

***Chapter Eight:  
The Camp Tale***

That night the King, Neko and I, Lord General Grey and his oldest son Peter, sat around the campfire, getting quite drunk and telling stories of long ago battles and more recent ones. I related the history the Jolian had given me in the spirit of a drunken camp tale, with appropriate embellishments and details to make it more interesting. When I finished up, we all sat in silence for a long moment mulling it over, and then Neko said philosophically, "As the Jolians were most likely once Wildmen who worked with a will to drive whoever held these valleys back into the mountains when they arrived from wherever, looked 'round, and decided to call these valleys

home." Then he returned to turning the matter over in his mind while he stared into the fire.

One by one we all stopped contemplating the fire and turned to stare at Neko.

He must have felt our stares because he looked up at us, "What, it could have been the way of it."

The fire burned late into the night. Grey and then his son had fallen asleep while the King told of a letter that he had received from one of the Lords before he left the Castle proposing that the Town be named for the King in his honor. The Lords could agree to call it "The Sake of Henry". The King had written back to respectfully inquire who in their right mind had come to the conclusion that the Town, at best an accident and at worst a nuisance, but principally something to tax needed a name other than the one it had come with, "The Town". "I told those rascals that it appeared to me that if there were two towns you might want to name one of them something other than "Town" to distinguish one from the next. If I'm to go to the trouble and expense of naming a thing I'm not all that fond of, then I'll want a better reason to do it than the Lords have finally found something that they can all agree on to do. I hope that will put an end to this Lordly digression from funding the war." He looked at Neko and said, "Don't

you think?"

Still staring into the fire, deep in his own thoughts of ancient Jolians and their enemies, Neko grunted, and then said loudly, "Damn the Town, I thought you'd finally made up your mind to burn it."

"When the war is over I might, but right now I need the Town Tax."

"Well then it would be foolish to name something that you're just going to burn anyway once its use is exhausted."

"That's the way I see it," agreed the King.

The King and Neko fell silent again and I finally had the chance to tell the King that I was happy to see that he had survived the day. He laughed drunkenly and said, "It was good to be in a fight again, war is not half so frightening when all you have to do is fight it." Then he reached into the stack of wood that he was using for a pillow and threw a chunk onto the fire while he asked, "Speaking of things that tend to provoke combat, how goes it with your Jolian?"

"How is it that you knew about this before I did?" said I, giving voice to a suspicion that, once uttered, seemed to be somehow the case.

"Grizzy?" the King said thoughtfully, "I think I knew

the day we found her. I knew something, maybe this was it." He kicked the log deeper into the fire and said, "Anyway, I've never believed that she just picked your horse out of the train that day. I thought to give her into your keeping, and nothing warned me against it. So I did."

"Thank you, she has a fair hand with toast," I said, and in so saying, any reservations that lingered in my mind frittered away. "No use arguing with fate," I decided. So, I told him everything fit to tell of what I'd felt and done since the last midnight battle of the Storm Gods. He stared into the fire, listening carefully, "I'm happy for you then...and happiness is rare enough in this world." Then he looked at me and said, "I must trust to your discretion in this, we have enemies that could turn information like this to their own use." The thought seemed to dismay him.

There was something that had been bothering me for a while, so I put it to him. "Sire, does the old Queen ever visit you late in the night? Does she ever come around and mention to you about the present Queen Lilli, things like that?"

He gave me an odd look.

"The old Queen?"

Then, "Come to me in the night?" I think he was trying to divert the question by pretending not to understand it.

I waited him out.

Finally, his face lit and then not lit by the flames, "I suppose once in a while. It's a consequence of the talent. Did you know that?"

"It's how I figured it."

"Is there someone bothering your sleep?" Then he looked at me, finally understanding.

"Annie?"

I nodded.

He laughed very hard at that, "I'll bet she's pissed."

"It's not funny."

"No, I suppose not." Thinking about the spring that our wives died seemed to make him sad. "I loved that woman you know. Not your wife, mine." The drink seemed to be confusing him. He fell silent, staring into the fire, remembering I suppose.

"Father," I said.

He roused himself from his thoughts and said slowly, "I'm sorry Jamie. The first Lily has gotten used to the new Lilli. She was angry in the beginning that I'd gotten married again so soon after she died. But I had a kingdom to run and Lords to satisfy." He frowned thinking of the Lords.

He looked at me across the fire and said, "I doubt

there's anything to be done about Annie. She'll never be happy about Grizzy. If I remember Annie rightly, you can be assured of that. She'll keep coming around until...well, that's a good question." He paused, then finished, "Annie can do no great harm. You'll just have to put up with her," he said airily.

The King stared deep into the fire for a while, then murmured drunkenly, referring to most things I suspect, "Soulless people do a lot of damage, but something always survives."

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"I will not have our separate fates depending on hasty decisions made in the field," the King told us over dinner the next evening. I had spent the day scouting the enemy with Neko and Grey's son. Neko had gotten us up with the sun and we'd ridden almost back to the castle trying to find evidence of Wildmen, and found nothing. Then we'd made a wide sweep around the camp and found little more, cold

ashes and trampled sleeping spots made of pine boughs, some small sign that the raiders had our camp under watch.

"The Muertra has set a trap for us much more dangerous than any he has set for Neko," the King continued, chagrined at the words. "He has taken control of the war with a rumor. We will have no choice but to defend Echo Pond now. And since we don't know where to attack this Witchking, we're forced to wait him out while we divide our forces to defend ourselves and Echo Pond."

"So," he said as he prepared to set his decisions in stone as he uttered them, "we will stay here three or four days doing some hard planning and then go back to the castle and raise the army. We'll send this army to the Oracle under Grey's son and then," turning to Neko, "you can spend some time with that fat wife of yours making me another grandchild. But in the end you'll be the one sitting on your ass in front of the Oracle."

"Why can't Jamie be the one to sit on his ass in front of the Oracle? It's more than his turn to be miserable out here for a while. He's quite capable of it, I'm sure." As soon as it was out of his mouth, Neko warmed to the idea enthusiastically. That he was willing to trust his army to me said a lot about how badly he wanted to see his fat Meleeza again for longer than a few days.

"Jamie is going to Sabbia," the King said, cutting Neko off before he could really get going on an idea that I thought had nothing to recommend--by stating one even worse.

"To fetch uncle Deke, it will be good to see old Deke again," Neko said; his enthusiasm easily rekindled at the thought of seeing the old warrior that he so admired. He nodded to me.

"Lucky Jamie, to see old Deke again, bearing news that he will not like to hear," he said, smiling again, happy to be compensated for the short visit with his wife by my own miseries.

I returned his smile with a rueful one of my own, "Old Deke again."

"I have already sent dispatches to the Jolians, the Joven, and the Perdido. I have told them as much as it would be good for them to know of what we know. I haven't decided how to tell the Lords of this yet. Those rascals will just have to have their feet put to the fire when I find the time," the King said disgustedly.

"And while I am not exactly begging the others for help, I tried to make them understand that no one can fight this thing alone. We can't be found fighting each other when the Muertra attacks Echo Pond."

Dinner then became a dour discussion, moistened with ale, of what we might expect from what allies we had. "We'd best dismiss the Jolians from our calculations," said General Grey. "That leaves the Perdido, the Jovens, and the Pretender to the Throne of Sabbia, Deke," he concluded.

"The Perdido are dandies in tunics, the Jovens hate us, and there is no throne in Sabbia," Neko said, neatly summing up his thoughts on our allies.

"Deke will be sorry to hear that Neko, he seems to have woven himself a tight crown from the Sabbian grasses," the King said dryly.

"Deke and the Jolians would find the Wildmen sore neighbors should we fail. They'll come around," I said, stating what I thought to be the case. I knew Deke-and I thought I knew Aaron. They had no reason to want to see us come to a bad end. They would gain little from it.

"Besides, all will rally to the Oracle. That is the key to the whole puzzle now," I said trying to put the discussion on an even footing, best not to get too gloomy.

"Damn the Oracle," said the King again, "I don't like being pinned to a defense of the thing."

"Can't be helped," Neko said, "that horse is out of the barn."

Old Grey nodded his head.

"We'll just have to send a contingent from each of the allies to Echo Pond. It will have to appear large enough to hold it while we raise the countryside to take the war to the enemy once we find him."

"The war will come to us," said the King with resignation. "We'll spend the summer defending ourselves from the raiders. And this fall, we'll find ourselves on the plain before the Oracle, fighting for our lives."

"Best get ready then," said Neko, standing up.

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Get ready we did. Neko rode out each morning, drilling his troops and looking for Wildmen. These seemed to have pulled in their heads after the attack on the King, and except for the occasional track or small half-buried cold campfire, there was still nothing much to be found.

The King and I were equally busy devising strategies for handling the allies, the Lords, and the soon to be hysterical priests of the Oracle. The King sent couriers

across and forth telling Queen Lilli to inform the Lords of things as they stood. More like how the King wanted them to stand to be honest. He also reversed his course and instructed that the Queen arrange a reception for her brother, and any Jolian soldiers who had been at Gorgrieth and could attend, to be held on the night of our return. And with it gave a sample of his wishes as to whom he required to attend among the Lords and Gentry. He also wanted the Ambassadors from the Perdido and the Joven.

I had a long foolish letter I wanted to send Grizzy in the worst way. I had been working on it when I could find a spare moment ever since I had arrived at the Wildwoman. Now it was sitting in my pocket demanding that I find a way for it to arrive at its intended.

Sadly, it was caught in a snare of my own making. I couldn't send it through my office because my associates were well-trained spies. One of the chief prerequisites of the job is an abundant curiosity; Sara is a nosey old thing who picks up an endless round of gossip that includes almost any interesting doings in the castle. And she seems to have a nosey old counterpart in almost every Lord's family in the Kingdom; sometimes we know what the Lords are thinking before they do. Sara could get a bucket of rainwater gossiping about the Storm Gods. And I could just

see Josperra sitting at his desk beside a candle, turning my letter over and over in his long thin fingers, dying of curiosity to know why his boss was writing a long letter to his servant.

One day, as he was assembling correspondence to be sent out, the King asked if I had anything I'd like sent to the castle through his wife. I had just the thing handy and gave it to him. Without looking to see to whom it was addressed he stuck it in with the rest and without a word gave all to the courier.

Then he looked at me and said, "And to answer your question, Grizzy will not be going with you to Sabbia, you'll have to dress yourself and eat burnt toast. It's going to be a long summer and I will be often in the field, Lilli will need someone to show her roses to. Grizzy seems to understand pretty things; I'd like you to ask her to keep Lilli company."

We both knew that this was for the best. I'd been trying to figure how to keep Deke and Grizzy separated. My feelings were not a thing that I easily hid. And if Deke suspected...well, that would be bad.

"It will be a long summer," I said feeling Grizzy's absence more than ever.

The King nodded and then picked up a map.

"Go and find your brother please. I want to discuss these troop placements with him. Whoever found the Oracle had no idea of ever having to defend it, a flat plain surrounded by steep mountains...if we don't hold the heights we'll be the laughing-sport of every duck on Echo Pond."

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It was finally our last morning in camp and although I would be happy to be home before the Midday Meal, I realized that life in camp was starting to agree with me. I slept better out of the castle for one thing. I don't think it had anything to do with all the ale we drank each night around the campfire either. I would stumble off to the tent I shared with Neko each night, crawl between the blankets spread out on the ground and suddenly it would be morning; shadows of leaves dancing in the sunlight on the roof of the tent, quiet sounds of men planning their day over coffee by the fire. I'd lie on my lumpy bed for a long

moment wondering where Grizzy was with my toast. Then I'd realize with a soft groan that there'd be no toast, no jam, and no Grizzy--only hard rolls and chewy bacon by a smoky fire with Neko.

In a second letter I'd written to Grizzy and snuck in with the King's post, I had told her, among other things that she would not be going to Sabbia with me. I wanted to soften the blow for both of us. The facts became real for me writing them down on parchment. And Grizzy would have time to get used to the idea before I got back. Grizzy could be quite a trooper once she had a little time to get used to something that she didn't like, and I really didn't want to pass our only night together between this trip and that feeling awful over freshly broken bad news. Grizzy tended to cry over things like that and although I enjoyed nothing more than comforting her, I wanted more for our only night together.

Grizzy and I had not been separated for any length of time in the ten years we'd been together. And I realized, thinking about the trip to Sabbia that I would have missed her soft pleasant ways as a counterpoint to my father even if I hadn't fallen in love with her. She seemed to bring sunshine with all that she did.

Just when I realized that I was becoming maudlin in my

enthusiasm to see Grizzly again, the King came storming out of his tent holding a piece of paper in his hands, red faced and thundering, "The damn rumor is all over that damn Town skulking around my castle walls, I should have burnt the thing when I had the chance. Lilli writes that the entire Kingdom is in an uproar over the threat to the Oracle and dancing in the streets that the Jolian heroes will be there to help defend it." He looked at the piece of paper in his hands as if to ask it where it had gotten such an impossible notion, crumpled it up and said with grim determination, "I'm going to shove my sword so far up that fat-headed Aaron Holmes's ass he'll be able to butcher a steer with his tongue. How did such a big-mouthed idiot ever become a diplomat? I'm going to hang him in the Town Square and then tax the Town out of existence." This was no idle boast. The King had the power to do it. His father, William the Mad, had threatened, and almost done, worse.

"Hang him later," I said, trying to divert the King's wrath. "Right now we have about three hours to figure out how to calm the Town and get a packet of our own lies in order."

"By the Storm Gods, Jamie, if one more thing goes wrong this week, I'm going to abdicate and Lilli and I are going to trade the castle for a hut way up in the mountains

where I can fish and she can grow roses until they cover the Kingdom." He stood looking regal in nothing but his nightshirt, watching the scrap of a note that he'd just thrown into the fire burst into sudden flame, "There are times when I wish I'd left the Kingship to Deke."

"Deke would have made an awful King," I said. "You did the only thing."

We considered each other for several heartbeats. The King would no more abdicate these problems to Neko than I would quit my post to become a priest of the Oracle. We both loved our posts; we were just having a bad week, or two.

I told him, "Your majesty, you should get dressed; we have a lot of work to do."

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In the end, we decided to go with things as they were and play dumb about the Jolians. The threat to the Oracle had to come out anyway. It would have been better if the

King had let it out in whispers, rather than having someone else trumpet it from the parapet. And as far as the Jolians went, maybe they really would show up. It could happen. The King would have to proceed on the assumption that they wouldn't. It would never do to show up to defend the Oracle with only half an army, hoping that the allies would show up when they had a mind too.

As we were riding back to the castle, I put my horse beside the King's and told him that it wasn't Aaron Holme who blabbed out the rumored threat to the Oracle."

He looked at me as if he hadn't heard me, although I was sure that he had, and impatient at my intrusion into his thoughts said, "What do you say?"

"It was not The Jolian Ambassador who blabbed," I repeated.

"Well then, who in the Seven Hells did?" he said, his anger and frustration evident.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"When I talked to the Queen's brother he told no lies. There were missing things...and some things that didn't sound altogether the complete truth. But I expected that from an experienced diplomat. There were, Sire, no outright lies. He believed that this was news that had much need to be kept quiet."

"Then I can't hang him in the Town Square and after that burn the Town and banish the Lords to the Southern Manors?" He seemed genuinely disappointed.

"You wouldn't anyway, but no, you can't."

"Do not mistake me Jamie!" he said through clenched teeth. "A King does what a King does for an entire Kingdom. I will hang or burn anyone who stands between me and my Kingdom."

"Be that as it may, you can't hang the Jolian Ambassador and first son of her King for this indiscretion."

That left very few people to be hanged. The news of the rumor had not come from camp. We had made sure that only the King, Neko, Lord General Grey and his son Peter Grey knew the full details. The King had told the Queen in his letters of instruction to her. I could think of no one else. It hardly seemed reasonable that the Muertra had blabbed out his plans for a surprise attack on the Oracle. There was a traitor and I was going to Sabbia to put the spurs to Deke. The King had a traitor and I would not be able to find the person before I left.

"Is this going to Sabbia necessary?" I asked the King as we rode along.

"I'm afraid so, I can send no one else that my brother

will listen to. He would come if Neko went, but I can spare Neko only slightly less than I can spare you." He leaned over in his saddle and said, "Go quickly, shame your father to his duty and get back here and find me someone to hang." He laughed, "That's not so much is it?"

"Maybe we could just hang Deke," I said sourly.

The King laughed very hard at that. He was still laughing when the High Tower came into view.

***Chapter Nine:  
The Lung Ailment***

We rode in through the Town Gates to a jubilant welcome; Queen Lilli had done her job well. The day had been marked a Holiday to honor the victory over the Wildmen. The King and his escort were met at the Gate and heralded as brave warriors who had faced the enemy in

battle and come away triumphant; small battle or large, it didn't seem to matter.

And by the roar that arose when the King rode through the Town Gate, I was sure that the entire town and every farmer from miles around had come out to welcome the King back from the wars. Every shop, with the exception of the pubs closed for the day. Even the pasty faced clerks were trying to shed their grim faces to show a little cheer. I wondered if they had heard of the King's threat to send them to fight the raiders in chains and were foolishly celebrating this small victory as the end of that possibility.

All along the route through the Town skinny clerks, pudgy-faced tradesmen and well muscled rustics were hoisting their beer steins to the King and his army, beer slopping out of the cups as they were raised high when the King passed. While young widows and grey-haired maidens threw petals of roses and Angelthorn under the horse's feet. These flowers are thought to be the ones to best give blessing to returning warriors, so that their next battle might be a long time coming.

It was a good moment for us. Neko and the King rode in the front of the procession, followed by the soldiers who had faced the Wildmen in battle, proud men riding straight

in the saddle, waving at the throng as they rode past.

I rode in amongst the soldiers beside General Grey, who had been feeling the effects of his wounds the last couple of days in camp and had ridden in a litter to the edge of the Town. Then, at the Gate he'd insisted that he be lifted on a horse so that he could ride in as befitted a soldier. The old fellow seemed well enough now, although his eyes appeared to mirror the sun a little too fiercely, often a sign of coming fever.

Even our horses marched along proudly, their hooves clattering loudly on the cobbles that lined the street as it ran from the Gate to the Town Square and then to the Castle. As far as I knew, the horses were the only ones in the Kingdom who hadn't heard the rumor that the Wildmen were planning to assault the Oracle. And yet, as we rode along, it seemed that the town had already forgotten the threat.

Maybe it was just the holiday atmosphere, and the fact that the beer and wine were flowing so freely today.

The King lifted his noble head, appearing to shed his concerns as he rode through the Gate. If he was surprised at the free spirit that seemed to invade the Town he never let on. As we drew aside the Town Square a pretty young serving maid in a bright yellow apron stepped through the

crowd and handed the King a stein of beer, then dropped a low curtsy. The King took it in his hand, drank off the contents in one swift draft, waved the cup over his head and threw it into the crowd. This was met by wild cheers.

At the Gates of the Castle the King turned one last time to wave at crowd, then passed under the Royal Arch Mad King William had erected to celebrate the success of the Sabbian Campaign, and out of view of the throng into the courtyard. As soon as he passed from the sight of the crowd he turned forward to scan the crowd gathered on the steps of the Castle, in search of his lovely bride I believe. Assembled there were the Council of Lords, ranged to both sides of the Queen whose deep brown eyes were locked onto her husband as he rode up.

I had begged the King's Pardon before hand, explaining that I had much to do before the reception and would miss the ceremony on the castle steps by his leave. If I was to see my Grizzly anytime soon on my only day before I left for Sabbia, I must look to urgent business first.

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First the Old Master.

I left my horse with the Groomsman, excused myself to the King, and hurried across the God's Fountain Square to the winding staircase that led up to the High Tower. With each step on the familiar, endless staircase the hot air long trapped in this dark cavern grew more intense until I began wonder if I were climbing down into the legendary Cave of Orion rather than up to see old Windy. "How has the man stood this climb all these years?" I wondered to myself.

I had taken a torch at the bottom of the stairs to light my way in the old man's dark tunnel, as there is only one window on the entire ascent, admitting so little light as to be worthless. And as I climbed countless stairs, it seemed as if the heat festering in the stairwell began to resent paltry heat from the torch as my feeble attempt to cool it.

Finally, I came to the landing that marked the halfway point; here was the small narrow window that admitted a little light but no breeze. I rested for a minute, trying to collect my thoughts as they baked in my brain. "I'll be an idiot before I get to the top," I told the window, "my

brain boiled."

I looked out the window, stuck my face right up to the opening, took as deep a breath of sun-washed as I could get into my lungs and waited for my eyes to adjust to the change in light--until I could finally make out a small slice of the castle wall and the movements of the still reveling town beyond, the brightly colored costumes of the celebrants and the golden thatched roofs of the town glowing in the bright sun. Further the view widened out and I saw crowns of green trees stretching out to the still snow-covered Jolian peaks. "I should have gone to see Grizzly first, even for a moment," I told the mountains.

The effect of being in this oven of a tomb after being out in the forest for four days was becoming too much and my mind rebelled. I felt tightness grip my chest for the first time in days. A small itch of panic touched the back of my mind at the sudden threat and I nearly ran back down the stairs and out into the sun again. I forced myself to stand still and concentrate on the far mountain tops, at the snow that still clung above Grizzly's original home. I willed my mind calm enough to accept the idea that I had no choice but to climb the rest of these steps to talk with the Old Master.

"Once I do that, I can escape into the free air

again," I reasoned.

I turned and trudged the rest of the way round, and round again, up the narrow stairway.

I knocked at the door at the top of the High Tower and it was answered by Josperra. My first thought was, "How did this old man make this ascent?" If there was some contrivance that allowed him to ascend to this doorway while avoiding the staircase I was going to wring someone's neck. I wanted to ask him what he was doing up here when he should be downstairs scribing the King's decrees, but all I could do was lean against the lintel and smile grimly.

"Good afternoon Jamie," he said in his dry cracking whisper.

I wanted to remind him that I was the Master. But, here at the doorway to the Old Master's oven, I wasn't the Master anymore. Here, I was "Jamie" again. I let it go and wheezed, "Hello Josperra, how is the old boy?"

With the effort of talking I was seized by a sudden fit of coughing so violent that I collapsed to my knees, my hands flying out in front of me to break my fall. I couldn't hold myself on my knees with all my strength focused on forcing air into my lungs and so fell to the ground, huddled on the cobbles, struggling to breathe. My chest felt like leather bands had been stretched round and

slowly tightened until I could get no breath in. The world began to grow dark, lit only but the spots that glowed before my eyes. I realized that I was going to die of my old lung ailment right here on the floor of the tomb that already contained my Old Master. I felt strong hands seize my shoulders in a grip as tight as the one that held my chest; and then nothing.

***Chapter Ten:  
The Old Master***

My first thought upon awakening was that someone must have smashed a window through the solid rock of the High Tower because I was breathing freely again: leather bands

gone, my lungs young and fresh, as if breathing cool air for the first time. Then I felt the familiar oppression of a wet rag covering my face, smelling of the underside of a log rotting away deep in the forest. "How is that I'm still breathing if they've buried me under an old log?" I mused.

Mistakenly buried under a festering tree or not, I took in a very deep breath that filled my lungs, feeling of the first breeze to ever ripple across Echo Pond and almost cried for joy when I felt it begin to soothe the pain that seared through my chest. I opened my eyes, content that I wasn't dead yet, and saw the face of my Old Master. He smiled kindly and said, "Jamie, have you been taking the medication I prepare for you? Your lungs nearly killed you this time for good. I had to force my preparation down your throat with a bellows to allow it do its work."

I must not have been as recovered as I felt because my mind screamed out an incoherent thought, "Why would the old fool have a bellows in this steaming chamber? He has no excuse for a fire." I laid there looking into his kindly old face for a while-trying to calm my panic. He looked into my eyes, clucked to himself, and then removed the wet rag from my face.

Relieved of the foul rag that Windy thought so highly of, I told him in fits, still having a hard time catching

my breath, "I was in the forest with the King for days. I left the castle in haste and didn't think to fetch it." Moving my tongue from the roof of my mouth had brought back the old sour taste of the rag with a force of ten. I was nearly gagging as I talked.

He looked at me reprovngly as he dropped the detested rag on a table beside the bed and said, "Once in the morning and once at night, and then whenever you need it. It may smell like shit and leave a bad taste in your mouth. But, without it...well, these attacks, one of them will be the last. They are quite dangerous."

"I know," I replied, feeling helpless in the face of my illness, my master's reproof, and my own stupidity.

"You go for days without my preparation and then make a climb to the High Tower, it's a wonder that you made it to the top," he scolded.

Then he smiled grimly and laid his hand on my chest. "Your lungs are shit, Jamie. They'll be the death of you. Enjoy your life while you can." Then he thumped my chest with his fist and said, "As your physician I advise you take your medication, you stupid boy."

I laid there looking up at his homely old face and felt like a small boy again. The attacks had began soon after I'd come to Illumiare from the foothills of my

father's lands. Old Windy, his name was Windom, but he preferred Windy, had come to me after a particularly nasty attack to tell me that it was the change in the air from the dry hills to the humid valleys that was pissing off my lungs to the point that they were trying to kill me. It was something that appeared to run in my family, although I had never heard of it. He told me that he had something I could inhale through a rag that would pacify them. It was nasty and foul smelling, he'd warned. "But that's life," he told me grimly, "everything comes with a price."

Then he told me that he'd been procrastinating on the King's order that he take over my studies. But now that he had met me and saw that I wasn't the stupid boy that he thought was the only type that could come from a witless Prince like Deke, he might stop his procrastination, so that, as soon as I felt able, I could join Neko in his studies. I wasn't sure what he wanted me to study. But the stuff on the rag seemed to clear my lungs, so I thought it best to do as he asked.

Old Windy shifted in his chair, gave me a withering glance and said, "I'm getting old. I'm going to teach you how to make it." He stood up slowly and walked over to the shelves that held his Apothecary.

"It's not too difficult, even a dimwit who neglects to

use it properly ought to be able to make up a batch." Then he turned to me, holding a clay vase in his hands said, "On second thought, send Grizzy to me. You still have Grizzy don't you?"

I nodded my head on the pillow.

He set the vase back on the shelf, "Good, I'll teach Grizzy then. You'd make a botch of it; probably conjure up something that would shrivel your penis. Never been good with your hands."

He laughed at his own lame wit, then hobbled over and sat back down by the bed.

"Things must have come to a pretty pass if Henry sent you all the way up here, eh?"

"Henry didn't send me, Aaron Holme did."

"That's interesting," said my old master thoughtfully. "And why would he do that?" he asked as he leaned forward on the chair and set his elbows on his bony knees.

"He told me that the old man who bakes in the High Tower might know something about a thing called a Muertra."

"Humph," huffed the Old Master.

"Well?"

"He's making it up," he said dismissively sitting back on the chair.

"Holme seemed quite certain; and it was obvious that

he wasn't lying."

"That's odd then."

"What's odd?" I asked. Talking to him was always like this: annoying. It took time to get a straight answer to the simplest question.

"The odd thing is that there is no such thing as a Muertra. It's just an old wives' tale told to frighten children.

"Don't go out in the barn after dark or the Muertra will get you," he pantomimed, throwing his arms up in alarm and generally carrying on. Then slightly calmer than your average rooster, he raised his hands to his ears and flapped them while he made a comically frightening face. Finally, having tired of this wit as neither Josperra nor I were enjoying it, he waved his hand dismissively and said, "Bah".

"The King of Jolie believes it and he has taken the effort to become a *Lore-Master*," I told the old fool, trying to one-up him.

"Then the King of Jolie is either a madman, or a fool, or both," he rejoined flatly.

Rather than argue with him I sat up on the bed. The effort made me dizzy and I dropped my head to my breastbone.

"Jospera, bring me the large brown book that sits on the table by the lamp."

I didn't lift my head; instead I listened to Jospera's quiet footsteps and then watched the Old Master leaf through the pages of the book at the top of my vision.

"Here we are," he said to himself. Then I heard his reading voice.

"With the founding of the Oracle, the more powerful Gods of the Light gathered, then banded together in that place and banished the lesser Gods of Darkness to the Nether Regions." He slammed the book shut in his lap and said, "There."

I lifted my head, looked at him tiredly and said, "Can't argue with that," with only a slight trace of sarcasm in my voice.

"Jamie, if such a thing had escaped into the world, or been conjured here, or somehow or another been allowed to pass through the Oracle, I believe I would have felt it," he said reasonably.

"Are you sure, this is important?"

"I would think so--it would be very potent, akin to your feeling of not being able to breathe. And like the bands of leather around your chest it would be felt. Maybe even by you--you're sensitive to influence."

"And these things are not subtle," he said as an afterthought.

Then he sat back on the chair and said. "What else did this Jolian tell you? Did he mention his sister, the Jolian Witch...maybe she is blocking me from the demon."

Windy had somehow become possessed of the idea that Queen Lilli was practicing a subtle, but discernible form of witchcraft somewhere in the Castle. The idea was complete madness, but he wouldn't let it go. The King had finally become so exasperated with Windy and his fears that he had threatened to put the old man in the Stocks for a day if he ever mentioned this delusion in his presence again.

"I would rather believe that if anything is blocking you, it is the softening of the mind in old age. That is what the King believes; he has told you many times that it is much too hot up here to maintain a healthy mind."

The Old Master sneered.

"The Jolian said of the Muertra then..."

It took a while to tell it all because I also told him much that he could not learn from his too talkative old friend Jospira of the movements of King and Kingdom. I managed to get it all out, but the effort was so taxing that I told most of it leaning back on the bed with my head

against the wall.

His only reponse was, "Neko is not so dimwitted as some like to think."

He sat, deep in thought for a few minutes and then looked up and said with asperity, "There's something you're not telling me."

When I hesitated he said impatiently, "Give Jamie."

I flicked my eyes at Jospera who was standing to the side hanging on every word.

The old man lowered his brow and pursed his lips, then said into his beard, "That's interesting."

He leaned back in his chair and said over his shoulder, "Jospera--it will take all the Angelthorn I have, and then some, to fix up enough of Jamie's breathing medication to last the trip to Sabbia. Will you go into the Town and get some for me?"

Jospera didn't move a muscle; I think he thought his long silence had allowed him to hide in the middle of the room. He was certainly reluctant to leave, his burning curiosity singeing his long fingers. "I'm not sure which shop..."

The old master cut him off impatiently.

"We won't say a word while you're gone. You'll miss nothing."

The old man was an accomplished liar. "It's the shop right out the gate, 'Herbs and Whatnots'; you know it."

"Fine," he said, and then shuffled across the floor and out the door. I waited until I couldn't hear his footsteps receding down the stairs any longer and said, "The King has asked me to be discreet." I told him about Grizzy and me.

He listened to the tale and said, "Something is very odd here."

"And..." I said warily. I knew what was coming.

He held his hands up and ticked off the first finger of his writing hand with the palm of his other hand.

"Think Jamie, the war suddenly takes a vicious turn."

He ticked off his second finger.

"Rumors are spreading that can't be contained."

He ticked off the third finger.

"The peaceful Jolians rise up and show an unlooked for Battle Standard."

He lost interest in fingers and dropped his hands to his lap and continued, "And then a Jolian yarns you a fable that his King believes. And you, and our stalwart King Henry, the two most powerful men in the Kingdom are deeply in love with Jolians...maybe in the thrall of *her* powerful spell." He looked at me sharply.

"What do you make of it Jamie?"

"The King will not be patient if you start on his wife again, that is what I make of it, he is tired and disgusted in all things." I finally felt sufficiently confident in my renewed ability to breathe to stand. I got off the bed, crossed to the door and stared at the little light that came in through cracks in the timbers. I turned to him and saw that he was watching me with an inquisitive look on his face I could just make out in the dim lamplight that was the only other illumination in the room. "I don't know Windy," I told him. "I just don't know."

"Which is the spy, Jamie?" he asked, trying to force me to share my thoughts.

I felt sick again, could almost feel the bands start to tighten. I stood quietly for a long time, thinking hard, trying to feel my way through this dark heat. Always after one of these attacks I would feel incredibly tired, this one was no exception. I felt too exhausted to think, but I had to. I realized that the old man was waiting patiently for an answer to his question. I had only one answer, the rest I did not know.

"Not Grizzy," I finally told him.

The old man's voice came slowly and heavily across the room.

"When Henry plods his way up here tomorrow, he'll tell me, 'Not Lilli,' with the same sad certainty and then, to make certain that I share his confidence he'll send me to the Stocks for the day to think it over. I can only hope that he comes late in the day."

I re-crossed the room and sat down on the bed in front of him. I could feel the anguish leaking out my eyes as I asked, "What do we do now?"

For an answer he smiled warmly and said, "You Thalia's do not love lightly, maybe there is another explanation."

I felt a sudden relief that he'd finally relented after spitting me and roasting me in this oven. "Grizzy couldn't lie to me for ten years. I would know it in a minute if she ever tried," I said, sure of my talent and some few other things Windy didn't believe in.

"Someone is lying nonetheless. And you, with all your talent, say that it is no one you know."

I nodded my head.

"And the King is no fool and he will tell me, "Not Lilli.""

"Just so," I said, feeling frustrated that things always seemed to hang by threads.

I heard Jospers's footsteps outside the door and Windy and I fell silent as he walked through the door.

The Old Master turned to him and his eyes twinkling said, "You see, very quiet. Jamie and I ran out of things to say to each other almost as soon as you walked out the door. Maybe you know a good joke or tavern ballad to liven up the party."

Jospera looked at him sourly, put the small urn in his hand on the table and said nothing.

Windy stood slowly and said, "Maybe you'll want to have a word with Jospera while I mix up your crap. You'll be gone a while and you can't expect him to come traipsing up here day after day to be told what to do by me."

So while the old man muttered the recipe to himself, cursed things that weren't where he left them and interrupted constantly to have Jospera hold something or stir something, I gave detailed instructions on how Jospera should behave himself, and mind that Sara did something useful, while I was gone. I finished up by saying, "If something refuses to fit in the way you want it, trudge up here and ask Master Windom," knowing full well that he told the old man everything he knew at every opportunity.

At long last Windy handed me a stinky wineskin full of the potion that kept me alive and said, "Mind that you send Grizzy up here. The recipe is written down somewhere around here, but it would be better if I showed it to her proper."

I nodded and said, "Thank you--you've been a help if not a joy."

"Always put the first arrow in the messenger, that's my motto," he said gravely. "It's not my fault if you and Henry have gotten yourselves in a tight spot."

"It was good to see you, enjoy your day in the Stocks you stubborn ass. You would do well to break a window into this place," I said, giving him a hug that he accepted gracefully. Then I turned and trudged out of his inferno.

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As I crossed the God's Fountain Square on my way to the small second floor cubbyhole that Jospira, Sara and I used to do our work I realized two things--the first was that with every fiber of my being I enjoyed the feeling of the sun on my face. In the short time I had been in the steaming cave that the Old Master called home I'd missed its bright face almost as much as I missed Grizzy's. And the second was that I hated the Witchking. Living or not,

real or illusion, whatever the phantom was, it would probably drive me crazy or kill me before the riddle was solved. The King of Jolie believed...and feared, if Aaron could be believed. And my talent had convinced me that he could. The Old Master made comical faces and sneered at the very idea. Both calling on the same sources to give testimony for their side: old books, legends, intuitions, suspicions that such a thing could, or could not, exist.

I had no more to go on than these learned men and I had to act in this moment to thwart the designs of a Phantom that may, or may not, have passed through the Oracle into our world. And counsel the King on the best methods to combat a being of uncertain existence. The Lore-Master King of the Jolie wasn't going to come down from his mountain to our aid until he was sure that it was too late to do any good. And Old Windy was just that now, not able to influence events or be a part of them, except at second hand.

And there had to be a spy among us, confidingly close and loved deeply, as incredible as that seemed. Maybe I would take Grizzy and go with the King when he abdicated to allow the Lords fight the war to the best defeat they could manage. No, the Thalia's would never go that way: Wars once begun must be fought.

The first thing I did when I sat down at my table was to write a note to Grizzy telling her that I would be home late. The King would require me until the last minute of the day and regardless, she was to wait up. Would she please give the Page bearing this note something for me to wear to a reception in honor of her brave peoples? I couldn't very well go in clothes that I had worn in camp for four days. Then in an aside, I inquired whether she had any information about a certain sword that had gone missing.

I gave the note to the page kept posted in the hall outside the door and then went back into the cubby to go through a pile of correspondence that Josperra had told me needed my attention. All the while trying to think what to tell the King about what Windy had told me. Henry Thalia would want to know what I thought.

I still had no idea what I thought when the Page came back from his errand with a bright robe and a note from Grizzy.

*--Jamie,*

*I'll be awake. I have something for you.*

*All my love*

*Grizzy*

Simple and to the point, I like that.

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I dressed and went to attend the King and at the door of his private apartments I was told by the Chamberlain that the King and Queen were in the Queen's Garden. I found them sitting on a bench talking with their heads close together, his hand resting on his knee with her hand on top of it, so small, pale and delicate sitting on his massive hand that it looked like a small fine white flower had grown up in an earthwork of dark and firm soil.

The Queen smiled and greeted me warmly. I thanked her for playing the go-between for my letters. She told me Grizzy hadn't written back because she hadn't wanted to try the patience of the King by requiring him to deliver post.

The King looked rueful and said, "A wise woman for one so young."

Queen Lilli laughed merrily at his sour mood and then

said to me, "I'm so happy my husband is returned. I don't mind being Queen and taking over duties in his absence, but anymore of this Lords and Council nonsense and I would have felt it necessary to offer to lead them on a Royal Expedition to the Ice Fields to hunt Snow Tigers."

That would probably have solved some of our problems. The urge to hunt Snow Tigers is strong in these valleys. Anyone who goes off to hunt Snow Tigers and lives to tell the tale spins a legend around their name that spreads from the barren wastes of the Ice Fields to as far as there are people to tell it.

"Could a Snow Tiger swallow a Lord?" I wondered out loud to the Queen.

"In a bite," the Queen said with one firm nod of her head. "Sometimes when the snows are deep the tigers become hungry enough to come off of the ice fields to raid the goats of the herders on the high places. It takes a special sort of warrior to fend them off. Few are able to do it. Even in Jolie there are few Snow Tiger pelts in the halls of our people." She smiled at me and said, "The Snow Tiger might find the Lords tough and chewy, but I think she could get a few down before her stomach revolted." Then the Queen made a fierce face before her laughter filled her garden.

The King was not so easily cheered. "I should have let

my father hang the lot," he said disgustedly. "The Lords were much grimmer than the festivities in the town when they finally penned me on the steps of my home."

I knew he had more to say on the subject, so I waited him out.

"The fools now believe that since the Jolians will be beside us to defend the Oracle, I need not go so wild in raising an army of our sons to defend it," he said with a trace of unbelief. "How will I convince the asses that you don't go off to war with untrustworthy allies at your back? There is no treaty, no negotiations, and no bargain with Edshu. Nothing but an unformed promise. The thing is insane. There is madness here Jamie. They are frightened and elated at the same time. I hate them."

The Queen said slowly, "My father is a very complicated man. Everything I hear this week of him troubles me. I must talk to Aaron."

Struggling to restrain his anger and frustration, the King said, "Do not speak to me of your brother. If it were not for Jamie's talent he would be..."

The King stopped speaking--it did no good to threaten to threaten to hang your wife's brother if your own laws would not allow you to do it.

Instead, he looked up at me and said, "So, Lord

Magistrate, what news of Old Windy?"

I told him all that the Old Master had said of Oracles and Muertra.

The King looked bemused and said, "No Witchking?"

"Old wives' tale," I said without the comical face.

"Huh?" said the King.

Then he looked at his wife. "Lilli?"

"These are the stories I was raised on. My father knows them. He studies these things and believes them. If Aaron says that Father believes there is a Muertra loose on the world, then that is what he believes. He is not mad."

She looked directly into her husband's face and said in appeal, "He is an honorable man."

"Is it possible that things could get any worse?" the King wondered out loud.

I wanted to say that this was a very bad time for me to be going to Sabbia, but we had been over it so many times that I didn't want to test his patience by bringing it up again.

Rather I said, "I think we must continue to be seen to be skeptical that the Witchking exists, at least until we have a competent answer to that vexing question. And we need to prepare to defend the Oracle and hang a few Lords if they don't own up to the bargain that was set at the

last Council."

The King nodded. "They'll be so afraid of the Witchking that they won't be able to fight," he said as he stood up. "We must prepare for the worst. That, at least, I know."

He looked off toward the mountains in the distance. The sun was just beginning to set behind them, sliding behind a high peak as we watched the play of light and shadow began to give way to darkness. The King spoke as he watched the passing of another day:

"The warrant gives me the authority to do as I please, Lords or no. That is how I intend to read it. We'll let them fear the Witchking and make them feel stupid by laughing at them for it. I believe we'll find out which is right this Fall on the plain before Echo Pond."

The King seemed to enjoy the irony implied by this statement.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "By the by, there is a priest of the Oracle somewhere in the castle, arrived today."

He grew thoughtful...

"Although he need not have come, I heard the Chimes at Echo Pond in my sleep last night...sounding like brave children singing a frightened chorus."

He stood lost in thought for a moment and then roused himself.

"He is not hysterical as I imagined he would be, but insistent...adamant that I send Neko to the Oracle tonight. I am not summoned yet. The Oracle admits that I may be needed here to make arrangements for its defense and allows me time. But Neko is to leave tonight. I managed to get him a stay until just before the last bit of darkness is dispelled by morning, but he is to leave before sun breaks upon the land. As long as he leaves before there is light in the sky I will not face the Fine."

Then he added ruefully, "The Fine would be my Kingdom this time. I would be deposed and set on the road with as much baggage as Lilli and I could carry on our backs. The Lords would have that full day to find a new King acceptable to the Oracle. If the Lords failed to agree in that time, the Oracle's priest is to rule the Kingdom for the duration of the threat to the Oracle."

"The same message is being sent to the Perdido and the Joven. The Jolians do not fall under the power of the Oracle, so they are let alone. Although a priest is being sent to them to arrange their cooperation. He has about as much chance of success as a field-mouse in the belly of a Hellbat."

Then he took his wife's hand and said, "I sometimes have a hard time believing that the Storm Gods have not passed through the Oracle. They seem to have alighted on the High Tower to shoot darts across the Kingdom". Then he shook his head.

"Oh well, let's go to the feast, I'm hungry."

***[END OF 4<sup>th</sup> INSTALLMENT...]***