

***Chapter Four:  
The Sputtering Candles***

It was just before dawn when Grizzy woke me. She was standing patiently beside the bed and as usual my sense of her presence there awakened me. I looked into her lovely Jolian face and asked her to set aside the tray and talk with me for a while before I began what I suspected would be an arduous day at the King's side facing down the burghers and the other men who were the Council of Lords.

"Yesterday was a long day that passed too quickly," I said when she was again beside me. "And today will be a long day that passes too slowly if I know the Lords, and I

do. But no matter, we have a few minutes. Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"No, I was going to wait until after you left."

"Well, then we will eat together. The King still has his head on Queen Lilli's pillow and I need only arrive at Chambers before him. He has the shorter walk but I have the younger legs. It will be a good race to see who escapes their Jolian's embrace first."

Grizzy laughed and kissed me, and I her. I felt myself becoming aroused and forced myself to sit up. If I stayed any longer in Grizzy's embrace I would be very late to Chambers and good for nothing for the rest of the day. I reached over and took the plate off the tray that held the toast and jam and fixed up a piece for Grizzy the way she often did for me and handed it to her. She looked me a queer look and said, "That's your breakfast, Jamie."

"Yes it is, and that is why I can share it with you. I meant it yesterday when I said that you were no longer my servant. We may be forced to keep up appearances before the world for a while, but here, in our home, we will be equals."

She held her toast in her hand and looked at me with such a determined expression on her face that I sat back

against the headboard and prepared myself not to argue with whatever Jolian nonsense she cared to utter.

"And I meant what I said yesterday too. I like my life the way it is and I don't want any changes. Burn those papers for me, please. Don't worry for me; I made all my decisions long ago."

Despite my resolve, I had to protest, "But Grizzy, everything has changed, I've fallen in love with you."

She smiled the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen on her face and said, "And I you, but that was a long time ago." She looked down at the toast in her hand and continued slowly, her voice firm, but sounding in my ears as if it was coming from great distance. "If you please, I have never considered myself your servant. I do what I do from my heart. And from the moment that I became aware of the longings of a grown up heart I have loved you. Your long silences, your quick temper, your kindnesses to me, your wit and your sadness at the folly of this world, I love all those things and more. I have dressed you and fed you and watched over you in your sleep when you've fallen ill. And I knew that you would love me if I hit you over the head with the brass tea kettle. So I waited until I was old enough to be sure of my own heart and then I took the tea kettle to you. Now that it is done I only wish I'd done

it sooner. I have what I want and that is you." After a thoughtful pause she added, "And only other, that you would mention an account to the Milliner today when you see him."

Having made the longest and loveliest speech I had ever heard her make, she smiled at me as if to say the subject was closed and took a bite of her toast.

I waited until she was busily enjoying it and then said, "Whatever you say my darling Grizzy, you're the boss."

My timing was too good and she nearly choked. I even had to pat the poor girl on the back several times before she fully recovered.

When I was sure she was okay, I kissed her forehead, apologized for choking her, swore my undying love, and jumped out of bed saying, "And now that we've settled our domestic issues, I must go. The King stirs in his bed-chamber and I am not to be late."

With Grizzy's help, I was quickly dressed in my most somber robes of state and headed for the door.

"I will see the Milliner and tell him that the owner of the heart of a person who has the King's ear wants to do some trading with him. I'm sure he'll send a messenger with instructions to receive you warmly before the Noon Recess, so urgently will I press the issue. And Grizzy, this day

will go very late into the night. The King will have much to say once we finish with the Lords. You need not wait up." With that I kissed her goodbye and ran for the door.

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I took a couple of shortcuts down disused passageways and managed to beat the King to Chambers, but just barely. I had scarcely composed myself to looking like I'd been waiting on him for a long toll of the Bells when he strode through the doorway. "You look too cheerful for such a somber occasion. Try to look like there is a hard rain pounding and the Storm Gods are at it with a will...If you please," was his first command to me.

The thought that had been crossing my mind, some part of which must have crossed my face and offended the King's sense of the decorum of the day was what a wonder life is. This morning I'd had breakfast in bed with Grizzy and then kissed her goodbye and told her not to wait up as if we'd been doing it that way for years. Although, in truth, it was something that the day before would have been beyond the powers of the Oracle to predict.

It is a curious world and wakes us up from our complacencies in odd ways at unexpected times. If this was one of those rare occasions when life's curious ways merged with the hopes of a pair of would-be lovers living out of step with their world, then I was going to be grateful for the chance to go with it, wherever it went. But first, the Lords.

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And the Lords were already in a dither this morning.

I opened the door to Chambers for the King and found the room nearly full of them; the steady buzz of their near-panic conversations rushing at us like a swarm of bees roused from the hive.

I announced into that tumult, in my best most courtly baritone, "My Lords, King Henry of the House of Thalia."

At that announcement, the silence was abrupt. And the King was ready for it. All heads turned toward him as his huge, muscular, body filled the doorway. He strode quickly into the room and directly to his chair at the head of the table. His usual habit was to stop and chat with one or two

of his favorites and in general play the role that most suited him, that of a benign monarch who took a deep concern for the welfare of his subjects. This departure from that routine, intended to impress them with the urgency of our situation, seemed to have the desired effect on this contentious group. Seeing him take his seat at the head of the table, and myself sitting beside him with my scribe's materials, waiting for them to come to order and begin the business of the Council, reminded them that there was an urgent threat to the kingdom. And that now, the King was sitting in Council, waiting for them to allow him to begin to tell them how it would be dealt with. They had stood in silence watching him enter, and continued to stand after he sat. With an impatient gesture he motioned them to take their places around the table.

I looked around the room while our Lords hurried to take their places. These men by their appearance of prosperity suggested our valleys' remoteness from the real fields of battle. They wore the fine robes of their class and also the noble aura of its power. Yet, as I watched them moving around the room to take their seats, they reminded me of the flock of pigeons in the God's Fountain Square, strutting proudly and self-importantly, but ready to take flight at the first sign of disturbance. They would

do their part in the running of the kingdom. Offer unasked for advice to the King on the decisions he must take. But mainly, they would argue and bluster for their own interests. And those interests, and not the interests of the kingdom, would likely determine their opinions of what actions the Crown should take.

The two factions that form the bane of the King's existence whenever the subject of the war comes up these days are the "Masters of the Town" and the "Lords of the Manor". The townsmen seem more and more each day to hold the valleys' purse strings. These towns that have been springing up the last few years around the King's castles are now growing quickly. The cause of this rapid and profound change is mainly an old custom that has never been interfered with. If a man becomes a resident of a town he is relieved of his duties to the Manor Lord whose lands he's left. No more tithing ten per cent of his crop to the lord. No more "work days" on the Manor Lord's "patch". These men, who come to the towns, are usually those of talent and industry bored with life on the farms. They've come to the towns, worked hard at their vocations, and are now tending to grow quite rich. They often have little love for the Manor Lords, who they feel are wringing too much of

the produce from the family members and villagers they've left behind.

The King does what he can to encourage the growth of the towns, even though the townsmen are a difficult lot to deal with. Even more difficult still, are the Manor Lords. They hate any custom that interferes with their privileges with a passion they usually reserve for the Wildmen and are constantly besieging the King to repeal or modify this particularly irksome arrangement of comings and goings without leave. The King steadily refuses. The kingdom has grown much wealthier due to the industry of the towns, and that increases the revenue to the Crown.

But power and influence have become the handmaidens of wealth in our times, and these are rapidly accumulating to the townsmen at the expense of the outlying Lords. Whether the townsmen are dying cotton or brewing beer, whatever they touch turns to gold in their hands, usually a good deal of manorial gold.

The actual fighting of the war is done by the farmers and herdsmen who are the real victims of the raiders and whose representatives are the "Lords of the Manor". The Manor Lords depend on the protection of the army for the integrity of the kingdom's borders. And that inescapable fact will again force them to ally with the King. Who, as

it happens, owns the army; and in theory, at least, everything else in the valley.

The fact that the two factions' interests are in common, and that the townsmen's interests are best served by a healthy and prosperous countryside, is a thing the townsmen rarely seem to take into account.

I was happy to see that Lord General Grey was still among us. As ancient as he is, there is always a doubt that he will live to see the next Council. He is a firm and steady ally of the King and the army. The old soldier was, decidedly, not dithering.

"Rumors abound," the King said once they were settled. "Now I will break them apart for you." He paused, and then said, "I have received dispatches from my son in the field and the news is not altogether good, and not completely bad. The Wildmen were met in battle and routed, but at a terrible cost. The battle may have gone ill for him but for the unexpected appearance of a strong troop of Jolians on the field at the precise moment that they were most needed. The Wildmen didn't fight in their usual hit and run style, they stayed on the field and fought with tenacity and sustained heavy losses before they finally withdrew. They seemed better organized and to have developed a sense of tactics and maneuvering."

"It is said that they are being led by a Witchking," interrupted one of the Lords of the Manor.

The King gave him a withering look, "I'm not sure that I know what a Witchking is, but I think that we can reason that they are being led by someone."

By the shocked looks that preceded the ensuing babble of voices, all competing for the attention of the King, the Lords seemed to appreciate that this was very bad news indeed.

The King waited for the uproar to subside and then said, "I have sent for my son and until he arrives we are just supposing. He will give us the true details that may tend to confirm or deny our suspicions that the Wildmen have found a leader. But for now, I think, we must proceed on the belief that the war has taken an unpleasant and dangerous turn, whatever the reason."

The Lords took a moment to digest this news. Then another Lord of the Manor asked, "And what of the other Kingdoms? Do they know of these events?"

"Obviously the Jovens and Jolians do, since they took part in the battle. I have contacted the others through their Ambassadors. And I'm sure that by now even the King of the Perdido will have heard of this new threat."

This same Lord looked at me and inquired, "What of the Sabians, my Lord Magistrate? Does your father know of these events?"

I expected a question of this sort and replied, "My father supports the King, and is involved in the attempt to meet the threat." I could only hope that would prove to be true when my father saw fit to answer the King's Summons.

"And what of these Jolians, when did they find gumption? That's what I want to know," inquired one of the members of the Cotton Guild.

I had been wondering about that too. Jolians seem to be full of surprises in these strange days.

"The Jolians appear to have found common cause with us in our war with these raiders. Through diplomacy we have reached agreements that we hope will cause further cooperation with them." I hoped this outright lie would not come back to haunt the King the way I feared my lie about possible cooperation with my father could rebound on me. Ever mindful of their purses, one and all wanted to know if these new relations would relieve the age-old trade impasse

"More urgent issues are being addressed right now, but I'm sure the subject will come up."

A Manor Lord from one of the outlying regions said grimly, "Your Majesty, while we do not have trade with the

Jolians; we do have trade with the Perdido. And now we hear rumors, oft repeated by travelers on the road, sometimes it appears that whole villages have been uprooted and set on the road by the war, that the Kingdom of the Perdido is hard pressed and nearly overrun by these wildmen. That poses a danger to us of a loss of the winter crop of fodder for the cattle and horses. We depend on that crop to get us through the winter, as we depend on them to buy our surplus grain. If this rumor is true I doubt that we can turn over the fields to grow and cut the hay in time to save the livestock. Haying is a burdensome task that our husbandmen have grown unaccustomed to. We are no longer self-sufficient Lords. We depend on the other kingdoms for much. It would be unwise of this Council to end today without resolving to aid the Perdido in their battles with the raiders."

Before this statement could spark an acrimonious debate on our responsibilities to the others, the King said, "I have heard this rumor too. In fact the Perdido have sent many pleas for the aid that you advise. We haven't exactly ignored them, but we have had our own troubles. It was my opinion that their chosen allies, the Jovens, should be the ones to aid them. But that appears not to be happening. I will not address it at this Council,

or debate the point with you today, but you should know that I intend to call for a Council of all the Kingdoms very soon. I have taken the step of setting my diplomats to sounding the others on their will to take such an unheard of step. If they consent, I plan to do it," he finished speaking and glared at them defiantly.

There was not a whisper of a word of dissent at this extraordinary statement. So far the King's strategy of taking them into his confidences and patiently answering their questions was having its effect. The Lords, so far seemed a pretty subdued lot.

Or so I thought. "Your majesty, how is it that your son was on the Plain of Gorgrieth at all? That lies entirely within the Realm of the Jovens. Who by his account took part in the battle, while we appear to have borne the main brunt of the affray."

Now it would begin in earnest, the fools would pick nits for the rest of the day.

"My son was pursuing a band of raiders that had destroyed one of our villages. They crossed the frontier and so did he. What would you have him do? Let them go?" When no one answered, he continued, "The Jovens patrolling their side of the border gave him parole, and then joined the pursuit. My son actually gave the Wildmen the

impression that he wouldn't cross the frontier by veering off his course and crossing the frontier at a different point than they because he was pretty sure he knew where they were going to ground. At what he judged to be the right moment, he came out of hiding and drove straight across the plain at them. Rather than continue to run away the Wildmen suddenly turned to face my son, and these Jovens, and gave battle. When the battle was joined a much larger band of raiders emerged from the dry river bed that cuts across the plain and took my son by the flank. Things went ill very fast after that. And that is when the Jolians came out of the forest and slammed into the Wildmen at their rear."

No one said a word for a moment and the King continued, "I will hear no criticism of my son at this table today. Wars, once begun, must be fought. Those of you who have soldiered know that this is how it is done."

"Begging your pardon Sire," said the same man, whose courage to rise was undermined by his next words, "But your son seems to have stumbled upon a Jovenian fight."

The King must have known a statement of this order of foolishness was coming, but still, he could barely conceal his anger. "Sir, I believe that you err when you say that my troops stumbled. It is hardly stumbling when you win the

battle." The King glared around the table, daring anyone to argue with his logic.

The room became very quiet at that. No one wanted to criticize the King's son to his face. No one wanted to mention that it appeared that he had ridden headlong into a trap, never mind that the Wildmen had never set a trap before. And no one, certainly, wanted to say that it had been the ever timid Jolians who, it appeared, had won the battle.

Lord General Grey slowly rose from his chair. He was still dressed in the tunic of a soldier, although he had long since retired from the field. His thinning gray hair was plaited down his back, but his beard stood out, thick and as white as the snows of the Jolian ice fields. His face was as hard as that forbidding landscape. His deep voice resonated anger as he addressed the assembled group, "Our armies have done very well, so far."

Then, having dispensed with the Council, he looked to the King and continued, "Sire, I do not like the sound of this. All along, the only reason that we have been able to hold off these Wildmen at all is that they have always been nothing more than rabble, small bands of raiders plundering the outlying villages. But, steadily, over the years we have seen their numbers and ferocity grow to the point

where they begin to tax the resources of each of the Kingdoms. Our armies remain small; the bands of raiders grow ever larger. We never know where they will strike next. We have been forced to garrison nearly the entire frontier. And still, we most often only know their whereabouts by the smoke of a burning village in the distance. In a word, they are beginning to overwhelm us as it is. Forcing the army to come to this Council several times, hat in hand, to beg money for troops and weapons. Now, if this rabble have organized to the point where they can lure our army over the border and spring a trap on the combined armies of two kingdoms so successfully that the only reason we don't lose those armies entirely is due to the unexpected intervention of a third, then the time for bickering among ourselves in this room, and among the Kingdoms themselves, is long past. We must seek accord with the others now to meet and destroy this new army, before it destroys us."

General Grey was indeed not dithering. If I didn't know better I'd say the old soldier was frightened. It seemed to strike everyone in the room at the same moment that if a man like General Grey, who had spent his life cheerfully taking turns fighting the other Kingdoms and the Wildmen whenever the opportunity arose, was now advocating

an alliance with his old enemies, than our peril was much nearer than anyone thought. The General had called the Wildmen an army; a strange term to use for this hodgepodge of raiders and the uncollected tribes of the western hills and mountains.

The King was troubled by this too. He said, "Lord General Grey, you have called this rabble an army, I hope you are using the term loosely."

"I am not Sire. If they are led by a Witchking," the General had the decency to look embarrassed at the notion and then impatient with it, "or whatever the hell it is. Then with training and coordination they are an army. And a larger one than that possessed by any of the Four Kingdoms alone."

The general took his seat in the much more subdued atmosphere his words had produced.

Then slowly, but gathering into an uproar as it went along, there ensued a wide-ranging debate over General Grey's remarks. No one liked what he had to say. Most felt that Wildmen fighting in mass did not constitute an army. Most saw that Wildmen fighting in mass constituted a menace, but were unsure what to do about it. Not surprisingly, most of the Lords suspected that the Witchking actually existed. They were like children in that

regard, ready to believe that there were monsters in the forest, just beyond the circle of moonlight. As the debate went back and forth the inescapable fact became, that however they were gathered, the Wildmen were more dangerous to us now than we had ever been to them. No-one could argue around that.

The King took no part in the debate. He let the Lords run until they were run out. General Grey finally made them see that, despite their prejudices to the contrary, an army is nothing more than a large mob sternly led by someone the mob fears, despises, or respects. It matters not whether the army has traditions and good discipline, marching in a straight line as it issues from the castle, or tumbles higgly-piggly from a dry stream bed screaming like the wind under the eaves. If two opposing mobs are concentrated on the field facing each other, all things become equal in a hurry, and the side that wins is usually the one that brings an overwhelming force, for whatever reason, upon the other one.

The debate died down slowly, each man becoming quiet, falling into contemplation of his own thoughts and fears. I got a sense that it was beginning to dawn on the private thoughts of each man in the room that we could be overrun. This new uprising of the Wildmen was such an unexpected

development that no-one knew quite what to do. We'd begun to take the war with the raiders as part of the landscape in the long years we had endured it. Now it suddenly appeared we could lose it.

Each of us sat turning his thoughts over in his mind, and then mine burst out of my mouth, so taken was I with a thought that had possessed me, "There is a bright spot here, Sire."

"Indeed, Lord Magistrate, you'd best tell us what it is quickly. It certainly eludes me," the King said dryly.

"Lord Grey has said himself that in the past the problem was the "hit and run" tactics of the Wildmen. If now, they are to be an army, they will have to deal with the same problems we have dealt with and, more or less, solved over the years. It is no mean feat to feed and clothe and discipline an army. They are expensive and unwieldy...and pretty stupid if untutored and under-trained. The "Witchking" or whoever will need to solve these problems as he goes. He may not even realize they exist as of now. He has revealed his strength, and at the same time a weakness that we can take advantage of: If we move quickly."

General Grey was nodding his head, "You're saying that we take the war to him, find his army and destroy it,

before he gets the opportunity to strengthen his army to the point that we are crushed under foot, Lord Magistrate?"

"I believe he is made vulnerable by the very thing that gives him his strength, this army of rabble."

"I don't know Jamie," the King said thoughtfully, as if we were discussing the problem alone in his chambers, "he seems awfully strong now."

"I agree Sire. But at the same time, he's trying to govern the actions of wildmen, a task I would not want. He may get it right eventually. But, it will take time and effort. Until that happens, his fate is uncertain. We shouldn't give him that chance. He'll grow stronger as we debate. The fact is he'll never be weaker than he is right now."

The King stared at his hands folded before him on the table for a long moment. Then, shaking off the mood of the room, he said, "It's been a long morning; we'll break for midday, and meet back here after the Midday Bell gentlemen. Lord General Grey, if you would accompany me, and my young scholar here, I would appreciate it."

Once we were out of hearing of the Lords in the passageway that led to the King's Chambers, the King stopped and looked at me and said, laughing, "That was well done, Jamie. Don't you thing so Grey?" The general smiled.

"He'll never be weaker." The King laughed again, "Well done."

"It'll light a fire under the old codgers that will be fueled by their midday ale," said General Grey. "We should get all that we want in the late session, food, weapons, and a warrant for the damned Witchking if we are careful to fan the flames."

The King looked at us both and said seriously, "We are in a narrow cleft here. But fear not, the House of Thalia is a fighting House. My forefathers didn't come to rule this land through timidity and negotiation. We will rally the valleys, crush this fool of a Witchking, and send the Wildmen so far back into the mountains that the only memory of them will be a minstrel's tavern ballad."

"Yes, your majesty, that is what we will do, no question," agreed General Grey as the King turned to open the door to his private chambers. He was hardly through the door before he was shouting orders for the servants to bring dippers for washing up and go fetch his meal away from the cook.

General Grey stood in the doorway watching the King sending the servants scurrying to follow his orders. Then he turned to me and said, "We must do as the King says Jamie. We must find the Witchking and destroy him." And

then, so quiet that I barely heard him, "Before he does the same to us," muttered General Grey into his beard.

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"So Grey, how would you propose that we contact the other Kingdoms?" the King asked as he cut into the leg of lamb that had been set before him.

"Since none of the Kingdoms possess an army as large as yours, I propose that they will contact you. All are subject to the same threat, all will see the same need," he replied while piling his trencher with the thick gruel, called pottage that was about all he could eat anymore.

He looked up from his occupation and said ruefully, "Damn my digestion, I haven't eaten a decent meal for years. And this crap runs through me so fast I'm tempted to just spoon it up my ass to save my guts the trouble of trying to fiddle with it."

The King burst out laughing, his first real laugh of the day. It was good to see him merry again. It had been a long morning.

Even General Grey smiled at the indisposition of his bowel. And then, appearing to attend his trencher, said, "So Henry, what of these Jolians of yours? Can we depend on them?"

The King looked at General Grey, who continued to attend his meal. Then looked across the table to me and said in the voice that he always used when instructing me on some point or other, "That's our General Grey, Jamie." He set down his spoon and leaned back in his chair and said as if expounding on a text, "It was the thing that made him such a fine general in the field. Often, he would first set his adversary off his guard with a light feint to the flank. And then at the right moment, in the midst of the distraction, he'd hit hard with the real business of the battle, generally that's right up the middle."

The General had the good grace to redden at this reference to his fighting skills. He set down his spoon and said, "Well Henry, when the sheep suddenly turns to snarl at the wolf, one must take notice."

"Just so," said the King. "And to answer your question, I don't know. I wasn't exactly forthright with the Council this morning when I mentioned the genius of our diplomacy. We have yet to pull the thread on the Jolians. And now I must tax Jamie to become our diplomat and hunt

down the Jolian Ambassador to find out just what this sheep plans to do. I can't let the rest of the Kingdom become privy to our bewilderment by sending off the usual incompetents to negotiate with the Jolians. We begin to keep a few new secrets as of today, we three."

The General frowned at his detested gruel deep in thought, "They just appeared suddenly on the field and saved the army?"

"By Neko's account, which I have no reason to doubt," said the bemused King.

"Damn," said General Grey, "I hate that."

I wasn't sure if he was referring to his pottage or the inconstancy of Jolians. And then, suddenly remembering a Jolian affair of my own; I startled. In all of the haste of the morning I'd forgotten to mention Grizzy's account to the merchant. And now here it was Midday and her business not attended to too.

Both the King and General Grey had noticed me start in my chair. The King looked at me and said, "Is something wrong Jamie? You look ill. Not another headache, I hope."

"No, no, this fish has a bone," I said pushing away the plate, "I'm fine."

"You should have had the pork, bones so big you could use them for a war club." Looking to the nearest servant,

he said, "Bring the Lord Magistrate a trencher of pork and get rid of this fish." Then turning to General Grey, "Now Grey, about the Perdido..."

I didn't hear a word of the rest of it. I was miserable. My mind filled with an image of Grizzy walking into the merchant's shop and being turned away by some cold-hearted ass of a clerk, "You can't trade here young lady, you haven't an account."

"Oh, but I do. The Lord Magistrate arranged that just this morning."

The clerk consults his ratty old ledger, "No, no record of that here. I've been here all morning and nothing was said to me of an account for you. Have you any Coin girl? We are always happy to take a little silver."

Poor Grizzy, all alone and neglected by me. As the scene played out in my mind I nearly wretched, my stomach filled with butterflies. "Damn the Lords and damn the war," I thought to myself. All morning I'd been feeling like something had finally gone right with the world, and now I had made a mess of the thing at the first chance. I wanted to run down to the damn merchant's little hovel myself and wring the clerk's scrawny neck for him. But I couldn't do that. I had to stay here and advise the King on this damnable war. I'd make it up to Grizzy somehow. I'd buy the

stinking little shop and turn all the fools out. Give the whole thing to Grizzy.

In truth I knew that Grizzy would forgive the wound I'd inflicted on her. It had been a busy morning, the Kingdom was at war. But would I forgive myself? All morning I'd been listening to this talk of the world coming down around our ears with the feeling that whatever happened, I had something that I could nourish and grow as far as Grizzy was willing. And now, at the first opportunity, all this wretchedness had inflicted itself on that. It was the last thing I wanted.

Suddenly the King was standing up and saying, "Well, let's go wring the wretched Lords for taxes."

Myself, I was going to wring that wretched little merchant for an account before I did anything else. I told the King that I needed to use the privy and went to stand by the front door of Chambers, where I waited impatiently until the fellow came along with one of his attendants in train. I called him off to a corner and told him what it was that I wanted. He seemed to think that I was trying to buy him off by offering to buy whatever it was that he so warily sold. I finally convinced him that my servant could hardly buy enough of his wares to alter the fate of the

Kingdom and he sent his attendant off to enter Grizzly's name in his ratty old ledger.

I then found one of the King's pages and sent him off with hastily scribbled note to Grizzly:

My dearest Grizzly,

It has been a long morning, what with the war and all. But I finally managed to arrange the business with the merchant. The thing is done. Go and get what you need. Buy the whole shop and have the clerk hanged if you like.

Love Jamie

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That done I hurried to attend the King.

The afternoon went pretty much as Lord General Grey had predicted. The Masters of the Town agreed to a levy of tax to feed and clothe the requisition of villagers, "To become soldiers. With horse to be provided by the Crown," that the Lords of the Manor grudgingly agreed to provide to the Crown's Army. Both sides tried to hang the thing on concessions that the King absolutely refused. He had them penned and needed concede them nothing.

The Townsmen were reluctant at first to agree to anything. After all, the town had never been attacked. They argued that, if anything, the wall around the town ought to be fortified. It seemed they were willing to abandon the Manor Lords to their fates.

The King told them, in some heat, "Would you then leave the countryside go to the wolves. Who would there be to buy your wares? And who would defend the town at the end? Most of the army is made up of the countryside. Your clerks are unwilling to leave their ledgers to fight." He looked around the room with asperity. And then, seeming to make a decision about them that caused his resolve to stiffen into barely restrained fury he said, "If it comes to it, I'll arrest the whole damn lot and send them to fight the raiders in chains. Think you on that."

The Manor Lords were all for letting the clerks do some of the fighting and for their part offered to open up the road to the town so that it could be attacked. Let the raiders burn shops rather than crops for a while. This was suggested by one of the Manor Lords who'd probably had too much ale with his meat.

But the disagreements couldn't be sustained. Both sides recognized that, reluctantly or not, we were going to have to take the war to the raiders with a will.

We reached agreement on emissaries to the Kingdoms and the Lords themselves suggested a reception to honor the Jolians for their aid in the late battle.

This notion of a reception made it all the more urgent that I consult the Jolian Ambassador. It would be embarrassing if he blabbed out at a court reception that we still weren't talking. The mystery of the Jolians needed to be solved.

The last order of business was to the men of the council a formality at this point. A Warrant was made out for the Witchking with no dissent. He was now properly the enemy of the Kingdom of Illumiaire. How we could swear out a warrant for someone that no one really knew existed was a thing I at first wondered at. But the world is a strange place and as I listened to the discussion of the harsh wording to be applied to the warrant, a feeling began to grow in me that it wasn't such a farce after all. In the end, I did not laugh at the men who demanded the strongest possible language be applied to it. I wrote it up as they required. And I realized in the process of writing it that I would give it to Jospera to file with a straight face.

Finished, I gave it to the King to sign, and he did so to the Lords' acclaim.

Earlier in the morning I would have thought it a very good tool to rally the Council. Now I wasn't so sure. Maybe it was the necessary thing to do. I even began to wonder at the optimism of my heart, the lingering doubt of his existence.

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The King kept Lord General Grey and I long into the night. Grey, by now nearly asleep in his chair, the occasional interruptions to allow the old fellow to empty his bowels appeared through for the evening.

We sat in a small globe of light, provided by a few sputtering candles that did nothing to illuminate the books that sat on the shelves in the King's Library. Darkness held her sway in the corners. I knew for a fact that there was a chair over by the door where a servant often sat to attend the King's needs. But if one were sitting there right now, I could not see him. We might have been in any room in the castle that held an end of a table and a few chairs. The only sound in the room for most of the evening had been the King's voice talking of the things he, or I,

or Grey, must do in the days to come. I believe that this is the best environment for our King to do his thinking. In dark and silence he spins the web of his thoughts as he wills. To a lesser mind this might be a dangerous occupation. It may be the very thing that has gotten the Witchking's mind into the trouble it must be in, the urge to dominate the madness that lurks in darkened corners. But our King is of a stout heart and fine principles. He loves his life and his Kingdom. He does not deal in phantoms.

And King Henry of the House of Thalia was about as optimistic, this night, as a man sitting on the edge of a precipice could be. He would overcome the Witchking-or know the reason why not. I would use the knowledge I had gained in this room studying with my old master to help him. And Lord General Grey, while awake, was in his element too, He was planning a war with the resources of a Kingdom at his hands.

"For that is what it boils down to Jamie," the King was saying. "We must take our courage in our hands, pillage our own resources, and take the war to its source. The thing that bothers me is that we all love a storm. There is excitement, anticipation, and a delicious sort of dread. And then comes the storm. An angry wind blows a stout tree down on a cottage and kills a farmer, leaving a widow and

small children." He leaned forward in his chair, "The thing that always gets me," he paused, his bemusement evident, and continued, "the sun comes out after the storm, the birds begin again to sing, and all the world falls back upon its usual course. And yet nothing, by this single act of the Storm Gods, is ever the same." He sat back in his chair again, the shadows darkened his face, "You look around and you see a little damage to the land, nothing of the heart of the widow, and even less of the author of her miseries. We go into these things with our hearts full, and we come out the Oracle hardly knows where, with nothing to show how we got there."

The King seemed to slump a little in his chair. He dropped his head and looked at me through lidded eyes, "I'm worried Jamie, I suspect that the gods intend to hand us our asses in this war."

I couldn't help it, I laughed. I think that had been what the King intended because he was laughing too. It felt good and seemed to dispel some of the gloom that wanted to invade the light of the candles.

The sound of laughter awoke old General Grey with a start, "What, what, did I miss something?"

The King looked toward Grey as he stood up from his chair, "No old friend, you missed nothing. Just a couple of

fools nattering in the dark. It's late, I'm going to go to my Jolian princess, Jamie is going to his, and you, General Grey? A servant has made a room for you. Sleep well; I'll want you with me in the morning."

There had been a servant sleeping in the corner chair because the King said, "Wake up Wadny, it's time for bed." Then the King took one of the candles off the table and handed it Wadny, who appeared out of the darkness, "Please conduct Lord General Grey to his room."

Then the King bade us goodnight and with his own candle went off to share Queen Lilli's pillow.

***Chapter Five:  
The Radiant Maiden***

I took a candle, bid Grey and Wadny a goodnight and went off to my rooms, thinking of Grizzy and wondering if she had waited up. Whether she was asleep, or no, I would crawl in with her and shut out the rest of the Kingdom for a while. Grizzy had suddenly become the one thing in my life that made all the rest of it endurable.

I went into our bedroom suite still holding the candle in my hand. Grizzy was standing in the middle of the room rubbing her eyes and saying, "I'm sorry Master I must have fallen asleep waiting for you."

I started to say "It's very late Grizzy," but suddenly my mouth wouldn't move. There was a phantom in my room again. But rather than appear frightening, it was only Grizzy wonderfully changed. The only thing I recognized about her was the familiar sound of her fair Jolian voice, everything else about her was the fairest of illusions, a trick of moonlight and candlelight on a tired mind; because, for a moment, Grizzy standing in the middle of the room, outlined by the moonlight that came in from the window and illuminated by the light from the candle in my hand, wasn't Grizzy anymore, but a being of light and color the like of which I'd never seen before. And as she stood there, patiently waiting for me to say something, moonlight and candlelight somehow seemed to merge and then weave

together to bathe her in a pale blue light, in the midst of which she was transformed into a radiant maiden more arrestingly beautiful than the most famous of the woodland sprites the old legends described. Her long brown hair almost black in the moonlight, curling away from her face and falling down her chest in large ringlets to her navel, her eyes seemed blue rather than brown, and her lips thicker and redder than I had ever seen them. As my eyes grew accustomed to the blue light shimmering around her, I saw that it radiated from the garment she was wearing, clinging to her body as tight as the sheerest hosiery, following every contour and shaping her slender form in a soft tender glow. Save for the puffing of her long sleeves as they fell toward her wrists, hanging in twin billows that almost completely hid her hands. She raised her hand to lift the hair off of her chest and lay it over her shoulder, and I swear I saw a larger mound of breast budding out under the sheer blue of her dress.

I set the candle on the table and the shifting light danced over Grizzy like the first rays of the morning sun reflecting across Echo Pond.

I waited for the moment to pass and my head to clear. Grizzy didn't even seem aware of the effect she'd produced on me. "Do you like it...I made it today while you were

gone." Her face so open, her expression so vulnerable, that for a long heartbeat I didn't dare move or breathe for fear that I would give offense. She shifted her weight slightly and that small movement broke the spell. I was suddenly terrified that by doing nothing I'd damaged the sacred trust that Grizzy had shown me and tainted all the love that had gone into the sewing of that simple garment. I crossed the room, the words tumbling out, "Grizzy, you're beautiful." I picked her up off the floor, pulled her close and kissed her on the lips as full and as hard as I dared. Grizzy returned my passion with her own, lifting her legs and wrapping them tightly around my waist.

I carried her across to the bed and carefully laid her down. Then my weight settled on her and it was there that we finally broke the kiss. I buried my face in the soft hair that fell around her shoulders muttering, "My lovely Grizzy."

Grizzy whispered in my ear, "So you don't mind that I made this?"

I lifted my head up and looked into that beloved face, "Grizzy it has long been the fondest dream of my heart to come home from a long day in the King's service to a beautiful maiden waiting patiently for me," I told her, looking into her eyes and smiling playfully.

Grizzy giggled and squirmed between my arms, "That would be me." Then, reaching her arms around behind my neck, pulled my face to hers.

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"There will be a calm before the storm," I told Grizzy in the morning. "I hope so anyway, we need time."

We were laying in bed, lingering over a long breakfast. The King had given me leave from my duties in Chambers for the day so that I could hunt down the Jolian Ambassador. I was to tax him politely, but pointedly, on their intentions now that they had joined the war. I didn't expect any sort of answer. The Jolians were unlikely to commit to anything that tied them to a defense of lands outside of their own, quite defensible, borders. Happily, the Jolian Ambassador was known to be an indolent fellow who never rose before noon. So, I was indulging in a little indolence of my own.

The King, never indolent himself, planned to ride out early in the morning with a small escort to intercept Prince Nekoleaf on his homeward journey. He intended to

accompany his son on the last leg of his journey home. I think he was anxious for whatever news was to be had. And anxious also, to have a discussion with the Prince concerning the wisdom of riding into traps. Conversely, he also wanted to demonstrate to the Lords that he supported the decisions his son had made in the field by riding in through the castle gate with him. There had been agreement in Council, but it had seemed qualified on the point of Neko's leadership during the last campaign. The King wanted to present the House of Thalia as a united front before the entire Kingdom.

But, other than the press of these affairs, the morning was fine. The sun was shining in through the little window by Grizzy's small and empty bed, and I was putting off going wandering about the town until the last possible moment. We were lying in the center of our bed, surrounded by the remains of an unhurried breakfast. Grizzy, who'd been quiet since the Sounding of last Morning Gong, now looked up into my face and said unexpectedly, "Tell me about your first wife, Jamie."

"Where had that come from?" I wondered. But knowing that Grizzy's curiosities were not a thing to be set aside lightly, I laid there for a few heartbeats gathering my

thoughts on the subject. The silence stretched out until Grizzy poked me in the ribs with her finger.

"Not much to tell," I said, acknowledging the poke. "My father foisted her on me. Showed up one day at the castle with this and that baggage in tow. Odd way for him to travel so I knew there was going to be some sort of trouble. Had a young woman with him. Perfectly odious person that he said I was to marry." I sighed and stopped talking. Grizzy poked me again after a while.

"Well fine then," I said, and continued. "We were, neither of us barely eighteen. The thing was by way of a disaster. I was deep in my studies, and she so taken with court life, Lady in Waiting to the first Queen Lily, that we hardly ever saw each other. Which, I think we both felt, not a bad thing." Then to cut the story down to the nub, I omitted all of the details and said simply, "She died of a winter fever after a mercifully short illness not long before we found you out in the woods."

We laid there for a little while, I was thinking about something that had always bothered me about her death. And feeling the need to unburden myself, I offered another detail without being poked. "Oddest thing about her dying the way she did was what she said to me at the end. She

laid there in bed, flushed and miserable, with me sitting beside her, offering her what comfort that I could.

At one point on that last day, she came out of a feverish sleep and looked up at me, sitting beside the bed, and said, "Jamie, I'm your wife and I've long felt I was owed something by that. You may not think so, but I do. I think I could have loved you if you hadn't been such a distracted young man."

I nearly said, "Oh horseshit, for distraction I could learn something from you." But she was dying, so I let it go.

Then she said, "I'm not going to survive this fever, and I'm determined to extract a promise from you before I go."

I told her, "Whatever is a comfort to you. If the thing can be done. I will do it."

She looked up at me with fevered eyes, nodding to herself as if she'd already scored a point on me, and said, "Good, then whatever else you do on the morrow of my passing beyond the reach of the Storm Gods, I will not have you to marrying that damned Breeze woman that you're always writing that perfectly awful poetry too. Whatever else you do, it would be a weight on my spirit, and yours, if you were ever to marry a woman that you had been trifling with

while I was sick onto death. As your wife, for your sake and mine, I forbid it."

I was dumbfounded; I thought she must be delirious. I said as kindly as possible, "And who in the Seven Hells is the Breeze woman?"

"Don't dissemble with me, Lord Magistrate, I know all". And that was all she would say on the subject, "I know all."

"She died early the next morning. Slipped away in her sleep, taking the secret of the Breeze woman's identity to her grave. Owing to the heat, she was buried the next day, and all through her funeral those last words bothered me. "What had the woman been rambling about?" I kept wondering, over and over. It was a hot and stuffy hell in the King's Hall that morning and I didn't hear a word the Priest of the Oracle said over her body. I just sat on a hard bench and sweated, and thought and thought. When it was all over I went down to sit by the crick. I wanted to be alone for a little while. I laid down in the shade of a tree that I liked. After a little while, out of the still heat, there came a small cooling breeze. And suddenly I knew what the woman had been on about, Breeze woman indeed."

I rolled over on my back and stared at the ceiling while I talked, "The summer before she died had been

incredibly hot and my old master and I had been spending day after day in the High Tower fiddling with different sorts of mud. If there's a hotter room in this castle than the High Tower it would be a place so hot that the cook could bake her bread in it without an oven. So, after a long day laboring in the High Tower, I'd go down to the crick and bathe my feet, lazing while the sun set, letting the breeze cool me. Being a foolish and sentimental young man, I'd get carried away with my comfort and compose verse to the crick, the breeze, even the occasional Goose Girl who wandered by. Sometimes I allowed myself the conceit that the verse was good enough to write down. Looking back, it was as awful as the woman had said, "Oh, my darling breeze, in your loving embrace I soar," trash like that. What must have happened is that my wife got into my papers and got the wrong idea. Thought I was keeping a woman on the side with the rather quaint name of "Breeze." I lay there, next to Grizzy. And still, after all these years, I was unable to fathom the truth of my wife's last days. Why she always scowled whenever our paths crossed.

"The stupid woman was going around jealous of the wind." I sighed at the memory, relieved to have finally told someone the story of the end of my marriage.

"I hope she didn't make herself too miserable with it," was all I could think to say over my poor wife's last folly.

Grizzy lay quietly, not saying anything.

"Well, you've had a question, now it's my turn." I felt Grizzy's body tense, but I went ahead anyway; one good turn deserves another. I rolled over and nibbled the nearest of the breasts that seemed to have sprouted on her chest overnight, "I'm curious about these."

She squirmed under my tongue and pulled my head down harder on her chest, "Old Jolian herb remedy," she whispered.

I gave the breast in my mouth a nip and she squirmed gratifyingly. Then kissed my forehead and soon rolled her leg onto my thigh, pressing herself against me while I continued to nibble.

"Yes," I said with my mouth full.

"Jolian men seem to like large breasted women, which Jolian women almost never are, or at least Jolian women think that Jolian men prefer large breasted women."

I bit her nipple harder and she groaned, "I got some from a Jolian Herb Master who came through the town a while ago."

"Seems to work," I said and bit her again.

Every part of Grizzy's body was now moving with delight, pressing her body against mine so tight that I would hardly have been surprised if she suddenly appeared behind me, having passed completely through to the other side. "They can be as large as melons if you like."

"These are fine," I said.

We were now thoroughly aroused and I decided that I could safely ignore that nagging little voice in the back of my head a little longer. The Jolian ambassador could keep. It wasn't like I had an appointment. He might even be out of town.

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Within another Gong, Grizzy had me dressed and I was headed down the corridor toward the residence of our Ambassador to the Crown of Illumiare. Our fine and indolent morning together had finally come to a reluctant end; I absolutely had to search out the Jolian Ambassador. The nagging little voice would not be stilled.

My main problem of the moment was that I had no idea where this Jolian headquartered. The only solution to seek

out someone who would know, and that lead me unhappily to the King's cousin, our Ambassador to the Kingdoms; he would know how to find Ambassador Holme.

Fortunately, I knew Holme rather well, having been involved in the tricky and intricate negotiations surrounding the marriage of the King to the Ambassador's sister, the present Queen Lilli. The King had been lucky at marriage twice. Both times finding women holding to the same name of different spellings, that he had fallen in love with. And only ever unlucky in that the first Lily had died of the same fever that carried away Annie the Witch. Neko had been the only product of the King's first marriage. The second Queen Lilli had so far been unable to bear a child that lived more than a few days after birth. The succession was assured. But the King wanted a guarantee that his wife had so far been unable to provide, that if something happened to Prince Nikoleaf, the throne would be assured to the Thalia's. And not some court grandee with the thinnest of claims to succeed, like this cousin I was now going to visit.

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As I approached the door to his rooms, I knew that the King's cousin would not enjoy a visit from me. I detested the man as much as I knew he feared me. For all his bluster whenever we met, I could see that he held me in something that approached real terror. I always got a whiff of corruption when I was near him and that accounted for the fear. A man with my position, and my gift for seeing the truth, could have him in the dungeon within an hour of my deciding that was where he needed to be.

Other than that, he was a vain snob with pretty moustaches he was quite famous for in his own circle. Snow white and bushy, they concealed both his upper and lower lip when he set the grim expression on his face that he liked to sport when he transacted business; with each end obediently curving up on his cheeks as he had carefully trained them to. Actually, the result was magnificent to look at, but it took more than the happy accident of growing fine moustaches to gain this King's confidence. If the man spent more time on business, and less time on his facial hair, he might have what he so craved: influence.

He claimed his kinship to the King in a haughty manner to all and sundry. And to the King's irritation called him "Cousin" in the most flattering way whenever possible. But he wasn't even really the King's cousin; some distant

relationship of the first Queen Lily. Not a Thalia at all. I hate pretense in all its forms and shun those who practice it. So, I avoid him, and his staff, whenever possible. I suppose I can be a snob too.

This talking artifice I didn't have to search out. He spent all his time in a huge wonderfully appointed apartment much closer to the King's area of the castle than my humble two room cave on the sunny side of the battlement. He never left it during the day for any reason. If you wanted to see the Ambassador of Illumiaire you went to him, or you didn't see him.

First the gauntlet of his door wards had to be run. It was my onerous task to convince two different self-important minions that the Ambassador could indeed spare me a minute to receive a message that I brought from the King. And that, "no", I could not share it with either of them to be relayed to the Ambassador. The second warden finally had to bow to the fact that I outranked him by so many removes that I could have him hanged for impertinence if he were to delay the King's message any longer. I advised him in some heat to inform the Ambassador that an errand of great importance was waiting on him.

I was completely out of temper when finally I was admitted to his presence. So, dispensing with the usual

social amenities I went straight to the point. I told him, "Sir, I need to know where I might find the Jolian Ambassador, Aaron Holme."

The King's cousin didn't seem surprised at my lack of social grace. He only looked at me mildly, "Why would you want to find the Jolian Ambassador? You are no diplomat Lord Magistrate. Those lines of authority run, always and anon, straight to me," he said by way of dismissal.

"I know that," I said feigning humility. "The King wishes me to deliver him a message."

He gave me the grim look that made his moustaches his most arresting feature.

I dissembled a little more, "It's of no real import. Nothing to trouble yourself with."

He frowned and began flatly. "I think there may be more to it than that, Sir. There are rumors flying all over the palace that there has been a breakthrough, and possibly a treaty, concluded with the Jolians. I have been most embarrassed more than once already this morning to have no answer for the Lords when they have come to query me concerning this astounding, and unlikely, turnabout." He stretched out his large hands and folded them in the middle of his desk, "A treaty with the Jolians would be very good

for trade. But now you come to me and ask for the residence of the Jolian Ambassador."

He sat back in his chair and appeared to consider, "It is odd that, how could there be a secret treaty if the intriguing secret keeper closest to the King is unaware of its existence? You would be hard-pressed to negotiate a treaty with someone you could not find," he said regarding me thoughtfully, while twirling an end of his beautiful moustaches.

I decided not to be offended at his calling me an "intriguing secret keeper" as it was mostly true. "I would not trouble myself to trespass on your hunting grounds. I only wish to convey a message from the King to Aaron Holme." This interview was not going as I had imagined it. The fellow was getting more information by inadvertence than I was getting from straight questioning. And worse, this intimate of the Lords had shrewdly come to the conclusion that we were still in the dark as to the intentions of our new ally.

He continued to regard me grimly. I decided to set him off his guard. "The King did not inform you that I was coming to you with this request?" I asked ingratiatingly, pretending to be surprised that the King had overlooked him. I knew that he was touchy about the King's low opinion

of him, inspiring him to a new round of complaint. But at least we would be off the subject of treaties.

The man pulled a sour face, and in the process he tugged his moustache so hard that he deranged an end of it. So that now, one side curled up, while the other drooped in the opposite direction. He told me, as if trying to make me understand things from his side, "The King is occasionally too busy to completely consult this office on matters that I certainly must be fully versed in-if I and my fellows are to do our jobs. I understand many duties occupy his time, but neglecting my expertise does not serve the Kingdom well. I control an important office to the Crown, but of late, I seem to get most of my information at second hand from the Lords. They come to me for advice. They seem to fear you."

The man said this last as if he were scolding me, suggesting that I might want to avoid frightening the Lords in my dealings with them. Get along and go along. But, he had been very unwise to mention his intimacy with the Lords. The Lords only came to him because they could not practice their subtleties on me. I saw them for what they were. And they knew they could not hide their designs from me.

"I would be careful in my dealings with the Lords. They are fools almost to the point of treachery," I told him.

"There are no traitors among the Lords," he told me. But something in his face made me uncomfortable.

I repeated his words back to him slowly, "There are no traitors among the Lords?"

"No," he answered too quickly. Then, seeing my doubt, he continued, "They are in it for themselves. That may amount to treachery to some. But, it is not something to hang for."

His countenance had registered so much fear and confusion running amok with each other as he explained his dealings with the Lords that his moustaches became completely disarranged under the ministrations of his nervous fingers. I asked him pointedly, "Do you doubt your King? Have your too familiar dealings with the Lords brought you to doubt your King?"

"Are you going to make an inquiry of me and my affairs, Lord Magistrate?" he asked evasively while tugging his moustaches so hard that he winced. There was a distinct note of fear in his voice. There were those who feared me. And even some who hated me. This man was jealous of my place beside the King. Jealousy has caused better men than

the one before me to do strange, and sometimes, unwise things.

"No, not as yet," I said, although I was very tempted.

"I could stand it. This office is quite in order."

"I have no doubt." But I could see again that not all the story was being told.

"Bribes," I thought.

"Sir, I must tell you that the King does not doubt your loyalty. But, if it were to come to that, your standing as his cousin would not save you. If the King does not seem to want your advice-he does not want your advice. If you persist in this obstruction, I will send Josperra to you to look into the financial dealings of this outfit of yours." I glanced around the room at the many fine lamps and tapestries that graced his walls and tables. Then looked straight into his eyes and said in a hard tone, "That, I think you would not stand. It would be wise of you to stick to your dealings with the Perdido and the Joven, and leave the Jolians to me."

The man looked as if he were ready to explode. I could see that he wished me dead. I had made a new and powerful enemy. The fellow may be a conceited ass, but the Lords revered him in his position as holder of all the trading patents. I decided it was time to end the interview with

him bound and gagged to me. I continued to look at him placidly, advising him, "Look to your moustaches my friend; they are at odds with each other. As is much else about you. But, as long as you continue to do your job, I will not mention to the King that what he expects of you is also the truth of you. You walk a fine line. Continue to do so," I told him firmly. "Do not step too far out of bounds."

"As you are now bound to me," I did not add.

Rather I said, "One of those bounds is that you tell no one of this conversation."

He gave up the struggle, as he had long ago given up his integrity, "As you wish, Lord Magistrate."

Then gave me instructions where I might find Aaron Holme.

***[END OF 2<sup>ND</sup> INSTALLMENT...]***