

about 13,000 words

THE CHIMES AT ECHO POND
By Bob Lambrecht

Chapter One:
The Storm Gods

I awoke to a huge crash of sword against shield that seemed to split the very fabric of the sky and shake the foundations of the palace. My eyes were drawn to the window and suddenly it filled with light. Then the sky was split again with a crash that was even louder than the one that had woken me. Into the following silence rushed, whimpering. I realized then that another battle of the Storm Gods had begun. But why was there whimpering? The Gods didn't whimper. And if they did, it was not in the hearing of men. If the Gods were taken now to whimpering, would that portend good, or ill? The King would want to know. I wondered if I would be forced to invent a reason for this unseemly behavior of the Storm Gods on the spot when the King required my thoughts in the morning. Or worse, sent to ask the Oracle at Echo Pond; prod it to invent something reasonable for a change.

There was suddenly a clash so violent that it nearly threw me from my bed, and into that tumult was confused the sound of someone crying out. This was beyond knowledge and reason, the Gods didn't cry out, ever.

Then the whimpering continued.

I tried to clear my mind. Unsure if the dark clouds the gods used to veil their presence had somehow confused my reason. The Gods may fight from time to time, but they never showed weakness. If they were come as close to us as that, what did it mean?

I sat up a little in bed and looked around the room. The night was very warm, and yet, I was shivering. As my head cleared of sleep's cobwebs the whimpering drew nearer, almost as if one of the Gods were falling toward Earth. I shook my head at the impossibility of that notion and looked deeper into the gloom, almost steadily lit by the light that filled the window with each clash of arms, for a more likely explanation.

There, in the far corner, behind the tall screen, on her small bed, would lay my young servant, Grizzy. Maybe it was Grizzy who was whimpering and not one of the gods. That would be best. One wanted no changes in the relations of god and man. The King wouldn't like it.

"Grizzy, are you crying?"

No answer, but the whimpering stopped. Then into that sudden calm rushed another clash of the God's weapons, and another cry, sounding muffled this time. As if someone had

stuffed a pillow to her face. That someone could only be Grizzy.

"Grizzy, what is the matter child?"

Still no answer, "Grizzy, if that's you crying, you'd better get yourself over here and tell me what is wrong. Is it a tooth?"

When she still didn't answer I said loudly, "Grizzy."

At last the child appeared from around the side of the screen that protected her modesty. She stood for a moment wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffing, then started across the room, until another violent clash of the God's swords put a hitch in her step. She stopped and stood as still as a sculpture in the Queen's Garden until there was a moment's peace, then hurried across the room to my bedside.

At long last Grizzy was beside the bed, looking down at me, as if waiting patiently for me to add to whatever misery she was suffering. I looked up at the poor thing and decided that was the last thing I wanted to do. I thought that she might have a flu or something.

I asked her calmly, having resolved to match her patience with some of my own, "Grizzy, what is it?" She groaned and knelt down beside the bed, laid her slender arms on the sheet, and dropped her head on them.

"Grizzy, what the in the Seven Hells are you so upset about, are you ill?" I heard irritation creep into my voice; patience has never been one of my virtues.

She didn't answer.

I held my breath for the full count "Is it the storm, is that it?" I saw her head slide back and forth in what might be some sort of nod.

"Grizzy, you've heard these arguments among the Gods before," I told her reasonably.

She lifted her head, but her face was obscured by her long brown hair. I reached over and parted it off to the side and looked into her face. She looked miserable. Her large brown eyes, almost hidden by her long lashes, started to tear up

I waited for a heart's beat of silence between the warring gods and asked, "Grizzy, what is it?"

She answered quietly, but still in the singsong voice characteristic of her people, "This fighting frightens me, I hate it."

Her race was indeed known to be somewhat timid, and in our part of the world, exceedingly rare and not easily captured. But when cornered, usually came along peacefully rather than put up a fight. They made for exceptional

servants, very deferential, and almost obnoxiously cheerful as a rule.

I rolled over on my side and looked into her face.
"It's just the way they are, they won't hurt you."

Almost before the words were out of my mouth there was a clash so violent that it nearly frightened me. It went on and on until I thought the fabric of the heavens must finally tear.

When finally it ended, Grizzy was crying and trembling like a small child. I reached over and put my hand on her hair, felt its soft coolness between my fingers as I stroked it. Glad that I had Grizzy to comfort, rather than lying in bed alone wondering about this new escalation of the battling gods, I reached down and grabbed her under the arm and pulled her up on the bed, "Come here Grizzy you fool."

She came willingly enough to lay beside me with her head on my chest, whimpering in small hitches. I stroked her long brown hair. And as each clash of the Gods broke upon us, we held each other all the tighter.

We laid for a long time listening to the ebb and flow of battle. After a while Grizzly seemed to fall into a fitful sleep. I held onto her and wondered at the Gods for the day of her capture. It had been on a late afternoon, ten years ago this last spring I believe, that I had been riding along in the train of the King. The King had been summoned to the Oracle at Echo Pond and we had left the castle early in the morning, and in some haste, since the Oracle did not like to be kept waiting.

The road to Echo Pond is long-and the forest was hotter and quieter than usual that day. I had almost fallen asleep on my saddle when a child rushed out from the cover of the trees and ran headlong into the side of my horse. The child was upon us so fast that even the horse was startled, jumping to sidestep the intruder and nearly knocking me off its back, so rudely had the encounter woken us.

On the child's heels came blundering out of the wood three wildmen, carrying spears and wearing nothing but animal skins on their filthy bodies. The only people in the glade not surprised by this encounter appeared to be the King's Archers, and the wildmen were each sporting several arrows in a trice.

The King, who'd been riding directly in front of me, turned in his saddle and cursed the Captain of the Guard roundly that wildmen, had gotten so close to his person. Then looked at me and asked, "What have you there Jamie?"

"It appears to be a child, Sire."

"I can see that. Of what sort is it?"

I tried to remember what I'd seen of the blur that had rushed at my horse. "I believe it's a small, half naked, girl, of about eight or ten summers."

The King didn't appear at all satisfied with my answer, even though I'd given him all the information I had at hand. He continued to look at me tiredly. It was hot in the glade and I felt his temper growing with the heat.

I looked away from him and down at the child standing beside my horse, clinging to the hem of my robe. "Girl, look up here, let me see your face," I demanded.

Then, in a more kindly voice I added, "Your assailants have gone where they can't hurt you. You needn't fear them...or me."

The child slowly lifted her head to look up at me and I saw the big brown eyes and delicate features of a race I recognized as kindred to mine.

"It's a Jolie, Sire."

"And how did you run afoul of those swine?" I wondered to myself as I looked over to the dead wildmen whose bodies the Guard was searching.

The King must have been wondering the same thing because after a moment's reflection he said, "A Jolie, we must bring her along then, lest she again find herself having difficulty surviving alone in the wild."

The King sat atop his horse considering the child, as if seeing something in his mind's eye more than a small girl. Then he looked at me shrewdly and said, "You should keep her Jamie. They're quiet, give very little trouble, make excellent servants, and you can get rid of that old hag who burns your toast most mornings."

"And you're thinking I can solve the mystery of what a Jolie is doing being chased through the forest on a hot afternoon, so far from home, and so near Echo Pond, if I take her into my service aren't you, you old rogue," I thought to myself.

I said, "Thank you sire that is a generous gift."

And indeed it was. Jolie's really do make rare and precious servants if well treated.

The King gave me another appraising look, and then dismissed the matter with a yawn and a stretch. He looked up at the sky, and into the forest. Then slowly settled his

huge, warriors frame back on his saddle, damned the Oracle under his breath and said, "Well, let's get going then."

As the King's train began to move away from us the girl's face filled with fear again. I wasn't sure if she was more afraid of being taken with us, or being left behind. So I said, "Now child, you heard the King, we must go," and lifted her off the ground to set her on the horse in front of me; where I could keep an eye on her. Fresh caught Jolie's had been known to try to escape from time to time, and I thought the King wanted news of this one, and not to hear that I'd let the thing go.

At first the King had been a little disappointed when Grizzy turned out to be nothing more interesting than a mere lost child, but he soon lost interest and moved on to other things. And Grizzy turned out to be a fine servant. I soon had no more cold teas and burnt toast for breakfast. Grizzy was what she was. And that was more or less in keeping with what I'd told the King. And if it turned out differently, well, all advisors made mistakes from time to time. It was the nature of the business.

Grizzy stirred and moaned in her sleep. I felt my lips moving over her brow as I murmured something soothing. She smiled sleepily, snuggled in closer, and it was about that

point that I too fell asleep. While outside our window, the Gods continued their loud dispute of the heavens.

I woke the next morning to see Grizzy standing over me holding my breakfast tray. I looked out the window as she set it beside the bed; the sun was shining, the air smelled clean, and was just heavy enough to give the world that slightly out of focus look that is often the ironic residue of a long night's battle of the Storm Gods. How something so awful gives rise to such peaceful mornings is something I've always marveled at.

After she set down my tray, Grizzy went to the tall wardrobe to select my clothes. I watched her going about her business while I nibbled at my breakfast. Something about last night was bothering me and I couldn't put my finger on it.

There was one thing I was sure of, and that was that after all these years of sleeping alone, having a little company in bed with me had been a comfort I'd all but forgotten.

So, while she was dressing me I said to her, "Grizzy, I think that it would be best, since it is the Season of Battle Storms, and you have become something of a ball baby, waking up important people in the night, that from now on you sleep in my bed with me. The thing is quite large. There's plenty of room for you to have a side all to yourself. You should be quite safe from storms there. That is, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all, My Lord...in fact, I'd rather," she said, staring hard at the floor.

It seemed Grizzy was still embarrassed about last night. "You've nothing to fear Grizzy. I'm not angry with you. I'm just lazy and need a good nights sleep. Crying girls disturb that. Besides," I said, trying to brighten her mood, "I thought you good company."

She looked up at me and smiled a very nice Jolian smile that filled her mouth and reached deep into her brown eyes, "Thank you My Lord, I'll do as you ask."

I nodded, having settled that. Then, something about her smile drove me to add, "And Grizzy, around here, when we're alone, you can call me Jamie."

As I crossed the God's Fountain Square on the way to the King's Chamber that unthought of *something* that had been nagging me all morning began to pester the back of my

mind again, like an itch that had so misplaced itself that it couldn't be scratched.

When I arrived at the anteroom to the King's Chambers the pair of my Juniors were already there, gossiping about what last night's battle might portend for the future of the kingdom.

Jospera, a nice enough old fellow, who only lacked for ambition was saying, "That was a rare one last night."

"These terrible battles among the Storm Gods have all the makings of trouble for us if they don't soon stop. We must do our duty and find a way to bring peace among the Storm Gods or they'll rot the harvest again with all this rain," replied Sara, an intelligent, elderly woman we'd taken as apprentice.

She turned to me as I was closing the door and said, "Master, I think that we must ask the King to consult the Oracle at Echo Pond. It's long since we did and these storms are wreaking havoc with the crops."

"The advice of the Oracle is as expensive as it is worthless," I replied without thinking. "The King will not go for it unless the entire kingdom demands that he bear the expense." Then more sure of my ground, I added, "With the cost of the war, I doubt he'd do it even then."

Sara had come to her station by an unusual road, and even after continued to be an unusual apprentice. During the years that she had been midwife in all of the first Queen Lily's confinements, she'd proved to the Queens satisfaction such a shrewd common sense that the Queen had been moved to recommend her to me. And, fortunately, the Queen had been right. Even before Sara had learned her letters, not an easy task for one of her age, her insights into the life of the kingdom had proved valuable. Not only did I respect her intelligence, and the wholehearted effort and long hours she'd put into her books, it was helpful for Jospira and I to have someone to talk to who didn't share the prejudices of the ruling class. We'd been getting stale and she saw things in a much different light. But she still carried the native superstitions of her own class. And the idea that the King would empty the treasury to consult the Oracle to calm the Storm Gods was such nonsense that I was quickly impatient with her this morning.

Right now she was aghast that I'd called the Oracle's pronouncements worthless. "Master, the Oracle is hardly worthless; if one has the sagacity to interpret its meaning," she said, giving me a doubtful look.

"I don't want to go into this again," I told her. "The King is nearly here. Josperra and I will attend the King this morning. I have some papers for you to draw up, with copies. Please have them prepared before the midday meal."

Seeing her grimace, I said, "It will be good practice for you." Then I quickly told her what I required and sent her on her way. Sara, who can be a little huffy when her wind is up, slammed the door on her way out.

Josperra looked at me dryly and raised his eyebrows, "You handled that well, considering that she has a point."

The Oracle is often a sore spot in our deliberations. So, I said slowly, enunciating each word, "We will, the three of us, talk about this later. The King is now in his chambers and we are not."

With that we crossed the threshold into the King's Chambers.

It may sound odd to address someone older than I "Junior", but I am the youngest of the King's advisors, and also their chief. When the old Chief had retired, he'd insisted to the King that I be appointed to take his place. I'm not sure why he did that as he was angry with me at the time. The unfortunate state of affairs came about one afternoon while we were in his rooms in the High Tower. I'd been assisting him in his attempts to make gold from the four base elements of air, water, heat, and earth, plus a fifth he'd called energy that employed a pair of acids in a large wooden bowl. It was all very interesting, but, as usual, we'd produced nothing but brightly colored mud.

Exasperated with the whole thing, I'd said to him, "Master, I don't think this is going to work."

He'd looked over at me through his big bushy eyebrows, and exasperated himself had said, "But it has to Jamie. These are the four elements that compose all that exists. If we find the right combination of them, it will produce gold." He'd said this last with conviction.

"But sir, generations of men have been messing with dirt and fire and water and never have they produced anything but mud."

At this he smiled and said, "Jamie, that is what patience is for. The secrets of the earth must be teased from her. If it was easy, any fool in a cottage could do it. All the old maids in every village in the kingdom would be brewing gold rather than ale in their kitchens."

This was not an argument, to my mind, that the elements could be expected to care about. Why would the elements care to hide their secrets at all? To tease the patience of the Master and maintain the poverty of old widows? I thought not, but I let it go.

"But sir that is exactly the point, we tease these so-called elements day after day, and never accidentally brew ale...or anything else for that matter. Wouldn't you think that if these were actually the elements that produce all that we see, that each of our experiments would brew something? One day we'd find mercury, one day lead, one day carbuncles. We go along like each of our attempts is a miss at brewing gold. But we don't find the recipe for anything else either. We don't ever go to the King and say, "Sire, we've still not found the recipe for gold, but today our miss was fortunate in that we found a recipe for some darn pure silver, can you use that?"

The Master's face turned a bright shade of red, but in my youthful innocence I continued, "I think there is

something fundamentally wrong with the whole notion that this apparatus contains all the elements. These four miscreants, plus energy, are only, and ever will be, the harbingers of mud."

The Master treated my statements with such derision that I was sorry that I'd ever brought it up. But I did notice that after that we spent less and less time each day fiddling with the elements in the High Tower. The Master retired not long after that. And when he did he told the King that I was the only man in the kingdom worthy to take his place. The King took him at his word, and has never yet voiced any regret.

I enjoyed working my craft, but today was going long in the King's service. It was Judgment Day and the King dispensing his judgments with a patient and even hand. He took his duties as Last Arbitrator of Dispute quite seriously. I had else on my mind and only one case actually interested me. Somehow a prize apple tree had grown up on, what had turned out to be when resurveyed, the boundary

line of two neighboring farmers' lands. The two had been disputing over it for years. And now that the apples it brought forth had won a Red Ribbon at the last Turner's Fair, the farmers were ready to come to pitchforks over it. The King listened to their tale, thought about it, did not consult me, and rendered his judgment. The apples would be as they fell. If on the land of the one, he was claimant. If on the other, the opposite should be true. They might build a fence if they wished, but not disturb the tree. "If", he told them, "I hear one more word of dispute, ever, as regards this tree and its fruit, I'll cut it down myself and use it to smoke a ham."

Everyone was satisfied, but me. I'd realized what was nagging me and had found another nag toddling behind that. If I didn't know better I'd say my late, unmissed, wife had finally risen completely from her grave to haunt my waking hours, as well as the long hours of the night when sleep so often eluded me.

The first nag had resolved when I realized that Grizzy had been sleeping under that window for all of ten years and never once, in all that time, had she whimpered during a battle of the Storm Gods. It struck me as peculiar that suddenly she should: when, really she was hardly a child anymore, be weeping and shaking like the actually quite

pretty maiden now standing before the court; who's betrothed had fallen down his own well while drunk. That was the case that was now, finally moving tediously to its close while I stood in my place behind the King. Lost in my own thoughts...waiting for the Midday break.

Dowry transfer. Pretty tricky really, she won't marry the brother and the disputants...Bah

Drat Grizzy. I have to admit that I stood behind the King all morning wrestling the other nag in my mind, wondering, hoping really, that I'd been a good master to Grizzy. Was she happy in her work? Did she think to run off and be with her people again? Then find myself wondering why I was thinking about the fool girl at all...or, worse yet, looking forward to seeing her bright smile whenever the King's damnable Renderings ever came to a conclusion. Here I was the Chief Advisor and Truthseer to the King of Illumiare, vexed by the feelings of a servant.

I tried, I really did. But I couldn't put the girl out of my mind to concentrate on what the King was saying. I supposed Grizzy was happy. She never complained. Just went about her business. And then there was last night, and this morning, impulsively asking her to sleep in my bed with me. Why had I done that? I had been content to share my bed with no-one after my wife had slipped off into her quiet

oblivion. Her nitpicking ways had cured me of the need for company long before she went to whatever God would have her. But now I wondered if, after all these years alone, had I finally gotten lonely?

And Grizzy. I'd always thought of Grizzy and I more as friends than master and servant. More than once during our long years together, I'd even wondered who was master, and who was servant. In fact, with Grizzy running my life at home with her gentle firm hand, and the King ruling me as he pleased at court, it seemed almost a conceit on my part to think that I had any authority over myself at all. Maybe not an all bad thing though, I'd been so distracted and frustrated with myself this morning that if Grizzy hadn't dressed me I would have probably shown up at court in my dressing gown.

But, the question I pondered now was whether or not I was presuming on her asking for a little companionship from my friend? Would I be better to rescind the request? I knew that there were old widows in the castle who shared a chaste bed with a servant for company. But I was hardly an old widow.

I suppose I could ask Grizzy what she thought of the arrangement. But I already had asked Grizzy.

"She'd had a choice, hadn't she?" I asked myself.

As I thought about it, I realized that she hadn't seemed to mind the idea. Didn't flinch, or give me a look like I'd gone off on a wander through the moonlight. Didn't seem afraid that I was asking for anything more than a little chaste companionship.

In fact, she'd become a whole lot less gloomy after I'd mentioned the idea. Maybe the Storm Gods were getting to her. She wouldn't be the first one for that. I mean, Grizzy was always right where I wanted her when I needed something; maybe she needed more from me. Had I been selfish toward the girl? I treated her well, if rather absently. What if something between us changed? Wasn't it enough that she shared my stuffy rooms with me? Why would I need more than that? I also realized that I took her for granted. Did she feel it, was she ever lonely? It suddenly occurred to me to feel very foolish at the notion that I might have taken such a one as Grizzy for granted.

And over it all, I began to feel that I was skirting some larger issue that loomed just out of grasp.

The whole thing finally gave me a headache.

So, at the Midday Recess, I told the King that I thought it might be well to let Josperra try his hand at being on his own for the afternoon, stiffen his back, good

training for him. And I'd tend to some other business that I had. I excused myself and headed back to our, my, rooms.

I opened the door and there stood Grizzy, arranging some flowers in a vase I hadn't seen before. Flowers? Where had flowers come from? There hadn't been flowers to cross my threshold since my last and final unpleasant attachment to marital gloom had parted company with this world. But, I reasoned as I watched her fuss with the things, carefully arranging them to catch the last of the morning light, if the child wants flowers, let her have a go at keeping them.

Grizzy finally noticed that I was standing in the doorway watching her. She looked over, smiled and said, "Did you forget something? You could have sent a messenger; I'd have brought it over."

"Nice flowers. The place looks different. More color scattered about...or something?"

"I found a few small things laying around, thought we should brighten up a little. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no, have at it. Anything you want. It's your home too."

That was one of the things I'd realized half-listening to idiots squabbling all morning, if the poor child had a home, this was it.

"The thing is I have a headache in dire need of fresh air. Run down to the kitchen and have that witch of a cook set up a lunch for two in some sort of basket. I feel the need of a long walk; get out of this stuffy palace for a while."

Something in Grizzy's face changed and she said, "Are you taking that Duchess the King wants you to marry on your walk?"

I blanched. "Are you mad as well as suddenly flower happy? I can't seem to escape that woman for more than a few Sounding Gongs at a time during the day at court, let's not bring a gloom upon ourselves so dark that it could blot out the sun at midday by mentioning her between these walls ever again."

Grizzy stared hard at the floor, something that was strong habit with her and muttered, "I'm sorry, I thought you liked her."

"Where did you ever...oh never mind, go get the lunch. I'm going for a walk, you're coming with. And since you'll need to eat, we'll need lunch for two."

"Oh", Grizzy said suddenly merry again, "that makes sense."

I smiled at her despite my headache and said, "I thought so too."

"I'll be right back." she said, returning my smile with her brightest Jolian smile.

Chapter Two:
The Flowering Hill

When all was ready Grizzy and I slipped out of the palace by the Queen's Garden Gate. We crossed the garden to a large wooden door that had been cut into the high hedge of honeysuckle that surrounded it; and exited the palace grounds. Then we walked down the path through the King's Hunting Preserve to a little creek that cut a rift between two of the Three Sacred Barrows and around behind them to follow the creek. We walked through the thick forest that covered both sides of the creek in an easy silence. Grizzy said that she was mindful that I had a headache, and quiet walking was a well-known Jolian cure. There were actually some things I wanted to say to her, but I thought it could wait a while. We wandered along the path, sticking close to

the creek. The only sounds were a few birds calling to each other and the soft murmur of the water as it flowed from the surrounding mountains to the larger river that bordered our lands.

We crossed the creek over a small bridge that I imagine the Royal Steward's Goose Girls must use to follow their gaggles as they wandered through the forest hiding from the heat. I had never been this way before but Grizzly seemed to know where she was going and I was content to follow her. I saw that the trees were thinner on this side of the creek and we felt more of the sun as it found ways to shine through the canopy. Then the forest cover all but disappeared as we emerged from the woods onto a grassy meadow that rose quickly into a large round hill. My eyes were slow to adjust to the change in the light. All I could see for a moment was Grizzly's back, and a mound of bright color that rose beyond her, flowing over the hill like a distant rainbow glimmering in the sunlight.

As my eyes began to resolve the scene before me, I saw that the sides of the hill were very steep. I also saw that what had so overwhelmed me with a sense of peace when we crossed into this place, and the reason that I'd felt as if I'd stepped out of the forest into a giant swirl of color rising straight out of the ground, was that the hill was

entirely covered in pink and blue and yellow wildflowers so dense that I couldn't see how a person could put a foot on the hill without disturbing them. But it looked as if Grizzy planned to do just that. I took her hand in mine and she stopped walking. We stood in the midst of this strange wild garden until she turned to me.

"Grizzy, do you think we should go this way?" I looked at the flowers at my feet. "We'll trample them."

Grizzy smiled and said, "Silly, there's a path; don't you see?"

I looked closer and there appeared a narrow brown path worn into the grasses and flowers meandering its way up toward the top of the hill. Grizzy squeezed my hand and let it drop, and I followed her lead as she picked out our path to the top of the hill.

The scent of wildflowers carried on the light breeze that flowed over this sunbathed hillside filled me with a new appreciation of the quiet person who moved along before me with such dignity and grace. I felt a sense of her inner world, beautiful as the wildflowers she passed between, and I longed to be a part of it. When we came to the top there were several large maple trees at the crown of the hill. Grizzy picked out the one she thought would give the best shade and we sat beneath it. She took off her pack and

began to go through it to see what the cook had given us for lunch.

While Grizzy rummaged in her pack, I sat down beside her and looked around me. From this high hill of tall trees and wildflowers waving in the breeze one could see a far ways; the huge canopy of deep green forest, broken by the little blue creek of clear water wandering through it, and beside the creek another break in the canopy made by the growing town lying within the large circle of the town wall. All of which had grown up around the stone sided castle, with the blue and yellow pennants of the House of Thalia waving proudly in the breeze at the top of the High Tower. And far off across the forest canopy stood the impossibly tall Jolian Mountains, looming dark gray, almost black, even in the bright afternoon sun. The deep shadows recessed in their slopes causing the gray outcroppings to glitter in the sun like dark jewels set into their sides. I found myself wondering about the reclusive people who lived on the other side of those silent peaks.

I stretched out my mind to them and began to feel something light and tingly seeping out of the ground; the merry tinkling of laughter, the joys of child-birth, the first cry of a newborn, an oft-told saga of Jolian memory spun out around the evening hearth fire. And then, as the

vapor grew more like life, the long struggle of optimism giving way to resignation. And then a time of great sorrow and long retreat. And somewhere in the memory of this garden hill was a tinge of bitterness so faint that I thought I might be imagining it. Almost like a dark thread that had found its way into a bright tapestry. Other than that slight discord there was a feeling of contentment here that I'd never felt before.

I came slowly out of my thoughts wondering what was causing my feeling of disquiet. I saw that at least it wasn't Grizzy. She was sitting beside me, with a faraway look in her eye and a small smile on her face.

She felt my gaze and turned to me, saying lightly, "Hi Jamie, welcome back."

Calling me Jamie after all these years sounded like something that her tongue would have to get used too.

"This hill knows your people. How is that?" I asked. It seemed like an odd question after I'd asked it. But I also knew it was the truth.

Grizzy slipped off her shoes, stretched out her legs and stared at her feet. Wriggling her toes, she said, "This hill is where Allyssa the Gardener first met Michael the Traveler. Jolians sometimes come here to celebrate that."

"Jolians leave their mountains to come here?"

"Sometimes."

I rolled over onto my side, gave a comfortable stretch, and looked up at the sky. "Well, they should stop by the castle then and say "Hello". They would always be welcome," I told her.

"My people travel only rarely. They like their mountain home. They come here only occasionally, in secret, for the Garden Festival," she said thoughtfully. Then she laughed, "If we travel too far from home we tend to get lost in the woods."

"To be captured by Kings and made Royal Servants it seems." I said, breaking away from my study of a big white billowing cloud drifting across the sky, streaked with ominous shards of dark gray along its puffy undersides, to her finely featured face.

Grizzy looked into my eyes, "I wasn't captured. I was lost. You found me, and now I belong to you. If not for that, I'd have been captured by wildmen, or killed. I seem to have come out on top." Then she turned her attention once more to the contents of her pack.

"Well that sounds all right." I thought. My imagination must have run away with me this morning, thinking that she might be unhappy or lonely for her home. She seemed pretty settled in her mind. But, for some

reason, I still was not. I realized that I wouldn't feel comfortable until I asked her about it.

While we'd been talking, Grizzy had been setting out lunch. We ate in silence for a little while. And then, between bites of some pretty good chicken, and something Grizzy said the cook called "Potato Salad", I asked her, "Grizzy are you happy in your work? I mean...huh...we've been together for a long time. Is there something you're missing, or unhappy with, anything like that?"

"Well..." she began. My heart sank. Maybe the disquiet had been Grizzy. Maybe something was bothering her.

"What is it Grizzy?"

"I was thinking to ask if you could open an account at the Milliner's on Cottonwood Lane. There are a few things I'd like to make for myself. And they have some very nice, not overly expensive cloth that I'd like."

"Sure, I can do that tomorrow. But Grizzy, don't worry about a few Coins. You can just buy clothes if you need them, you know that. Can you sew?"

"Uh huh," she said reddening. "One of the boys apprenticed to the Royal Tailor has been showing me how."

Although I could not imagine what an apprentice tailor could teach Grizzy to sew that she could possibly want to make, the other part of this riddle seemed to want solving.

So I asked her, "Is he someone special, a young man you're interested in?"

She stared hard at the grass between her legs and said, "No, he's nice. We have fun together. I think he likes me. But, I don't know, I guess I'm just not interested in all that business right now."

"If you never got interested in young men it would be soon enough for me," I said heartily. And then felt suddenly foolish. What business of it was mine whether Grizzy had a beau? I told her quickly, "I was married once, that seemed more than enough..." and then concluded with conviction, "I decided after that, I'd never do it again."

The King and his Duchess be damned.

I wanted to stop there, but my mouth was open and I continued blabbing. "Not of course, that you might meet someone nice and be happy."

I told myself that if I couldn't stop making this worse, I could stick a chicken bone down my throat until I choked. But my mouth kept moving of its own accord. "I just don't think I was meant for marriage." I could feel my face reddening and mentally clapped my hand over my mouth.

"I suppose we'll always be single then," Grizzy said looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

I wasn't entirely sure if she was making a statement or posing a question. It would all come to the same thing in the end, Grizzy and I alone together for a long time, which was pretty much what I was beginning to think I wanted. Until this morning I'd never realized how little thought I'd given to Grizzy's future. She'd been a girl growing up in my service, and I'd been busy with the affairs of the kingdom. I tried to imagine a lot of little Grizzy's running around underfoot, and I couldn't get a picture of it. Now it sounded as if some of my attitude toward a life lived under a contentious roof with a member of the opposite sex had rubbed off on her. Just to put a fine point on it, I asked her, "You wouldn't marry?"

"Not if I was to be boiled."

"Suits me," I said cheerfully. Then, to bring it back to the original point I'd been striving for, I said, "So you're happy then, not thinking about running away, or anything foolish like that?"

Grizzy's face contorted and she looked at me as if I'd suddenly gone daft, "Run away...to where?"

Grizzy sat among the wildflowers searching my face for some clue as to where this idiotic conversation I'd begun might be going; and as she did her expression softened from alarm to a slightly perplexed look that lingered in her

innocent brown eyes. In the slow transformation of Grizzy's face I saw for the first time the soft warm beauty of her Jolian features as one quick emotion was replaced by another that she was happier with. I saw too, depths of tenderness in her eyes that I'd almost begun to doubt existed in the world. I felt a sudden rush of my own tender feelings for her so powerful I almost took her in my arms. It occurred to me that a person that Grizzy gave her heart to would be a very fortunate person indeed, "After all, she's nice looking. Quiet, I've never heard her raise her voice. She makes a nice cup of tea. And now, for some reason, she can sew." I had, I knew, grown very fond of Grizzy over the years.

"Yes, she'd be very good for someone," I realized.

"She's certainly been very good for me."

And suddenly I knew, right then and there, that rather than lose her to some Apprentice Tailor, if Grizzy would have me, I wanted to be that person. I resolved that whether it took the rest of the afternoon, or the rest of my life, I would indeed be that person. And with that resolve I decided that I didn't care if the King ordered me to, I wasn't marrying the Duchess of Echo Pond. I didn't know how I would win Grizzy, but I would do it. And anyone who didn't like it could visit any or all of the Seven

Hells. I also knew why it was suddenly so important that Grizzy not run away when I'd just found her. It took my breath away.

I sat there on that quiet hillside beside Grizzy, amazed to realize that everything I'd thought, said, and done, since Grizzy had stood beside my bed in the storm, including having her papers drawn up this morning, had tended to this moment. But I didn't feel misled in the least. In fact, my new conviction bothered me not at all. I was even, for the first time in my life, contented in my heart.

I had no idea how I was going to arrange all of this. I'd worry about that later. There was plenty of time. "Something will come up," I thought contentedly, "it always does."

Somehow Grizzy must have sensed all that passed through my mind because she said quietly, "Why would I run away, I have what I want." Then reached out her small hand and took mine in her's and let them fall together into the tall grass that lay between us. A breeze blew across my back and stirred the wildflowers as we sat looking at each other, and to avoid speaking before my mind sorted out my heart, I whispered, "I don't know, forget it."

After lunch we wiled away the afternoon contented in each others' company. Grizzy produced a deck of cards from her pack and we played a few hands of "Kings in your Pocket" until Grizzy decided that she was hot and needed a swim. I took a nap while she was gone. And when I awoke, Grizzy was sitting in front of me with a very intent look on her face.

"Ah, you're back, we should go pretty soon, the sun will be going down."

"Jamie, were you serious this morning when you said that I could start sleeping with you, instead of on that narrow old mattress under that drafty old window?"

If she hadn't looked so serious I would have laughed out loud. Drafty old window, she'd pulled the bed over there herself soon after she came to live with me. If the King for a minute thought that there was a draft in that room, he and Queen Lilli would be sleeping in there, and Grizzy and I would have the Royal Chambers before nightfall. But, instead, it was my turn to redden. I had one last thing to do this afternoon, and I had to do it for my own peace of mind.

"Grizzy, before we talk about that, there's something I have to tell you: this morning before I left the palace I had your papers drawn up. I didn't know why I was doing it

then, but I do now. You're your own person again. No longer my servant. You can come and go as you please." I pulled the parchments out of my pocket and handed them to her.

She sat and stared at the papers, without touching them, with a queer look on her face. Then her lower lip began to tremble. And finally, very much to my surprise, she burst into tears, "That's why you asked me all those questions before, you want me to go. I did something wrong." She shuddered with such force that her entire body shook, "I frightened you, or something. I suppose the whole thing was always impossible." She moaned helplessly, "Oh, I don't know."

Then she looked into my face with such pain in her eyes that I nearly wretched up the cook's potato salad. She dropped her head beside me on the grass and cried, "I'm sorry. Don't make me go away. I'll be good, I promise." She pounded her small fist on the ground and moaned, "I'll be good."

The sight of her lying in the grass like that almost broke my heart. I reached over and gathered her in my arms and pulled her close to me. "Grizzy, it isn't like that at all," I held her as tight as I could, "I don't want you to go, you Turner's Fool," I said more severely than I intended.

Then more calmly, trying to explain this blunder that had hurt her so, "I just wanted you to be free to make your own decisions, I don't want you to feel you have to do anything because you're a servant: Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. I want you to burn those papers and never bring it up again. Please, Jamie."

I hugged her trembling body next to mine and whispered, "Its okay Grizzy, don't worry, I'll burn them. Don't think about it anymore."

After a few moments, when she'd settled down a little, she said, "You frightened me." In a tone that made me feel distinctly like an evil sprite lurking behind a tree in the woods, waiting to jump out at children who had the misfortune to cross its path.

"I'm sorry. I truly am. I wouldn't hurt you for all the gold buried under the Oracle." I told her, feeling even more miserable than my voice sounded in my ears.

"I shouldn't think you would," she said as she nestled in closer.

We lay under a tree on top of a hill covered in pink and blue and yellow wildflowers like that until Grizzy had composed herself. And then I said, "Ah Grizzy, there's something that's been bothering me all day. Maybe I could ask you about it?"

She murmured something into my chest that I took for assent.

"When, exactly, did you start being afraid of Storm Gods in the night? If I remember right we used to sit at your window and watch them hurl thunderbolts at each other by the hour when you were younger."

She sat up a little, wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, and said, "That started about the time I decided I didn't want to sleep under that drafty old window anymore."

"I thought it might be something like that," I said while admiring the field of beautiful colors that Grizzy had led us too.

As Grizzy and I walked back to the palace, I realized that a great burden that I must have been carrying for many years had been lifted from my shoulders. I must have been very lonely, or heartsick and not even realized it was there. But now that it was gone, I was very aware of its

absence. I felt lighter, the day felt warmer. But it wasn't an oppressive heat anymore, I rejoiced in it.

Grizzy got a little bit ahead on the path and I watched her walk along, holding one hand over the tops of the high grasses. Not catching it, just letting the soft seed pods run along her palm. I watched her body move in her thin summer shift. The gentle sway of her hips as she moved along.

I thought to myself, "One must be careful with this; one could get carried away with this thinking that one has suddenly fallen in love with his servant. But," I decided, "I'll guard these feelings later. I'll enjoy this now...and be more careful later."

***Chapter Three:
The Tattered Bed***

We retraced our path back to the castle. And by luck, and for good or ill, considering the fact that I'd taken

the afternoon off to go skylarking with my servant, the King and Queen were taking an evening tea in the Queen's Garden when we arrived. I greeted the Queen, and so did Grizzy. The Queen and Grizzy seemed to be on some sort of acquaintance, and after some polite words to me from the Queen, the two of them began a discussion of the Queen's new Tea Roses.

The King looked at me and said pointedly, "Well, we're not needed here."

The King and I excused ourselves to the Queen and Grizzy and walked over to where a servant stood waiting beside a tea service.

"Nothing fuddles my mind faster than listening to Lilli talk about her roses. I like them, they smell nice. But their names and all the rest of it are more than I can hold in my head." Then he looked at me and said, "Jamie, I sent for you earlier and you were nowhere to be found. Did you find a cure for your headache?"

"A good airing in the summer sun seems to have cleared it up. I apologize that I was unavailable, but I'm worthless when these ill humors get into my head."

The King offered me tea, took a fresh one for himself and said, "I see you still have your Jolian."

"Yes, the girl is still with me."

"She's hardly a girl Jamie; she's grown to a young woman."

I looked at Grizzy standing with the Queen and said, "These Jolians are not a tall race are they?"

The King's wife was Jolian, and with us through an arranged marriage that was supposed to have fostered trade between our two kingdoms. The marriage had ripened. But the trade still floundered.

Following my gaze, the King said, "Yes they know each other, but my Queen claims to know no more of Grizzy's past than we have been able to learn. She tells me that she enjoys the young woman's company because she reminds her of home. Much less dull for her than my conversation of wars and taxes, I suppose."

We watched in companionable silence for a few moments as Grizzy and Queen Lilli began wandering through the rose garden. They were chatting like long lost sisters. Then the women stopped and Grizzy looked toward the Queen. Then she turned and bent over, putting her hand between her legs to prevent the material of her tunic from billowing onto the Queen's Roses. Using her other hand to push a few loose strands of her long hair behind her ear, she broke into a warm smile at a new rose that the Queen pointed out.

The King broke into my study of Grizzly's graceful movements by saying wistfully, "I suppose you'll never want to marry the Duchess of Echo Pond now. Oh well, maybe some things were just never meant to be."

I maintained a judicious silence on that fearful subject. Let the King's own words be the last uttered on her forever.

We fell into another long silence, thinking our own thoughts while we watched the sun set over the mountains. When the last red ribbon winked out behind Ragnot's Peak, the King said, "There will be a convening of the King's Council tomorrow."

"Lords and all?" I asked.

"Lords and all," the King said heavily. "I finally received news from Prince Nekoleaf, your cousin, this afternoon. Three days ago there occurred a fierce battle on the plain of Gorgrieth. The Prince led a confederation composed of his troops, some few Jovens, and a strong contingent of Jolians against a mass of Wildmen bold enough to camp there."

He paused, and then continued, sounding slightly bewildered, "Surprise was on Neko's side, and yet the wildmen fought as never before. They even executed a move on the field that flanked my son."

"Then the rumors may be true." I said, coming completely out of my reverie.

"It gives them weight."

"A Witchking. What next, did they also have a Hellbat of Orion?"

The King laughed, "No, no Hellbats are rumored to have been present."

"And Jolians fighting: How is that possible?"

"Not just fighting, they saved the day. Jolians rolled up the wildmen and pushed them nearly off the plain. The word Neko used for them was "appalling". He said in his report that, "The Jolians are appalling to behold when aroused by great need or anger."

"So, we have a new, unexpected, and formidable ally."

"It appears, and with no diplomatic breakthrough that I'm aware of. Something has aroused the Jolians to fight after all these years. We know not what it is, and yet they fight."

I realized that I was still watching Grizzy, standing on the other side of the garden, chatting amiably with the Queen; while my mind tried to assimilate all that I'd been told. There was much depth and subtlety here that I did not understand.

The King was watching Grizzy and his wife reflectively too. From a distance, as the light from the torches set around the garden began to get the upper hand on the fading summer light, it was difficult to say for certain which was Grizzy and which was the Queen. The Queen's long brown hair was plaited down her back. And Grizzy's, as always, fell free. But, they were both shorter of stature, both slim; neither was at all a buxom woman. And both wore the thin white summer shift that most people in Illumiaire favored in the summer. With many variations of tailor and embroidery, it was basically a loose sack that hung from the shoulders until about mid-thigh. It was loose and comfortable and never seemed to go out of style. No matter what the Court Grandees affected, most people wore them throughout the summer.

"You still don't have any idea who she is? Or why she was sent to us: to you particularly?" The King continued thoughtfully, "There has always been doubt in my mind that it was an accident that she ran to your horse that day."

Events were threatening to move fast now and I needed time to fit them together.

"No, I've sent spies over the years. But they either don't return, or return empty handed."

I looked away from Grizzy to the King and said, "Grizzy could not have such influence as this. Are you sure it's not your wife trying her own diplomacy with her father?"

This was tricky ground to tread with a King who loved his wife. There would be, at best, a gray area between secret diplomacy between the Queen and her father, King Edshu, on our behalf, and the passing of information that we may not want him to have. How could she know the difference without instruction?

The King seemed to let this matter weigh between us without comment, and then continued, "Well, it could be a ruse, but trade goes nowhere with, or without, her help. Her father seems little interested in her opinion of the price of corn. But now, suddenly, Jolians trust us and are willing to fight...and bleed, along with the rest of the kingdoms."

The King and I stood studying Grizzy and the Queen, stroking our beards, a habit that we seemed to share when thinking hard.

"I had thought to send you and your Jolian to Jolie to work out a treaty. But now I'm not so sure. It may be best to keep her here."

"There is no lie in Grizzy. Of that you can rest assured. I would have seen it. She couldn't hide a lie from me for all these years. There is no talent of that depth in this world." I needed to get off this ground to somewhere I could think, "Neko is all right then?"

"Neko is fine." The King looked hard across the garden and said, "We need to know who she is. I don't like mystery or coincidence. We are groping in the dark now, Jamie. That can be a serious impediment in war. We need information."

The King's musings were following my own so closely that I laughed. "If only we could gather information as fast as we gather our troubles."

"Maybe we should go as pilgrims to Echo Pond, consult the Oracle," the King said, mostly in jest.

"The Oracle couldn't light his robes on fire if he had a torch in each hand." I said conversationally.

At the King's sudden fit of laughter, Grizzy and the Queen looked up and the King waved them over to where we stood.

"There is much to decide. Tomorrow will be a long day, sleep well. I will not have you woolgathering in Council tomorrow the way you did at my Renderings this morning. You will need your wits."

The King had noticed my distraction this morning, even before I abandoned him to the wisdom of my Junior. But then he had never been a person to underestimate in any event.

"Yes, my Lord."

"And now that I see the cause of this sudden headache, I must warn you to have a care in this. I want your happiness. But it would be difficult for this to come to a good end," the King whispered into his beard as the Queen and Grizzy approached.

"Yes my Lord." I agreed, feeling some of the old weight settling back in.

The Queen came to stand beside her husband and he took her arm.

She looked up into his face and said, "What was so funny? Were you laughing at my roses?" While smiling that bright Jolian smile that I'd come to appreciate so thoroughly the last day or so.

"No, heavens no," the King said laughing again. "Jamie and I were discussing religion. He has some rather startling views."

The King appeared to be attending to his wife, but I noticed that he was studying Grizzy intently.

Grizzy held his gaze while the Queen said merrily, "Jamie is a thinker, they're always confused."

At that we all chuckled and the King and Queen bid us goodnight. The King gave Grizzy one last thoughtful look, then smiled warmly and shook his head. He turned to his wife and said something under his breath as they walked away. The merry tinkling of the Queen's laughter hung in the garden after they were gone.

Grizzy and I stood in the garden for a moment before following them through the doorway. I reached over by the doorway and took a torch out of its stanchion on the castle wall, put my other hand on Grizzy's shoulder and asked, "So, how did you find the Queen's company this evening?"

Grizzy watched them retreating down the hallway, arm in arm, in the dwindling light of the torch their servant carried along before them and said, "She certainly knows her roses."

After Grizzy and I returned to our rooms, I sent her down to the kitchens to find us some sort of dinner, and then sat down on her bed, staring out the window at the town below, pondering all that the King had told me. One

thing was sure; Jolie had someone in our inner circle. The *someone* seemed to have worked a wonder for us, at a time when a wonder had been most handy for Neko. But the *someone* was working without the knowledge of the King and his most trusted adviser. And that suggested a hidden agenda.

The King realized all of this as well as I did. Who might he suspect? The obvious choice would be his wife; she was of the Jolian royal family. But he loved the woman and her roses. And she him.

The question was; did our unknown benefactor plan to eventually betray us? I decided I must get closer to the Queen.

I also thought about the King's words when he spoke of my Jolian, "We must know who she is."

"We must indeed." I said, musing out loud to the open window...

After a light dinner of fresh fruits and brown bread that we took sitting on her little bed by the window, watching the nightlife of the town below us, Grizzy took up her hairbrush and brushed out my hair as was her habit each night before bed. When she was finished she took the brush

and went over and sat at my vanity, with her back to me, and brushed out her own long hair.

I left off absently woolgathering over affairs of state to watch the brush flow through her hair from the very first long stroke. And I thought to myself as I did, that I'd probably sat at this window a few thousand or so nights, and maybe, watched her brush her hair hundreds of times. But now I wondered how I could have missed so much beauty in a few simple movements as she weaved the brush lovingly through her hair. It must have happened so slowly I barely noticed until I was fully absorbed in her, as long gentle stroke flowed from gentle stroke, that the world became just Grizzy and I. Finding its beginning with the first long graceful movement of her slender arm as she brought the brush to the top of her head, and completing itself with the last little shake of her head as she pulled the brush free from her hair at its end. And each time she pulled the brush through her hair, I saw cascading glimmers of gold mingling with the rich browns that danced in the lamplight.

Finally, when even the sound of the brush gliding through her hair began to mock the last hesitation I felt, insisting that I follow my heart where it wanted to go. I gave in to a deep longing to have Grizzy near me again and

got up from the window and went over and sat down on my bed and watched her for a little while longer. I wanted to be sure of us. But there was no notion of going back. And after all, what did I have to fear from someone as warm and gentle as Grizzy?

I asked her, grateful that the sound of the voice in my ears sounded reasonably like mine, "Grizzy, would you come here and let me do that for you? If you can brush my hair, it seems only fair that I brush yours for you once in a while."

The brush stopped in midstroke and Grizzy stood and crossed the room, almost as if she'd been waiting for me to ask. Then, as she stood before me with her cheerful Jolian face shining in the lamplight, I felt a sudden impulse to reach out and take her hand. The distance between us seemed to shrink to nothing, and all my resolve that I had all the time in the world to wait until something came up melted away. A sudden conviction grew upon me that everything I really wanted in life was standing before me. Position and comfort had come to me at birth. Grizzy's love I must earn. And then find a way to make it work. I still had no idea how. People just didn't openly fall in love with their servants. Or maybe they did the reverse. Maybe they

compromised their principals and told no-one. Maybe old widows wisely kept their own counsel.

Here I was, in love for the first time in my life, and I could in good conscience do nothing about it. I was caught between a powerful desire for her, and the knowledge that asking Grizzy to hide away with me was impossible. Or maybe Grizzy and I *could* hide our love in this room forever. If love made me a coward, would Grizzy understand that I had no choice in the matter? The real problem was that I could calculate nothing of this with Grizzy standing in front of me.

All I knew was that feelings were awakening in me that I hadn't known were there. Or had known about, but thought them too wonderful to ever come to light in a world such as this, but now suddenly filled the small space that separated Grizzy and I.

Grizzy stood patiently, returning my gaze with a small smile. She must have seen all of these thoughts plainly written across my face as they passed through me, but she only said of this newfound intimacy that filled the space between us, "You'll need this Jamie." Then held out the hairbrush for me, and after I took it in my hand slowly turned around and sat down on the edge of the bed, our bodies almost touching.

I sat with the hairbrush in my hand looking at her hair shining in the lamplight for moment. And then, when I lifted the brush to the top of her head, I saw that she was sitting so close to me that I was going to have to lean back a little if I was going to brush out her hair. I set the brush down beside me on the bed, braced my feet on the floor and my arms against the bed and slid back on the linen sheet a little. And when I did my thighs squeezed up against Grizzly's hips. She moaned softly and stretched her head back on her shoulders until the ends of her hair fell into my lap and brushed against me like hundreds of soft tiny feathers had suddenly fallen from their nesting place to reveal a cherished secret long hidden away. A shudder went through my body so powerful that I knew Grizzly must have felt it too. It was lucky that Grizzly was facing the other way or she would have seen me trembling for the first time in her life as I lifted the brush to the top of her head a second time. And with each stroke, as I pulled the brush through her hair, it slid through those vibrant silken threads as effortlessly as fingers run across the face of cool water.

In my mind, I set down the brush and reached both arms around her waist and laid my head on her shoulder. Inhaled

the musk of her hair, felt the curve of her neck on my lips. Time, where was time now?

I left off brushing her hair and sat watching the lamplight flicker on the far wall until the danger passed. When I felt a little calmer, and my sudden excitement was one of those memories that reproach people who leave urgent and unfinished business for the future, I reached up and grasped Grizzy's waist in my hands and lifted her gently off the bed saying, "Grizzy, if you wouldn't mind blowing out the lamp and coming to bed I'd appreciate it. Tomorrow is a long day and we should get some rest."

Grizzy walked over to the night table and blew out the lamp while I lay down in the bed. She slid in next to me and tucked herself in as close to me as she could get, lying with her face on my chest, her forehead resting against my lips. I kissed her brow and she snuggled up and wrapped her arms around me. We lay like that for a while. And then I heard her sing-song voice say, "I think something wonderful is happening to us, Jamie."

My heart leapt at that. And when I told her, "Grizzy I'm almost afraid to talk out loud for fear that I'll wake myself up and all of this will turn out to have been a dream." I felt my lips moving over her forehead like endless butterfly kisses.

I lay beside my sleeping Grizzly for a long time, staring at the ceiling and thinking about all that had happened during this strange and eventful day. I must have finally dozed off when suddenly the phantom was standing at the foot of the bed; her white dress giving off a faint glow, her long black hair falling away in waves, her bright blue eyes over high cheek bones, her perfectly red lips. The face of a goddess and the heart of a witch: Annie.

"Jamie," she whispered.

"Annie," I sighed.

"I'm back," she said in a tone that suggested that I should be grateful.

"I see that. I thought you'd gone off to marry a Storm God."

"Still the quick wit," she said with a trace of bitterness.

Then her eyebrows shot up so high that her forehead disappeared in a spasm of wrinkles, her eyes becoming perfectly round circles. After all these years haunting me,

it was good to see her look like she'd seen a ghost. "Who's this who sleeps in your bed, so long empty? Is it that damnable Breeze? Did you finally catch the Breeze you so longed for?" she demanded, her face contorting into the rage that I so well remembered.

Then she disappeared, I could only hope-gone for good.

But it was not be so easy. I perceived her strange light again out of the corner of my eye, lifting the sheet off Grizzly's face, "Why it's the serving girl who sleeps by the window." Annie looked cross through narrowed eyes, "Is the little brat's bed broken-the frame in two pieces and all the ropes on the floor, the ticking out the window in a storm? What is amiss here, Jamie?"

"Nothing," I said.

But she was gone again. To the window, "No, her little bed of tatters is not broken, the ticking not gone. What is amiss here, Jamie?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

She strode across the room, so angry that her feet never touched the floor. "That is where you are mistaken my little man. This is quite impossible, you know that. It *will* not do," she said from the foot of the bed, studying me with a look of contempt on her face that took for

granted that her opinion meant something. It was still her right to think things of me, and my obligation to care.

"I'll find a way," I said dryly.

"You're clever, but not that clever Jamie."

I sighed; it did no good arguing with a witch.

Her voice took on a brittle tone, "So you think to supplant your wife with a serving girl?"

"Since you refuse to stay dead, I won't bother to spare your feelings. You can hardly supplant something with nothing."

"I think you're lying," she said, giving me what passed with her a shrewd look, the old rage simmering below the surface of her pale white face.

She nodded her head at Grizzy, "Jamie, I think I can do better than that." And she said it with that confidence she always wore without thinking.

Grizzy sighed in her sleep. I could only hope she wouldn't wake up and see Annie the Witch floating at the foot of the bed.

Then Annie wasn't at the foot of the bed. She was crawling up the bed, over my body on her hands and knees. Pulling the sheet down as she came up towards my face, staring into my eyes with me a sweet and knowing smile that came nowhere near her blue eyes. "I think I can do better

than that," she said seductively. "Who knows your secret places better than your wife?" Nodding her head dismissively to where Grizzy laid, "Not her."

Then she was over me, looking into my eyes, her hair hanging to crowd out the moonlight all around. Smelling not of the grave, but lightly of sandalwood. I could see by her look that she thought I was hers for the taking.

Then she settled down on me, pressing her mouth on mine. As I felt her weight settle lightly, and then fully, on me I knew that this must be a dream; because I felt myself responding against my will. I felt the same way that I often did in dreams when I wanted to cry out and could not. I felt myself rising up into her.

Suddenly, I knew that I had to stop this. And I knew that I could.

I said forcefully, pushing her and this madness in my mind from me, "Oh no you don't." I think it helped that I had no desire for this. Someone was trying again to force something on me, again, that I had no desire for. I felt deeply offended that she had the nerve to try, and betrayed by the part of my mind that seemed to crave her. Yet, it was so simple to resist. All of me, but one little part, didn't want her.

I pushed the phantom away again. Not by hand, but by will. "Oh no you don't," I said more forcefully. She was gone.

"Jamie, what was that?" It was Grizzy. She was lying on her side looking a little frightened, I think for me. "I saw something."

I rolled over and laid my head on her pillow, then buried my face so deeply into it that her face completely covered mine. I burrowed in deep and safe and confessed in her ear, "I love you Grizzy. I realized it this afternoon and became sure of it tonight. I love you the way I love walking in the forest in the early spring, when the world is young and fresh and I have nothing better to do than walk through it."

The words were inadequate to the task. But I felt so full and complete lying there, with her face covering mine that I had to try to tell her-that for once, finally and forever, I felt free.

She hugged me with all her strength and I felt something warm and wet on my face, "I love you too, Jamie". I didn't know if the tears were mine, or hers, or were somehow mingled.

We laid there for a long time holding each other and kissing lightly.

A while later Grizzy pulled her face away from mine and said, "Jamie, my love."

"Yes Grizzy."

"What was that? It seemed to frighten you."

"That, Grizzy, was my own personal Storm God come to Earth."

"Is there anything that I can do?"

"You could kiss me again." I said with a hugely guilty smile that I could not have wiped off my face for any amount of coin.

Grizzy giggled.

And in her embrace I knew that Grizzy would find secret places in me that Annie never dreamed of.

(END OF 1ST INSTALLMENT...)