' or whatever. Or find others like it that would do the same thing. It was no longer of any use so I ended it."

He cleaned the goblin's blood from the runeblade on its filthy tunic and then checked both bodies for pouches. Neither carried anything but knives and cloth sacks. Sighing heavily, Lars took the torch from Thorgrin. "This trip hasn't worked out at all. Maybe that old woman was drunk when she read my cards." He turned and started heading down the tunnel once again. "These two came from this direction, so at least we know we're on the right track."

Thorgrin patted Karli on the shoulder. "He's right, Karli. We couldn't let that thing go. It's hard, but it was the right thing to do."

Karli sighed and rubbed her eyes. "It may have been the safest thing to do, but I'm not so sure it was right." Thorgrin nodded in sympathy as they both jogged to catch up with the long-legged swordmaster.

The corridor turned several more times before Lars called for a stop. He pointed up at a narrow set of stone stairs to an arched doorway.

The Herald leaned heavily on his staff while Karli's steps dragged across the cavern floor in a shuffling skip-step as they tried to keep stride with the warrior. Within her sling, Karli's hand continued to itch and tingle, though the intensity of the sensation was clearly waning. She could also make a fist without much trouble. Despite their fatigue, the thought that Piper might be in the next chamber inspired them to hobble faster toward the foot of the stairs.

Lars whispered. "We don't know what's up there. I'll go ahead with the torch and see what I can see. If it's safe, I'll come back for you."

Karli arched an eyebrow. "And if it's not?"

Lars shrugged. "Then you'll hear me call for you."

Karli smiled and Thorgrin shook his head as Lars started climbing the stairs. It was only a few minutes after he passed through the arched doorway that the two companions saw his return. He took the steps down to the tunnel two at a time.

"The arch opens up into a small chamber. Looks like some sort of wooden panel hid the doorway from the other side, but has long since rotted away. That doorway leads to a stonework corridor, a short one that ends at an open, iron-banded, wooden door."

Thorgrin nodded. "I bet these tunnels originally served as some sort of escape passage in case the tower was ever under siege."

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“You said the door’s open?” asked Karli.

“Yes, not wide, but open enough.”

Lars led the way into the small vestibule. Just as he had said, a rotted wooden panel had been moved from a narrow doorway that led into a hall of cut stone. Lars had to duck as he moved into the hallway toward the iron-banded door. Once the others had caught up, he handed the torch to Karli and then gripped the runeblade with both hands before stepping forward into the next room.

Once inside, Lars took two long strides so that Thorgrin and Karli could enter the room behind him. Karli waved the torch about the chamber. The walls housed about thirty niches; each wall sported several columns of three niches each. Some contained wooden or stone caskets. Some were empty. In the center of the room, on a pedestal, was an ornately carved stone sarcophagus. The symbol of a tree with elaborately entwined roots dominated the etchings on the lid. Karli recognized the symbol from the signet they saw in the painting she and Thorgrin had found in the goblins’ treasure chamber. At the other end of the room was an arched doorway.

Lars made a ring around his eye, spat, and reached into his pouch for a pinch of salt—which he promptly threw over his shoulder. “I don’t like it,” he muttered.

“It’s just a crypt,” Thorgrin said, though his eyes were open wide as they flicked across the room. “Probably the family tomb for the Greenmantles.”

Lars shook his head. “Something don’t smell right.”

The others noticed what he meant. There was the faint sweet smell of rot in the room. But these people had been dead for untold years; there should be nothing left but bone.

The three gathered together and made their way slowly toward the archway at the end of the room. The doorway opened into a stone passage. To the right, the passageway continued until it turned a corner. To the left, after about twenty feet, the passage opened into a room, lit with torches. The companions could hear movement and the voice of a muttering old man. Lars motioned for the others to follow. They made their way slowly down the corridor, listening as the old man debated with himself.

“’Tis a ward. A powerful ward. But the sigil is unfamiliar. I have never seen its like.” He shuffled out of view and returned to a work table with a large tome. “Not Kalidonian, no. Perhaps the runes of the Vänenmaarith. Must know, must know, before I continue.” The old man continued turning pages in the tome. “Perhaps Simonicus Vallum had seen its like, or wrote of it, at least. Rare. Rare and frustrating, is this sigil.”

The view into the room expanded as the companions made their way toward the wide archway that led into the chamber. The chamber itself was lit by torches while the old man had additional candles illuminating the work bench. The man wore tattered robes

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that must once have been blue but were now faded to a dingy grey. About his neck hung a gold chain that bore a silver medallion, the torchlight catching the etched surface without revealing the words carved upon it. Long grey hair, matted and filthy, hung across his hunched shoulders. His thin, knobby fingers ended in dirty, talon-like nails. In the middle of the floor lay two rotting goblin corpses, their limbs sprawled like discarded puppets. Across from the disheveled old man was a precariously placed wooden shelf filled with books, scrolls, and jars placed haphazardly across its uneven surfaces. Some of the jars were glass, filled with some sickly viscous liquid in which darker, unrecognizable, shapes floated. Chained upright to the wall beside the shelf, shirtless, battered, and bloody, was Piper.

The old man sighed heavily as he shut the book. “Nothing. Nothing at all.” He gazed at the prisoner chained to the wall. “Who is protecting you, my friend? Who has claimed your soul?”

Karli and Thorgrin exchanged a glance of bewilderment. The old man tapped his fingers on the useless tome, now closed, on the desk.

“And who will I cross when I take it from you?”