

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

Sergeant Garvis stooped to help Lady Whitheron onto her mount, nearly vaulting the lady-in-waiting over the saddle in his surprise as his troops sprang to life, grabbing spears and hustling toward movement heard in the surrounding woods. The lady, calm but flushed, frowned down at the stocky leader of her guard.

“Really, Sergeant. Do take care.”

“My apologies, m’lady.” Garvis strode purposefully to where the soldiers had gathered. “What passes here, men?”

In answer, the gathering parted to permit Karli and Thorgrin entry to the camp. They both supported an obviously weakened Piper. The surrounding troops stiffened as Lars followed them, a well-armed stranger, smirking at the spears that slowly rose as he passed.

“You are hurt, Master a’Kieranon,” the lady observed from her mount, her brow furrowed in concern.

Piper’s smile was thin-lipped. “I’m afraid so, m’lady. But I am sure to recover. I am in the care of a Master Healer.”

Karli and Thorgrin helped Piper settle down into the bedroll that still lay on the ground near the smoking remains of the campfire. Karli shook her arm out of her makeshift sling and started rummaging for herbs in her pack.

“And who is this one, then?” Garvis bellowed, waving a finger at Lars. The swordsman stood with his arms crossed in the center of a circle of spears and sniffed at the burly sergeant, unimpressed.

“Lars of the Road is my name. I saved your friends here from goblins and a necromancer.” The mercenary turned his gaze toward the other soldiers. “Your men afraid of the dark or something? Sending a girl to do your work for you?”

Garvis drew himself up, puffing his chest out as far as he could. “Our duty is to the Lady Whitheron, not to some miscreant Tumari vagabond and his keepers.”

Lars looked up at the lady in question, resplendent on her noble steed and smiled, continuing to ignore the jagged ring of steel that surrounded him. “Good morning, Lady. Lars of the Road.” He bowed low. “I’ve already attached myself to the good Healer there, but if you’re in need of a bodyguard, let me know. I’m for hire.”

Lady Whitheron’s brows drew together in a confused expression belied by the play of a smile at her full lips. “Thank you, Lars. I will bear that in mind should the need arise.”

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“What do you mean you’ve attached yourself to the Healer?” Garvis snapped, turning toward the Healer in question who had started applying herbal pastes to the Piper’s various injuries.

“Exactly what I said, sergeant,” Lars answered. “You and your men aren’t willing to protect her. These two,” Lars waved a hand to encompass Thorgrin and Piper, “are clearly incapable. That leaves me.” He struck himself in the chest with a melon-sized fist. “Should be an easy enough job as long as that minstrel doesn’t fall in any more holes.”

Garvis’ face turned as red as the silk of his overlay. “You cannot be serious! I will not have the lady’s safety compromised by picking up stray mercenary dogs out of the earth. He is not welcome to travel with us.”

“Dog?” Lars’ voice was dangerously quiet as he turned the full power of his gruff visage on the sergeant. The soldiers that surrounded him stepped forward a step with their spears held level, sensing the danger inherent in the mercenary’s stance. “I’ve clouted bigger men than you for less.” He looked the barrel-shaped sergeant from helm to boot. “By the Void, I’ve *shat* bigger things than you.” He started dropping his blades to the ground and then raised his huge fists in a fighting stance, giving Garvis a wolfish grin. “I’m game if you are, Sergeant. Been awhile since I had a good fight.”

“Enough!” Lady Whitheron’s cry doused the tension in the camp like a pail of spring water. Once all eyes were upon her, her cheeks aflame with a mixture of pique and embarrassment, she continued. “There will be no brawling today. Sergeant, we will continue to camp here until Master a’Kieranon is ready to travel. I would hear what happened to our companions this past night. Further, they will need to rest, I’m sure, before we continue.”

“But, m’lady...” Garvis sputtered.

“Sergeant. I’m sure our journey can stand a brief delay.”

His body vibrating in agitation, Garvis gave the lady a stiff bow. “As you wish, m’lady.”

Lars smirked as the soldiers backed away from him and started rebuilding the camp. He collected his things and joined the others.

Thorgrin grinned at the mercenary. “Well, that was tense.”

Lars shrugged. “I meant what I said. The goblins were fun but nothing like a good old-fashioned brawl. I bet that sergeant would have given me a bit of sport.”

“Did you mean what you said about being my protector?” Karli continued to look at Piper’s wounds as she spoke, hiding the blush that suddenly spread across her cheeks.

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“Sure. It’s obvious you need one. And I’m between quests at the moment.” Lars started cleaning his fingers with the tip of an iron dagger.

Karli continued tending to Piper’s wounds as she considered the prospect of the mercenary continuing with them to Newcastle, or even beyond, when they began her quest proper. He was a skilled warrior, brave if a bit foolhardy. Karli felt he was essentially a good soul, despite his obsession with treasure and glory. He didn’t like magic, but wasn’t frightened by it. Perhaps she could trust him with the truth. At the very least, if he was going to travel with her, he deserved to know what he was getting into.

The soldiers continued to bustle about the camp, re-erecting Lady Whitheron’s tent and unpacking the day’s food stores. As per the usual arrangement, the small band from Attis had established their belongings outside the perimeter of the lady’s camp. She hoped the noise and distance would keep her voice from any prying ears.

“As it happens, I am on a quest, Lars. Perhaps you would be of help on it.”

“Karli...” Piper started to rise but the Healer shoved him back down and applied a poultice to a cut on his shoulder, making him wince in pain.

The Herald looked perplexed. “Karli, I don’t know if you should...”

Lars grinned. “A quest. I knew you were looking for treasure. I’m in.”

The Herald smiled in spite of himself. “You haven’t even heard anything about it. How do you know you want to come with us?”

Karli shook her head. “No, not treasure. At least, I don’t think so, anyway. We can discuss it later. Maybe in Southport where we can have more privacy.” She looked around at the soldiers and at Sergeant Garvis pleading with Lady Whitheron.

Lars suddenly frowned and reached down to grip Karli’s wrist as she tied a bandage around Piper’s ribs. “What happened to your hand?”

Karli blinked and looked down at her restored hand, the bones firm inside healthy flesh. She noticed that she no longer felt the burning and itch that had been present since she had applied the salve.

Lars sniffed and then turned his head to spit. “Are you a sorcerer?” he whispered.

Thorgrin gasped as Piper muttered a curse. Karli looked Lars in the eyes, trying to ignore the gruff man’s intimidating scowl. “No Lars, I’m not. But there is magic in what we have done, and will do, on this quest. I can’t talk about it now. I need you to trust me, as I will trust you.”

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Lars and Karli held each other's gaze for a long moment until Lars finally blinked. "Very well. But you're going to tell me what's going in when we get to Southport." He turned his head and spat again. "Magic. Don't trust it." He reached under his tunic and gripped an iron medallion on a leather thong that bore the symbol of three arrows twisting away from a center point. "Nope, don't like it." He started shucking out of his travel pack and making his own space in their campsite.

Karli patted Piper on the shoulder. "That should help ensure you don't get infected. Rest now and I'm sure you'll be ready to travel by morning." As she rose, her magically restored hand collapsed in on itself, the bones snapping and grating anew. She gasped in pain and felt herself stumble as her eyes suddenly filled with darkness. Her nostrils twitched at the smell wildflowers, wet with morning dew. The voice of the Dark Lady filled her mind.

The bargain is sealed anew, my rabbit. Remember this. When we call, you will come. All that is given can be taken away. You will come.

The pain left her as quickly as it had begun. She blinked, the morning sun burned too bright. Gulping, she flexed her fingers—they were still healthy and fully restored. She finally noticed that Thorgrin was holding her in his arms. He smelled of sweat, leather, and rosewater.

"You collapsed. You must be very tired."

Karli took a deep breath and tried to gather herself up. "Yes. Yes I am. I think I shall lie down."

The Herald helped her to her bedroll and then settled into his own. He turned toward Karli and mouthed, "I hope you know what you're doing with Lars."

Karli smiled sleepily. She really was quite exhausted. "I do," she mouthed and faded into sleep, unsure if the tingling she felt at the sound of the Dark Lady's voice was from fear or from excitement. She truly hoped it was fear.

That evening, after Karli and her companions were allowed to rest, Lady Whitheron insisted that they share their adventure with her and her entourage. Piper apologized that he would not be able to tell much at all, being the damsel of the tale, a description that earned him a small smile from the lady and a smirk from the surrounding soldiers and Lars.

According to Piper, it had all begun when he had wandered away from the camp to make water. He heard movement in the surrounding woods and had decided to investigate.

"At night? With no torch or candle? You *are* a fool, songsmith," The sergeant guffawed at Piper's expense while the lady motioned for the story to continue.

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“As it happens, the good sergeant is right. I was proven a fool because as I walked into a small clearing the ground broke from beneath my feet and I was plunged into darkness. I awoke as I was being dragged by goblins down one tunnel or another and was then plunged once again into unconsciousness. I awoke again, chained in a strange chamber with a sinister old man who seemed intent on bestowing upon me much pain.” He bowed to Lady Whitheron. “I will spare the lady the details and let my various bandages and poultices speak for me in this regard.” She acknowledged Piper’s tact and motioned for him to continue. “The next thing I know, these three are dragging from beneath the bowels of the earth.”

Lady Whitheron turned to Lars. “You said there was a necromancer?”

The gruff warrior nodded, picking his teeth with a sharpened twig. “Aye, but the Healer here took care of him.”

All eyes turned to Karli as she felt her stomach sink down into her shoes. The guilt and shame and, yes, even pride, of what she had done swirled in her now-empty guts. She opened her mouth to respond when Thorgrin came to her rescue.

“And that is the other half of the tale.” The Herald picked the story up from when they left the camp, and if he did not have the flair of the master storyteller, he told the tale succinctly and accurately. Karli also noticed that he deftly avoided the incident with her hand and the salve.

After the tale was told, Lady Whitheron reached out and patted Karli on the knee. “You poor dear. You should not have had to do such a thing.”

Lars cast away his makeshift toothpick. “See? She obviously needs me.”

The sergeant snorted. “If we can even believe this, this barroom tale, am I still to believe that this one,” he pointed to the mercenary, “just happened to be in the catacombs? For all we know he was in league with this so-called sorcerer or is one himself.”

Piper gave Lars an assessing look and shook his head. “No, if Lars is a sorcerer, I’ll eat my boots.”

Lars smiled and said “Of course not.” Then he looked indignant. “But if I wanted to be, I could. But I don’t.” He narrowed his eyes at Piper and pursed his lips, not sure if he was being insulted or not.

“Nevertheless,” Thorgrin replied, “you, Sergeant, have made it clear that we are a separate company than yours, simply sharing the road. It is not for you to decide the traveling companions of one of His Grace’s Heralds. Lars travels with us for as long as we wish it.”

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Garvis rose, pointing a stubby finger at the reclining Herald. “Now look here, boy...”

Thorgrin rose, straightening the red cap of his office as he did so. “I am not ‘boy’, Sergeant Garvis. I am a Herald of the court of His Grace, the Duke of Newcastle. This man saved our lives. He will travel with us. You see to your duties and allow me to see to mine.”

The two stared at each other across the campfire until Garvis turned away and started calling out the guard roster for his men. Thorgrin let out his breath and sagged a bit.

Lars rose and clasped a beefy hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got sand, boy. I mean, Herald.” Chuckling to himself, he sat down and started to sharpen his various blades.

Piper chuckled. “Lars is right. Thanks, Herald.”

Karli reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “Yes, thanks Herald.”

Piper, still reclining on his bedroll, though much of his color had returned after a day rest, turned to the mercenary. “By the way, I’d like my sword back, if you please.”

Lars pursed his lips as he sharpened the long iron blade of his own weapon. “I suppose you would.” He continued assess the blade’s sharpness, ignoring the minstrel.

“If you please,” Piper continued, holding out his hand.

The mercenary turned his head slowly, his eyebrows rising. “Now?”

Piper nodded.

The mercenary reached across his pack for *Goblinsbane* and handed it to him hilt first.

“It’s a shame, really,” Lars murmured, continuing to polish the iron of his own weapon. “Sword like that should be wielded by someone who knows one end from another.”

Piper rolled his eyes and took the sword and placed it, point down, in the earth near his bedroll. “If any of the locals arrive at night, this should give us some warning.”

Thorgrin pointed his chin toward the soldiers. “If the guards have the sense to watch for it or even believe it.”

“We set our own watch, then.” Lars had traded his long sword for a dagger, scraping its length with a small whetstone.

“I’ll go first,” Piper volunteered.

“Then me,” said Thorgrin.

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“And me,” said Karli.

The three men looked at her. She narrowed her eyes at them. “What?”

The men looked at each other and then shook their heads in unison. “Nothing,” murmured Thorgrin. Karli smirked, satisfied. *Nothing, indeed. At least they had the sense to not travel that path.*

“I suppose that makes me last,” Lars said as he put away his weapons. “See you all in the morning.”

Thorgrin and Karli settled into their bedrolls and left Piper to watch the camp and the sword as the cool mid-autumn wind stirred the embers of their campfire.

The journey to Southport passed slowly, but without much incident. Autumn was in full swing, bringing mild days and chilly nights. The trees showed gold, red, and orange and the wind smelled of evergreen. The road was in good repair and made for easy travel, though Piper and Thorgrin still chafed at having to take the long way to Newcastle. Karli, for her part, was glad to have a chance to stop in a real city before arriving in the ducal seat. Southport was reputed to be huge, especially by her standards, and Karli was hoping to gain some degree of sophistication before being presented to the court. Lars seemed indifferent to the travel, and even grew bored as the journey dragged on, frequently relating his hope that the band would be attacked by brigands, or even goblins.

“Even just a scouting party. Maybe five or six. Just to make it more interesting.”

“Perhaps that’s what you were doing in those caves, mercenary. Plotting a robbery with your conspirators?” Garvis gave Lars a hard look.

“Nope, just having a chat with your family, Garvis. Your mother says hello, by the way.”

The sergeant stopped marching and fingered the cudgel at his side.

Lars took several long strides to catch up to the sergeant and smiled into his reddening face. “Care to take a swing? I truly hope you do.” The sergeant merely glowered at the huge warrior. “Suit yourself.” With that, Lars dropped back to walk with his friends. “I am so bored,” he sighed.

Other than Lars continuing to bait the angry sergeant into a brawl, Karli caught him frequently eying Karli’s restored hand. When she’d catch him at it, he’d simply ring his eye with his fingers and spit, not daring to look the Healer in the face. Despite the simmering tension Lars seemed intent to produce, the troupe passed the days in relative peace, until they arrived at Southport just after the city’s harvest faire.

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The troupe fell into the already long line of peddlers, farmers, and other travelers that were passing their way slowly through the broad gates that loomed over the end of the road. Karli gazed up at the tall stone walls that surrounded the gates. "They're taller than the walls at Glassrock," she murmured, awestruck.

Thorgrin smiled. "They have to protect more than a small keep and a relatively minor garrison of troops."

Piper nudged the Healer as she continued to stare, slack-jawed, at the walls. "Keep close. Keep a hand on your pouch. Don't get separated. There'll be a bit of a crowd in the entry plaza. The streets will be slightly less crowded as we make our way to an inn."

"Won't we be staying with Lady Whitheron?"

Thorgrin smirked. "Probably not. I doubt she'll pay our way and she will probably be in a venue far pricier than we can afford. We'll probably have to pool our funds as it is."

"I can sing for my supper, and maybe a room we can all share," Piper added.

"We might try the White Horse. It's clean and not too expensive," Thorgrin rubbed his chin, thinking. "If not, then maybe the Westerner."

"So long as we don't go to the Mad Pilgrim, anything's fine with me," Piper replied, shivering visibly.

Thorgrin eyebrows crawled up under his red cap. "Is there a story there?"

Piper chuckled. "An old story, and not very funny."

Karli cocked her head at Thorgrin. "Have you been to Southport, Thorgrin?"

"I actually grew up here. My father is a merchant sailor."

Piper smiled. "Hey, then maybe we can stay with your family. Save a bit of coin."

Thorgrin frowned and shook his head. "No, let's not." His face clouded with some old memory. He glanced up at his friends and put on a smile. "Old story, and not very funny."

Piper patted his back and the three continued down the road to the gates. As they approached, Karli was able to make out the city's banner, a blue field separated at the diagonal with a wavy white bar. The upper half sported a siren, wings outstretched and bare-breasted. The lower bore three black wave crests. Thorgrin pointed at the standard as they approached.

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“The three crests represent House Windrider, the house of the Earl of Portlund, lord of Southport. The Windriders have held Southport and its environs since the Crossing. It is said that the first Windrider rescued the first Newcastle from the sea itself as they crossed over from the Empire in the early days of the realm.”

Karli shook her head in wonder. For all she knew, her village of Attis was as old as this city but it bore none of the history that Southport could claim. She felt far from home not a little out of her depth. Shaking the feeling off, she chided herself. *It's not as if some Windrider can come rescue me from drowning in my own thoughts. Keep your wits about you, girl, and you'll do fine. You are not the bumpkin everyone thinks you are.*

The three managed to scrape enough coins to pay their gate taxes (not without a great deal of grumbling from Lars, who seemed intent on not parting with any coppers he did not absolutely have to), and passed through the great wooden gates into the plaza. It was just as Piper said. People and livestock milled about, deciding on where in the city they needed to continue. Some peddlers had set up stalls in the plaza, hawking their wares to weary travelers as soon as they passed through the stone arch. The stench of sweat, animal waste, and too many bodies too close together filled Karli's lungs and threatened to gag her. Her senses were far more used to clean mountain air and life outdoors. Piper was speaking with the sergeant, shouting to make himself heard over the din of the courtyard.

“The Red Tun. Yes. Sunrise.” Piper saluted the sergeant, with barely a trace of irony, and bowed low to the mounted lady. “Until the morrow,” he added, for her benefit. Lars rolled his eyes as Karli and Thorgrin chuckled. Lady Whitheron and her entourage took one of the cobbled streets that ran like rays from the plaza as Piper returned.

“They'll be at the Red Tun and plan on leaving at sunrise,” Piper reported.

“We heard,” Karli replied.

Thorgrin whistled. “The Red Tun, huh? Too rich for me.”

“We should go to the docks,” said Lars. “That's where the inns are the cheapest.”

The Herald snorted. “For good reason. The ale is bilge water and the patrons are as likely to kill you as drink with you.”

“Right. Cheap and fun.” Lars started walking toward the southernmost street. “Let's go get a drink at the Pike and then find a room.”

“No, we're going to the White Horse,” Piper started leading Karli toward another street.

Lars grabbed her other arm. “She'll be fine! If you *boring* people want to go to some expensive-assed inn and drink *wine* or whatever it is you city folk like, you go ahead. Karli needs some fun for a change.”

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“Stop it, you lout, you’re hurting her!” Piper pulled on Karli’s arm again.

“No I’m not, you are!” Lars pulled Karli out of Piper’s grasp, forcing her to stumble to her knees. Lars actually looked chagrined. “Sorry, Healer.”

Karli removed her arm from Lars’ grasp and dusted off her skirt. Her level gaze took each of the men in turn. “Boys, we will go to the White Horse where I will have a bath. I suggest you do the same. Then we will have a modest meal. I owe Lars here a story.” She started walking alone down the street that Piper had been pulling her toward. She looked back over her shoulder. “Are you coming or not?”

The three men followed, smiling ruefully at their female companion.

The White Horse was exactly as described: modest, clean, and relatively inexpensive. After a brief discussion with Master Barleykeep, the inn’s owner and proprietor, Piper was assured that their meals would be paid for by his entertainments. They secured a large room that the four of them could share, though Barleykeep seemed rather dubious of a young woman sharing quarters with three road-hardened young men.

“But, that’s none of my affair, I assure you, Mistress. It is your room, at least for the night.” He raised his work-worn hands in mock surrender and then eyed the men with a glint in his deep-set eyes. “There should be plenty of space in that room to allow the lady to have her privacy without any...shenanigans.”

Karli, face bright red with embarrassment tried to reassure the innkeeper. “I am certain that my dignity and that of your inn will remain intact. We simply need to save coin and these men are like my brothers.”

Though Barleykeep raised no more protest and readily took their coin, his expression spoke much of his doubt as to the character of the men of the party.

The room was quite large, with tall windows that, when open, provided a nice cross breeze. There were three small beds with straw mattresses set up at three of the four walls of the chamber and there was a wash table in the center of the room with fresh water waiting in the basin. Master Barleykeep had his son, Feldin, bring another bed in from a different room. It was cozy, but clean and none of them would have to sleep on the damp earth that night. By the time everyone had settled their belongings and everyone had visited the small bathhouse, four bells rang from the nearby Cathedral of Calm Waters, its towers visible from their southern window.

Lars lay down on one of the beds, his long legs dangling from the footboard. “So tell me about this quest, Healer.” He gazed at the ceiling as if he was indifferent to the tale, but Karli could see his eyes cut sideways to her in anticipation.

Thorgrin and Piper lounged on their bunks and looked to Karli. After taking a deep breath, Karli began her tale, starting with the Herald’s arrival in Attis and ending with the

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vision she saw back at the campsite and the Dark Lady's message to her regarding the healing of her hand. Lars seemed to take the story in stride, though he'd spit periodically as Karli mentioned the more mystical events. Both the minstrel and the Herald started at the new revelation about Karli's further bargain with the Fey.

"Are you insane? What were you thinking?" Piper seethed and began pacing about the room. "Karli, that was foolish. Foolish!"

Karli gritted her teeth and stood. "I have to complete this quest, not only for my sake but for Thorgrin's. If I had let my hand remain ruined, I could not continue and we'd both be damned to what only Gaal knows."

"Or the Dark Lady," murmured the Herald.

"Fey folk," Lars face twisted in disgust as he spat. "Don't like them. Not one bit. They get their joy from messing with people, people that can't do anything about it, unless they've studied up on their lore." He fingered the nearby pommel of his iron sword.

Piper gave the warrior a skeptical look. "You know faerie lore?"

The big warrior nodded. "Sure. They hate the touch of iron. And salt." He patted one of his belt pouches. "And some are driven away by the ringing of bells." He shook a string of small steel bells that dangled from his pack. "And the evil eye, of course." He ringed his eye with his fingers and spat.

"And apparently they dislike spitting as well. Sensible folk." Piper smiled at his own joke, though Lars ignored him.

Thorgrin took Karli's hand. "I wish you didn't keep putting yourself deeper in danger for my sake."

Karli smiled and took his hand in hers. "I mean to see this through, one way or the other. I'm of the Dordanni. We're stubborn."

"And foolish," muttered Piper.

The Healer rounded him. "And foolish, yes. I didn't know the cost of trying the salve. But sometimes there is only one way to know. Sometimes it is necessary to take risks. Even foolish, stubborn, mountain girls."

Thorgrin clasped Piper by the shoulder. "What's done is done. Nothing left but to see it through and be there for her when they call."

Lars rose from the bed and rubbed his calves. "So you mean to go to Newcastle and see if you can find more information on these Tears of Vriannon? Find out if they are treasure or not?"

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“That’s the idea,” Karli replied.

“Then why don’t we start here? Southport’s a large enough town that there are probably sages. Do we have any coin left?”

Thorgrin patted his purse. “Yes, some of the coin from the goblin horde.” He smirked as he mentioned the meager treasury the goblins beneath the ruins had collected.

“Then let’s use what daylight we have left to see if we can get a lead on this.” Lars left his larger sword behind and secured his short sword to his belt.

Karli smiled. “Then you’re still in?”

“Oh, I’m in. For a share of the treasure, any treasure, along the way. And a chance to kill some faeries.”

Karli hugged the big man, much to his apparent surprise. “Thank you, Lars of the Road. I can’t guarantee you treasure but you are more than welcome to a share whatever we come across.”

Thorgrin shook the mercenary’s hand. “Thank you.”

Lars, red-faced and ill at ease, made his way toward the door. “Time’s wasting.”

The others followed, with Piper taking the rear, shaking his head. “Foolish.”

The harbor district of Southport was known as “Port City”. A gate and a long stone wall separated the area from the rest of the city. Inside were the offices of the Harbormaster, assorted warehouses, the garrison house of the Harbor Watch, and the docks themselves. Looming over this interior wall were the twin towers of the Cathedral of Calm Waters, one of the oldest structures in the realm and one of the first erected to glory of Gaal. Directly outside of Port City were numerous stalls and shops devoted to the selling of papers, parchments, inks, scrolls, and books. Some of the brethren of the Church kept apartments here as well as various scholars and scribes that worked for the Cathedral.

The four companions gathered inside the crowded parlor of Master Talthus, a scholar from the University at Thaloc, the city of the High King. Talthus was employed by the Deacon of Southport as a scribe in exchange for access to parts of the Cathedral’s extensive library and scriptorium, access he was sure would allow him to complete his treatise on the lives of the first Deacons. The aged scholar lived in a narrow, two room apartment within walking distance of the Cathedral. His four new guests were taxing the limited comfort of the small quarters.

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Talthus puffed on a long, narrow pipe that filled the room with pungent blue smoke. Karli dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief provided by Thorgrin. The scholar stroked his long grey-brown mustaches as he pondered the Healer's question.

"The 'Tears of Vriannon'. Yes, I believe I have heard that name before. A Tumari legend, if memory serves." He smiled, revealing small, brown-stained teeth. "Yes, Tumari. Vriannon being the daughter of Vriann, if it follows the usual pattern."

"Is there anything else you can recall about it?" Karli smiled weakly, wishing the man would open a window to allow the pipe smoke to escape the small chamber. She glanced over at Lars and Thorgrin, who were fidgeting on a small couch that was too small to share, though both men were too large to sit on the floor. Piper perched on the arm of the overstuffed chair that Karli currently occupied.

The old sage spoke slowly, still in thought. "Yes, a Tumari legend. I believe the lady in question was said to be a beautiful maiden, as they always are in these tales, of course." He smiled at the insight as Piper motioned for the old man to continue. "Yes, a beautiful maiden who cried for her lost love, a love lost to war. The legend says that she cried even as she died, and beyond. Crying still, for all the Tumari know." Talthus chuckled. "Such a whimsical people, our northern cousins."

"Was she real?" Thorgrin resettled himself on the uncomfortable seat and gave Lars a cross look, as the big man refused to yield any of the couch's territory.

Talthus shrugged. "Hard to say. I could do some research into the tale, if you wish. Though it will interfere with my duties and with my other studies. I would need fair compensation for my work, of course." His smile tightened as his eyes narrowed, taking in the companion's road-stained clothes.

Karli shook her head. "I'm afraid we're only in Southport for the evening."

The old man rose, smiling. "Then I'm afraid I can be of no more use to you and the hour grows late. It is time for my supper. Men of my age are firmly ensconced in our habits, I'm afraid."

The companions bid the scholar good day as Thorgrin deposit a few iron Commons on the man's desk.

As they ventured back to the White Horse, Lars sighed heavily. "No treasure."

Karli patted his shoulder. "No, but we know a little more than we did."

"Looks like the best thing we can do is to continue north," Piper said. "If it is a Tumari legend, more people may have heard it the further north we go."

"And there is still Newcastle, as well," Thorgrin added.

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“Great. We’re looking for some no-treasure holding, crybaby, undead, Tumari princess.”
Lars growled.

True to his word, Piper performed at the White Horse, to the enjoyment of everyone in the common room. Karli felt herself thinking back to those nights in the common room at the Blue Wyvern, back in Attis, when Piper came to town after his wanderings with new songs and news of the surrounding lands. All of the companions went to bed humming the minstrel’s songs and laughing at his jokes. Even Lars’ humor improved after he consumed a few ales and engaged in a contest of strength with a local longshoreman.

That night, as Karli settled into sleep, she thought about the girl at the heart of the tale that she and her companion chased. *What could make a girl so sad that even death was no release from her pain? As sleep descended upon her another thought slid into her consciousness: What would the Dark Lady want with the tears of such a girl?*