

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

The following morning passed relatively quickly and without much fuss. Shortly after the early morning sun rose above the inn's roof, the four companions settled their bill with Master Barleykeep and made their way to the Red Tun. Many of the faire vendors were stirring with the dawn, readying their stalls for the commerce of a new day. The air of the city still held the sweet scent of joyful anticipation that can only come from a harvest faire--Karli was surprised to find that the feeling was much the same whether she was in a large city like Southport or a country village like Attis. At the Tun, they met Lady Whitheron's entourage, who had just finished arranging themselves into travel formation. Sergeant Garvis glared at the smaller troupe but said nothing until he gave the order to march. Despite the crowds still filling the streets for the faire, the sheer size of the company allowed them to make a wedge through the throngs and make their way out of the city gates without much incident.

The countryside was beautiful, especially radiant in the brisk air of autumn. The road wound through dense forests of gold, red, orange, and green. A gentle wind with barely a hint of winter stirred leaves that skittered across the flattened plain of the road and crunched under hoof and boot. Piper whistled a merry tune called "The Baker's Wife", a well-known taverner about a woman whose disposition was so cheery that she allowed all manner of unseemly behavior to go on in her home under her very nose. Though she knew the lyrics, having heard them on many a late night at the Blue Wyvern, Karli was glad the bard merely whistled the tune instead of singing it aloud in sober daylight.

Night, on the other hand, turned the air from brisk to chill. Karli and her companions once again gathered outside the Lady Whitheron's camp, huddled close around a small fire for warmth.

"I do miss the beds in Southport," Piper sighed wistfully as he put down his bedroll.

"For the prices we should have gotten room service," grumbled Lars.

As Karli settled into her blankets she yawned. "How many more days until we get to Newcastle, do you think?"

Thorgrin poked at the fire with a long stick. "Five or six days. We're travelling much slower than I usually do so it's hard to say for certain. No more than six days, though."

"Have you been to Newcastle, Lars?" Karli asked.

The large man fidgeted a bit with his gear and mumbled into his pack. "Yeah. A bit. It's been a long time."

Karli frowned at the apparent discomfort the subject brought to the usually lively mercenary and dropped it. "Well, I'm beat. Wake me for my watch."

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Blessed with pleasant weather and a quiet road, the next two days and nights passed much the same. Even Sergeant Garvis seemed content to ignore Piper instead of antagonizing him and Lars seemed content to do the same for the pugnacious sergeant.

As the company completed its third day on the road from Southport, they were brought up short by a sizeable encampment that had established itself in a clearing within a stone's throw of the road. There looked to be about fifty people in all, traveling in three box wagons, several carts, and a handful of horses. A string of goats gnawed at their bindings from the back of one of the carts and chickens had apparently been given run of the camp. The people were dressed in threadbare, yet colorful, traveling clothes and had skin the color of creamed tea. Women, young and old, wore colorful scarves woven with garish designs over their long, dark hair. Children ran about, challenging the chickens for dominion over the site. Most of the men sported thick dark mustaches and carried long, curved knives and cudgels on their belts. They gathered in front of the wagons, eyeing the armed escort on the road with wary suspicion.

"The traveling folk!" The excitement in Lars' smile shattered his usually gruff exterior. "I bet they have an old woman in there!"

Thorgrin grinned. "I imagine. They may keep her in a box."

Lars turned to the Herald, frowning. "What do you mean by that?"

Thorgrin's eyes widened in innocence. "Nothing, friend Lars. Nothing at all."

The mercenary grunted and spat. "Anyways, they may have an old woman in there. One that tells fortunes. They always know stuff you need."

"You mentioned that you and they had an understanding." Karli motioned toward the travelers' camp on the opposite side of the road as Garvis oversaw his men's preparations of their own.

"Well, yes," Lars rubbed his jaw and smiled ruefully. "We both have a respect for the road and what it can bring. Trouble. Fun. Fortune. Misery. They usually warm up to me when I visit their camps."

Piper sniffed. "Warm up to your coin, more likely."

Karli had heard of such people, wandering across the kingdom doing odd jobs or trading from town to town. Most were descended from a people across the sea, one of the many lands of the Empire from which Karli's ancestors had fled hundreds of years past. The traveling folk were known to be shrewd traders. However, it was said by some that they stole from the townsfolk they did business with. And that they stole children to keep and train as thieves...or worse. They worshipped strange gods--if they worshipped any at all. And, by all accounts, the traveling folk brought nothing but trouble wherever their wagons stopped. Most folks believed that you could not trust a people that could make no

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home of their own. Why else would they constantly wander if they didn't make trouble for themselves? As for Karli, she had heard many of the same things told of the Tumari and she had met enough Tumari to know that all such stories weren't true. Well, at least it wasn't true of the few Tumari she knew.

Karli turned to the minstrel. "I'd have thought you above such assumptions, being one of our 'northern cousins' and all."

The minstrel had the grace to blush. "Well. In their case, some of what they say is true. They have queer notions regarding other people's property."

"How do you mean," Thorgrin asked.

"Well, for one, they'll set up their camps anywhere they please, regardless of fences or banners. And if you try to tell them that someone owns that land, that they can't just park there big-as-they-please, they'll just blink at you with those big dark eyes of theirs and say 'How can so-and-such own the land? Do they think to pack their wagons with earth?' And his fellows will laugh and just carry on as if *you're* the crazy one." Piper pursed his lips. "Queer folk. But they play a lively tune, I'll give them that."

Lars grunted. "As if you never camped on some lordling's acreage without his permission, minstrel. Who that travels the Road hasn't?" His gruff voice managed to gild the term 'Road' with a capital letter while sounding lofty as a sage. "Besides, I ain't ever had any coin taken by the traveling folk what I didn't give them." He eyed the minstrel with an appraising glance. "I'm going to take any insult to them as an insult to me, bard." He clenched his large-knuckled hands meaningfully.

Piper bowed low, without even a whiff of mockery--at least as far as Karli could tell. "My apologies, Master Lars."

The mercenary just grunted and continued unpacking his kit.

By the time the party had set up their camp, the sun had begun to sink below the tree line. Fires were lit across the road and music filled the air. Some of the men sat around a burning brazier and played high-pitched stringed instruments, like miniature lyres, as well as pipes and dulcimers and fiddles. Women danced with each other in tight circles, their movements lively and graceful, as others clapped in time and laughed and shouted words in a tongue unfamiliar to Karli's ear. The music was infectious and soon the Healer felt her feet tapping of their own accord. She found that the others were similarly affected.

"Let's go over there!" Lars said and took Karli by the arm. He had removed his sword belt but still carried his iron dagger.

Thorgrin looked wistfully across the road. "They do look like they are having a good time."

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Piper shook his head. "I can hear the music just fine from here. I, for one, can resist the Nighter's call."

At the mention of the fey creature, Lars paused to spit and circle his eye with his forefinger. "Nighters don't have anything to do with the traveling folk." He frowned and rubbed the hilt of his iron dagger. "At least, I've never seen them about at the same time."

Karli ignored the mercenary's musings and narrowed her eyes at the minstrel. "Suit yourself. I don't know anything about a nighter or whatever." She put her hands on her hips and cocked an eyebrow at him. "In fact, I just might dance." She grasped Lars' escorting arm and started to lead him across the road.

Throgrin grinned at the dumbstruck Piper (who, in turn, let his jaw dangle beneath his nose), shrugged his shoulders and followed his friends to the traveler camp.

Piper shut his open mouth and sighed. "Its song lures you into dangerous water, you silly girl," he muttered. But he stubbornly stayed on their side of the road.

As the three approached the traveler camp, Karli could smell the aroma of stewed meat and spices rising from the wagons. The music, so gay and so fast, lifted her spirits. She walked in a cloud of wonder and readiness for fun. So it came as a shock when three men emerged from the growing shadows in front of them to block their way to the camp.

The men each fingered the long, curved knives they wore on colorful sashes at their waists. Thick mustaches hid their mouths so that Karli could not tell whether they smiled or frowned at them, but the hardness of their eyes made her suspect it was the latter. One man, whose thick dark hair was streaked with grey, took the three in with his eyes; deep, dark, and treacherous eyes--much like a Nighter's pool. His gaze lingered on Lars' dagger. Coming to a decision, he looked the big man in the eye and murmured. "You do business with the *Manush é Drom*?"

His voice was deep and gruff with an accent strange to Karli's ear. She gulped and gripped Lars' arm tighter. The big man shrugged and said, "Sure, the manshee drum. Sounds good. Do you have a old woman, too?"

The three men looked at each other, confusion clouding their faces. They murmured to the leader in their own language until he motioned for them to be still. He turned back to Lars and smiled.

"Old woman? Yes, you seek fortune, yes? The *drabarni*, yes?"

Lars narrowed his eyes. "If that means 'fortune teller', then yes."

The man nodded. "Lonna, she tell you true. You have coins?"

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Lars patted his tunic. "I do. But the fortune first."

The man chuckled, then his compatriots followed suit. "You must pay little now, little later, no?"

The mercenary pursed his lips and then nodded as he removed his pouch from beneath his tunic. "Very well. How much?"

The traveler man and Lars haggled like horse traders on the cost of the fortune, finally settling on five bronze pieces first and five more after the fortune was told. Karli could feel the eyes of the other men on her and gripped Lars' arm tighter.

The traveler man turned to her and smiled; it was a very warm and inviting smile. "And your lady. She wish to see Lonna?" He gently took one of her hands from Lars' forearm and kissed the top of her knuckles. His whiskers tickled. Lars just looked at her.

"Um, no. No thank you, Master..." She trailed off, realizing she never heard his name.

He clasped a fist to his heart and closed his eyes. "*Te merav*, please excuse rudeness." He bowed his head curtly. "I am Spiro, son of Palo."

Karli dropped a quick curtsy. "I am Karli Rowantree. I am pleased to meet you, Master Spiro."

Thorgrin returned the man's curt bow. "And I am Thorgrin Redthorn. We simply wished to share your fire as fellow travelers and listen to your music."

Spiro nodded. "Then you welcome for both. Come." As he started leading them toward the traveler camp, Karli realized that the music had stopped during their exchange. Now it began again with renewed vigor. Spiro led them to the centermost fire where folks shifted aside to give her and Thorgrin a place to sit on the large wooden beams that everyone seemed to be resting on. Before she realized what was happening, women and men embraced her warmly, kissing her cheeks, and she had a warm wooden bowl of stew in her hands. Glancing at Thorgrin, she saw that he had been given the same treatment, though some of the younger women seemed to linger around his end of the beam.

Karli frowned at the sinking feeling in her stomach at the sight of the girls. *What is that about?*, she chided herself. *He's handsome and a stranger. Of course they'd be curious about him.* But why did it seem to irritate her so? She turned toward the musicians and gave a start as she looked into the eyes of a young man, standing just outside the firelight, the flames reflecting prettily off of his dark eyes. *Seems Thorgrin's not the only interesting stranger in camp, tonight* she thought, amused.

Spiro led Lars to one of the box wagons on the outskirts of the camp. "Wait, friend. I ask her to see you."

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Lars gripped the smaller man's shoulder and Spiro's knees buckled slightly. "If she doesn't see me, I get my coins back."

Spiro nodded. "Yes. Course, course." The smaller man stood on the short stair that led to the door on the back of the wagon and knocked three times. Lars could barely make out a voice murmuring from within. Spiro conversed with the voice for a minute in the traveler's tongue and then motioned for him to come forward.

"Come, friend. She see you. She see you."

The door opened to a cramped space awash in color. The box was filled from top to bottom with various curtains, cushions, and scarves bearing garish, and often clashing, designs. Small candle sconces were lit about the box, their small flames in danger of catching cloth aflame at any moment. A woman of middle years with unadorned long brown hair sat on cushions at the center of the room. Before her sat a polished wooden plank set on the floor like a table. She motioned for Lars to kneel and sit on the floor cushions across from her.

The big man settled his bulk down into the wagon; he could feel the entire structure sway under his weight. Spiro shut the door behind him.

Now that he was inside the candlelight of the wagon, Lars could see that this woman was different from the other travelers he had dealt with. For one, she was pretty young for a old woman, barely old enough to be his mother. The woman he had gotten his last fortune from was a wizened old crone. For another, her eyes, unlike most of the other travelers, were a light blue, almost silver, color. The travelers he had met were dark of both hair and eye. He circled his eye with his fingers and spat.

"I am Lonna." The woman's voice was deep and musical. She spoke with the same accent as Spiro. "You come to seek *tachiben*?"

"If that means my fortune, then yes."

She reached from beneath her cushions and pulled out a deck of stiffened paper tiles. The back of the cards were ringed with strange symbols surrounding the central motif of a dancing goat-legged creature sporting an enormous male member. She set the deck face-down on the plank and motioned for Lars to give her his hand. He did and she lashed out, quick as a snake, and pricked his hand with a needle and then slammed his bleeding palm onto the deck.

"We must...attune...the cards to you. Make them ready to tell your secrets."

Lars felt the hairs on the back of his neck grow stiff and he used his other hand to circle his eye and spit again. Lonna looked at him distastefully. "Please stop with the spitting, yes?"

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“As long as you stop with the pricking and the bleeding, yes?”

After a moment, she lifted his hand, which Lars cradled and rubbed, and began to shuffle the deck. Her gaze discomfited the large man--he found he couldn't watch her as she shuffled. For her part, Lonna stared at Lars without blinking. Finally, she laid a card on the plank.

“The Wheel. See how it turns...” And Lars did see it turn, turning upon the card, like the constellation in the night sky that shared its name, shining and turning in a field of darkness. “Chance seems to favor you...for now.” He saw three arrows diverting from a single point, like on his medallion, shining red in the darkness beyond the card. The image flashed and was gone in the blink of his eye. She laid another card upon the plank.

“Five Cups. Return what they have given and you will find your destiny much improved.” On the card Lars saw five chalices rotating on a dark field. His mouth was dry and his throat rough. “Who are they?” Lonna gave no answer but laid another card upon the plank.

“The Priestess.” Lars saw a nude woman resting against a tree, mountains rising in the background. Its roots and branches wound about to make never-ending circles. “Your destiny is entwined. The mountain ash, its roots find naught but reeds and points to the north.”

“The Knight of Swords.” The card bore a drawing of a powerfully built man in spiked armor wielding a mighty sword. He used the blade to cleave a bound chest. “You will find much power...for good or ill, I cannot say. Many secrets will you unravel.” She laid another card upon the plank.

“The Fool.” A man wearing a bed sheet as a cloak danced on the prow of a boat. The man's head was large and unwieldy, too big for his scrawny neck. His moon-round face bore a foolish grin that threatened to split his head in two. Lars started to grow dizzy watching the stars turn in the night sky behind him. “I see you on the sea, gazing to a distant shore to a house made of stars.” Lonna's voice grew hoarse, her eyes were red-rimmed and tired, but she laid another card upon the plank.

“The Knight of Stars.” An armored warrior stood in a field of flame. His armor gleamed in the light, except for the shield of deepest black he bore on his is arm. “Beware the black shield that purifies with flame!” The woman closed her eyes, as if in pain and drew another card, placing it upon the plank.

“The Empress.” A matronly woman sat upon a throne while seven circles twirled above her crowned head. “Circles upon circles. You will answer the call. Round and round until you face a great destiny.” Sighing with relief, she drew one final card and placed it upon the plank.

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“The Hanged Man.” A large man dangled from a tight rope, his hands glistened with a coating of fresh blood and his face turned away from view on a broken neck. “The blood of vengeance will be on your hands. But there is always a price to be paid.” She sat back on her cushions, rubbing her face and breathing as if she had run up a long hill. “That is all I see for you this night, traveler.”

Lars gulped and nodded. He rose a little shakily and stumbled out of the wagon, shutting the door behind him. As he made his way back to his own camp, he muttered and pawed at all of his various charms. He also spat several times along the way.

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The musicians played a mournful song. Its melody tore at Karli’s heart. Of course, the spiced wine that the travelers favored probably softened her resolve a bit as well. Both she and Thorgrin swayed with the rest of the audience as they sang along to what was obviously a song of love lost and never regained. The two Darchanese did not know the words but felt the loss as deeply as any traveler. At least, that was Karli’s opinion at this moment. As she hummed and swayed, the Healer spotted Lars staggering away from the wagons and heading back towards their camp. She tugged on Thorgrin’s sleeve. “Lars is heading back. We probably should as well.”

The Herald nodded and rose. Then sat back down again. Then rose again. Nodding once, now sure of his footing, Thorgrin extended a hand to Karli. She leaned on the Herald more than she wanted to admit as they waved their farewells to the traveling folk and stumbled back to their own bedrolls.

The next day came early, at least to Karli’s way of thinking. Her head buzzed and she suffered a minor, but persistent headache for most of the morning. The sun also seemed to be particularly bright. Piper kept chuckling every time Karli caught him staring at her. She frowned and decided that if Piper wanted to laugh at her suffering, he could walk on his own today. Thorgrin bore his pain quietly, but shared compassionate and rueful grins with Karli. He must have felt the same wine-borne effects. Karli thought that with the right herbs she could do something about this but the headache was driving her to too much distraction to think. She would ponder the problem another day.

Lars was decidedly silent as well. When the company stopped for a midday meal, Karli approached the normally talkative mercenary. “So did you get your fortune told? Will we be meeting any buxom maidens with chests of gold upon the road?”

The big warrior looked affronted. “Are you crazy? I’m not telling you what Mistress Lonna saw.” Now she was *Mistress* Lonna? Karli grew intrigued.

“Why ever not?”

“Because if I tell you, the good stuff won’t happen and the bad stuff certainly will. Don’t you know anything, Healer?”

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Karli sniffed and turned on her heel. “Apparently not,” she muttered as she went to get a drink from a nearby spring. There she found Thorgrin apparently engaging in some sort of prayer before taking a drink. He chuckled. “You never know who these things may belong to, after all.”

The Healer chuckled as she took her own drink and filled her skin with cool water. “No, I suppose not.”

Karli awoke the next morning in high spirits, if a bit nervous. According to Thorgrin, they would arrive at the gates of Newcastle by nightfall. By the time the twins moons rose, little Karli Rowantree of Attis would be reporting to the castle of the Duke of Southlund to request lodging for the night as a guest of a royal Herald. The thought brought a smile to her face and a flutter to her stomach.

As she packed her gear for the day’s walk, her ruminations on the future brought her up short. Frowning, she approached Thorgrin.

“Um, Thorgrin? Am I to be presented to His Grace in my dirty, travel-worn clothes?”

The Herald grinned and hoisted his pack upon his shoulder. “Not necessarily. When we first arrive we’ll probably be housed in the guest’s wing and will see only servants. We should have time for a brief shopping trip before the formal presentation is made.”

Karli considered the small amount of coin she had. “Well, that’s good to know. At any rate I can launder and repair my old things if needed.” She sighed and Thorgrin clasped her shoulder. “You’ll be fine, Karli. Just be yourself.” The Healer nodded and continued packing her things.

The afternoon turned warm. Most of the men shuffled off their cloaks and Karli offered Ginger’s back to carry them. As the troupe climbed a tree-covered hill, Karli could see towers in the distance ahead, the autumn sun gleaming off of granite and red clay tiles. The Healer smiled as she imagined herself twirling in a brightly colored gown to courtly music, a faceless man turning her about a lavish ballroom...

“Stand and deliver!”

Karli’s daydream shattered as she jerked to a halt with the rest of the company. A young man with a dirty rag tied about his face stood in the road just ahead of Sergeant Garvis. He brandished a wooden club with horseshoe nails driven through its head.

Garvis took a step forward while his men circled Lady Whitheron, creating a spiky circle of spearheads that surrounded the noblewoman. “I think not, ruffian. Stand aside. You block the passage of a member of the ducal household.”

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“Then she’ll probably have a fair bit of coin, no? Stand and deliver, I say, or my bowmen will whittle your men down to kindling.”

Karli heard two high-pitched whistles come from the surrounding woods followed by the thud of an arrow bouncing off the packed earth of the road and the thunk of another piercing the flesh of one of the guards surrounding Lady Whitheron. The man gasped and dropped to his knees. And slowly, like the ninth pin in a brace of bowlers, tipped forward onto his face.

The Healer twirled as a familiar “HA-ha!” drew her attention to Lars, who bounded into the trees with his sword raised high. She turned again as Piper ran and leaped into a clump of brush on his side of the road. Sergeant Garvis rushed forward with his cudgel and shield to engage the bandits’ spokesman while the soldiers tightened their circle around the Lady. The maiden’s horse pranced and snorted; though the Lady seemed to maintain a fair amount of control over the beast. Thorgrin stepped forward with his staff and told Karli to “Get down and stay safe!”

Another arrow thudded into the road, followed by a low grunt from the direction Lars had ran. An arrow suddenly appeared in Garvis’ leg as if placed there by magic; he quickly dropped to one knee. Karli pulled her moonblade as the sounds of struggle emerged from the brush that Piper had cast himself into. Garvis raised his shield weakly as the bandit leader gripped his club in both hands, preparing for a blow clearly meant to knock the Sergeant’s head from his shoulders.

“No!” Piper’s yell drew Karli’s gaze back to the brush where the minstrel was standing with his hand outstretched toward Garvis and the bandit. The hairs on the back of her neck stuck up like needles and a bright flash erupted between the bard’s hand and the bandit. The light, hot and iridescent, struck the other man hard in the chest, knocking him off of his feet and backwards about a foot. He landed on his back, hard enough to push a grunt out of him before he laid still.

All eyes turned toward the minstrel. His face turned an unusual shade of crimson and Karli recalled that this was the first time she had ever seen the man blush. He reached down and grasped another man by the tunic and dragged him out of the brush. The unconscious man gripped a short bow loosely in his hand.

Lars emerged from the woods carrying another man on his shoulder and gripped a similar bow in the same hand as his sword. “Look what I found!” he called as he flipped his prisoner off of his shoulder and plopped him down onto the road. The man had a deep gash across his chest but was still breathing.

The soldiers loosened their ring about the Lady as Hronthar stepped forward to help the Sergeant to his feet. The Lady deftly dismounted and started calming the beast with pats and coos. Karli jogged forward with her pack and examined the first soldier that was hit. His eyes were glazed and no life beat in his chest or neck. “What was his name?” she asked, holding back tears. Hronthar answered her. “Thaer. A good lad.” She closed her

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eyes and took a deep breath. *First help those you still can. Worry about the rest later.* She opened her eyes and made her way to the fallen sergeant.

“We’ll have to get that arrow out first...” she murmured and motioned for Hronthar to lay his commander down gently on the flat road.

She looked closely at Garvis’ face. His forehead was sweaty and his eyes were closed tight. He panted like a hound after a long chase. Karli checked the wound in his leg and sighed in relief as she realized that he would recover; the arrow only pierced the fleshy part of his calf. She then gently wiped his brow and smiled gently at him. “This is going to hurt a great deal.”

Garvis nodded once and growled, “It’s barbed.” Karli felt the blood drain from her face. The injured man gritted his teeth and looked away. “Do what’s needed.”

The soldiers crowded around the Healer and her charge. Hronthar continued to hold his sergeant down and frowned at the men. “Go and secure those prisoners...now!” The soldiers broke up and followed their orders.

First she tied his leg off to slow the bleeding. Then she reached down and silently counted to herself. On ‘three’ she pushed the shaft of the arrow deeper into the sergeant’s leg until the barbed point emerged from the other side of his calf, narrowly avoiding the bone. Garvis ground his teeth and moaned, squirming beneath Hronthar’s grip. After taking a deep breath and repositioning herself to get the proper leverage, she broke the end of the arrow’s shaft off and cast it away. Then quickly, before she lost her nerve, she pulled the arrowhead until the remainder of the arrow emerged from the bloody hole in Garvis’ leg.

Releasing a breath she didn’t realize she held, Karli then reached into her bag for needle and thread to seal the wounds. She motioned with her head to the soldiers who were tying up the two men that Piper and Lars had disabled. The leader still lay at the head of the road, untouched. “You might need one of the men to cut you down a crutch.”

Hronthar repeated the order and one of the men dashed into the forest with a hatchet from Hoplin’s cart. The old man had only just emerged from his hiding place beneath the cart’s narrow bench seat.

As the Healer closed the Sergeant’s wounds, the soldiers gently placed Thae into the bed of the cart with all of his belongings. They placed his blanket over his face and murmured prayers for Gaal to judge him worthy to dine in his great Hall in Valaar. Piper sat on the side of the road resting his head in his hands. Lars eyed the minstrel suspiciously as he cleaned his blade.

Thorgrin approached Hronthar, who clearly had taken charge of the soldiery. “The man Lars brought in is injured but alive. Piper clubbed the other one in the back of the head

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pretty good and he'll live as well." He pointed at the still-prone leader in the road. "What about him?"

Hronthar made the sign of the Wyrn and looked at the minstrel. "I don't know."

"If he's alive," Thorgrin stated with slow patience, "then we'll need to bring him in to face the Duke's justice."

"And if he's cursed?" one of the soldier's asked. Alden, Thorgrin thought his name was. "I don't want to touch a cursed man."

"Give me a moment and I'll check him." Karli applied an herb paste to help cleanse the wound and dull the pain and wrapped it all tightly in gauzy cloth. "You'll be alright, Sergeant Garvis. But you won't be attending any dances for a while." The gruff commander nodded and grimaced as Hronthar helped him to his feet. Then the Healer rose, straightened her clothes, and marched to unconscious body ahead of them.

After a cursory examination she announced, "He's bruised, slightly burned, but still alive. I think we should bind him with the others."

The soldiers looked to Hronthar and Garvis. The sergeant gave a tired nod and the men moved forward to claim their prisoner. "While you're at it," he continued, "bind the sorcerer as well."

All heads turned toward the minstrel, who looked up with tears in his eyes. "Sorcerer?" he croaked.

Garvis stood as straight as he could on his new crutch. "We all saw what you did, warlock. I'm turning you into the Church as soon as we pass through the gates."

Thorgrin stepped forward. "Now, Sergeant. I don't think any of us know for certain what happened here."

"Don't try to play me for a fool, Herald. How can you deny what you saw with your own eyes?" Suspicious eyes continued to follow the minstrel who stood silently, a bald expression of fear on his face.

The Herald cocked his head. "With all due respect, Sergeant, you were facing the fallen man in the heat of battle. I'm not sure what you think you saw. Strange things happen in fields of conflict. But I think that we can all agree that whatever did happen, it saved your life. I think that's worth a bit of trust."

The Sergeant harrumphed and rolled his eyes. "Trust? In a Tumari vagabond sorcerer? You are mad. I will make sure His Grace hears of this."

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“I’m sure that you will. However, I do not mean for you to trust him. Trust me. I will be presenting him to the Duke and will present a full report of our journey. You are welcome to do the same, of course. Let the Duke’s justice prevail, not that of common men. In the meantime, Piper will be my responsibility.”

“Sergeant Garvis,” the Lady called from the center of camp where she combed her now-calm mount. “The Herald speaks sense.”

The Sergeant eyed the minstrel, the Lady, and then the Herald. Shifting and grimacing, he snorted. “Fine. Let it be upon your head, not mine.” He motioned for Hronthar to rally the men. Then he hitched himself up into Hoplin’s cart and gave the order to resume their march.

Karli and the others fell into the rear of the train, as usual. Lars maintained a distance between himself and the minstrel while Karli took Piper’s arm patted it gently. “Are you alright?”

Piper sighed heavily and took Karli’s hand. “I’m not sure.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not here. Not now.”

Karli nodded and continued walking with her friend in silence.

The entire troupe maintained a somber air as they passed through the gates of the city of Newcastle while the sun faded beyond the line of golden-leaved trees that met the ambivalent road.