

Chapter 3

“What do you think, Mikus?” said a tall knight who wore a golden tunic with the symbol of four horseshoes that faced out from each other with a broken hand symbol in the middle. His hair was gray at the temples and thin on top and his steady blue eyes gazed at a younger man dressed in a plain tunic that bore the four horseshoe symbol but was empty in the middle. The older knight sat in a high backed leather chair behind a large oak desk clear of papers, although an inkwell and feather pen rested on it. The room contained a number of hunting trophies on the walls and a heavy carpet, both thick and lush, covered the floor.

“Everyone saw him come into town with the brewer boy this morning and he was talking with the blacksmith’s daughters. Nobody knows much about him yet but he’s going to have to come here eventually, dad,” said the young man who fingered a slim sword scabbarded at his side.

“The symbol on his cloak, some kind of plant, what’s that all about?” said the man.

The boy shrugged. “I don’t know dad. Why don’t you send for him?”

“Let him come to me,” said the man and pursed his lips. “There is something strange going on for a fellow like that to just show up in Black Dale. We’ll have the First Rider breathing down our necks soon enough and that sanctimonious Coppercoin never liked me, not since we took the challenge together that one year.”

“He’s always been nice to me, dad,” said the boy as his face broke into a small smile.

“That’s because he knows it will make me angry, Mikus,” said the man. “Mark my words, son, mark my words. That stranger brings trouble to Elakargul and trouble to me. The faster we can get rid of him the faster we get back to our way of life.”

Just then the outer door of the chamber opened and a plain looking woman with dark eyes peeked her head inside. “Sir Thorius, there is a young man here to see you.”

“Thank you, Servellia, you can show him in,” said the older man and then made a motion with his hand to Mikus. “Sit down there and pay close attention to everything he says. I want to make sure I remember every word in case we can use it against him later.”

“But, dad,” started Mikus but was cut off from further discussion by a hard glance from his father.

A moment later Jon Gray strode into the room, a huge smile on his face and he nodded his head to the man behind the desk. “I’m Jon Gray from Tanelorn, my father is the Gray Lord and I’m here to discuss a matter of great importance to both our nations!”

Thorius looked at him coldly and shook his head sadly, “I have never heard of this Tanelorn or this Gray Lord of yours, how can I be expected to treat you as an ambassador if I do not even know the nation you represent?”

"I have papers," said Jon, taking a step back, and rummaging around inside his gray jerkin.

"What on earth could papers mean to me?" said Thorius, "If I have never heard of this Tantalorn? You could have written anything about anyone. How would I know the difference? I'm sorry young man, you have come a long way for no reason. I offer you the hospitality of Black Dale for as long you would like, but that is all that I can give."

"But," said Jon, his smile fading for the first time, "you don't understand, Sir Thorius."

"I understand all too well young man," replied the knight with a slight smile on his face and again a sad little shake of his head. "You hoped to create some sort of stir, bilk some money, or run some sort of a scam on the people of my little town. Well, it won't work, not while I'm on watch. So, you might as well take your little confidence game somewhere outside of Elekargul. We are not a nation of people to be fooled easily."

"But," said Jon opening his hands to face up and spreading his arms.

"No buts," interrupted Sir Thorius. "If you don't leave my office immediately I'll send for some knights. You can stay in town for a few days but if I hear word you are trying to spread any of this Tantalorn nonsense then I'll have to do something about it. Do I make myself clear?"

"I ... yes. I understand," said Jon and stood to his full height. A look of calm replaced the anger that had threatened to burst through. "Thank you for your time today." With that the tall young man turned and strode out of the room, his fury only barely in check. Once out into the street he managed to stifle the scream that rose in his throat but his fists clenched at his side and his jaw was tight. "Damn that bastard," he said to himself and stood there for a long moment as walkers by stopped to gawk at the stranger for a moment before they continued on their way. It took him a little while to remember that the mason supposedly knew the First Rider but in his anger he couldn't remember exactly where he was supposed to go. "And damn if I'll ask any of these miserable people," he muttered to himself.

It took him half an hour as he wandered around the small village and stewed noticing almost nothing about town before he found himself in front of the building that seemed to fit the bill. There was a placard out front which Jon couldn't read completely but the squat stone structure and the large number of half cut and uncut stones that lay in the yard served to make it clear what kind of place it was. Jon walked around to the back and spotted an immensely fat man with a chisel in one hand and a hammer in the other at work on what was clearly a statue of an orc with a long spear. Jon moved closer and was surprised at the detail of the work even in this half-finished condition. The man who worked on it sweated profusely and, when he pulled a rag from his back pocket to mop up the overflow, noted Jon for the first time.

"Ho there, stranger," he said with a jolly laugh. "You're a tall one but not as big around as old Odellius Buffalorider!" he said and patted his immense stomach. While the man was quite fat he was also tremendously broad with thick shoulders far wider than Jon's own and the muscles beneath the layers of fat in his arms were pronounced and clearly powerful.

“Pleased to meet you Odellius,” said Jon. “My name is Jon and the brewer suggested I might come talk to you.”

“Hang on now a minute there, sonny,” said the giant man and wiped more of the sweat from his brow. “Let’s take a canter over to the well and get some fluids in me. I’m leaking like a two bit orc whore who sees a rich old client.”

Jon shook his head for a moment, not sure he heard correctly, and then laughed out loud. “Anybody ever mention that you have a way with words?” he asked as he walked with the man over to the well. The mason cranked the lever with power and a gusher of water soon emerged with which he filled with a big tin cup and poured over his head. The big man repeated this process two more times and then drank two full tins with huge gulps.

“Ahh, that hits the spot. Now, where did you say you were from my little friend?”

“Tanelorn, have you heard of it?”

“The gray lands!” said Odellius. “Of course I’ve heard of it. You’re a free people just like us. No slaves, no master, each man to make his own way. There’s Caparal on the Western Ocean too but not many other free people in the world. I’ve heard tell of the Gray Lord even this far south and I’ve been to Doria and met with captains of trading vessels who tell tall tales. I know about the sea king of Cawl as well. You’re a long way from home lad.”

Jon shook his head in astonishment, “That’s all exactly right Odellius. The mayor said he’d never heard of Tanelorn, that I should get out of town.”

“Ah, yes, he’s an old Brokenhand he is,” said Odellius. “You best lay a bit low,” he continued and then looked over the seven foot tall boy and smiled with a shake of his head. “Yes, well, you won’t much be able to manage that any better than I then, will you?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Jon.

“Well, no matter, just try to stay out of trouble and the old guard can’t do much to you. We’re a free people here in Elekargul, freeriders some call us,” said the big man and offered up another cup full of water to Jon who took it, drank half and poured the rest over his head. “So, what do you think of Brutus there?”

It took the young gray knight a moment to realize the older man spoke of the sculpture in the yard, but once it sunk in, he smiled, “I like it,” said Jon with a smile. “The detail work is very nice; you must have been sculpting for many years to be so skilled?”

Odellius laughed and his massive belly jiggled about wildly, “No, no, believe it or not, fifty-five years old, a knight of Elekargul for thirty-seven of them and this is my first twelve month as a mason. The First Rider, damn him the little shrimp, said I was getting too fat to ride into battle and thought a good outdoorsy type job might thin me down a tad.”

“How long have you been sculpting then?” said Jon as he walked back towards the piece and gave it a careful look. There were half a dozen more statues in the yard of various form but they all looked to be by the same hand.

“This is my third month of the twelve,” said Odellius and stood up tall but still a full foot or shorter than Jon. His chest filled with pride and the barrel was massive and clearly contained a huge amount of muscle under the layers of fat. “I started off a bit slow but I’m getting the hang of it. A well rounded knight is a good knight is the motto of Elekargul. You should have seen me when I was tailoring. The thread and needle aren’t made for ham hocks like these,” he said and grabbed Jon by the shoulder and gave the boy a squeeze like none he ever felt before.

It took all Jon’s willpower to keep a cry of pain from his mouth but he managed to contain himself and smiled at Odellius as his eyes almost burst out of their sockets. “You’ve done amazingly well, Odellius, what was the surname again?”

“Buffalorider,” said the big man and turned back to the stonework. “I’m going to give this another hour but then you meet me in the yard and we’ll have a tussle with the sticks. I can’t judge a man proper until I’ve battled him. Meantime you get on over to the Temple of the Black Horse and see if Sir Kentstus can set you up with a place to stay while you’re in town. I think the First Rider will be wanting to talk to you and you might as well stay here as go anywhere else. He could be riding anywhere on patrol but he’ll likely come by here to pay his respects to me and make sure I’m exercising properly.”

“There isn’t an inn in this town?” said Jon and looked around.

“You won’t find many of those in all of Elekargul. It’s considered inhospitable to have a stranger in town and not put him up. You might want to learn a little of our ways as well or you’ll be getting yourself in trouble,” said Odellius, smacking Jon on the back. The boy staggered forward a few steps.

“How’s that,” said Jon when he got his breath back.

“Don’t go admiring anyone else’s things,” said Odellius. “Here in Elekargul if a man needs something another man has, he just asks for it. He’s expected to give something of equal value in return naturally. We don’t tender coin for the most part although it comes in handy at times for dealing with outsiders. If you see something needing done then just go about doing it.”

“That’s an odd system. How do you get food, supplies?”

“You go to the shop you want and take what you need but bring something they can use. If you need a coil of rope take it but bring in hemp so they can make more or a few fish you caught out of the river so they can have lunch. That’s pretty much the way it is here in Elekargul,” said Odellius and nodded his head. “Most strangers don’t much ken to it but those of us that live here seem to like it just fine.”

“I can see how a stranger might well get himself in trouble. The mayor didn’t give me any advice on that but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Jon with a shake of his head. “What could the mayor have

against me when I only just got into town?" but his words went unheard as Odellius was already back at work with his chisel at the big stone in the yard.

It took Jon only five minutes to find the temple of the Black Horse, the giant placard of the rearing black horse being a dead giveaway, and shortly after that spoke with Sir Kentstus, a thin man with decidedly hawkish features that spoke of goblin blood in his veins.

"So you need a place to stay for a bit then, Sir Jon," said the man scratching his chin. "I'd probably better ask someone without any impressionable daughters or there's likely to be trouble," he said with a wink to the handsome boy.

"I can keep myself in hand," said Jon with a smile.

"Don't be so sure, young man," said the middle-aged knight with a shake of his head. "We teach our girls to take what they want just like a man. The only thing they can't be is a knight unless they got the purple face disease as a girl and can't bear any children. Any girl named Speed is as likely to saddle up on a big handsome fellow like you as not. We better put you with boys. You seem the heroic type, might inspire a few of the lads."

"I've already met Sorus Brewer," said Jon with a helpful smile. "He and I hit it off pretty well. Does he have a place in town?"

"Right he does," said Kentstus with a smile. "He's a big lad too, with dreams of glory. You might well be a good influence on him. He lives on the south side of town in a little house painted red. You tell him I said it was fine to stay there while you're in town. Any idea how long you'll be here? No one will say anything, but you can wear out your welcome if you stay too long. Has anyone explained our rather unique economic system to you yet?"

"Sir Odellius gave me a good lecture on it," said Jon, "and I'll try to be careful not to offend anyone."

"He's a good man that one is," said Kentstus. "A lot of those Buffaloriders are a bit too free spirited for my tastes. I'm an Openpalm myself but Odellius is a fine man and he's fought in many a battle over the years."

"How does one become a Buffalorider?"

"You just choose the name that seems most appropriate when you gain knighthood," said Kentstus with a shrug. "I think Odellius chose pretty well but he'd have been a fine Brokenhand. Too many of the boys who want to be heroes but don't have the right stuff take the name Brokenhand these days. It used to mean something when I was a lad but not anymore. A crying shame. Brutus Brokenhand will be spinning in the grave no doubt."

"I'd like to talk with you further about Elekargul, its religion, its founding, but Odellius wanted to meet me in the yard for something about the sticks, and I've got to find my horse and get things unpacked or I'll be late."

“Going into the yard with Odellius then are you,” laughed Kentstus and took a step back to size him up. “You might just be big enough to get a win but ... well, that’ll be something to see. I’m sure you’ll draw quite a crowd and I have to say I’m interested in seeing it myself. Until then, sir.”

Jon gave a little bow, “Until then.” The gray knight then walked back outside and gave a long whistle although it was several minutes before his horse found him. They made their way to the house with the red door, managed to unpack in fairly short order, and then wandered about to find the yard. It didn’t take too long as there was a crowd already gathered in a large open yard where a number of wooden swords and helmets lay in orderly rows.

The cry of, “There he is,” sounded at about the same time as he spotted his destination. It was clear he was expected. “I’ll have to go easy on the old tub,” thought Jon to himself as he approached the throng. The people of Elekargul might think Odellius a great warrior but compared to the finest Tanelorn had to offer Jon didn’t think he’d have much trouble with an overweight fifty-five year old man.

There were several hundred people gathered at the yard and that number included the rotund knight. As Jon approached a couple of young men pulled on heavy leather breastplates, slapped iron helmets on their heads, took long practice swords from the pile, and walked out into the middle of the yard. They nodded at one another and a shout from a thin man at the edge of the pitch, “Go!” sent them to it. They began to spar at first cautiously and then with heavy strokes. Eventually one of the boys managed to catch the other a strong blow to the side of the head and the second went down in a heap to the applause of the spectators.

The fallen boy shook his head a few times and took the hand of the first boy to stand. “Another go?” asked the victor with a smile on his face but the second boy’s face remained a little dazed from the blow and he shook his head. “Give me a minute or two,” he finally said as they made their way over to a set of benches where a number of other potential combatants awaited.

Odellius stood up, his massive bulk making him rock from side to side as he walked, moved quickly to Jon and clapped him on the shoulder. “Shall we have a tussle?”

Jon smiled broadly, walked over to the pile of wooden swords, and found a thick specimen that was almost the longest in the pile. Next he examined the hide breastplates and found one, that if adjusted wouldn’t be too tight, and then put on an old iron helmet that was lined with sweat stained leather and stank of too many uses without a good scrub. “Let’s go!”

By now the crowd swelled to more than three hundred spectators, as the entire village seemed to have flocked to the scene. Among those who watched was the young son of the mayor, Mikus Swift, although his father was nowhere around.

Jon watched as Odellius went through the equipment and found a massive leather breastplate that he loosened to the end of its strap, a bowl like iron helmet that still barely fit over the man’s giant head, and then, strangely, a very short and small wooden sword more suitable for a young boy than a man of his immense size and strength.

The two large men, one tall and the other extremely broad, made their way out to the center of the pitch and nodded heads. The same "Go!" came from the sideline and Odellius launched himself at the taller boy with a speed that belied his immense girth. Soon the two fought in close quarters and Jon found his lengthy wooden sword completely incapable of a powerful strike against the close in opponent. He tried to get away from the massive man, but Odellius stayed with him as his little sword ripped around the big man's body with tremendous rapidity and slammed into Jon's side with wind smashing blows. In a matter of only a few seconds Jon found himself backed towards a patch of dirt that was a slightly different shade than the rest of the pitch, and when his foot hit the area Odellius shifted suddenly and pushed Jon into the looser ground. Jon's foot slid in loose dirt just as the big man's belly hit him in the waist, a fast blow caught him high in the shoulder, his knees buckled, and he tumbled to the ground to a huge round of applause from the crowd.

Jon shook his head and looked up into the sun to see Odellius bending over him, his hand held out, "Another go?"

Jon nodded his head and let Odellius pull him to his feet.

The two stood face to face in the central yard again and Jon balanced on his toes and waited for the word from the starter. When it came he immediately dodged to the side but this time Odellius kept at a distance and slowly circled in a manner that forced Jon towards the loose ground. Aware of the danger, Jon lashed out with his superior reach to strike home blow after blow against the midsection of his foe but Odellius didn't even seem to notice the swats that would have sent most men to the ground with a cry of agony.

"His skin must be thick as an elephant," thought Jon to himself and tried to move in, only to have Odellius charge forward quickly and land several lightning fast shots that almost sent Jon over backwards. Jon used his huge stride to back away from the massive man whose forehead was covered with sweat and whose mouth hung open as he tried to suck in more oxygen. Jon realized this was the way to beat the behemoth, keep out of range, strike, and force a chase. Eventually the big man would go down and Jon smiled in triumph. As he carried out this strategy he became aware of the crowd's shouts for the first time.

"Look at the tall one run," shouted a boyish voice, followed immediately by another cutting comment, "Fight like a man, Julia," it came and hurt him deeply. He took a moment to look at the spectators and spotted the sisters, Rhia and Shia and their look of acute disappointment hit him like one of Odellius's strikes.

Jon looked at Odellius, who now breathed like a horse after a long run, and suddenly decided on a change of tactics. He charged forward, let his wooden sword drop to the ground, drove his shoulder into the midsection of the man, wrapped his long arms around him, and tried to throw him off balance. For the briefest of instants the fat mason seemed to slide off his feet and Jon had him all but tipped over, but then Odellius shifted his weight forward and Jon felt his knees buckle. The gray knight went to one knee and, with a tremendous effort that turned his biceps into massive balls, drove forward, and lifted Odellius to his toes and then a few inches into the air. At the last moment the big man used his little

wooden sword to smack Jon on the side of the leg and Jon felt all this strength suddenly leave him. He collapsed to the ground as the big man stumbled and dodged to the side to avoid smashing him.

Jon rolled on his back and looked up at Odellius whose face was red with exertion and whose hand was out in an offer to help him up. It was only when he took the hand that he heard the eruption of screams and cheers that came from every member of the crowd. Jon walked off the pitch his arm around Odellius as everyone continued to applaud. They walked to a wooden bench and collapsed on it together, the thing creaking ominously beneath their weight. A young boy, not more than seven or eight, rushed over with a huge mug of frothy beer that he handed to Odellius and another boy, whom Jon vaguely recognized as Sorus Brewer, handed him a smaller mug filled with water. Odellius tilted back and drank with one huge pass, then pulled off his helmet to reveal wet and sweaty hair.

“Well fought, Jon Gray,” he said with a nod of his head. “I never thought I’d know what it feels like to fly but I was like a bird there for a moment!”

The people nearby broke into laughter, whispering back to those further away the words of the immense mason; laughter began to break out all over the little pitch. Jon stripped off his own iron helmet revealing his shock of sandy blonde hair and began to pull off his jerkin as a dozen young hands immediately reached in to help him.

Mikus Swift ran quickly back to the manor house his feet covering the distance quickly. He burst in the front door of the home, slammed it, and dashed to the large office where his father awaited his report. The man sat behind his large desk and drummed his fingers on the surface. “Well?” he said, his eyebrows arched.

“Odellius beat him, dad,” said Mikus, and Thorius smiled broadly as he eased back in his chair.

“So the young warrior from Tanelorn was humiliated?” he asked and Mikus hesitated for a moment, his face turned down towards the wooden slats of the floor. “Well?” repeated Thorius as his eyebrows came together. “The boy was thrashed, yes?”

Mikus nodded his head. “Twice straight.”

“And this Jon Gray did he take defeat poorly, whine and complain?” said Thorius and sat up in his chair and eyed his son closely. “Tell me what happened, boy!”

“It was a fair fight and ... and ...,” the story tailed off into silence.

“And,” said Thorius who stood and came around the table to hover over his teen son. “What happened?”

“Jon Gray tried to wrestle Odellius down,” said Mikus suddenly in a burst as his eyes shone brightly. “He had him for a second too, had him lifted up, but then Odellius knocked his leg out and he fell!”

“In the air?” said Thorius as he turned and sat on the edge of the desk. “Odellius?”

Mikus nodded, "He almost had him!"

"I suppose the crowd thought that it a noble effort," said the man as his shoulders slumped.

"They went crazy, dad," said Mikus. "Maybe you're wrong about Jon Gray. He seems like a pretty nice guy."

"I'm not wrong," insisted Thorius and shook his head sadly. "You remember that. No matter what happens from here on out that boy will bring trouble to Elekargul. Any sort of alliance with Tanelorn will bring down dangerous foes upon us."

"We're knights of Elekargul," said Mikus, standing tall, his eyes shining with passion. "It doesn't matter what danger comes against us. We'll fight it and defeat it!"

"You're not a knight of anything, squire," said Thorius. "But the chance to defeat the boy early is clearly finished. I must muse upon a new plan. Get out of here, Mikus. Go practice in the yard, your sword skills lag behind other boys your age."

"Yes, father," said Mikus and turned around and left the old knight by himself.

"If anyone is going to be a hero it's not going to be some trumped up teenager with delusions of grandeur," he said to himself, and then returned to the desk and looked at its empty surface for a long time.

