

***Chapter Eleven:  
The Oracle's Priest***

The food at the reception for the Jolian Ambassador was good and there was a plenty of it. I ate until I was ready to burst. After four days of camp food and nothing, even of that poor fare since the early morning, I was busy with spoon and cup for a long contented time. I sat next to Neko, who was seated beside the King on the side opposite the Queen with his wife between the King and himself. They were chatting merrily. Meliza was catching Neko up on the doings of their two small children. I heard their talk as a pleasant buzz while I enjoyed my full stomach and thought quiet happy thoughts of Grizzly.

Neko broke into the near stupor I'd fallen into by poking me in the ribs. He nodded at Ambassador Holme, who was crossing the room to approach his sister and said,

"That man was at Gorgrieth, he had a helm over his face, but I feel in my bones it's the same man." He looked from Holme to me and said, "And the closer he comes the stronger the feeling becomes. Who is he? Should I know him?"

"You might, although you wouldn't have seen him for a long time. That my brother is the Queen's brother, the Jolian Ambassador, say nothing of your feeling to him, but tell father at the first opportunity," I said in his ear.

Neko looked at Holme, who was now chatting with the Queen, and said, "A spy who fights talking with our stepmother...who is also his sister."

"The world is a strange place," I said languidly.

When servants entered to clear away a place in the center of the King's Hall to make room for the musicians who were making ready to play for people who wanted to dance, the Priest of the Oracle the King had said was in the castle entered the room and took up post by one of the doors that had been thrown open to admit of a little air. He stood placidly under Neko's baleful gaze, quite unconcerned with the change of atmosphere that blew through the room along with the refreshing breeze at his entrance. Even for a Priest of the Oracle he was a big man, with a huge black beard that stood out under his large bald head. He wore the thick golden collar that all priests of the

Oracle wore to symbolize their submission to its power. This one was barefoot and wore only light calfskin knee breeches and an open vest over his barrel chest.

Neko looked at him with a face that could have chilled hot tea before it reached his lips and said angrily, "The would be King."

I had never seen a priest outside of the Oracle. It was something that few people had ever seen. Most of the guests were trying not to stare. All knew well enough what a priest looked like; they had just never seen one. I told Neko, "I thought he would stay away altogether, what is he doing here? They usually only attend their own feasts."

"I suppose he wants to remind father to obey by standing in the corner, looking dull and watchful at the same time. There has never been a threat to Echo Pond. This may be the hysteria that father expected." Neko became thoughtful, and mused, "For priests to emerge from the Oracle and travel the Kingdoms holding the thrones to ransom may show more fear than if they'd gone screaming into the night at the first rumor of approaching darkness."

"Hermits with clumsy ways: Can you imagine a priest ruling a kingdom? They wouldn't have the first idea what to do after they'd finished looting the treasury and carting it off home."

Neko laughed and said, "Well Jamie, I must be gone before the sun breaks the horizon on the morrow. I think I shall take this woman here. . ."; he pinched Meliza who giggled, "and go off to find a nice big haystack. I'm sure I'll find you single-handedly defending the Oracle after you've fetched Deke. I know what a reverent fellow you are," he added dryly.

"I wish you a pleasant journey and safe passage to the Home of all the Gods," I said, meaning it.

Neko nodded and pinched Meliza again; "Come woman," he ordered.

I crossed the room alone to attend the King. Neko had asked me to obtain the King's permission to do what he had already done: excuse himself from the remainder of the feast to make the King another grandchild.

When the priest had entered the main hall, the King had gone to stand on the other side of the room near the opposite of the open doors. Immediately there had formed a long line of people who wanted to congratulate the King on surviving the battle and I suppose to ask for favors or pardons for friends or family members who'd fallen afoul of the King's Justice.

I approached the King while he was talking to the Ambassador from the Perdido. He was telling the King that

they had had some recent reverses but still held the Capital City. Unfortunately, they would only be able to send a small troop to aid the Oracle as they needed the bulk of their army for their more immediate problems with the raiders. When the King told him of the arrival of the priest--and his message--the man's face drained of color.

After he passed, the King looked at me and said between clenched teeth, "What does the man mean, 'Still holding the Capital City?'"

I told him, "These reverses must have happened awfully fast." I had a pretty good spy network in the Perdido and had heard nothing of this.

I stood with the King a few minutes and then noticed Aaron Holme standing alone by a window holding his shirt collar open to a small breeze that was blowing into the room. I had one last piece of a puzzle to find a spot for and I knew that he knew where it went.

I went to him and said without preamble, "Where were you going in such a hurry after our pleasant lunch at the 'Lingering Traveler'? Not after Constance, I hope."

I watched his face and saw first the reaction I expected, surprise, then wariness, and finally to my surprise, embarrassment. He knew that he could not dissemble with me and so confessed, "I wanted to make sure

that you arrived safely at camp, you should really wear your sword while traveling Jamie."

One more word about that sword and I was going to lose my temper. "The King wants to hang you Aaron. I talked him out of it. Don't make me regret it."

Aaron laughed. "Did you convince him I'm not the one who let out the threat to the Oracle?"

"Yes, I believe so." Then I amended, "No I'm certain of it. He trusts my talent--and it has led me to trust you."

"As I trust you." Then he said quietly, "King Edshu of the Jolie will not fail the Oracle."

Then I heard spite in his voice as he looked across the room and said, "But we will not bow to these false priests. Their threats and blandishments are idle boasts. I doubt my father will allow one in his home: much less concede anything to one."

A page approached and said stiffly to Aaron, "My Lord, when you have a moment the Queen requests that you attend her."

Aaron thanked him and told him that he would join her momentarily.

"Not so idle," I said when we were again alone. "They have real power in these valleys. With a word they could

force the Council of Lords to depose this King and choose another."

Rather than reply, Aaron smiled brightly and said, "There is a beautiful woman standing behind you Jamie, maybe you should speak to her."

Before I could turn around to see to whom he was referring, I heard a soft voice in my ear that could only belong to the Duchess of Echo Pond.

"Good evening, Lord Magistrate, are you going to introduce me to your handsome friend?"

I turned to face her and said as cheerfully as I could manage, "Good evening Duchess, this is the Jolian Ambassador, Aaron Holme."

"Ahh, the hero of the hour come to save us in our time of need. Thank you for being such a stalwart defender to us in our peril," she said and then curtsied.

Aaron bowed and then said, "My lady, Henry Thalia is quite capable of defending himself, as is the brave Prince Nikoleaf. Our part in the affair was small, not worth mentioning." He added this last with real humility.

"That is quite true," I said laughing. "Neko is upset that his thunder has been stolen."

Aaron smiled self-deprecatingly and said, "You see pretty lady, nothing but spear holding. And now if you'll

excuse me, I must attend your queen." He bowed graciously again, then turned and crossed the room to where the queen sat with two of her ladies in waiting.

The duchess turned to me, and said with stardust in her eyes, "So that was Aaron Holme, he's beautiful." Then she said, "You're beautiful too, Jamie. If you'd just shave that ugly beard, I might marry you."

"Madam."

She put her finger to my lips and said, "Jamie, how often must I ask you to call me Sandra?" Then she took my arm in hers and began a long one-sided chat extolling the charms of her home at Echo Pond. All the things that I could be expected to endure if I would just consent to the King's wish that I marry her.

It was the King himself who finally disengaged me from the clutches of the Duchess of Echo Pond. He came across the entire room, introduced himself to her with his best courtly manners and said, "Madam you are beautiful tonight."

She curtsayed low and when she arose said silkily, "Your majesty is too kind to a plain girl from the country." Her demure smile a calculated ruse to my eye.

Then all calculation appeared to flee her eyes as she said breathlessly, "Sire, are the rumors true? Does the

Witchking intend to attack the Oracle? Is my home in danger?" She added this last after a pause, during which the calculation returned as she watched the King's face intently for any information that his words might not hold.

The King did not flinch under her gaze. He held her eyes and said lightly, "This rumor is all the talk tonight. I myself am not entirely sure that there even is a witchking. It seems like a story intended to frighten children...and grown people who ought to know better." His green eyes twinkling under their bushy red eyebrows he continued, "As your father's daughter I'm sure you share that opinion. He was a brave man who believed a thing when he saw it, and feared nothing he could lay a sword to."

The Duchess seemed to stiffen at the King's words. He had her where he wanted her now and went in for the kill. "Have you seen something magical near your home that frightened you child? Something that your father could not have put to the sword?"

His tone speaking plainly that he knew that she had not.

The Duchess arose to her full height. I hadn't even been aware that she'd been carrying such weight on her shoulders until the King reminded her of her father, a captain in Mad King William's army who'd been killed in one

of the many battles that had been fought years ago to wrest Sabbia from the King who'd ruled there. "I am my father's daughter and I will tell you plainly that I have seen nothing to frighten me." She was angry now, saying, "And if I did, Henry of Thalia, I would take my father's sword off the wall and skewer the damn thing and give it to the steward to feed the dogs!" Her eyes went flinty and she bored them into the King, daring him to think differently.

The King looked at her gravely, his face a mask to hide his true feelings because I think he was having a hard time not smiling at this woman who'd been suddenly reminded that she had a brave heart. He told her, "Then you are your father's daughter, I never doubted it."

"I hope not," she said. Then drew in a breath and I imagine dearly wanted to tell the King what he could do with his witchking. She looked into his face: her mouth open, the words ready to tumble out and saw that his eyes equaled hers' for flint, saying quite plainly, "Watch your step madam."

She recalled herself from lecturing a king at a reception in his own home and said, her tone softening as she spoke, "Your majesty is quite correct, my father was a brave man. If he'd heard such a foolish rumor he would have polished up his sword and gone about his business." She

gave him a pretty smile, but the flint never left her eyes, saying, "Which is exactly what I intend to do."

"I never doubted it." Then he said, "I may be visiting you sometime soon Sandra, I have business with the Oracle this summer and I may stay with you a day or two."

The King's tone had changed again and she responded to it.

"It will be an honor to share my home with your Majesty," she said reverently, but her face had gone thoughtful.

"You know Lord General Grey's son, Peter, don't you?"

She nodded.

"He is on his way there now, with a contingent of troops. He will be joined in a short time by Prince Nikoleaf. They may stay in the region for some time. In a word, Sandra, the army is assembling at Echo Pond. You understand what this means?" he asked quietly, his eyes searching her face.

She met his gaze evenly and said reluctantly, "I do."

"Good," he said, still searching her face. He seemed satisfied because he smiled and said heartily, "You will have much company this summer, Sandra, I hope that is to your liking."

"I will be honored to share my home with your Majesty

and the Prince as long as you would be happy to stay."

"Thank you for your kind offer of hospitality."

"You are a wise King, Henry of Thalia," she said, not seeming embarrassed to admit that he had bested her so completely.

The King became serious again, saying, "These visits I am honoring you with are not a matter for rumor, there are enough of those already. Might I suggest then that you head back to Echo Pond soon, to prepare your home for visitors, welcome and unwelcome. There is a strong troop, under Neko, leaving in the morning, before sun-up. You may want to avail yourself of his escort as a traveling companion. I would not insult you by offering you the hospitality of the castle for the summer. Although Lily would love the company." He looked at her, seeing if she would take this way out of harms way.

"I will be ready to travel in the morning. I would love to pass the summer with the queen, but a good hostess is home to welcome the invited guests and give the uninvited a fitting reception," she concluded grimly

The King took both her hands in his and said warmly, his eyes filled with a new respect for her that he didn't try to mask, "You're a brave woman Sandra of Echo Pond, it will be an honor to visit you in your home."

Despite herself, her eyes filled with tears.

"Until then Henry of Thalia." Then she turned and strode quickly from the King's presence.

The King and I stood thoughtfully watching her as she slowed her pace until she could walk proudly through the throng and exit by the door. I felt nothing but remorse for having so misjudged her and said with feeling, "She's a fine woman."

"Yes, she is. Damn the war for its misery."

"I was very wrong about her, I thought her just an empty-headed girl full of fluff and vanity," I said, my heart full at having watched this brave woman accept the charge that the King had laid on her with such grim determination.

"Did you now?" the King asked looking at me with a wry smile. Then he laughed and said, "So did I. We both misjudged her. I thought I knew what she would do right up until she did the opposite." He shook his head and said, "People are full of surprises."

Then he said, "Well Jamie, unless you have any other business at this party I would excuse you to your rooms. You have a long ride tomorrow. I know how you love to sleep in the saddle and I don't want you falling off your horse and hurting yourself before you can light a fire under my

brother."

I laughed and said, "I'll sleep most of the way either way. But, thank you. I think I may say good night to this assembly, I am a little tired." I bowed to him with my best courtly manner and said, "Good night your Majesty."

"Good night Jamie."

***Chapter Twelve:  
The Haunted Castle***

I climbed the circular stairs that led from the first floor of the outer wall of the castle to the second, where our apartments were contained, feeling happy that I would

soon be holding Grizzy in my arms and saddened that it would be a while before I would be with her again after tonight. Although I had been within shouting distance of our rooms a couple of times, I hadn't found the time to see her all day. Now, as the time finally drew near, I felt a little nervous and tried to slow my thoughts.

My mind had been racing all day. So much had happened so fast in the last week that I couldn't think about all of it, so I decided to think about none of it. I would have plenty of time to think on my way to Sabbia. My mind still raced as I mounted the steps but it chased itself. I let it come to rest nowhere, except to encourage it to be happy that it would soon feel the arms of my love.

I blew out my candle before I entered our bedroom. As I crossed our threshold I saw again that falling in love with a Jolian filled all the sense; every minute spent with them is a celebration of warm smells and soft colors. They are so creative in their approaches that it is like living with a magician who is casting a spell to make you forget that there is a world out there that you can't make whole by being kind to it.

Three lamps had been arranged so that one cast a blue glow, one yellow, and one pink. The blue one hung from the ceiling off to the left. The yellow one sat on a small

table a little to the right, and the pink one sat in the window near Grizzy's little bed. The room was otherwise in darkness. Grizzy stood in the center of the room, all in white, looking at me with a look on her face so full of emotion that I thought she might cry. She tried to smile, but she couldn't hold it. She started to hold her arms up. And then suddenly, a frightened look crossed her face.

In the instant of that look everything that had happened since we had parted came back with a weight that I hadn't realized I'd been carrying. Everything I'd felt from the shock of the attack on the King to almost dying in the High Tower this afternoon came over me in a rush.

I had looked into Grizzy's smiling face and known that these things could hardly happen in the same world that contained the person who stood before me. Grizzy seemed more solid and real than the wild twist of events that I had endured, as my heart drew toward her and away from the world outside, toward the lamps and away from madness. I felt myself pulled and I heard something tear.

My mind had tried to go between these opposing worlds too quickly and I lost my balance. I had to sit down. I staggered to a chair and fell into it.

Grizzy came across the room in a rush and knelt down beside the chair. She called my name quietly, but firmly,

and asked me if I was all right.

I looked into that face so filled with love and concern for me and I felt the weariness, each of the cares of the last few days fall away; my mind becoming clearer and clearer until all that was left was Grizzy, her three lamps, and my knowledge that I loved her completely.

I put my hand out and stroked her hair. She smiled up at me.

"That is a powerful spell you've cast," I told her. I had meant it as a wit, but as soon as I said it I knew that it was true. Living with Grizzy wasn't like living with a magician; it was the fact of it.

"I may have overdone it," she said slightly chagrined.

"No, I doubt that, it's been a long week." I schooled my face to ask the unspoken question.

"It's all in the lamps," she answered, relieved that she hadn't shocked me too badly by being clumsy.

She said lightly, "There's nothing to it, all Jolians can do a few bits of things."

"Then everyone should have a Jolian," I told her, grateful that I at least had mine.

"Can you stand?" she asked me softly.

"Yes," I said, still staring into her brown eyes.

She stood up and kissed me lightly on the lips and

took both my hands in hers' and led me across the room to the tub. "Get in there," she told me.

I climbed into the tub, the water so cool that I thought I might stay in there, with Grizzy beside me, in the quiet lamplight, until the world came to an end.

I told her, "Speaking of spells, Windy wants you to climb up and learn a few that he knows."

"Leather bands again?"

"Something awful," I said before I sunk myself completely under the water. I laid there at the bottom of the tub watching pink and yellow and blue flow across the surface of the water until my lungs threatened to explode.

When I could stand it no more I sat up, gasping for air as soon as my head broke the water.

"Jamie I was just about to reach in and grab you; I thought you'd drown or something."

Grizzy looked frightened again.

I reached out and took her in my arms and pulled her close. Then I held her and kissed the top of her head, my mind filling with the sweet, musky smell of her hair. My lips told her through more kisses, "I missed you."

"Sometimes these rooms are like a prison," she said hugging me with all her strength, "there is nothing so empty as them without you."

I ran my hands along her back. The white dress seemed to come alive under my fingers. It felt as smooth and cool and as soft as her freshly washed hair.

"I wrote you a letter, did you get it?"

"Yes, Lily brought it over herself. She was so excited for me that she couldn't wait for me to come to the garden for tea". Then she said slowly to my chest, "I read her some little bits of it. I hope you don't mind."

I stood up in the tub and picked her up off the ground until her face came level with my mine. I looked into it for a long time, savoring it. Then slowly our lips crossed the distance.

I carried her across the room and laid her on the bed.

Grizzy and I made love. Then we lay in bed and chatting and drinking some wine and eating a sharp green cheese she'd gotten from the cook. After we'd been lying quietly for a while I decided that I wanted to know a little more about this Jolian magic.

"So what else can you do besides put my fevered mind to sleep?" I asked her.

"Oh, just little bits of things," she replied mildly.

"What sorts of little bits?"

"Well maybe just some things like tonight, things to relax you. . ."

"And?" I decided to press the point.

"Well, there are some things that most of us know about healing, although so far your lungs have defeated mine and Lily's best efforts. I might know if something bad happened to you...I was very worried about you today and now you tell me that you got sick in the High Tower."

"Grizzy," I said sternly, "what else?"

"Well, if I plant something, it grows," she said smiling happily.

I knew that Jolians were great lovers of gardens.

She continued to stare thoughtfully at the ceiling. I knew that Grizzy had not yet told me the entire story, so I asked her, "Is that it of magic?"

She rolled over and kissed me lightly and said quietly, "Well, I might be able to tell when something's bothering you or worrying you, even when you want me to think everything is fine." She finished by looking at me quite sternly, for Grizzy.

"Oh that," I said looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes that," she said poking me in the ribs harder than usual.

So, I told her everything that had happened since I'd last seen her, including the embarrassing parts. "Crap Grizzy, the King says that he and Neko are to be the blunt

instrument for pounding or something like that, and I'm supposed to be the brains out there. I stepped in shit three times in one day; I don't feel like the brains."

"Don't worry about it, you'll be fine."

"It was a lot of shit: I'll be forever cleaning it up."

Grizzy looked me full in the face and said, without a trace of sarcasm in her voice, "Jamie, anyone can show up on a battlefield without their sword."

I looked at her sourly, and said, "Grizzy, if you're trying to make me feel better, stop."

Grizzy lifted her head off the pillow and looked down at me, her soft hair falling across my face and shoulder. She brushed it away absently and laid it over her back.

"I'm not trying to make you feel better, I'm scolding you," she said schooling her face and voice to be stern with me.

I looked up into her face, "You a scold?" I did my best to appear incredulous and said flatly, "Grizzy, I don't believe it."

At that she smiled grimly and said, "It's quite true, nevertheless. You're not to go around without your sword. I found it in that trunk over there," she said, waving airily at the corner; "under some old papers. It is now very sharp and very shiny. And it's to be used, not mislaid," she said

imperiously. Then she bent down and gave me a light kiss on the lips, saying, "There, I've scolded."

If this was Grizzy scolding, I might make a botch of things more often. It was certainly a lot easier than having Neko yelling at me.

Then she said offhandedly, "By the way Jamie, you do know how to use a sword?"

"Yes," I said tiredly. "Deke taught me. He said the most important thing to remember was never to try to hold it by the pointy end. 'That's the business end of the thing Jamie. You'll hurt yourself.'"

Rather than laugh, Grizzy became very serious.

"Jamie, I don't want to scold you again, but I will. The King will need his brains. It's not something to joke about."

Then she rolled over on her back again. We laid there for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling, thinking our own thoughts. Finally, I had to ask, "Grizzy, no one's going to forget this sword thing any time soon, are they?"

"Unlikely," she said simply.

"I thought not," I said to the ceiling.

Grizzy turned her head and kissed me on the cheek.

"Goodnight my love." Then she rolled over on her side and faced the wall.

"Good night Grizzy." I rolled over and kissed her ear.

"I appreciate that you cleaned the thing for me"

"My pleasure, you'll find it standing by the door in the other room. Promise me you'll wear it."

I kissed her ear again.

"I love you Grizzy."

She rolled over and smiled sleepily.

"I love you too, now try to go to sleep." She smiled again and rolled back over on her side.

I settled on my back, watching the light and shadow cast by the candle sitting on the bedside table flicker on the ceiling while I listened to her light breathing become a quiet snore. Grizzy was good at going to sleep and I envied her that. It was never easy for me. I did most of my best thinking when it would have been better to be asleep, and probably my best sleeping when it would have been better to be awake, thinking.

Right now I was thinking that this of the sword wasn't fair. I could never tell Grizzy that, it would sound like making excuses, but how was I supposed to know that the war was going to start so soon? I mean I did know, but that's not the point. I'm the King's Counselor not a sword fighter. The note the impatient captain brought to the "Lingering Traveler" said "Come right away, I need you". It

didn't say, "Come right away, but rummage around for your sword first."

I hadn't been quite truthful with Grizzy either. I knew how to work a sword, had actually been quite good with the thing, once upon a time, ten or twelve years ago. Now I thought there might be a chance that, in the heat of battle, I might get confused and pick the thing up by the pointy end.

"Spend the rest of my life trying to explain where my fingers went," I said out loud.

Grizzy shifted in the bed and said sleepily, "Did you say something?"

"No," I lied.

"I thought I heard something."

If I didn't know better I'd swear she was talking in her sleep. People are amazing, what they can do.

"It was just the Storm Gods warming up," I lied, again.

I got a snore for a reply. "Misses nothing and is asleep again", I thought.

"I'll just have to do better," I decided as I rolled my body over closer to her. "No more stupid mistakes." I put my arm around her and resolved, "As soon as I get to Sabbia, I'll have my father's Master at Arms go over a few

moves with me. That'll be good and embarrassing. My father will be on and on about the "Cushy life of a Court Magician withering my sword arm"...endless sarcasms like that. Better that than make an ass of myself again though. Somewhere in these doldrums I must have fallen asleep because suddenly it was morning.

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But not without a visit from Annie the Witch somewhere in the night. She stood at the foot of the bed eyeing her imagined competition with undisguised contempt. I could see that if she weren't already dead herself and incapable of the act, she would murder Grizzy where she slept. Then she turned to me and said sadly, "So Jamie rides to war without his sword."

I was momentarily flustered by the look of unbridled hatred in her eyes. "Could a ghost go mad?" I wondered.

"I was foolish," I agreed, calmly admitting the worst. "It won't happen again."

Her face softened as she appeared to think about it.  
"We'll see," she said dryly.

Then she turned her unkind gaze upon Grizzy, "So how is it with this Breeze girl of yours? Does she satisfy?" As she turned her face back to me she looked almost like a caricature of someone who was trying to get their mind around an impossible notion.

Rather than rise to the bait, I almost laughed at her discomfort. I rolled over on my side and put my arm around Grizzy and, drawing on her strength willed the witch gone, until she was.

I wished again that I could take Grizzy with me. I thought it might be better for both of us to be out of this stuffy, haunted, old castle for a while.

**Chapter Thirteen:**  
***The Mad King***

Grizzy and I said our goodbyes in bed, over breakfast before the sun came up. Our time together passed too quickly and Grizzy was soon standing in the doorway watching me go down the hall. She looked so forlorn that I ran back down the hall, kissed her goodbye again and told her not to worry: "I'll be fine."

"I know," she said, "we both will." I looked into her dark brown eyes for a long moment and then, screwing up my courage, hurried down to the stable.

I wasn't at all surprised to see the King standing outside the huge stable door in the light rain that was falling talking to the Captain of the Escort when I came around the corner. The King pretended to be surprised to see me and said, "Good morning Jamie, you're up early."

"Good morning Sire," I replied.

The captain looked at me and said, "Good morning Lord

Magistrate, whenever you're ready to leave." He nodded toward the other end of the stableyard and continued, "The men and I will be waiting at the Parade Ground." With that he nodded to the King and said, "Sire." Then he turned and hurried across the wet cobblestones into the stable.

As soon as he was out of sight, I looked at the King and said, "I'm turning over a new leaf, thought I'd get up with the sun, come down here and shovel up a little shit, get myself in shape for the long road ahead."

Rather than smile, he reached up and scratched his head, trying to rub the last of the sleep out of it and said, "It may be all of that." Then he looked me over and said, "I see you found your sword. I hope your Jolian had an edge put on it."

"She did."

He looked at me and said firmly, "I don't need to tell you how important it is that Deke comes quickly."

A groomsman came out of the stable and wordlessly handed me the reins to my horse while the King and I studied each other thoughtfully.

I held the reins and said, "No sir."

I think we both felt that somehow a way of life was coming to an end this morning as we stood there talking in the stableyard. We'd happily taken all of this for granted.

Maybe thought we'd always be King and Counselor in a land that turned in predictable ways. Now, it seemed, the Storm Gods had us well in hand.

"Don't worry father, I'll be fine. And Deke will come. It's his way to be a jackass, but he always comes along."

The King laughed, saying, "He is a jackass, but Grey will soon die. I need Deke. He is the bravest man I know, almost reckless."

He looked at me for a long moment and then said, so quietly that I barely heard him, "Be careful Jamie, I've just sent one of my sons into the field; two is hard to bear."

I began to feel overwhelmed by the mix of emotions that were passing all around us; I said, "I love you father."

He gave me a big bear hug and said, "I love you too Jamie."

When he let me go I jumped on my horse and said, "I'll see you soon." And with that, I and my escort set off for Sabbia.

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My heart was full as the horses clattered their way through the awakening town: much quieter than yesterday when all and sundry had been out celebrating the return of the King.

The town even appeared to be sleeping off the worst of last night's reverie this morning. A few merchants were out opening their shuttered windows and setting their wares out on large tables that appeared when the shutters came level with the street and supporting legs dropped down.

A few vegetable hawkers were already strolling the streets pushing their little carts before them. They, usually so loud and insistent, saw no reason to try to push their carrots and corn on a troop of passing soldiers. They waved their best produce at us, but did not shout the singsong praises of their vegetables, trying to convince passersby that their produce was the only one anyone with any sense would buy.

Only one of the many fruit stands that lined the main street was showing any signs of activity at all. The merchant had first gotten his apples ready: green, red and yellow; they shone in the early morning sun as if the vendor had been up all night polishing them rather than

reveling with his kinsmen.

The old fellow who ran the stall shooed a young boy out into the street to see if the soldiers would buy any of his fine produce for an early breakfast. The boy jumped up and down beside the soldiers as he ran along with a different colored apple in each hand. Several of the soldiers bought apples and it was worth the slight delay just to watch the boy juggle coins and apples as he made his sales.

As we neared the town gate we caught our first hint of the sweet aroma of the King's Bread ovens. All of the bread that was baked for sale in the town came from this quarter. The huge bread ovens had been built and maintained by the King's Order and were under the constant vigil of the King's Steward. The revenue from the ovens rivaled the slaughterhouses and the tannery for filling the treasury so this section of town was kept in very good order. The King's Steward came down here often to weigh the loaves and insure that the assigned mark of each baker was properly affixed before the loaf was sold. Woe be onto the baker who tried to cheat a patron by selling a light loaf.

The ovens were huge, ten feet across and shaped as huge domes; they rested under the heavy leaves of shade trees planted to keep the hot sun off the bakers as long as

possible. A large carefully tended fire roared in the center of each dome, and at this early hour the ovens were a flurry of activity, all around the domes were small portals that men and women with stout paddle shaped "spats" were busily pulling finished loaves out, while another baker behind him held a similar spat with a fresh loaf to put in. It was as clever a dance as anything to be seen at the reception last night. Running through all of this activity were small boys and girls waving old spats at birds that flew just overhead, trying to steal a little breakfast for themselves. All of this baking would be done long before the midday meal when the hot sun made further work impossible for the bakers.

The freshly baked bread went straight from the ovens to little shops that were arrayed around the ovens. These sold every different sort of bread to be imagined: from pastries, to rich loaves and poor loaves, to breads baked with fruits, meats, and nuts--to pies that were a meal in themselves.

The town was taking on a life of its own as it grew; chaotic, disordered, and often far too rowdy, the Manor Lords and even occasionally an exasperated King, complained that the town should be dismantled and the inhabitants returned to their country ways. I enjoyed the town myself

and often found myself arguing that the Kingdom could no longer do without it. Here a person could live comfortably, and for now peacefully, selling their wares as they pleased. Life would get pretty dull in a hurry if the town were not allowed to grow the way it would. In his better moments the King knew that, and he pretty much let the thing do as it pleased, while collecting the taxes that were his due.

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By the time we rode through the town gate the rain had stopped and the clouds began to break up to reveal the morning sun. Once we were out of the town we rode along the wide road that narrowed soon enough as it branched off to the several directions that formed the rest of the kingdom. Out here everything that was sold in the town found the place it was nurtured or natured. Fruits and vegetables were grown. Horses and cows and pigs raised. Cotton cultivated. And the Manor Lords ruled as they always had.

Nothing much ever changed in the villages and that was the way almost everyone who lived out here liked it. None of the industry and wild changes that the town enjoyed found their way past its gates.

Our kingdom of Illumiare is a long wide valley bordered by mountains on three sides and the river on the fourth. The King liked to say that our valley was shaped like the first queen, a buxom woman with a slender waist and hips made for having babies. The castle that we'd been stuck in for the last several years of the war had been built at the slender waist where two mountain ranges reached across the wide valley and came within a couple of miles of meeting. It pinched off the waist, was perfectly defensible and had held the raiders out of the southern realm for all of its existence. That it was built for war rather than comfort made it a difficult place to live. It is a stout castle that could be defended against the Storm Gods themselves, but it was a little like living in one of the town's bread domes.

The fact that we'd confined the depredations of the Wildmen to the north with Deke to the west meant that most of the troubles were to the northeast. And that was the direction that Neko had ridden out with the Duchess of Echo Pond in tow before the sun came up. His road had taken him

northeast to the Oracle. Until now the raiders had always given the Oracle at Echo Pond a wide berth: for reasons of their own they seemed to fear disturbing it as much as the rest of us did.

My road went to the northwest. Anyone could find Sabbia. All you had to do was ride toward the unbelievably tall steep-sided Jolian Mountains. The Storm Gods themselves could not have better designed a more imposing fortress than Alyssa the Gardner had when she threw up the Jolian Mountains. With that huge range on one side and the Jolian Ice Fields on the other, all it took was the raging river flowing through the steep sided cataracts that came from the ice fields to make a place that was only accessible by invitation from the King of Jolie. Something that had never been extended to anyone that I'd heard of. Well, some said Deke had been there once or twice. But I thought that more in line with his legend than fact.

It was also said that in some long ago war that the Sabbians and Jolians had mingled their blood when they'd been allies against the rest of the valleys. One of my father's companions had even told me that my mother was more Jolian than Sabbian. He had known her, and I had few memories of her so I suppose I took him at his word. Whatever the rights of that, during the long war between

Sabbia and Illumiare in which the old King, William the Mad, finally wrested Sabbia from the rightful owners and gave it to Deke, the Jolians took no part, having already retired from affairs in the rest of the valleys long before.

Whenever I thought about Deke the first thing that always came to mind was his bullheaded conviction that all things Sabbian were the gift of Michael the Traveler and everything else was a counterfeit of the Storm Gods. He raised the best horses, whelped the finest puppies. The sweetest apples came from Sabbia and the wool from his goats could keep a Jolian warm who had a mind to explore the Icefields.

How Deke came to Sabbia is a well known story. But why Deke is still in Sabbia is not so well told. Deke is after all the oldest son of William the Mad and should by rights be the King of Illumiare. That he is not is his fault as much as anyone's. The father of Deke and Henry, William the Mad, had not been happy with the Lords as he had fought the long Sabbian War. At every twist and turn of the war, they had tried to wring concessions from the old King that he was in no mind to yield. He was not a patient man when penned by circumstances not in his control, one of those circumstances being that the rightful owners of Sabbia were

putting up a much better fight than he'd planned on. At times he could be more frightening than Neko when his temper bested him. But his anger availed him not and the Lords were able to strengthen the Council during his reign.

When the war finally ended and Deke had been safely installed as Prince Regent in Sabbia, the old King decided the time to avenge himself on the Lords had come. He'd had enough of their harangues. Neither had he learned to like the idea of a King sharing power. When the opportunity of another confrontation presented itself, he went ahead and arrested the entire Council of Lords and ordered them hanged for treason without trial. His reasoning for going to this extreme, he claimed, was that he could no longer resist the voices in his head demanding that he hang the scoundrels. He told all who opposed him in this that the voices came from somewhere near Echo Pond and therefore must be heeded.

No one in the Kingdom could bring themselves to believe that the goddess Alyssa the Gardner, living somewhere on this side of the Oracle was advising the King to do away with the Lords. That left the authors of the voices to be the Storm Gods trapped on the other side of the Oracle. The kingdom was in near revolt at the idea of being ruled by those five miscreants.

"Something had to be done to prevent William the Mad from becoming William the Rope," the King told me when he took the time to explain to me why he, rather than my father, was the King of Illumiare.

Young Prince Henry thought to give Deke every opportunity to intercede with their father to save the Lords and maybe the entire kingdom for the Thalia's, from William's ill-advised, at best, resolve to do away with Council. Deke sat it out in Sabbia, saying that the decisions of a King, no matter by whom counseled, had to be obeyed. "If father wants to hang the upstarts let him. It can do no harm and might even do some good. The next crop may not be so stubborn," was his advice to his brother Henry.

Young Prince Henry waited patiently for the Mad King or Deke to relent until the night before the morning that the executions were to take place. And then he went to the dungeons, sword in hand, to make a bargain with the Lords.

"Depose the old King," he told them, "and support my claim to the throne or hang."

"You wouldn't believe it," the King told me, "but, even at this extremity, sitting on foul straw mats in a steaming dungeon, with their lives forfeit in the morning, they tried to hang the thing on concessions--which I

absolutely refused. It was one of the rare times in my kingship that I had them penned and need concede them nothing."

"Without concessions, they refused to strike a bargain," he continued, "pointing out that Deke as the oldest had the claim to the throne. I told them that Deke is in Sabbia and seems willing to let my father hang you. That leaves me or the gibbet."

The King had tried to explain his action, "I didn't want to take the crown from Deke. But I couldn't very well let the Lords hang on a whim of the Storm Gods, now could I? And as far as your father goes, I knew that in his heart Deke didn't want to be King and would make a bad job of it. He's almost smart enough, but the ambition isn't in him."

"The Lords had a hard time seeing it that way and seemed to want to go by the book. I couldn't very well save them if they refused to cooperate. So, I sheathed my sword and laughed at them. 'Hang then,' I told them and turned to walk away, appearing to leave the stubborn asses to their fates. That was all it took."

"Of course when Deke found out what I'd done he made quite a stink. Threatened to raise an army of those Sabbian hill people of his and march in and take the throne. Nothing ever came of it. Deke didn't want civil war, or the

throne for that matter; all he really wanted was to set himself up in Sabbia as his own master. He used his anger as a shield to do that."

This confused state of affairs went on for years. Deke and the King each possessed an equal share of the stubborn Thalia temper in common, if nothing else, and that ensured a feud that could last for generations.

Even before the succession crisis, Henry and Deke had never been close: their temperaments were too different to ever be comfortable with each other. But after this strange succession they were not really enemies, they just for the most part didn't understand each other. The King could never understand how his brother could have stayed in Sabbia during this crisis and Deke never understood how his brother could have usurped the old King. The King thought that Deke had forfeited the throne and should act accordingly. Deke thought that Sabbia should be independent from the upstart throne of Illumiare.

Deke still sent his yearly taxes to the crown as a matter of honor, being that he could never bring himself to make war on his own brother. But he obstinately resisted fulfilling many of his further duties to his Lord the King. That was why I had to go to Sabbia. To make my father attend to his duty.

"The thing that put an end to talk of civil war was an exchange of hostages," the King told me. "When the pissing contest was all over, the youngest sister of the old queen had gone to Sabbia to be fostered. And you, a lad of five, came here."

No Thalia ever did anything to intentionally harm a child in their care. There is where the stalemate now stood.

***Chapter Fourteen:  
The Barefoot Feet***

Once the rain had let up and the sky cleared we rode all the rest of the day through the hot sun. I thinking my thoughts, the Captain of the Escort drilling his dozen

troops. He busied himself riding up and down the line drawing their swords from the scabbard to see if they were sharp and polished and checking their bows to see that there were no splinters and that the quivers they carried on their backs were full of arrows.

Satisfied with their weapons he had them performing close order formation and practicing turning and charging in unison for all of the morning and part of the afternoon. He finally took time to come up and introduce himself as Captain Baily sometime later in the day. "These are fresh troops," the captain told me, "never been in the field before. The Prince thought that this quiet ride through the country would be good training for them."

At the phrase, "quiet ride in the country," his face had revealed something that I didn't like, so I asked him, "The raiders do not come this far west then?"

"My lord, there is nothing of that here. The Prince of Sabbia keeps things well in hand."

I was still getting nothing like the truth so I said, "We are three days ride from the castle to Sabbia. Prince Deke never ventures too far from Sabbia, I hear." Although there was agreement that Deke patrolled these lands, with Neko to the north, no one was quite sure he did it. The area remained quiet, with few raids, so we allowed

ourselves to believe that the hillmen held our left flank.

The captain seemed to believe this fact himself. "The raiders fear him enough to keep a wide furrow between them and him," he reassured me.

That at least was true, but things were not yet ringing right. "The raiders fear very little now. They attacked the King half a day's ride from the castle. If they are to fear anyone, they ought to fear the King."

The captain looked embarrassed. He could hardly say that the raiders would not be more afraid of a garrisoned castle than they were of a tribe of hillmen, no matter how fierce. So his next sally would have to aim a little closer to the truth.

"The fact is that Prince Nikoleaf took all the veteran troops to be had to defend the Oracle. This lot was all that was left," he admitted.

I laughed, saying, "That is what I thought all along. Something in your face told me that there was more to tell than a training exercise for green troops. Now I have almost the full story, I think."

Having parted with this much of the truth, he decided to let the rest out. "The fact is that there have been some reports of wildmen this far west: not in any great number. We are to scout them out if there is time. Report any sign

that we run across. And check the villages for rumor of them. The Prince did say that we were not to engage them to the point of getting ourselves, or you, killed. He seems to think that you are quite an important fellow. We are only to find out if danger lies this way and speed you along by the quickest possible route. That is all."

I told him, "Rumors have been a plague on the house of Thalia this summer. I'm sure we'll find more of them as we go."

I saw that he wore the device of Michael the Traveler on his shield. It was a huge bear with a garland of wildflowers around its neck that legend said had been woven for him by his lady Alyssa.

"Maybe we should appeal to your god to aid us on our journey."

He laughed, and said, "That inscrutable god will do as he wishes. I respect his ways and hope that maybe, if his sees his mark, he'll be kind to an old soldier defending his homeland."

"Better then to wear the device of his lady love, Alyssa the Gardner. He goes to the ends of the earth to defend her."

"He goes to the ends of the earth to see what is there," Baily replied dryly. "Some of the other men wear

the Mark of the Lady. We are well covered. If the gods are anywhere about they will know that we are here."

A soldier rode up to us, saluted the captain and said excitedly, "Sir, we found some sign ahead on the trail. It looks as if the barefoot feet of many men crossed through here not long ago."

"Barefoot feet?" he said disgustedly to the soldier. "Is that what you really want to say, Cotterman? Wouldn't it be better to say unshod feet of many men? That at least makes sense."

The soldier looked confused and then amended his report: "Sir, it seems that many men crossed the trail up ahead who had nothing of their feet."

"Better, but not quite," the captain told him. "The point is son, if you are going to report to an officer, do it calmly and say what you mean."

The soldier sat up a little straighter in the saddle, but he didn't look any less nervous. He pointed up the trail and said, "Sir, however you like it said, there is possibly trouble up the road."

"Good, Lord Magistrate, would you like to see these barefoot feet that this man is so excited about?"

I laughed and said, "Certainly, lead on Captain."

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***[END OF 5<sup>th</sup> INSTALLMENT...]***