



THE GLUTEN FREE KINGDOM

Alan Klapperich - Branch Manager
Gluten Intolerance Group of East Central WI
www.gigofecw.org
<https://www.facebook.com/GIGofECW>

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Chapter 1

Once upon a time, in a kingdom not so far away, lived a strong and handsome knight. Like all knights of his time Sir Alcher was sworn to uphold the values of faith, loyalty, courage, and honor; a task he took seriously. Behind every great knight is a great lady; Lady Pechal was no exception. While her job was not as adventurous as her husband's, it was just as important. Sir Alcher's job was protecting everyone else, Lady Pechal's task was to watch over her husband; to make sure that he was healthy and happy. Do not be fooled by her aptitude in the culinary arts; she could wield a broadsword as easily as a ladle. A protector for the protector; an important job indeed!

Sir Alcher was known all throughout the land for his physical prowess and dragon slaying skills. Snatching the king's daughter from the claws of such a beast earned the knight a considerable amount of fame and honor as well as gratitude from the king. However, despite his extraordinary skills, the knight could feel his powers slowly slipping away. He knew something was wrong. He would've sworn he quaffed a bit too much of the king's ale and wine every night; but this did not happen thanks to Lady Pechal. The brave knight did his best to fight the evil spell, but it was just too powerful. His innards felt as if he had swallowed a fire-breathing monster. He feared he too would be breathing fire; perhaps this was the beast's revenge for all the slayings? Battles required the utmost focus and concentration and single lapse could cost him his life! How could he protect the kingdom if he was constantly sick, tired and grumpy? The steady downhill decline was very troublesome not only to him, but also Lady Pechal and their king.

After much persistence, Lady Pechal was successful in getting the ever-stubborn knight to see a doctor. In fact, he saw several doctors in the kingdom. Each one applied their wisdom in an effort to fix the suffering knight, but none of them were successful. A peculiar thing, there were others in the kingdom that suffered similarly. Knight Alcher continued to get sicker, wasting away before everyone's eyes. The demon was slowly consuming him and the others. One night after dinner the knight found himself doubled over shivering, sweating and aching. He did not expect to see the light of dawn. As he drifted in and out consciousness, Alcher remembered meeting a curious being during one of his travels.

Roderick the Wizard lived far away in another kingdom. No one knew much about the reclusive wizard except that he spoke with a different accent and was generally thought of as “off center” or “completely mad”. Unlike others, the knight did not fear him. Just maybe Roderick was the one to help. The knight was willing to try anything to restore his life.

After several days hard riding Sir Alcher made it to the wizard's home; exhausted almost to death. Once inside they sat down and Roderick began to actually listen to the knight. Taking in and processing all that was revealed to him. After a bit of pondering Roderick silently got up and disappeared into his massive library. It was filled with ancient manuscripts, charts, scrolls and maps – everything imaginable and even a few things beyond imagination.

Sometime later Roderick emerged with a slight smile and a stack of manuscripts. He uttered words from the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates -“Let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food.” The wizard asked the knight if he ever considered food his enemy. Perplexed by the rather odd question, Sir Alcher replied no and asked why. Sharing wisdom beyond his years, the wizard explained to the knight that mortals get sick because their bodies revolt against offending foods like angry peasants against an oppressive king. The knight thought about when he felt the worst – yes, it was after he had eaten! Things started to make sense now.

Roderick continued to explain that many foods might make the knight sick, but they were going start with the biggest offenders. He suggested Alcher not eat foods made from wheat, barley, rye and oats because they contain a substance called gluten. This meant no breads, no cakes, no biscuits, no beers or ales. Wheat, barley and rye are the three main crops grown by farmers of the kingdom.

By now Sir Alcher's head was spinning faster than a windmill grinding wheat on a windy day. Dazed and confused, the knight asked Roderick how he was supposed to know all of this? Roderick smiled and told Alcher not to fear for he would teach him everything while he was recovering. You see, doing what wizards do and knowing what wizards know; Roderick now knew that gluten was behind much of the sickness in the kingdom. Over the course of several months, the wizard generously shared his knowledge of medicine, food & nutrition. Alcher learned that every mouthful matters when it comes to nutrition and every skerrick [the wizard's term for a

speck, a crumb, a very small amount] of gluten must be removed; only gluten-zero will do – no gluten – ever.

Alcher's health steadily improved during his stay with Roderick. Mental sharpness, physical strength and stamina were all beginning to return. The noble knight was starting to feel like his old self again. At first, Alcher was skeptical about Roderick's claims about the effects of gluten. How could “the bread of life” be in fact “the bread of death”? Roderick explained that no human is equipped to properly digest gluten.

It was time for Alcher to leave the safety of the wizard's gluten-zero home. He was now well enough to survive the journey back home and well armed; this time with knowledge. His horse was loaded with parchments and manuscripts full of recipes and nutrition information, exotic gluten-zero flours and planting seeds for gluten-zero grains. Before heading out Alcher again thanked Roderick for all of his help. The wizard graciously accepted Alcher's praise but told him it was not necessary; Roderick was simply doing his part to fulfill destiny. Alcher looked puzzled. Roderick revealed to Alcher that the knight had been chosen because of his skill set. Chosen? Chosen for what Alcher wondered? The knight had been called to a new mission as a gluten slayer instead of a dragon slayer. There are many sick people in kingdom and he must help them. Gluten is a bigger and far more dangerous adversary than any dragon. Roderick pointed out to Alcher that he battled and won against gluten; he knows what it takes to win. With this new piece to the puzzle, Sir Alcher sets off on his journey to a new destiny. Godspeed. Good luck in creating a Gluten-Free Kingdom.

Chapter 2

The knight climbed atop his favorite palfrey horse, Chaser. Chaser was selected because his smooth gait would be more comfortable on this long journey. Horses played an important role in everyday life in the kingdom. They were used for transportation, farming, hunting, and of course carrying knights into battle. Wealthy knights often owned several different types of horses; each one used for a specific task. For riding and travel, the best and most expensive were palfrey horses, like Chaser. Destrier horses are best known for their strength, speed and agility, which made them perfect warhorses. As he settled in, Alcher couldn't help but notice how good it felt to be back in the saddle again.

With a gentle nudge of his heels into Chaser's sides, Sir Alcher started his journey back home. A soft rain started to fall as he turned back one last time to wave goodbye to his wise new friend. Roderick waved and shouted “Stay well my friend! Remember, every mouthfull matters.”

Alcher smiled, responded with a “thumbs up”, and disappeared into the woods.

Castle-Sweet-Castle was a several day ride away. This quiet time would allow Alcher to think about all that he had experienced during his stay with Roderick. It had been a time of great change and upset. His entire life has now been turned upside down. So many details, so many rules. There was so much knowledge that Roderick tried to cram into his brain, Alcher thought for sure his head was going to explode! The flood of thoughts and emotions were all very overwhelming and frustrating. Alcher wondered, what if the wizard was wrong about all of this? Maybe gluten wasn't really the reason for his sickness? If it really was a problem, why him, why now? He was angry because this was going to change life as he knew it – nothing would ever be the same again. Had he really won against gluten like Roderick said? Alcher stopped mid-thought and realized that Roderick told him he'd experience these thoughts and feelings. The knight was grieving; he was upset and saddened by what gluten was doing to his body and his life.

Feeling sad, angry, happy, frustrated, confused – sometimes all at once – was to be expected and quite normal. Roderick cautioned Alcher not to ignore these feelings. For if he did, he'd have a demon living inside him far more dangerous than a three-headed dragon. Deep down, Alcher knew that he needed to reach out to someone he trusted; someone he could talk to about his feelings. A shiver ran wildly up and down his spine.

Following in his father's footsteps, Alcher had been in training to be a knight since the age of 7. However, absolutely none of this would prepare him for the most difficult task asked of any knight, in any kingdom - talking about his feelings. He gagged and thought, Better to be thrown into a pit of a thousand hungry rats! Alcher's training did prepare him for doing the right and “knightly” thing. He knew that he must deal with this, so he committed himself to doing it right.

Everyone grieves at some point in their life; kings, queens, peasants, adults, children and yes even brave and powerful knights; each in a way that is as unique as their fingerprint. Grief comes from realizing that the way things used to be are different from the way things are now. Talking about those feelings with a trusted person is a way to let go of the past and prepare for the future. Since Alcher had been so sick, letting go of that sickness in order to prepare for better health was welcomed. Yes, it meant his 'old normal' way of life would be no more, but regaining his health and creating a 'new normal' would be worthy of the effort. It would be hard work, but the knight was no stranger to hard work. After all, one does not get to be a knight without commitment, dedication and hard work; the same applies to being gluten-free. Sir Alcher made a promise. Knights always keep their promises, no matter what.

By now Alcher and Chaser were a half a day closer to home. The rain stopped, the clouds were breaking up and the sun was streaming down in bright, unbroken beams. It was a glorious sight to behold. Surely this must be a sign that Alcher's life was on the right path. Up ahead in the distance, he could see a shimmering light. It was a reflection of the sun off of something shiny,

but what? A quick tug on Chaser's reins brought them to a halt. Out of instinct the knight checked to make sure his sword was still by his side. Since he did not feel at full strength yet, Alcher must be cautious as he did not know what lay ahead. If it was a band of raiders, his current fighting abilities might not be able to save him. It was also likely, he'd be outnumbered. An outright confrontation wouldn't be the wisest plan at this point. There was a fine line between bravery and stupidity and this situation required more brains than brawn.

The road they were on was the only one through this area - no other way in, no other way out - their paths would cross. Surveying the landscape and his location, he saw a large clearing was just ahead. The clearing would offer no protection or place to hide, he would be out in the open and vulnerable. The element of surprise is an important tactic in warfare; something that Alcher knew all too well. The smartest option is to stay in the forest where cover is plentiful. Hiding a human is one thing, but hiding a human and an entire horse is of course, a horse of another color.

Jumping down, Alcher lead Chaser into the woods alongside the road. He wanted to go in far enough to blend in, but not so far he couldn't see the road. The underbrush was thick, but not thick enough to properly conceal a horse that was 16 hands tall [one hand equals four inches]. Since nature had not supplied the proper cover, Alcher would have to create it - and quickly. They found a stand of shrubs that required the least amount of work for full coverage. Grabbing a hatchet from his saddle bag, he started chopping down suitable branches to add to the existing bushes.

After some creative and strategic arrangement, he had something that would work. After leading Chaser behind the curtain of leaves, he walked back towards the road to see how well they would be hidden. He was quite impressed with his work. Someday when he was too old to perform knightly tasks, perhaps he could sell floral arrangements to the town folk. Laughing at himself, he headed back to Chaser to wait. Even though he didn't want to do it, he removed the heavy saddle bags from Chaser. They needed to be ready for anything, being weighed down by precious cargo from Roderick would not allow them optimal speed and agility. Should they get through this alive, they could always return for it. After climbing atop Chaser, he pruned just a few select branches so he'd have a better view of the road.

He finished just in time as the silence of the forest was broken by the faint sound of hoof beats. Rather fast hoof beats at that; they were traveling at an accelerated pace and getting louder. Alcher's heart was now beating almost as fast as those hooves. Eyes closed, listening carefully, he tried to determine how many were in the party. His ears told him one, but wanted visual confirmation before he made any decisions. It didn't take long for his eyes to see what his ears already heard - one horse, one rider. Alcher breathed a sigh of relief - one on one was much better odds. Studying the horse and the rider, they seemed oddly familiar. The markings on the

horse, the dress and posture of the rider looked a lot like his squire Cavalon! A closer, unobstructed look was needed. Why would his knight-in-training be out here?

Alcher and Chaser started making their way through the brush as quickly as possible. Once on the road, Chaser would once again live up to his name; he would quickly chase down the target ahead of him. Before long they were up to a full gallop and closing in. The wind was whipping through Alcher's hair and the adrenaline was pulsing through his veins. All of his senses were in overdrive, feeling more alive than he had during the past year.

Chaser was in perfect form. It was as if rider and horse were one; both moving and working together in harmony. Perfect examples of an excellent horse and expert horsemanship. They were now tasting the brown, gritty powder that was kicked up by the other horse. Alcher started yelling in hopes the rider would turn around, see him, and stop. He was positive it was Cavalon, in fact he was betting his life on it. As Alcher pulled within a few yards and the rider turned to his left and looked back. Cavalon was surprised to see Sir Alcher chasing him! Cavalon pulled back on reins and came to complete stop.

"Sir Alcher!" exclaimed Cavalon, *"The king needs you. Princess Cristiana has fallen ill and believes you can help."*

Alcher could not believe his ears. He wasn't sure exactly how he was able to help as he was not a doctor, but if the king asked for his help, it shall be so.

"I will do whatever I can, to the best of my abilities," Alcher replied. He turned Chaser around to head back the way they came. *"We best get moving. We need to pick up my saddle bags. I have a feeling I'll be needing what's in them."*

"Exactly where did you come from?" asked Cavalon. *"You appeared out of nowhere!"*

Alcher smirked, *"Abbh, my good and faithful student, I haven't taught you all of my tricks yet. All in good time. By the way, excellent riding. We had to chase pretty hard to catch you."*

Grinning from ear to ear, Cavalon puffed out his chest and bowed at the waist, *"Thank you, you have taught me well, Sir Alcher! Were you expecting it to be easy? You really should have more faith in your teaching skills."* Together, they laughed.

"Well done," commended Alcher. *"We also need to do something about that shiny metal object you have on your saddle."*

The knight and his squire raced back to pick up the saddle bags before heading home. Alcher was hoping and praying the precious cargo would help restore Princess Cristiana's health. There is a lot at stake, and the burden weighed heavy like a millstone. For the knight, the king, and more importantly the princess, failure was not an option.

Chapter 3

Alcher and Cavalon pushed the limits of man and horse. They rode day and night, stopping just long enough to rest and feed the horses. At night, the light of a full moon allowed them to safely navigate their path. The pale blue night slowly gave way to dawn's early light.

The sun broke over the horizon as Alcher and Cavalon reached the top of the ridge. A sigh of relief could be heard from each of the riders and their horses. They were almost home, they could smell it in the air. The light blue sky was filled with fluffy cotton candy-like clouds of orange, pink, and purple. The crisp morning air and the warmth of mother-earth created a silky frosting of low lying fog that flowed over everything.

Their village was just on the other side of the valley. In fact, if they looked closely through the trees, they could see one of the castle's towers. After a brief rest, they continued their homeward trek. The trail snaked down the side of the ridge and onto the valley floor until it met up with the Vita River. Several hours had passed and the sun was riding higher in a cloudless sky. It would be a perfect day for a ride, had they not been in the saddle for what seemed like an eternity.

The entire trip homeward, Alcher spoke very little. Buried deep in thought, he was concerned about the health of Princess Cristiana. Saving her from the claws of a dragon a few years earlier created a special connection between them. Even Lady Pechal had drawn close to her. With a wink and a smile, Pechal would secretly sneak her a fresh baked cookie, causing Cristiana to let out the cutest giggle. It melted Pechal's heart.

The faint squeak of the mill's water wheel in the distance was enough to snap Alcher out of his trance. Surprised, he noticed they were already at the village's edge. Alongside them were fields of amber waves of grain.

With the bright sun and a gentle breeze, the crops of barley and wheat looked like a sea of gold. Alcher knew those fields of gold were making many in the kingdom very sick. Wheat, barley, and rye had to go because of gluten, but he hadn't figured out exactly how that was going to happen.

Farming was the main source of food for the kingdom. It was difficult, backbreaking work that was performed by the lowest class of people in the kingdom. Peasants were the poorest of the poor and often the sickest of the sick. Their living conditions were less than ideal. Homes with dirt floors were made with mud bricks and roofs of wheat straw. They slept on piles of wheat

straw with wooden logs for pillows. At night, their animals would be brought inside so their body heat would provide warmth.

The king would allow the peasants to live on his land in return for goods and services. Wheat, barley, rye, corn and a variety of vegetables were grown not only feed themselves, but also the nobles like Sir Alcher, Lady Pechal, as well as the king and his family.

The squeaking was now full volume as they passed by the mill. This is where all wheat, barley, rye and corn were brought to be ground into flour. The water from the river turned the water wheel; the wheel turned the millstone; the millstone ground the grains into flour; the flours were used to make a number of foods like breads, cookies, cakes, and doughnuts. Like the gluten crops, the mill will have to be dealt with. Grinding flour made a lot of dust that floated in the air for hours. Breathing in and swallowing the dust is no different than eating it. Any corn ground in the mill will be covered with gluten making something that was safe, now off-limits.

As they neared the center of the village, the marketplace buzzed with activity. Villagers bought, sold and traded any additional food they grew, animals they raised, household items they had made. You name it – it was there. The merchants shouted wildly to get shoppers to look at their items for sale; the shoppers haggled with merchants to get the best prices. One of the most popular merchants was the village baker, whose baked goods filled the marketplace with wonderful and tempting smells. The sights, sounds, and smells were overwhelming Alcher's senses.

“Oh that smells so good! I am hungry as a wild beast!” shouted Cavalon. *“We need to get some of that bread.”*

Alcher could not force himself to disagree. After almost two days of limited food, his stomach growled like a bear. He felt as if that bread reached out to pull him closer. His mouth watered as he thought about that warm, crusty bread.

“Here, be quick about it,” said Alcher, frowning as he flipped Cavalon a coin. As Cavalon got off his horse and ran towards the baker, Alcher looked around to see if anyone was watching, expecting that someone would catch him cheating.

Cavalon returned with a large loaf of bread. Before getting back on his horse, he held out the bread for Alcher. Alcher paused. Cavalon shoved the bread at him again. Alcher finally grabbed it.

“Well, are you going to look at it or eat it? Come on, I'm hungry!” cried Cavalon.

He tore off a small chunk and handed the rest to Cavalon. Cavalon grabbed the bread and quickly stuffed pieces into his mouth. Alcher stared at the piece of bread a bit longer and slowly raised it to his mouth. Just as he was about to take a bite, Chaser started bucking. As Alcher was

jolted out of the saddle, the piece of bread went flying through the air. As soon as it fell to the ground, one of the village dogs gobbled it up.

"What was that all about?" mumbled Cavalon through a mouth full of bread, spitting crumbs everywhere.

"I'm not sure, but I think someone is watching over for me," replied Alcher. *"We need to get to the castle, now!"*

Even though he had been home for only a short amount of time, the reality of daily gluten-free life had slapped him in the face. It certainly was not like the gluten-free home of Roderick the Wizard. So many places that gluten hides; so very many temptations! Alcher then realized that if he cheats, he not only hurts himself, but also those around him. Many people counted on him to always be at his best. If he had eaten that bread, he would have been too sick to care for Princess Cristiana. His own behavior made him angry.

Ahead was the castle. A sight for sore eyes and sore behinds. As far as castles go, it was an average castle. Not too big, not too small, it was just right. Like most, it was built upon a hill which made it easier to see approaching attackers. The four tall towers were round, not square.

This gave the guards a clear line of sight all the way around them because there were no corners to hide behind. No castle would be complete without a drawbridge and mote filled with man-eating dragon fish and deep dark dungeons.

Everyone passed through the hallway-like Gatehouse to enter the castle grounds. The main entrance was the weakest part of the castle, this meant it must be well defended and cleverly built. It must allow family, friends and staff to pass easily, but it must also keep out would be attackers. Many traps and obstacles were used to stop unwanted guests. Big, heavy metal gates blocked the entry and exit of the Gatehouse. If attackers were caught in between the gates, heavy rocks and boiling water could be dropped down upon them. Also, archers could shoot arrows through a number of slots that lined the walls.

Alcher and Cavalon passed through the Gatehouse into the outer courtyard. They headed straight for the stable so the horses could get proper food, attention and rest. Relieved to be home, Chaser snorted his approval. Alcher ever so gently climbed out of his saddle and stretched. His knees and bottom were sore from the extended riding time. In order to show his appreciation, Alcher reached up to scratch behind both of Chaser's ears. Chaser lowered his head and leaned into Alcher as if to say *"Abhh, please don't stop."* If there was one thing Chaser loved, it was getting scratched.

"Well done my four legged friend. You have served me well yet again. Thank you," whispered Alcher, as he fed Chaser the last two carrots.

Handing the reins over to the stable boy, he said, *"Please check Chaser over carefully, he has had a hard couple of days. He's earned an extra good brushing as well."* Alcher made his way over to Cavalon.

"Well done my faithful squire, your performance was excellent," praised Alcher, as he put his hand on Cavalon's shoulder.

"Thank you Sir Alcher, coming from you, that means a lot," Cavalon grinned and nodded. There was an awkward moment of silence. Cavalon nervously fidgeted with his saddle. *"I can tell you've been worried about Princess Cristiana. I know that she means a lot to you and I know you will do your best to help her. I wish you luck."*

"Thank you Cavalon. Yes, I am worried," replied Alcher. *"I have been asked to help, but what if I do not have what it takes this time? I fear not for myself, but for the Princess. It is she that must pay the price should I fail. I'm not sure I can live with that."*

Alcher walked over to the saddle bags filled with all the items from Roderick. A groan escaped as he bent down to gather them up. Somehow they seemed heavier than when he first loaded them. Lord, knowledge is heavy, he thought. Tired and aching, he headed off to find his hearts, Lady Pechal and Princess Cristiana.

Chapter 4

Making his way through the outer courtyard, Alcher passed the beautiful chapel and priest's house. He had always admired the colorful stained glass windows that filled both buildings. Having a chapel and priest on the castle grounds was a sign of importance, but it was also a smart defensive strategy. Only the most uncivilized attackers would hurt a priest or their buildings. Religion played an important role in medieval life; it did not matter if you were a king, noble, or peasant. It was common practice for people to attend a church service every morning.

If there was one place in the castle to find Lady Pechal, it would be the kitchen. It was there that she felt most at home. Creating delicious foods for others is what fed her soul, it filled her heart with joy. While she loved to cook, baking was her favorite kitchen activity.

As a young girl, Pechal pushed a stool over to the counter so she stood next to her mother as she prepared food for the next meal. Pechal begged to help, so she was taught some simple cooking tasks. As those were mastered, she was given more. Slowly she learned "the ways of the kitchen". In her early teens, she was able to do almost all of the food preparation for their family's meals, however, she was not yet allowed to work with an open fire. Over the years, she continued to expand her skills and knowledge. The king was so impressed, that he asked her to join his

kitchen staff. This was quite an accomplishment for a woman, because in medieval times the kitchen staff was mostly men.

The royal medieval kitchen was a well organized, finely tuned operation requiring many servants and helpers. It was a large, open room with a sink for washing; fireplaces and ovens for cooking and baking; several large worktables for food preparation. Hanging on the walls were rows of pots, pans, and a variety of utensils. Windows were placed high on the walls so the light could fill more of the room. As a light haze of smoke from the cooking fires filled the room, crisscrossed shafts of sunlight made the kitchen look like a concert stage. The staff's talents may not have been musical, but they turned simple ingredients into a symphony of flavors. The sound of chopping knives, stirring spoons, clanging pots made a type of music all of their own. The people that created the meals were food rock stars.

For several minutes Alcher stood silently in the doorway as he watched the performance play out in front of him. Never before had he given much thought to what went on in the kitchen. Food just “magically” appeared when it was placed before him in the Great Hall. He was amazed with what he saw. He had a greater appreciation for the skill, talent and effort it required to create the food he ate. He was beginning to realize that these – often unnoticed – people would be important to him if he wanted to stay healthy. Educating the kitchen staff about gluten would be yet another task to tackle. Thankfully, Lady Pechal would be a great help, but first she must be educated.

Through the hustle and bustle of activity he spied Lady Pechal in the far corner tending one of the several fires. He carefully navigated around the workers to reach to her.

"How does a hungry knight get something to eat around here?" announced Alcher, as he put down his precious cargo.

Deep in thought, Pechal was startled by his voice. Her heart pounded both from surprise and excitement. The love of her life had returned from a long and uncertain journey. She had not heard anything from Alcher since he had left the castle to seek the wizard's help.

"Alcher you are finally home!" cried Pechal. She threw her arms around him and squeezed very tightly. After releasing him from the bear-hug, she touched his face and looked into his steel blue eyes. *"I have been so worried about you. How are you feeling? Are you okay? You don't look so pale. What have you found? What was the wizard like? Are you okay?"* blurted Pechal. Her mouth tried to keep up as her brain raced with questions.

"Slow down, slow down," chuckled Alcher, wiping the tears from her eyes. *"We have much to talk about, but I am doing much better. Roderick the Wizard was able to figure out what was wrong. Food was making me sick."*

“So,” Pechal growled, as she waved the fire poker inches from his nose. *“My cooking was making you sick?”*

“No, no, no!” Alcher laughed as he raised his hands and slowly moved the poker aside. *“If it was that bad, it would've killed me long ago. Dear, your cooking is beyond question. It is the food itself, not what you do to it. Foods made with wheat, barley, and rye made me sick. Roderick called it gluten,”* he explained.

“Ob dear,” replied Pechal with a puzzled look on her face.

“I do not have time to explain right now. I should not have stopped here first. I must get to Princess Cristiana,” said Alcher. *“She is sick and the king has asked for my help.”* Alcher bent down to gather up the saddle bags.

“The poor Princess has not been herself lately. It breaks my heart,” replied Pechal with a painful look. “Good luck,” she said with a forced smile. *“I love you.”*

“Thank you, I'll need it. I love you too,” sighed Alcher, as he kissed Pechal on the cheek. Alcher headed back towards the doorway.

Pechal was relieved that Alcher was finally home. She returned to tending the fire while her thoughts drifted. While she still didn't know all the details, she felt better knowing why he was so sick. She had felt so helpless as she watched her husband slip slowly away. Little did she know that her skills and talents would play an important role in Alcher's health.

Chapter 5

Children in medieval times had to be fighters from the minute they were born. Their survival could have been decided by a simple flip of a coin - heads they made it, tails they didn't. Unlike the peasants, royalty could afford much healthier living conditions and a proper supply of food. It allowed them to tip the odds of survival in their favor. However, neither food nor money could guarantee a child's survival. King Bernard and Queen Lorelle lost their first and only son, to an infection, weeks after his birth. Losing their only daughter Princess Cristiana would have been unthinkable.

For royalty, raising children was most often someone else's duty, not the parents. Nurses were hired to perform “motherly tasks” of feeding, bathing, and comforting the children, often times into early childhood. Around the age of 7, often times children were sent to live with another royal family.

Boys became pages and learned about religion, hunting, reading and writing, mathematics, and languages. Around the age of 14, they became squires or knights in training – just like Alcher’s squire Cavalon. Girls received a very different type of education, if any at all. If they were lucky, they were taught reading and writing. After all, a future royal wife was expected to run her own household, but also help her husband manage the other houses that he owned. Girls were also schooled in the fine art of music, poetry, storytelling, as well as manners and courtesy. Peasant children had little to no education. They were expected to work in the fields or help their parents so their family could survive.

As Alcher neared Princess Cristiana’s bedroom he could hear the hushed voices of the king and queen. Cristiana’s sickness must have been serious if both of them were there. Alcher took a deep breath and softly knocked on the door. He was told to enter.

The hinges squeaked as the door opened slowly. He stepped into a finely decorated room. Hanging on the stone walls were colorful, expertly crafted fabric panels known as tapestries. Several wooden chairs with detailed carvings allowed guests a comfortable place to sit. The cold stone floor was covered with thick rugs from the far-eastern lands of Asia. A large fireplace with decorative stone carvings added a glowing light, but also helped remove the chill and dampness. The centerpiece of the room was of course, the bed. Beds were some of the most expensive pieces of furniture in a castle; it was a sign of great wealth. Each of the four corners had posts that reached almost to the ceiling. On top of the posts was a tent-like canopy with floor length curtains. When the curtains were pulled closed, it created a private and peaceful space. The bed was placed on a stage-like platform to keep it off the cold floor. A fluffy, feather filled mattress was topped off with several pillows and an elaborately decorated quilt. Indeed, a room fit for a princess!

Cristiana lay on the bed as the king held her hand and the queen softly stroked her hair, hoping to provide some comfort. Alcher put down his saddle bags and moved toward them. He could see the worried looks on their faces. Cristiana was holding her stomach and looked very uncomfortable. Alcher’s heart ached, because he knew what it was like to feel that sick. He wanted to take her suffering upon himself in order to save the princess from the pain.

“Good day my lord and lady.” Alcher bowed to the king and queen. *“I got here as quickly as I could. I am sorry the princess is feeling poorly. How can I be of service?”*

“As you can see Cristiana is sick.” King Bernard glanced back towards his daughter with a pained look in his eyes. *“Several doctors have looked at her but she is still sick. We are at our wits end. We cannot sit idle and watch her waste away.”*

Queen Lorelle frowned and nodded her head in agreement. *“We know that you were sick much like Cristiana and sought a wizard’s help. Was he able to help you?”*

“Yes, he has. Since I have been following his advice, I have been getting better each day,” replied Alcher.

“What did he do? Did he put a magic spell on you?” King Bernard asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I wish it were that simple,” Alcher smirked, knowing the effort it takes. *“It was not a magic spell. He realized specific foods were making me sick and showed me a new way to live.”*

“Are you saying I serve poor quality and unacceptable food?” protested King Bernard.

“I don’t think I need to remind you that your own wife helps in the kitchen, surely she would not be happy about this,” added Queen Lorelle with a serious tone to her voice.

“I am not saying that at all your Highnesses,” apologized Alcher. *“You have the best food and the finest kitchen staff, including Lady Pechal. Please allow me to explain.”*

Knowing that it could be difficult for others to understand, Alcher patiently explained that it was not the quality of the food or the way it was prepared. To make it easier, Alcher used poison as an example. Royalty understood poisoning because it was a common way for someone to remove them from power – permanently. Taste testers were part of the royal staff. It was their duty to taste the food and drink first to make sure it was safe. Alcher told them gluten was like a poison. Gluten was so toxic that even a tiny, crumb-sized amount could make someone very sick. He continued to share some of his thoughts and experiences during his time with Roderick the Wizard.

Before, eating was something that could be done without thought or worry. Never a consideration just how much food affected every aspect of daily life. Food not only fuels the body, it also fuels the social activities that humans require to be happy and healthy. Since the beginning of time, food has been used to bring people together. Gathering, hunting, planting, harvesting, and preparing food was a group effort that required everyone’s help. Eating and food have strong emotional connections as well. Love, comfort, reward, and celebration could all be shown through food.

“Rubbish!” shouted the king at the top of his lungs, startling the sleeping princess. The bed creaked and cracked from his barrel-shaped body as he struggled to get up. King Bernard waddled over to Alcher and poked a sausage-like finger into his chest. *“I asked you to help us, not to fill our ears and heads with such nonsense! We have been eating wheat forever, how can it be causing sickness? Even The Holy Bible tells us of bread made with wheat and barley,”* protested the king.

The room bristled with tension. Queen Lorelle looked even more troubled as she glanced back and forth between her husband and Alcher, unsure as to what would happen next.

“King Bernard, I mean no disrespect to our God or you. I apologize for upsetting you, it was not my intention,” replied Alcher in a calm voice. *“You asked for my help. You asked about the wizard. Queen*

Lorelle asked if the wizard helped me. I am helping you in the only way I can - by answering your questions honestly, and sharing my experiences. You know that I would risk my life to help Princess Cristiana. I have done it in the past, and will keep doing it until I am no longer able."

"I know, I know, Alcher," said the king in a quiet voice as he hung his head in shame. The king looked directly into the steel blue eyes of the knight and placed both hands on Alcher's shoulders. *"Thank you. I let my emotions get the best of me, I am sorry. As you can tell, this is very worrisome and has me on edge. I will be forever grateful for any suggestions or advice you have to offer."*

"I was confused as well when Roderick first said those same things to me." Alcher nodded with a reassuring smile. *"It is hard to believe at first, but after spending time with him, I have come to trust him. He has detailed knowledge of the past, present, and future. He knows things that are impossible to know and has powers beyond all explanation. If he didn't, he'd not be a very good wizard I suppose. All things aside, he is kind, caring, and very generous."* Alcher pointed toward the door and said, *"My saddle bags are filled with items from him that will help us."*

Since the king talked about "eating wheat forever", Alcher wanted to share Roderick's thoughts on this subject. Our Stone Age ancestors that lived two and a half million years ago were gluten-free. Their diet was mainly small wild animals, eggs, fish, nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, vegetables, leaves, and roots of plants. Ten thousand years ago they changed from hunter-gatherers to farmers. They discovered by planting crops like wheat, they could produce food in much larger quantities.

Humans have been gluten-free for over 99% of their existence. Roderick knew that the average person might have trouble understanding millions or thousands of years, so he created his own example. He shrunk the time frame down to a calendar year, where today's date is December 31st 11:59 pm – the last minute of the last day of the current year.

Beginning in January of the current year, we celebrated New Year's day with a huge gluten-free feast. We continued with our gluten-freedom until December 30th. As lunch time rolls around, we started eating gluten. In Roderick's example, humans have been eating gluten for only 1½ days. Gluten is so new that human bodies have not yet adapted to digest it properly. How our body reacts is up to our immune system.

"Sir Alcher?" said Cristiana in weak, crackly voice. *"I am glad you are here. I know you will be able to make me better."*

Alcher made his way over to Cristiana and placed his rugged hand on hers. *"Honey, I am so sorry you are sick,"* he said softly. *"I promise to do my best,"* he said as he bent down to kiss her forehead. *"Now, try to get some more rest. I must go now, but I'll be back later."* A comforted smile appeared as she closed her big brown eyes.

"She adores you so, Alcher," whispered Queen Joelle. Alcher smiled as he quietly returned to the king.

As a young child, the princess connected with both Sir Alcher and Lady Pechal. They would spend time with her, even if only for a few minutes. This bond was further strengthened when Alcher saved her from the dragon a few years ago. Pechal and Cristiana would act out fairytales about other princesses in far-off kingdoms. As the princess grew a bit older, Alcher would give her horseback rides, galloping around the room making horse sounds. Giggles and laughter from both of them filled the air. Cristiana never wanted to stop and always pleaded for "one more." The nurses would step in and ask her to give Sir Alcher a break. This would usually bring a frown to both Cristiana and Alcher's faces even though he knew he must carry on with his daily duties.

Sometimes the world works in mysterious and wonderful ways. Even though Pechal and Alcher were not blessed with children, they were able to open and share their hearts with Cristiana. Perhaps this was the universe's way of keeping balance. Each getting exactly what they needed.

"I best get to my task. I need to find something in Roderick's treasures that will help Cristiana," said Alcher.

"Thank you. Good luck in your quest," replied the appreciative king. *"Let us know what you find."*

"I will," said Alcher as he headed toward his saddle bags. Once again, he picked up the highly guarded cargo. He turned for one last look at the sleeping princess before he walked out the door.

Chapter 6

Alcher made his way through the castle, getting ever closer to home. The knight and his fair lady Pechal didn't live directly in the castle, but in a manor house located near the castle. In a medieval kingdom such as King Bernard's, the king owned all the land. As the sole landowner, he decides how it is divided. King Bernard granted Sir Alcher a parcel of land and a house. This was not a generous gift from the king; he did not acquire his wealth by giving away his belongings. In return for the property, Alcher was expected to help protect the king and the kingdom.

Finally home, Alcher opened the door and stepped inside. He was delighted and relieved to be back. It was common for him to be away traveling to different parts of the kingdom, but this time was different. He felt like he was coming home as a brand new person. In some ways, this was true.

He walked into the great hall; placed the saddle bags on the dining table and let out a sigh of relief. The contents within provided the hope of solving Princess Cristiana's health problems. The weight had been lifted from his arms, but Cristiana's health still weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Alcher was tired, but he knew there was no time to rest. One by one, he removed the objects and carefully placed them on the table. Everything Roderick had packed was now in plain sight.

"I see why the bags were so heavy," Alcher mumbled. There were ancient papyrus documents from Greece. Thankfully Roderick had translated them to English because it was all Greek to Alcher. Rolled up were many parchments written by the wizard describing his observations and thoughts on a variety of medical conditions. Also found were seemingly endless bottles of potions, powders, and herbs. Some of the items left Alcher scratching his head, questioning their purpose.

The creaking hinges of the front door interrupted Alcher's quizzical trance. Lady Pechal was returning home from her duties in the king's kitchen. Surprised by finding Alcher there, she ran to hug him. When they met in the kitchen earlier, they didn't have time to talk about all that happened. Finally, they had some time to catch up with one another.

"So, how was Cristiana?" Pechal asked.

"She was hurting. Seemed restless, not able to get comfortable," Alcher replied with a frown on his face. *"She was positive I could help her."*

"I am confident as well," Pechal added.

"After laying out all of Roderick's things, I'm not so sure. I thought I'd be able to piece something together, but I have no idea," Alcher said.

"Please, tell me about your adventures with the wizard!" Pechal exclaimed.

"There is so much, I don't know where to begin," Alcher sighed. *"His house, if you could call it that, is not a building as we know it. It's hard to describe because there is nothing to compare it to. It looks more like it was grown, instead of built by human hands. It's a combination of grass, dirt, sand, trees, rocks, and plant life. It blended into the landscape, almost hidden. When you went inside, you swore it was alive. You could almost feel life pulsing through it. There was constant, light air movement, like the house was breathing. Not a straight or level line to be found. Everything was curved and flowing, like a winding river cutting through the earth."*

"It sounds so...otherworldly," Pechal said.

"His knowledge and experience helped restore my health. Being in his presence was an experience of a lifetime. I am grateful to have had that opportunity," Alcher responded.

“And I am grateful to have my husband back,” Pechal sobbed. She squeezed his hands tightly and looked into his eyes. *“I had been so frightened. You were slipping away from me. There was nothing I could do to stop it. Nothing. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life. I tried not to let you see me worry. You are so strong for myself, and for many others, I wanted to be strong for you.”*

Pechal’s tears splashed onto the table as she lowered head. As tough as Alcher was, he could no longer hold back his emotions. His own eyes started to tear up as he listened to his wife share her feelings for the first time. At that moment, it was like a jousting lance struck him. It never occurred to him that his loved ones shared his suffering. They were all traveling the same path, each experiencing the same situation, but in a different way.

“It’s alright. I am well now. Everything will be fine,” Alcher whispered as he carefully wiped away her tears. *“We know why I was sick and we know how to keep me from getting sick. You are strong. I will need your help to keep me healthy. All around us, people are dying from the awful Black Plague. I am lucky. I only need to change what I eat.”*

“You’re right. Enough crying. We must keep moving forward,” Pechal said, as she wiped the remaining tears from her eyes and regained her composure.

The sound of a loud clanking doorknocker brought them back to reality. Alcher blinked repeatedly to clear his eyes as he headed toward the door. He had only seconds to switch from the emotional husband to the in-control knight before he greeted their guest. With a deep breath he opened the door and found one of the guards.

“Good day, Sir Alcher. I have some important news about Princess Cristiana, might I come in?” inquired the guard.

“Yes, please,” Alcher said, as he motioned him in. He closed the door and turned around to speak to the guard. He was stunned at what he saw. It was not the guard that stood before him, but Roderick the Wizard with a grin from ear to ear.

“Roderick” Alcher shouted. *“What a surprise. How...what...why?”* After what he saw, he didn’t know what question to ask first. The knight was unable to complete a full sentence.

“Good to see you again my friend,” Roderick said with outstretched arms that invited a manly hug.

Pechal came out to investigate the commotion.

“We have surprise visitor,” Alcher said. *“Pechal, this is Roderick. Roderick, this is my lovely wife, Lady Pechal.”*

Almost before Alcher got the words out of his mouth, she ran to Roderick. Overcome with emotion, she threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek. Was it proper to hug and kiss a wizard? She didn’t know or care, it was important she expressed her gratitude.

"I am forever grateful that you helped Alcher. Thank you," Pechal said.

"What a pleasure to meet you. During our time together, Alcher spoke of you often. It was an honor to be of service," Roderick said while nodding his head. *"Allow me to finish answering your questions. King Arthur's legendary wizard Merlin the Magician and I have the ability to shape shift. I can become anything or anyone I choose, like the guard, or perhaps a favorite horse."* The wizard patiently waited for Alcher to connect the dots.

Alcher thought for a second or two and then snapped his fingers. *"That explains it. It wasn't Chaser, it was you!"* Alcher said. *"You started bucking to make me drop that piece of bread in the market place. Also, when I left your house, you walked me out and waved goodbye. And where is my Chaser?"*

Roderick threw back his head and let out a hearty laugh.

"Alcher, my friend, allow me to explain," Roderick replied with a relaxed tone. *"Yes, I had to stop you from eating that bread and making a big mistake. By the way, thank you for feeding me the carrots; they are an excellent source of Vitamin A. At my house, you saw one of my apprentices. He has the ability to shape shift as well, I am helping him perfect his gift. He's doing quite well, don't you agree? That same apprentice returned the real Chaser safely to his stable. Fear not, he was always in good hands. Why am I here? I am here to help you, your king and his daughter, and all the people of this kingdom. It has taken me centuries to learn all that I know; you are an exceptional student, but I can't expect you to learn it in a few short months. I have consulted thousands of kings during my time in this human form. Kings are a suspicious lot and I must be cautious. If King Bernard knew I was here, he'd feel threatened because I have not proven myself to him. Kingdom building is for kings. My concern is the well-being of the people. This is where my heart lies. The choice is yours. You can turn me over to the king, or we work together as a team. Of course, I need to remain hidden until we restore Princess Cristiana's health."*

"Never a dull moment with you Roderick," Alcher said, shaking his head in disbelief. *"How can I turn you over to the king after what you've done for me? I choose to build an alliance with you in order to help as many people as we can. It will be safe for you to stay here while we work through this. I think Pechal will agree."*

"Yes!" Pechal chimed in.

"Excellent," Roderick said as he clapped his hands together. *"We will make a great team. Together, we will make a difference."* Roderick looked confidently at Alcher and Pechal, they both nodded in agreement.

"We will work on King Bernard," Alcher said. *"I do feel he is skeptical based on our recent conversation, but I believe we can win the king and queen's trust."*

"Perfect," Roderick said. He walked the length of the table, surveying the items Alcher had placed there. He was searching for something specific. *"Abhh, here it is."* He picked up a black

velvet bag with gold tasseled drawstrings. Ever so carefully he opened the bag and removed three bottles and a magnifying glass. One bottle contained a liquid, the remaining two bottles contained powders. *"The ingredients are applied to the skin, the largest organ of the body. First the liquid, then the light colored powder, then the dark colored powder. After about thirty minutes, we use the magnifying glass. If we see glowing specks, we know that gluten is causing a problem."*

"If we don't see glowing specks?" Alcher asked.

"We look for something else," Roderick replied. *"I don't like to wait and see, I'd rather test and do"*.

"The hour is getting late," Pechal said. *"Should we wait until morning to test Cristiana?"*

"Can we at least give her something for her tummy?" Alcher asked as he looked up from the parchments he was studying. *"She looked uncomfortable when I saw her earlier."*

"Yes indeed. We can test her in the morning after a good night's rest," Roderick said. He walked back to the table to pick out another container. As soon as he opened it, the room was filled with the smell of different herbs, roots, and plants. He selected a few items and closed the container. *"Lady Pechal, would you be so kind to make a tea with this? It will calm her tummy and help her sleep. Make sure the water comes to a full boil, then soak these items for seventeen minutes in the water."* Pechal smiled and nodded as she took the items from the wizard and headed off to her kitchen.

Pechal sampled the tea before she poured a cup for Cristiana, it was horribly bitter. A touch of honey would make it taste better, so she added a small bowl of honey to the tray. Returning to the great hall, she asked if it was all right to add honey to the tea. Roderick gave his blessing to the honey. Pechal volunteered to run the tea up to Cristiana.

Balancing the tray on one hand, Pechal knocked on Cristiana's door. There was no immediate answer, so she gently opened the door to peek inside. A couple of torches bathed the room in a soft flickering light. She could see that King Bernard and Queen Lorelle were not there. Cristiana tossed and turned as she tried to get comfortable. Pechal whispered Cristiana's name several times before Cristiana asked who was there. Coming closer to the bed, Cristiana saw Pechal appear out of the shadows.

"It's Lady Pechal, I am sorry it's so late, but I have some tea. It will make you feel better and help you sleep," Pechal said.

"Thank you," Cristiana said. Pechal carefully set the tray on the nightstand, making sure not to spill a drop. Cristiana sat up while Pechal fluffed up couple of pillows and put them behind her back. Pechal sat down on the edge of the bed next to Cristiana.

"I know you have a sweet tooth, so I added some – a lot of - honey," Pechal said. She picked up the cup and handed it to the giggling princess.

“Will this make me all better?” Cristiana asked with a glimmer of hope in her eyes. She took a sip and scrunched up her face and coughed. *“Needs more honey.”* Pechal smiled and drizzled more honey into the cup.

“It will for a little while,” Pechal said. *“We have some things the wizard sent with Sir Alcher. Tomorrow we will try to figure out why you are sick, but first you need to drink all of the tea.”* Cristiana frowned and took a bigger sip of tea.

To help pass the time, Pechal shared stories of her own childhood while the princess drank. Before long, Cristiana had trouble staying awake. Pechal wondered if it was from the tea or her stories as she gently removed the empty cup from Cristiana’s hand. It didn’t matter; she was asleep.

“Goodnight my dear princess, sweet dreams,” Pechal whispered as she kissed Cristiana’s forehead. Pechal got up slowly from the bed, gathered her belongings and silently left the room.

Pechal returned home to find Roderick and Alcher discussing the plans for the morning. Everyone needed to be on the same page since Roderick wouldn’t be able to do the testing himself. After all three were comfortable with the plan, they decided to call an end to a long and emotional day.

Chapter 7

The rooster loudly announced the dawn of a brand new day. Before heading to the king’s kitchen, Lady Pechal rose early to get a head start on breakfast for Alcher and Roderick. Unlike the main meal of the day, a medieval breakfast was usually light and simple. Classic breakfast foods were bread with butter or cheese along with a stew or porridge.

She began to prepare as she had done countless times before. After a lifetime of cooking, these actions were automatic; they happened without thinking – just like breathing. However this time, she froze in fear midway through a slice of bread. She scolded herself and realized this was unacceptable. Pechal had little time to really think about all the needed changes. Everything she knew must be forgotten and relearned. Her mind raced with questions. Each question created another question. How was she going to feed and take care of her husband? It didn’t take long for her emotions to come out as sobs and tears.

“My dear Lady Pechal, why are you crying?” Roderick asked. He paused a moment in the kitchen doorway before making his way towards her. *“Is everything OK?”*

"I suppose it is," Pechal said, as she blushed with embarrassment quickly wiping the tears from her eyes. *"I just realized how unprepared I am to help Alcher. I know nothing about being gluten-free."*

"You are feeling lost and confused right now," Roderick said. *"It's okay, it's all part of this journey. A Swordsmith uses heat and hammers to forge raw metals into a sword that is able to withstand the stress of many battles. This experience will make you a better and stronger person. You and Alcher have been chosen to do this. When destiny calls, you must be strong."* He patted her hand and offered a comforting smile. *"You have a lot of knowledge already - more than most - it just needs a bit of fine tuning for this stage of your journey. Do not worry a minute longer. I will help you, and Alcher will help you too."*

"Thank you Roderick, your words have helped a lot," Pechal said. *"I accept this challenge, and will do my best."* Once again, she hugged the wizard to show her appreciation.

"Your best is all you can do," Roderick said. *"You will be required to share this new knowledge. Others will follow. We will be able to improve the lives of many."*

Their time was limited this morning but Roderick began teaching Pechal the basics of gluten. Since there were bread crumbs on the table, the first lesson was on cross contamination. Even a small crumb of gluten will make Alcher sick, it was important for her to know. How small? Less than a grain of rice, Roderick explained.

As Pechal cleaned, Roderick walked around the kitchen and pantry placing foods for breakfast in bowl. In no time he collected a variety of fresh vegetables, herbs, eggs, and some fruit.

"Being gluten-free is not about what you must remove, but what you get to add to your diet," Roderick said, while selecting three white onions. Tossing them high into the air, he started to juggle them like the king's jester. *"There are many naturally gluten-free foods to choose from. Expand your food vocabulary. Be creative. Experiment. Mix things up. Have fun!"*

Without dropping a single one, he returned the onions to the bowl after his performance. With a big grin on his face, he presented Pechal the gathered items and asked her to surprise him with her creativity. Pechal heartily accepted the challenge. She happily went about making breakfast while listening to Roderick's gluten-free teachings.

Alcher shuffled into the kitchen rubbing the sleep from his eyes while sporting the worst case of bedhead in the kingdom.

"Good morning Alcher," Pechal and Roderick said at the same time, trying not to laugh at Alcher's hair.

"Perfect timing, breakfast is ready," Pechal said. She invited Roderick to sit at the head of the table, a place of honor most fitting for the wizard.

Pechal nervously described the ingredients and the preparation of her first gluten-free meal. Roderick and Alcher listened carefully, making note of the details. They cheered and clapped to show their approval. Their mouths watered as she dished out the Herb and Vegetable Egg Bake. Pechal also prepared small bowls of fresh fruit salad. It was simple, but still a feast for all of the senses.

King Bernard and Queen Lorelle were unaware of Roderick's presence in the kingdom. It was kept secret because Alcher knew the king would feel threatened by a stranger. If King Bernard felt threatened, he'd never allow Roderick to help. They were in a difficult situation. The quickest way to help Princess Cristiana was to work with Roderick, but keep him hidden until the right time. This plan was very risky for everyone involved. It had to work, there was no room for failure. Even if they saved the Princess, there was no guarantee the king would accept the way they did it. Alcher's plan was risking everyone's life.

During breakfast they talked about testing Princess Cristiana. Roderick went to the Great Hall to get the black velvet bag containing the testing supplies. Upon returning, he removed each item from the bag and explained how it was to be used. Alcher asked questions and made mental notes. To practice, Alcher explained the process back to Roderick. They made a few small adjustments, but in the end Alcher knew what to do.

While they were talking, Pechal cleared the table of the breakfast dishes. Alcher and Roderick complimented her again on the tasty, gluten-free breakfast. She always loved getting compliments on her food, but this time, it was about Alcher's health. Touching Roderick's shoulder, she thanked him again for his knowledge. She quickly kissed Alcher's cheek as she rushed off to the King's kitchen. Time had slipped away, making Pechal late for work.

A gloomy, misty day greeted Alcher as he stepped outside his manor house. The narrow cobblestone walk leading to the castle was slick and shiny. He looked toward the crying sky and scowled; the weather matched how he was feeling inside. While he was thankful to be moving forward, he was nervous about what they would find with Cristiana. An answer - any answer - would be better than not knowing. Once they knew what was wrong, they could figure out how to make her better. He was relieved that Roderick was close by.

Wall torches dimly lit the castle's staircase; their flames flickered and danced as Alcher whooshed past them. At the top of the stairs he turned left and continued down the hall to Cristiana's room. He paused a moment to gather his thoughts as his heart pounded. In the silence of the hallway, he could hear the king and queen's voices through the door. He took a deep breath and knocked. The king opened the door.

"Sir Alcher. Please, come in," King Bernard said. Alcher greeted the king and entered the room. As Alcher turned to close the door, he noticed something moving in the shadows. A small mouse

scurried through the open door. It hugged the wall, as it ran across the floor from shadow to shadow. It was common to have mice in the castle, particularly when the weather was less than favorable outside. The cats would make quick work of the unwanted guest.

The king carefully hobbled back toward Cristiana's bed. Alcher could see the discomfort in King Bernard but would not allow himself to get distracted. His focus had to be on Cristiana. The king let out a slight groan as he slowly lowered himself into one of the chairs.

Cristiana and Queen Lorelle greeted Alcher; he bowed and returned the greeting with a smile. The princess was sitting up while she chatted with her mother and father. She appeared to be feeling better than she did yesterday during Alcher's visit.

"Sir Alcher, I'm feeling better today," Cristiana said with a weak smile. *"That awful tasting tea Lady Pechal brought last night helped. I've had less icky poos."*

"Cristiana Lea, proper ladies do not talk like that," Queen Lorelle scolded.

"Not to worry," Alcher said. *"I think that's a proper medical term. I'm certain I read it in the wizard's parchments last night."* He gave Cristiana a quick wink when the queen looked toward King Bernard in frustration. The king took no interest in the queen's silent request for back up. Cristiana's eyes had a faint twinkle.

"We must allow Alcher to get on with this testing," King Bernard said.

"But father, I'm feeling much better. I don't need it anymore," Cristiana said, as she pulled the covers up and around her.

Alcher explained how the test worked, that it was painless and nothing to be afraid of. The king and queen took turns trying to convince her. Try as they might, nothing worked. The king was yelling, the queen was pacing back and forth, and Cristiana was crying. It was clear to Alcher his years of battlefield experience was not enough to prepare him to go head-to-head with a pre-teen child. His training did prepare him to keep calm and think clearly under pressure. He had a plan in mind, but first he had to stop the king from yelling, the queen from pacing, and the princess from crying.

"Why don't we make this a family thing? We can pretend you are on holiday and this is the latest beauty treatment used only by the most royal families." Alcher said. He was certain the king and queen would agree if it meant an end to this stand off. They both agreed. Two down, one to go. Peeking out from under the bed covers, Cristiana agreed, but only if her parents went first.

Alcher, pretending to be a spa attendant, made his way to where the king was seated. Since Alcher had already explained how the test worked, the king rolled up his sleeves and cupped his hands together. Alcher removed the bottle of liquid from the bag and poured some into King

Bernard's large, meaty hands. The king rubbed his hands together before applying the oil like liquid to his oversized forearms. He made sure both arms were well covered. Alcher sprinkled first the light colored powder, then the darker powder over the king's shiny arms. Cristiana watched very closely; looking for any signs of pain caused by the procedure.

"Beauty treatment - I feel more like a well-seasoned piece of meat, ready for the roasting fire." King Bernard said. This gave everyone a much-needed laugh.

The same process was repeated on Queen Lorelle and finally Princess Cristiana. Alcher's plan worked like a dream. Cristiana's performance as "the most royal princess" was quite convincing, maybe too convincing.

When Alcher was finished, he flipped the sand clock upright to start the timing. It took time for the liquid, the powders, and the skin to react with one another. A sand clock is a glass tube that is pinched in the middle, making a narrow passageway between two halves. The tube is filled with sand and sealed. When the tube is turned so the sand is on top, it falls slowly through the passageway until it fills the bottom half.

After 10 turns of the sand clock, the tests were complete. The moment of truth was at hand - would they learn the cause of Cristiana's illness? Alcher removed a magnifying glass and black cloth from the bag. The magnifying glass is used look at the powder particles. Biological and chemical reactions caused the particles to glow if the person was reacting to gluten. The black cloth was used to block any remaining room light. The arms had to be as dark as possible in order to see any glowing sand sized particles.

King Bernard was the first to be examined. Alcher placed the cloth over his head and the king's arms. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness he was able to continue. Starting at the fingers, he moved his way up the left hand. He wasn't seeing anything that looked like glowing pieces of sand. As he neared the wrist, he saw a couple of scattered glowing specks. He blinked several times to make sure he wasn't seeing things, the glowing specks were still there. Moving closer to the forearm, the glowing specks increased in number. Alcher was surprised; he was seeing exactly what Roderick described. He examined the right arm; it looked like the left arm. Unprepared for these results, he tried to remove any expression from his face before coming out from under the cloth.

"What did you find?" King Bernard asked.

"You have two arms, two hands, and eleven fingers," Alcher said with a smile, doing his best to avoid giving him a direct answer. The king stared back at Alcher with a look of disgust. *"Before I say, I'd like to check everyone else."*

Moving to Queen Lorelle, he checked her arms the same way. Just like the king, there were glowing specks on both arms. Alcher politely thanked the queen for her cooperation and moved on to the princess. Cristiana's hands and arms were completely dark, not a single glowing speck – anywhere. He re-checked both arms, still nothing. The results confused Alcher. Removing the cloth, Alcher was ready to share the results of the test. They looked at Alcher impatiently, waiting for him to speak.

"I did not see a single glowing speck on Cristiana," Alcher said. The royal family let out a sigh of relief,

"If gluten is not making her sick, what is?" Queen Lorelle asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't know," Alcher said. It hurt him to say those words, but he had no other option.

"We cannot give up, we just have to keep looking." Cristiana began to cry.

"Sir Alcher, you said you would help me and make me better," Cristiana whimpered. Those words cut Alcher deeper than any sword during battle. Alcher turned and walked toward a darkened corner of the room so they wouldn't see him break down.

"My dear Cristiana. I am trying, I am doing everything possibly I can," Alcher said, as his voice cracked.

"What did you find about the queen and myself?" King Bernard asked. Alcher came out of the shadows and approached the king and queen face to face.

"I saw many glowing specks on each of you," Alcher said. The king's face started turning red and the veins in his forehead began to bulge.

"What is this garbage you are feeding us?" King Bernard yelled. *"The test is useless! It says our daughter is not sick and we are? Any fool can see it's wrong. How dare you use this...this...witchcraft on us. You..."*

"The test is accurate and far from witchcraft," said a strange voice from the darkest corner of the room, cutting off the king's rant. Alcher immediately drew his sword and stood ready to defend the king and his family. Screams came from the queen and the princess.

"Who are you? Show yourself at once," King Bernard demanded. Out of the shadows stepped a figure cloaked in a black hooded robe. A gloved hand pulled back the hood to reveal the face of Roderick. He slowly approached the group. Alcher looking rather confused, relaxed his stance and returned his sword to its sheath.

"I am Roderick the Wizard," Roderick said. *"King Bernard and Queen Lorelle, I apologize for this intrusion. I am here to help you just as I have helped your noble knight. I could not let this go any further."* The king grimaced in pain as he got out of the chair and hobbled over to Roderick.

"Tell me why I shouldn't have you drawn and quartered?" King Bernard asked with fire in his eyes, their noses nearly touching. Roderick stared back and stood his ground.

“It is your kingdom, you may do as you wish,” Roderick said. “The life of your daughter seems like a good reason. Right now, her problem is not gluten, but I can save your daughter. She is feeling better now because of the tea she had last night. Without continued treatment, her condition will worsen. I do not want you to lose your second child - your only child. The test you called witchcraft, is pure science in action.”

“Bad science, I’d say. We are fine, we’re not sick,” King Bernard said.

“King, tell me about your worsening joint stiffness,” Roderick said as he circled around the king, looking him up and down. “You can hardly get out of the chair and walk. The painful headaches that keep you in bed. The burning in your chest after eating. Sound familiar? Queen, please tell me about that oozy, itchy rash that is always gnawing at your skin, and those unladylike bathroom experiences.” The king and queen were dumbstruck as the wizard described their health problems with perfect accuracy.

“But, they’re all normal things,” King Bernard said waving his hand as if he was dismissing one of his staff.

“It may feel normal to you because you’ve been sick for so long, but it’s not normal,” Roderick said. “You don’t have to be sick, tired and grumpy. Please allow Alcher, Lady Pechal, and me to help you.”

Deep inside, the king and queen knew Roderick was right and they could not deny it any longer. Poor health had them in a chokehold for far too long. Not only were they suffering individually, but their relationships with one another also suffered. The king and queen looked at one another, and then to Cristiana – all three nodded their heads in agreement.

“Wizard, you have ripped the blindfold from our eyes and made us see. It was painful, but we humbly accept your offer,” King Bernard said.

“Excellent!” Roderick shouted. “First order of business is to get Princess Cristiana well, then you two, then your entire kingdom. Together we will change the world! By the way, you need to get better cats.”

King Bernard and Queen Lorelle struggled with being gluten-free in the beginning, but Lady Pechal, Sir Alcher, and Roderick the Wizard gave them the help and support they needed to be successful. Eventually, the King took the entire kingdom gluten-free. The health and wellbeing of its citizens improved greatly. They were the most prosperous kingdom in all the land.

Princess Cristiana continued to drink Roderick’s awful tasting tea until she was fully recovered. Unsanitary water and living conditions were the usual causes of dysentery. Children, elderly, and the sick were often the hardest hit. Cristiana grew up to be an elegant and sophisticated woman. In time she became the queen of the Gluten-Free Kingdom and continued the tradition her parents started. Each generation after her kept the tradition alive.

Lady Pechal went on to become the head of the king’s kitchen; a feat very few women ever accomplished in any kingdom. Food quality and safety were her top priorities. Keeping her

promise to Roderick, she volunteered to help other citizens of the kingdom master the art of gluten-free cooking and baking.

Sir Alcher continued his knightly duties until his body said “no more.” His travels allowed him to spread the gluten-free word to many different people both near and far. Like Lady Pechal, he shared his gluten-free knowledge with anyone willing to listen. They opened their home to others to give them better education. The spirit of Pechal and Alcher lives on in gluten-free advocates and support group leaders around the world.

Roderick returned home once he was confident the royal family was on the right path to gluten-freedom. He knew Alcher and Pechal would be there to carry on his teachings. Whenever possible, he would visit the kingdom where he was always welcomed with open arms. To this very day, Roderick follows his passion for helping others and his quest for a gluten-free world. Wizards never pass away. When their earthly bodies become too tired, they regenerate new ones. This process is repeated over and over to carry them on through the centuries. The twenty first century Roderick is a children’s doctor living in New Zealand, a small island in the South Pacific Ocean. He specializes in food allergies, celiac disease, and non-celiac gluten sensitivity.

The End

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Branch Manager

Gluten Intolerance Group of East Central Wisconsin