

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

Lars nudged Karli and pointed at the bound man across the room. “That your friend?”

Karli nodded and then gasped as the old man turned his gaze toward the archway, narrowing his eyes. They glinted with a yellow sheen in the torchlight.

“Gaal’s blood...we’ve been spotted,” Thorgrin murmured.

Lars hefted the rune-sword and cracked the joints in his neck. “Get ready, Herald.” The large swordsman lunged forward, raising the blade high and filling the room with his cry.

“HA-ha!”

Thorgrin shrugged and charged forward with his staff, roaring incoherently.

The man then barked a series of words in a language unknown to any of the companions while making sharp, angular motions in the air toward the rotting goblin remains that lay sprawled on the floor. The corpses rose as if on invisible strings, their bodies sheathed in a nimbus of pale green light. Karli could hear the sickening squelch of shifting liquid flesh as they lurched across the room and met the charging companions before they reached their target.

The Healer swung back and leaned against the passageway wall, gasping for breath. Her mouth filled with bile and her stomach ached with cold dread. She had never seen such sorcery before. Tales of necromancers defiling the bodies of the dead and filling their remains with the spirits of Voidspawn demons were common enough around campfires and in bard’s tales. But they were just that, stories, tales to make children shriek and shiver for want of warmth on a winter night. The *wrongness* of the rotted goblin corpses filled her with revulsion and fear. She could not face such a mockery of everything she held as pure and right. This was true evil, living and flaunted before her eyes. Her body trembled as she covered her face.

Lars met the first of the walking corpses with a mighty two-handed swing of the goblin-slaying blade. He laughed as the rotting goblin’s head flew from its shoulders and crashed against the wall across the room with the force of the mighty warrior’s cut. Black-green ichor sprayed across Lars’ chest and left a trail of gore across the stone floor as the body fell.

Thorgrin found his opponent to be far more of a challenge. He attempted to sweep the legs out from under the corpse, envisioning it falling to a heap of meat and bones to the floor. Instead, his hands and arms vibrated like chimes at the impact of the wooden staff against the stony legs of the goblin corpse. The corpse took advantage of the Herald’s surprise by gripping him hard around the neck with both of his cold, doughy hands. Thorgrin gasped for air and fell to his knees, desperately trying to tear the goblin’s frozen claws from his throat.

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Lars, grinning widely, stepped over the twice-dead goblin and approached the madman, who stood tittering as his other marionette throttled the Herald. The massive swordsman raised his blade to strike the man down when the mage's bony hands shot out, quick as snakes, and he snarled a series of unintelligible words. Lars lurched to a stop as his body bucked in waves of pain. A cry pushed itself from his lungs as each of the warrior's muscles spasmed in a ripple of nausea-inducing waves. The old man cackled in delight, his laughter piercing the narrow passageway.

Karli looked over her hands and saw that Thorgrin's face had turned as blue as the shadowed hallway. Lars bucked and lurched, his body seized with blinding pain. Karli could see his skin crawl as if infested with burrowing worms that rippled beneath his flesh. Swallowing her bile, the Healer pushed herself forward, watching her friends' tormentor, and felt her way along the wall behind her. She moved quickly but carefully, staying in the shadows until she could get around the wizard and free Piper.

Her hands slid across the rough stone walls of the crypt as she made her way. Twice she nearly tripped over an uneven patch of stonework in the floor, her attention completely drawn to hateful scene playing out before her. She heard Thorgrin's boots scrape and scramble on the stone floor as Lars continued to moan and jerk, much to the delight of the necromancer.

"Fools! Vermin! Do you feel the music? The dance of the carrion eaters? Is it not pleasing, you great oafs? Bornash will teach you the tune!"

Lars jerked back hard, nearly breaking his spine. A low whine whistled from between his clenched teeth. Grunting, he pulled himself upright to face his tormentor again. As Karli crossed the room, she could see the adventurer's face in the torchlight; tight-lipped, white as death, and rippling with small, grub-like whorls that danced across his countenance. Thorgrin's shadow cavorted across the ceiling as he continued to struggle with the animated corpse. She tripped over a fallen stone, but caught herself before kicking debris across the room, alerting the wizard to her presence.

Karli now stood behind Bornash, crouching between the demented mage and the bound minstrel. The necromancer's bony shoulders shifted knobbily beneath his tattered robes as he guffawed at the plight of her companions. Shuddering, she turned toward Piper.

The minstrel lived, but hung unconscious against the chains that bound his wrists to the wall. She saw no mark, no sigil; she had no idea what the old man was raving about as they had approached. Only a nasty bump with a seeping cut marred his forehead. Still, his breathing was shallow, but regular. Karli felt that if he were freed and given some time to rest, he would recover. She tried to pull the iron cuffs that bound him over his thin hands to no avail. Each was secured with a small iron lock; locks that required keys that Karli did not have. Cursing to herself, she wiped tears of frustration and fear from her eyes and turned back to the battle.

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The madman sounded as if he had run out of laughter, his gleeful exhalations emerging only as moist wheezes. Lars continued to shake and jerk, his teeth clenched in a rictus so powerful that Karli could see blood seeping from his gums. She could not see if Thorgrin still struggled or had succumbed to the powerful grip of the walking corpse.

“Dance, you fools! Dance! And when you fall, I’ll raise you again, a never-ending festival of pain!” Bornash wheezed again as Lars lurched.

Gritting her teeth, Karli reached down and gripped the handle of the moonblade. She stalked forward carefully, on the balls of her feet, and slowly drew the dagger from its oiled scabbard. Six feet. Five feet. Four. Three. Two...

“Pain and life never ending! Never ending!” The sorcerer raised his arms in insane triumph.

Karli closed her eyes and plunged the dagger deep into the man’s back. “It ends now,” she whispered as she pulled the enchanted steel blade from the madman’s flesh.

The sorcerer gasped and dropped heavily to his knees. Karli watched in numb horror as a dark stain spread across the back of old man’s filthy robes. Then he fell forward heavily onto his face. Karli heard the snap of his nose breaking on the stone floor.

Lars inhaled deeply and dropped to his knees as well, gasping for air. Thorgrin lay on the floor, the now-inert goblin corpse sprawled on top of him. He tried to roll over to throw the body off of him but, weak from his exertions and near-strangulation, all he managed was a half-hearted rocking motion.

After a moment, Lars rose and stood over the body of the dead mage. He turned his head and spat hard before hefting *Goblinsbane* high above his head. “Screw you, you old bastard,” he muttered as he let the runeblade drop heavily upon the corpse’s neck, separating the necromancer’s head from his body.

Blood pooled around the corpse and ran along the cracks in the stonework floor. Karli watched it run in rivulets along the floor and touch her shoes. She continued to stare at the decapitated body as Lars gently, but firmly, pushed her to the other side of the room and leaned her against the wall.

“Good job with the knife, Healer. Could have done it a bit quicker, but still. Good job. You rest here for a bit.”

Lars patted her shoulder and then crossed the room to pull the goblin corpse off of Thorgrin and help the smaller man to his feet.

“You alive?” he asked the gasping Herald.

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“Just.” Thorgrin’s voice was little more than a rasp. His neck was already turning black and yellow with heavy bruises. “Karli, are you alright?”

Lars placed a hand on the Herald’s shoulder. “Give her minute. I don’t think she’s feeling very well.”

The Herald moved slowly toward the Healer who leaned heavily against the wall where Lars had propped her. Her eyes were locked onto the bloody remains of the necromancer. He gently cupped her chin with his hand and lifted her face towards his.

“Karli, I need you listen to me.” His sand-paper voice was calm and gentle. “We’re not in danger anymore. You need to think about what comes next. Piper is hurt and needs your help. We all need to get out of here. Can you do that for us?”

Karli looked into Thorgrin’s eyes and then took a deep breath, exhaling with a nod. She turned away from Bornash’s corpse and let Thorgrin lead her back to Piper.

Thorgrin lifted Piper’s wrists and examined the cuffs. “Lars. Check the body for a key to these cuffs.” After a moment, Lars tossed the Herald a small iron key. With it, he and Karli released the minstrel and gently lowered him to the floor.

Karli dug in her pack for ingredients and began mixing a poultice to cover the cut on Piper’s forehead. She examined him further and found several other small bumps on his skull, though none were serious injuries. After she tied the poultice to his head with a length of cloth, she crunched some pungent herbs beneath his nostrils. After a moment, he began to stir. He moaned and rubbed at his now-watery eyes. The Healer dropped the mashed leaves and threw her arms around the groggy minstrel.

“We found you! We found you!”

Piper returned the Healer’s embrace and looked up at the smiling Herald who reached down to help the minstrel to his feet. “Welcome back, friend.”

Bewildered, Piper looked around at his surroundings. “Where in the Void am I?”

Lars spoke up. “The lair of the legendary necromancer Bornash.” He pointed to the corpse that lay in a pool of congealing blood.

Piper gingerly touched the bandage that Karli had wound about his head. “And who are you?”

Lars stood the runeblade point-first on the stone floor and rested his hands on the pommel. Lifting his chin, though never taking his eyes off of the minstrel he proclaimed, “I am Lars of the Road. Bane of all faerie-kind. Protector of Healers, and, dare I say, Hero.” He then turned his head and spat. “Don’t want to draw attention to any faeries by saying their names without spitting.” The he spat again.

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Piper turned his confused expression to his friends for explanation. Karli smiled. “He was exploring the ruins, looking for treasure. He saved Thorgrin and I more than once and has now helped you.”

The minstrel pursed his lips and then nodded. He turned to the warrior and extended his hand. “Then I owe you my thanks. I am Poric a’Kieranon. My friends call me Piper.”

Lars warily accepted Piper’s hand and shook it. Piper winced at the strength of the big man’s grip. Karli thought she spotted a satisfied smirk on Lars’ face as Piper took his hand back.

Piper motioned to the dead man on the floor. “So you slew the necromancer?”

Lars started to nod, but then glanced at Karli and shook his head. “No, that’s her kill.”

Piper raised his eyebrows and turned to the Healer. Karli felt the color drain from her face and a sickness crawl across her insides. Then she set her jaw and swallowed. “Yes. I killed him.” She felt some of the nausea abate as she asserted what she had done.

Piper took her hands. “Are you alright?”

Karli sighed. “Not really. But I will be. We’ll tell you everything later. Right now we need to get out of here.”

Thorgrin crossed to the far side of the room. “Surely this Bornash didn’t traverse the goblin tunnels to come here. Especially if he went out for supplies or victims with any frequency.”

Lars nodded. “Right, a secret entrance. Sorcerers always have a secret entrance.” He joined the Herald in searching for another exit from the room. Soon enough the Herald pulled back a rotted tapestry to reveal a small chamber dominated by a narrow iron staircase winding upwards.

Lars led the way up the staircase, holding *Goblinsbane* before him. Its runes remained nothing more than dark shadows along the edge of the keen blade. Karli helped the weakened minstrel climb the stairs while Thorgrin followed behind them, occasionally rubbing his bruised neck. The staircase ended in a debris-filled stone chamber. Only three out of four walls remained standing.

Over the rubble of the fallen wall the companions could see the hazy light of dawn breaking over the horizon. The fall air was chill and their breath curled from their mouths like white smoke.

“I’ve never been so glad to see that,” murmured Thorgrin.

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“Indeed.” Karli smiled at the rising sun, hoping that perhaps its warmth, and time, would dissipate the chill that coiled in her gut every time she thought about Bornash and what she had done to save her friend. Healer or killer. She wasn’t sure she could accept herself as both.

But that would have to wait. For now, she willed herself to simply enjoy the morning and the fact that she and Thorgrin had saved Piper. And she had made a new friend as well. Master Redhand always advised to count her blessings before she counted her curses. Karli squeezed the minstrel’s arm affectionately as he leaned against her and limped over the debris of the ruined tower and towards the forest camp where the companions had left Lady Whitheron and her entourage.