

# War of Burning Glades

*By Alex "WriterX" Bielski*

## Chapter 1

Ellen ran out of her room, parchment in hand, quickly trotting down the corridor to show mother her latest creation. With a light patter of her feet upon the carpet with which the corridor was laid out, she went past different paintings, statues and tapestries, homages to her family, ancestors, and kingdom. The occasional servant greeted her as she ran past, but the young bunny could not stop in her quest and seldom waved back, shouting out a brief greeting. The Palace was vast, especially for one so small, but with an abundance of energy reaching her destination proved to be of little challenge.

Finally, within sight of the door to her mother's office, she came to a near screeching halt, if not for the carpet, and was greeted by one of the Marble Knights who stood guard. In his milky white armor, which indeed resembled marble, he looked down at the doe and nodded in greeting.

The young rabbit collected herself, as she now stood before one of the few people in the entire kingdom whose loyalty to her family was unquestionable.

Still holding the parchment in her little paws Ellen asked, "Could I please come in?"

The Marble Knight only brought a finger to his lips and shook his head. It was clear Ellen's mother had a visitor and was not to be disturbed. Unflustered, Ellen then asked, "Could I wait here then? Until she is free?"

The knight nodded and gestured to one of the chairs that stood next to the door. Ellen happily accepted the offer and sat down, then looking over the parchment with a critical eye. She thought it was excellent, divine even, but suddenly she felt the need for somebody else's critique. She looked to the knight who resumed to gaze at the wall ahead of him, until he felt the princess's paw, pulling on his tabard.

"Excuse me..." she began, shyly, "But do you think Mom will like this?" and the young bunny presented her work. Three characters were painted upon it, three rabbits. All of them smiling and one did not take long to realise that Ellen painted herself, and her parents, all quite happy.

Unlike marble, the knight could actually smile and he did so, nodding to the young rabbit.

"I painted it myself!" Ellen then exclaimed, showing her paws which were covered in paint, especially their tips. "Mom said I should do more arts..."

The knight only listened, unable to speak himself, he occasionally nodded to let the bunny know he was still following her words.

"But Mom then said... I should learn stuff like... flute... or piano... but that's boring! The teachers are boring... I prefer to paint like-"

The door to the office swung wide open and a frustrated individual seemed to enter the corridor. Dressed in finery he looked like a noble, but the expression on his face was less than pleasant. He only seemed to send an angered gaze in Ellen's direction, something the rabbit could not understand the reason for, before he left, without another word. Ellen did not even have the chance to study his face closer. As the angry noble stormed off, down the corridor the Marble Knight peaked inside the office, with Ellen still seated. She tried to look inside as well but sat too far, and her ears could faintly catch the words of her mother, "Always the same..."

The knight looked back to Ellen and motioned for her to stand before knocking on the door frame.

"Yes?" came the queen's voice, and the knight, with one hand on Ellen's back, guided her to stand in the doorway.

The young rabbit could now see the inside of the queen's office. An expansive room, filled mainly with books and records, but also a single large painting, of Ellen's closest family. Her father, Edward, Queen Augustine and herself, Ellen. It was almost as good as her own painting, almost.

Augustine was standing by her desk, and a few papers were scattered on the ground in the office, but she seemed pleasantly surprised by her daughter's visit.

"Hey, Mom! I brought a- oh!" only now realising she almost left her work of art behind, the knight held it before her, for the princess to collect. "Thanks!" she said loudly, the knight only nodding and closing the door to the office behind her, the queen and princess now alone in the private quarters.

The queen was dressed in her regal dress, as was expected of her, perhaps because more official duties awaited her later on, or perhaps she just returned from a meeting. Ellen was not privy yet to the secrets of managing the realm, for she was far too young. With a quick patter of her feet over the office carpet, she ran up to her mother and showed her the painting.

"I made this for us!" Ellen exclaimed, and her mother knelt, reached out for the parchment to study it more closely. They both walked over to the balcony where there was, just moments ago, bright sunlight. Now, however, the sky was covered in dark rain clouds, and a few droplets already began to fall upon the stone from which the balcony was built.

"Strange..." Augustine remarked, and Ellen found it strange too. Though it would not have been the first time when the weather changed so abruptly. Or perhaps she was remembering it wrong?

"Come, let us sit at the table." the queen remarked. She covered the exit to the balcony with thick curtains and then sat at her office chair. Ellen was helped up onto the Queen's lap and both mother and daughter began to study the painting.

"So tell me, who are these rabbits?"

Ellen was invigorated by the question and began to point and explain, each of her childish creations.

"That's dad... that's you... and that is me! The smallest rabbit! And we are all smiling and happy!" Ellen presented her work. She was very proud of it, so much so that she now looked right at her mother, waiting for confirmation of her skill, much like the knight did!

Augustine studied the painting slowly, and it did not take long for her to look at Ellen and smile in turn, "It is beautiful. Maybe we could frame it and hang it somewhere?"

Ellen let out a gasp at that idea, caught off guard by such a suggestion!

"Yes, Mom! That would be great!" Ellen said, letting out a happy bellow.

Augustine's smile only widened as she set the parchment down upon the table, straightening it out carefully.

"It will be a beautiful addition to the palace... I will ask the Court Painter to frame it, next time I meet him."

The moment of happiness seemed to pass quickly, however, as a strange chill seemed to seep into the room. Ellen looked back at the curtains behind them, but they were still tightly shut together. That chill prompted Ellen to ask her mother something.

"Mom, who was the angry man?"

"Angry man?" asked Augustine, and she then looked to the door, the entrance to the office. "Ah, him... Ellen... You know how sometimes you want to eat all of the biscuits from the jar, and I tell you that if you eat all of them your tummy will hurt?"

Ellen seemed to recall that particular lesson, especially since she did once disobey it, and paid a rather achy price for it. She nodded her head and added, "Yes Mom."

"That man is like that. He has a few cookies but sees a world full of them... and wants every single one."

"Is he that hungry?" Ellen asked.

"No, just greedy. He does not need all of the cookies, he just wants to own all of them."

Ellen squeaked disapprovingly at that.

"He is a bad man then!"

Augustine smiled and stroked the back of Ellen's head.

"Not bad... simply misguided... he believes in things that would make other people unhappy..."

because he wants all of the cookies, even those others own."

Ellen huffed up.

"So he is bad then!" she repeated her accusation.

Augustine only smiled at that, not wanting to argue with her daughter's point, perhaps even approving of it. The expression on her face became far more serious suddenly, as she looked directly into her daughter's eyes. There seemed to be fear or worry in her gaze, and Ellen did not understand why.

"Listen, my dearest Ellen, what I have to say to you now is very important. Are you listening?"

Ellen was worried by the way her mother spoke. Was something about to happen? Why didn't she remember any of this?

"What's wrong mommy?"

A loud hiss came from outside the office, in the corridor, followed by a roar. An unearthly, alien roar, nothing Ellen has ever heard before. It froze her heart almost immediately, and instinctively she curled up and pressed herself against her mother's chest. Whatever was just outside the door was bad, very bad. The air became cooler. The roar was answered by another, much calmer and disciplined one and one could hear a weapon swung. The battle was brief, however, and it ended with the sound of crushing bone.

Ellen was terrified, she looked at the door, and after the fear was too great she looked up to her mother. Augustine's face did not show fear however, it bore the expression of somebody ready to fight. The princess could never remember seeing her mother like this, she was always a stern and diligent ruler and loving head of house. She never imagined her as a warrior, and yet she suddenly felt safer with her mother, her protector, and defender, even as the monster on the other side of the door began to scrape with its claws along the walls.

Then the alien voice could be heard again. It was clear, almost as if the being was already inside the room, right in front of them. As it spoke it seemed as if each word, each letter, was an attack, trying to crush Ellen's will.

"How long do you intend to hide from me?" the monster asked.

The door slowly came ajar, but nothing could be seen in the corridor. All was pitch black, darker than any night, and the room suddenly became even colder. Ellen blinked and suddenly the office was filled with candles, trying to keep the darkness at bay.

"Ellen, hide behind the desk." her mother said as she rose up. Ellen followed her mother's command and stood behind the desk, peaking just barely over the top to not lose sight of the queen.

As Augustine moved to stand between the door and the desk behind which Ellen was hiding she took one of the decorative swords that hung in her office and held it in her hand confidently.

In the darkness suddenly two purple flames could be seen, but they were not the embers of some imp, they were the beast's eyes. The fires at first seemed to look at Augustine and then to Ellen, an eerie gurgling sound coming from the corridor.

"You will never have her! I will not allow it!" Augustine exclaimed, pointing her sword at the doorway.

A grin, broken, disfigured, joined the two burning eyes as the monster looked back to Augustine.

"Then you have already failed."

## Chapter 2

The King's speech was coming to an end, or rather that of the King-Regent. After the death of the Queen and kidnapping of the royal heir, the Council in all of its wisdom, appointed Edward as the temporary head of the kingdom, until an actual successor would be found. If the princess could not be retrieved or rescued, then a new heir would be chosen, by the Council.

Edward, with a trembling voice and tears flowing down his cheeks, stood on a balcony overlooking the main Plaza of the city. Every inch of said plaza was filled with spectators, people who, just like Edward, were in mourning and filled with anger. Retribution was the word on everybody's lips. Revenge. And this was reflected in the King-Regent's speech.

"We will do right to all the wrongs Nubine cause us! We will quell this barbarian and bring order to these lands! So that others do not suffer the same fate we have!" he shouted into the crowd. Each word was empowered by his bleeding heart, and every rabbit present in the plaza took them in hungrily. The same sentiment was present throughout the kingdom. And as the King called to action few could object. A grand levy was called. Powerful armies would rise up and march out into Armello, crushing Nubine's own armies with righteous fury.

They had the steel, the discipline and the technology to overcome bands of mercenaries and bandits with ease. The kingdom was known for its many innovations and progress, and now the finest minds of the guild would be put toward the same singular goal. Winning the war.

And all of this, in the name of a good cause. For the first time in over a century, the kingdom will leave the safety of its burrows to once again fight on Armello's soil. For their and others' sake.

Yet the King Regent for all his pride and anger was utterly heartbroken, few could not be. Their dearest queen and sweetest princess were gone.

Behind the King, hidden from sight, was a rabbit, nodding approvingly to what he heard and the people's reaction. It would even seem he was smiling, but the rabbit in question was known for wearing a mask for every occasion. He turned to leave and passed through the many stairwells and corridors of the palace, many more guards present and every torch lit, even at the height of day. After a while, the rabbit reached a large wooden double door, ornate, with engravings of the kingdom's heraldry upon each of its sides. The guards on its flanks nodded to the rabbit and one of them opened the doors for him to enter, soon after closing it as he went within. The room turned out to be the Council's Chamber. A roundtable with a number of seats around it. One for the king, currently empty. Another for the Chancellor, who just returned to the room. The third for the Treasurer, who calmly, even stoically, awaiting the Chancellor's return. The fourth for the Marshal, who despite his age now wore with pride, and with good reason, his armour once more, with his heavy metal gauntlets resting upon the table's top. The other two seats remained empty, one which was for Ellen to attend these meetings, and the last for the High Priest, who had no say or sway in kingdom affairs, for now.

"The King's speech?" asked Havard, the Marshal.

"Rousing, as we had hoped, though I needed to fill him with the right sort of courage so that he did not break down in the middle of it... Have we reached an agreement with the Guild?" asked Charles, the Chancellor.

Lonius, the Treasurer, nodded in response. "They did not need much pegging. It seems that in their free time they too were developing new ideas that now offer the best opportunity to be... tested."

Over the table was spread out a map, with numerous pawns and figurines of different colours situated all over it. Those present in the Rabbit Kingdom capital appeared to be the most numerous. The borders of different smaller and greater kingdoms were drawn out. Nubine's own claims were decorated with black pawns. It looked almost like a game of chess, if very one sided at a glance, for it seemed the Rabbits had more than enough strength to control the entire board.

"Have you reached a decision in which direction we shall expand first, Lord Havard?" asked the Chancellor, looking over the map.

The elderly rabbit stood up and picked up one of the pawns, setting it down on one of the villages just outside of the kingdom's borders.

"We will first lay claim to all those that are most likely to join us. Those who fear Nubine the most. We will offer them adequate protection in exchange for fealty. We will do so at the same speed our armies march, to both impress and intimidate those who might be indecisive."

"Are we expecting any opposition in particular?" asked Charles and Havard shook his head.

"I expect the most resistance will come from those who already have a foothold in Armello. But, at the same time, they are already occupied with Nubine or her minions. The Wolves have remained in isolation for the longest time, and the Rats might have some City Councils in their pockets, but here too I doubt they have enough strength to rise up against our armies."

Lonius fixed his glasses as he gazed over the map and his paw rested on one specific spot upon it. "The Bears, or rather their woodland. That would be a useful addition."

Havard let out a displeased grunt at the notion.

"Why would we fight over a bunch of old trees?"

"For the wood, naturally," answered Lonius. "Some of it to power our furnaces, but once the war is over we will need plenty of it for the reconstruction that will follow our victory."

"Why not just get it from elsewhere then?" asked the grumbly Havard. "We do not need to fight over these ones."

"I dare say, Lord Havard. I thought you were itching for a fight, and yet you do not seem keen on fighting a few bears?"

"Fighting in dense forests is different to besieging castles, or fighting on open ground." pointed out Havard. "We have some tunnel fighters, yes, but we cannot control the forest as the bears do. We would be fighting on their turf, unfamiliar to us."

"But, more importantly..." interjected Charles, "We have no reason to attack them. We have a reason to go after Nubine, and embrace Armello under our protective cloak, but unless the Bears give us a reason to take their forest our paws are tied."

"What have the bears been doing, since Nubine rose up? Have they reacted at all to her attacks throughout Armello?" now asked Lonius.

"Nothing, thus far. Like they have done for centuries, they remain hidden in their forest home and do not take heed of worldly affairs. Sometimes I do envy them, living in ignorance." said Charles.

Havard was already, greedily, moving his yellow pawns across the map. Claiming one village after another. A castle, a small county or duchy. It was akin to watching a child play with his toys. Lonius then produced a little box and settled it down atop the map, making Havard stop his scheming.

"What's that?" he asked, curiously.

"A gift from the guild. They assure me that, given time, we will have more." And the box was opened. Within were small wooden cannons, about the size of the pawns. Havard's eyes widened as he picked up one of the miniatures and examined it, before setting it down on the map with a wide grin.

"Armello will belong to us," he said confidently.

While Lonius and Havard began to discuss strategy Charles' own mind began to focus on other, far more important matters. For he knew that while there were potential threats outside of the kingdom, there was still the matter of internal security. After all, there was always the risk of defiance. Something that in this new order could not be accepted. And while the window was still open he had to act quickly. Very quickly.

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The news was disconcerting, to say the least. The grand master of the Marble Knights was called before the Council and the King-Regent, soon after the call to arms was declared. Polos was concerned by this, for his gut warned him of something bad about to happen. And he feared that depending on what the meeting was about his suspicions could be correct.

His knights guarded the palace and the royal family for about as long as both of those things existed. There was never any doubt about the loyalty of his men or their due diligence. Yet somehow, an assassin passed into the Queen's office and assassinated her. Not only that but before his knights could reach the princess, who just arrived at the outer gates, she was first attacked by an unknown assailant and then kidnapped by one of the gate guards. The assassin of course escaped, but the kidnapper was nowhere to be found either. No ransom demands were delivered and though Polos sent out patrols to check every burrow and village within the Rabbit Kingdom there was not a single lead.



And all of this seemed to play all too well into the Council's hand which, suddenly, became very vocal in their demands to seek justice.

Justice

against whom though? Nubine was clearly a threat, there was no doubting that, but if this was indeed her doing would she not had followed this attack with another scheme already?

All of this was indeed very suspicious.

Reaching the Council Chambers he was ushered in by the guards and Polos immediately identified the King, Chancellor, Treasurer, and Marshal present. The High Priest, however, still did not attend the meetings, ever since the Queen's death, or so he heard.

"We are honoured by your presence, Grand Master." began the Chancellor.

They were all seated at the roundtable and Charles gestured to one of the empty seats.

"Sit, if you will."

"I prefer to stand." was Polos' answer. He looked over the faces of all those present, and they were all equally stern, the King-Regent's especially so. It did not help that his eyes were red and cheeks still moist from all the tears he wept.

"Very well then. We have called you here in regards to the Queen's death." began the Chancellor. "As I understand the assassin got past your knights, killed the Queen and then... kidnapped the Princess? I would say that all of this puts the competence of your order into question."

That sly toad. Thought Polos to himself.

"We are still investigating the method and the reasons behind both of these events. We will need more time however to reach a conclusion."

The Chancellor nodded at that slowly, his fingers tapping upon the table's surface.

"Then you will be relieved to know that your order need not concern itself with this matter any longer. Lord Havard will conduct the investigation himself, as we believe, and the King-Regent agrees, that one of your knights might have been responsible."

The grand master clenched his fist in anger. This was exactly what he feared would happen.

"My Highness." Polos looked and addressed the King-Regent. "We have served your family without fault, and we stood by your side when things were good and ill. This slight can only be corrected by my order. Whoever is responsible for this heinous act will be found and brought before you."

"I do not think you were listening, grand master." the Chancellor brought his voice up.

"I do not think I was speaking to you." Polos rebuffed quickly.

"Enough!" came the mellow call from the King-Regent. His voice not nearly as strong as during the speech, but the crown upon his head held enough authority to cut the quarrel short. The grand master huffed and looked to his lord, who in turn took in a deep breath and spoke weakly.

"Your order will help Haval in... our efforts against Nubine. She did this... She..." He raised his hand, which trembled terribly as he rested it against his forehead and took in another deep breath.

Then Haval finally spoke.

"Your knights are to leave the palace. My guards will now ensure our King's safety. You will soon be given your assignment and the Council expects you to comply." he narrowed his eyes then upon the grand master. "You understand this, don't you?"

Out of all those present, only Lonius remained silent, his eyes moving from one speaker to another, but on that final question, his gaze was focused squarely upon Polos.

With little choice given the grand master bowed.

"If that is my King's wish," he answered shortly. As he turned to exit the chamber he did not feel betrayed, for it was written in the creed of his order that one should expect to face many dangers alone, in the protection of the royal line. He knew for the longest time that the Council wanted to lessen his order's protective grip over the palace, but to do it in such a way was cruel.

As he saw the strings coming off the limbs of his beloved ruler, pulled by the three vermin present before him, he knew that ultimately he was the one that failed. But though he lost this battle and his king, he would not fail his queen.

At least, that is what he hoped.

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After Polos returned to the lower levels of the palace, where his order hosted its barracks, training room and other facilities, he informed his captains of the new orders but also asked for a private meeting with a select few of them. If the Council planned on scheming against him so too would he dabble in their game.

The meeting was hosted in his office. Every curtain closed, his knights stood guard just outside his door. Not a word could escape out of this room, his intent could not be learned by the Council.

He was not going to betray his King, but the princess had to be found if she were still alive. At the very least he would have to learn who was truly behind these attacks. If it was the Council, which he hoped was not the case, he would have to set a trap for them, ensure they cannot offer resistance or spark a civil war. If Haval's own men now guarded the palace then the King could act as their hostage.

He suspected that the Council knew of his suspicions, and that is why they tried to push him away from the King, as far as possible. What role, if any, did the High Priest play in all of this? Was he

even one of the conspirators?

As Polos considered these questions, with only guesses and no answers coming to his head, he heard a faint knock on the door. The meeting was about to begin. He had to keep it brief, and quick.

The knights entered. Six of them present before their grand master. They bowed their heads in silence.

"My brothers," spoke Polos. "You have heard the news, no doubt, of us being relegated to fight for the Kingdom in the frontier, but like all of you, I refuse to surrender the truth to the Council."

He looked to each of them in turn. His knights took many vows. Of silence, celibacy, all to better serve the royal family, but now these very vows would have to be broken.

"I order you to disobey the King's orders. We cannot fail the Queen once more."

The six knights looked without expression upon their grandmaster, but something told Polos they thought the same as he did. All of the order did.

"I will discharge you from the order, officially, and you will be free to continue the search on your own. I will aid you in any way I can but understand that the Council must not learn of your task. Do all that is in your power to accomplish this, for the well being of our kingdom, of our people, depends on it."

For a moment he stopped, and as he scratched the back of his head, his large ears folded back.

"Under any other circumstance, at any other time, I would not ask any of you to do this. But these are troubled times, and sacrifices must be made. I shudder to think what plans the Council holds for all of us if their acts remain unchecked."

He let out a tired sigh, the earlier meeting with the Council and their King weighing down on his mind more so than any other burden before.

"Do you understand what must be done?"

The six knights bowed once again and called out in unison.

"Yes, grandmaster!"

Polos smiled.

"Well, there goes the Vow of Silence... Sun and Moon watch over you all... Good luck."

## Chapter 3

The events of the past weeks were impossible to recall. One moment Peter was standing guard at the gate, the next he is before the Princess, telling her of her Mother's death. Then the bolt, chaos, and shouting. Before he could realise what was happening there were Marble Knights, guardsmen, and the Princess's own escort not only trying to chase down the assassin but also arguing who should take care of her. It all looked like a bad joke, a very dark one at that. The princess was dying, Peter could see, but instead of helping her everybody was arguing, ready to kill each other.

Why then, by whose authority, could Peter excuse what he has done? As he stood closest he took her in his arms and ran. He kidnapped the royal heir from right in front of the city gates, from right beneath the blades of her guards and knights.

What lead him to this? A gut feeling. Perhaps not insubstantial, for he heard whispers. Orders given to some of the guards, from one of the guard captains. The princess was to be taken somewhere. Where? He did not know. It all made no sense, however. Who gave the order? Why? What were the Marble Knights doing there as well, outside of the palace? There was already a lot of paranoia regarding the silent knights. How could anybody reach the queen, past all of them? Were they responsible for her death?

He could not trust anybody, not even his fellow guardsmen. Nobody in the city. Sun and Moon know, what he did was incredibly stupid, but he did so out of love. It really would not hold up before any court, if he even lived to see one.

But what did Peter decide to do in the end? He brought the princess to the only place he could think of that could both help her and keep her safe, the Bear Woods.

There were a lot of issues with his plan, and even now, after all, was said and done, he still could not believe how half-baked and mad it was.

The princess might have died before she even reached the forest. The Bears might have refused access to two strangers coming to their land, or even not allow a kidnapped royal heir to be held within their forest. Everything about his plan was stupid, and relied on so much luck it seemed impossible to succeed.

But not only did Peter manage to carry the Princess all the way to the forest, but he also convinced the bears to help him, even though they knew exactly who she was, and what were the circumstances of her abduction.

Over the following days, since their arrival, he walked from tree to tree, leaving the imprint of his forehead upon many of them, as he continued to remind himself of how foolish all of his actions were.

Still, perhaps by the will of the gods, or pure rabbit's luck, everything worked out. Almost.

As he sat in one of the tree houses, where the princess was tended to, he remained next to her, guarding her as much as he could. The elder of the particular tribe he visited informed him that

the bolt that was used against the princess held a rare poison known as Wormblight. Peter never heard of it before, and when he tried to ask the elder if there was any way to cure it he was only told, "We can help her, but she must fight it off herself."

It was both ominous and unwelcome news, as it seemed all of Peter's good intentions came to naught.

Now, he sat by her bedside, in his armour that was now completely covered in grime and dirt, and only a sword by his side. He did not sleep well, and when he did sleep he slept little. He could barely keep his eyes open as he guarded her, and even the tribe elder suggested that he should rest, but he couldn't.

It was silly and dumb, but he simply could not get himself to. So instead he stood up and moved to one of the windows of the tree house.

Despite its name, the tree house was not high up in the crown of some tree, but instead, it was on the ground, so to speak. Hollowed out by magic, or other means, inside of an ancient tree, it was the home of the elder, and so vast and sprawling was it that it even had a separate room for guests.

Most of the houses or tents were built as one would expect, standing in the open, between the trees, but Peter counted at least three such large tree houses around here.

As one approached the forest nobody could not see these hidden dwellings deeper in at all. In fact, it was the bears that found him on the outskirts of their lands and brought him before their elder. Honestly, from the stories he heard, he expected the bears to speak exclusively in grunts and ancient tongues, but he was wrong.

The bears understood the common tongue, they used tools, although rarely, and while they were not as sophisticated as the rabbits they certainly did not appear to have the need for gas lamps, fine silks or steel. Their fur was so thick they only really needed cloth to be more decent in front of each other, and not to protect themselves from the weather. Their strength so great that they had no need for wheelbarrows or cranes. Even the older bears seemed fit and strong.

Though, quite honestly, Peter had a problem telling apart the females from the males.

All of them seemed to be performing similar tasks. Though the elder appeared to be a male, Peter was still not too sure of that, however. The shaman of this tribe appeared to be female, but her apprentices and helpers? He had no clue.

It was the magic that intrigued Peter the most. The very same one he saw the shaman perform on the princess. It looked, at a glance, like a very convincing light show. But as the glow radiated from the shaman's massive paws even he felt a strange warmth throughout his body, and he felt rejuvenated. While Peter did see illusionists and tricksters in his younger days, seeing actual magic baffled him. Most said magic, as such, was something only primitive people would resort to. Why rely on the words of some old hag from the countryside when you had wise scholars with all of the answers?

Yet here he was, in the middle of something unfathomable, something he could not imagine

possible. Though, as awestruck as he was, the thought of his execution at the hands of his kin never followed far behind.

As he looked out the window and watched the bears perform their daily duties he pondered on what he should do next, once the princess recovers. Because of course, she would, right? The thought of that not being a possibility crossed his mind for a scant moment and left his entire spine trembling in fear.

When OF COURSE the princess recovered from this deadly, ancient poison, he would have to escort her back to the capital, explain his actions and pray for the best. After all the princess was in safe hands... right?

Peter put his face straight into his hands and murmured.

"You complete idiot." he said to himself.

"I would not judge you so harshly.." came the voice of the elder. "Perhaps by bringing her here, you gave her the best chance to recover."

Peter's ears perked up, and he turned his head around to look at the elder.

The bear was old, yet as large and wide as others of his kind. He did walk around with an old, gnarly staff, but whether it was the symbol of his leadership or a magical artefact, Peter could not tell. It seemed very mundane.

"I am not certain of that." Peter remarked. "I do not know what will happen back in the kingdom, once we return. How could I ever explain this to anybody?"

The elder shook his head slowly and motioned for Peter to stand next to him, as he, in turn, moved to the foot of Ellen's bed. The young guard came over and looked up to the bear.

"Whoever did this to Ellen knew very well how powerful the poison was... But what I fear more is its origin."

"Origin? You mean animal, or plant?" asked Peter.

"Wormblight does not appear naturally anywhere in this world."

As the two of them watched the Princess as she slept in her eerie coma the guard only now noticed how patches of her fur were becoming much darker in colour. Her breath, although calm earlier, now seemed much more laboured. And occasionally she moved her head from one side to the other, as if having a bad dream.

"If it is not "natural", as you say, then where did it come from?"

"Wormblight can only be created through magic. Very old and forbidden magic that I have not seen used within my lifetime."

"Then, if you have never seen it, how do you know where it came from?"

The elder narrowed his eyes for a moment, and then looked to Peter as if the rabbit was mocking him.

"We keep records."

Peter only tilted his head, not seeing how he could have possibly insulted the bear. The elder shook his head slowly for a brief moment.

"You have heard of the Worm, I gather? In your temples and stories?" the bear asked.

"Yes. Usually, scary stories, so that children do not visit old ruins or cemeteries at night, stay out of trouble and all that."

The bear nodded and then began to explain.

"In the old days, it was said that there were only two forces present in the world, that of the Wyld and that of the Worm. The Wyld was life, while the Worm was death. While the Druids of the Wyld ensured its natural growth, those who followed the Worm were not too keen on seeing their god overshadowed. They created diseases and corruption which sometimes consumed entire continents, but in the end, the Worm always failed to hold a tight grip over what it conquered. For in death new life blossoms and the Worm and its followers knew that unless all life was ended the cycle would begin anew."

"That just sounds like a terrible plan, overall, just killing off everybody. Why would these Worm followers want to end everything? Wouldn't they end up killing themselves as well?"

"Ah yes, if it was that simple nobody would want to follow this malevolent force... but the Worm created its own mockery of life, it tries to imitate the Wyld, in its own way. The promises all followers of the Worm get is that of a new life, one of their choosing and making, something they can mold together... Become gods."

"But this Wormblight... what does it do exactly?"

The elder's expression became sadder for a moment as he looked to Peter.

"It is one of the ways the Worm makes its... creations. If Ellen loses this fight, if her mind will prove too weak, the Worm will slowly remake her into its own image... But it will no longer be the Ellen you once knew... It might just be another Nubine."

Peter looked in fear at Ellen, who seemed to thrash in her dream even more than before. He only now realised the gravity of what was happening, and what this could lead to.

"The Worm is rising once more... it wants to break the cycle, and hopes Nubine will be the answer... I doubt she can succeed, but the elders have been called and we will decide on what to do next."

"You will go to war? Fight her?"

The bear looked to Peter, and his eyes did not betray his thoughts, as he turned around and began to head out from the room.

"The healer should arrive soon... You should get some rest before she does, your help might be needed."

And just like that, the elder was gone, leaving poor Peter in an even sorrier state than before.