

## Chapter 2

Jerichi scratched his neck beneath the heavy wool collar that topped his formal suit and grimaced, "I hate this thing."

"You think you've got it bad?" said Silenia who wobbled along next to him with heeled shoes that made her already gangly frame even more so. She looked down at her friend and made a gargling sound, "I won't be able to walk for days after wearing these. I'll have to spend a week in your library, oh darn."

"It makes my neck itch," repeated the young man, still tugging at his collar as he walked along with her. "And these shoes pinch my toes."

The two emerged into a large corridor where a massive set of wooden doors was emblazoned with the anchor symbol that was everywhere in the newly built palace. A guardsman, wearing impressive blue armor with a huge green helm shaped like a dolphin, snapped to attention and pulled open the door. Another man, this one wearing a funny little outfit with a large collar and bulbous white billowing sleeves looked up and announced, "Prince Jerichi Aranasti and Lady Silenia of Serapis."

Silenia rolled her eyes, shook her head, and whispered to her companion, "Come on, Jerichi. Let's go in and meet this ambassador, the sooner we get done the better. I've done it before a hundred times. I'm sure he's some fat, pompous know-it-all who thinks his kingdom ..." her voice suddenly trailed into silence and she stopped moving forward at the entranceway to the dining hall.

Jerichi looked at her and saw that her mouth was hanging open and her eyes were focused across the room to the head of the table. He turned his own gaze that way and saw first Granatz, at the center of the table in his customary black, and then Lady Sharwene laughing gaily at the some joke told by a young man with long, slightly curly, brown hair, sparkling gray eyes, broad shoulders, and perfect features. Next to him sat a smaller stranger with dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and beard.

The bigger fellow, who looked no more than nineteen or twenty, wore a gray cloak with the symbols of four horseshoes facing out and some sort of plant sprig in the middle. The younger man wore a yellow jerkin with the same horseshoe symbols but a crescent moon in the center.

"Good of you to join us," said Granatz looking up at the duo with a frown. "Not more than ten minutes late and looking like most of the mud was scrubbed clean."

Silenia blushed and looked down while Jerichi scrunched up his face as if eating a particularly tart lemon. The two walked forward, both gazing at the newcomers.

"You're looking so handsome," said Sharwene dragging her eyes away from the impossibly good-looking fellow at her side and towards the young prince. She stood, came around to the front of the table, and smiled warmly at the girl. "You are just an angel. I'm Sharwene. That scary fellow at the center of the

table is Granatz the Black, my brother Glengarias is the one with the eye patch, and our visitors are Ambassador Gray and Sir Nightwalk.”

“Please, call me Jon,” said the gray-cloaked man with a funny accent and smiled at the attractive woman with such genuine happiness that everyone else in the room, except Jerichi, did as well.

“Oh,” gasped Silenia next to Jerichi, and the prince turned to look at the girl with a deep frown on his face.

“You’ve learned our language in short order, Jon,” said Glengarias who sat next to the regent and was dressed in naval gear with massive epaulettes on his shoulders.

“It wasn’t as short as you would imagine,” said the young man and smiled with that infectious grin again. “We spent the last few months aboard a sailing ship that hails from Sea’cra, and if I wanted to get a decent meal I had to ask the cook nicely. Still, I appreciate the compliment. I’ve learned several languages recently and once you get the hang of one of them they all have common elements.”

Everyone laughed at the seemingly unfunny remark and Jerichi felt a burning fire in the pit of his stomach as he watched both Silenia and Sharwene laugh loudly.

Jerichi quickly began walking over to the head of the table across from those seated there and somehow his little ceremonial dagger found its way from the scabbard at his side and into his hand. “I’ll scare the big oaf,” he muttered to himself although he didn’t really understand why he felt such anger towards the man dressed in gray.

In a moment Jerichi stood in front of the broad shouldered stranger and glared at him with fury in his eyes. The ambassador smiled brightly his big gray eyes apparently taking in everything, “The young prince I understand?” he said and reached forward with a hand.

Jerichi feigned reaching for a handshake himself but then lunged forward with the knife in a jabbing motion. In an instant a massive hand clamped his wrist in an impossibly strong grip that felt as if he was stuck between two massive rocks. He felt his arm pulled up and then with a dashing motion slammed into the table. His fingers let go of the blade which clicked once on the stone table only to be snatched by the handsome boy with his other hand and pointed directly at Jerichi’s eye. The young prince tried to pull back but the fist that held him was as unyielding as the relentless crash of waves upon the shore.

“Don’t over-extend your thrust,” said Jon, with that strange accent of his and a cool, calm expression on his face while his stared intently with penetrating eyes. “You leave yourself open to counterattack.”

Jerichi looked over to Glengarias but the elf simply shrugged his shoulders, “I’ve told you the same thing a thousand times.”

Then the pressure was gone and Jerichi stumbled back a step.

“But don’t feel bad,” said Jon reaching forward with long arms and tussling his hair. “You might find this hard to believe, but there are those who claim I often make the same mistake!” Then he winked at

Jerichi smiling so broadly and laughing so deeply that everyone in the room, including Jerichi, began to laugh as well. He put the dagger down with the hilt facing Jerichi and winked at the boy.

"I'm Silenia," said Silenia blushing furiously, looking down, and suddenly appearing at Jerichi's side.

"It's quite nice to make your acquaintance, milady," said Jon somehow managing to bow a little even from his seated position. "I trust you don't carry a dagger beneath your lovely dress?"

Silenia blushed even more brightly red and opened her mouth to say something but only little gasping breaths emerged.

"I'm told your people are from the swamplands?" prodded Jon.

Silenia nodded her head and continued to blush.

"Wizards of a sort?" said Jon.

Silenia suddenly smiled, "Oh yes, and I can cast spells myself. Everyone says I'm the finest young witch of all the girls and most of the boys too."

"My brother Valari is a wizard," said Jon, nodding his head.

"That's it!" exclaimed Glengarias suddenly snapping his fingers. "The Gray Druid, Valarious Gray!"

"Perhaps we should start dinner," said Granatz interrupting from the chair at the center of the table.

"Jerichi, Silenia, would you care to sit," he continued and pointed to a pair of seats off to the side of the main table.

The two children immediately walked over to their assigned position and sat down quickly, unable to tear their gaze away from Jon.

"So, Jon," said Glengarias. "What brings you to Cawl?"

"I came to see the king," replied Jon as the food began to arrive at the table on elegant silver trays carried by teenage boys and girls dressed mostly in green and blue. "We," he pointed with a fork to the second man at the table, "are here on a mission from my father, the Gray Lord."

"I'm afraid the king is away on an extended journey," said Glengarias. "As admiral of the fleet I am in charge of all naval operations and Granatz the Black is the regent. My sister," with a nod of his head towards the delicately-featured elf woman sitting next to Jon, "is in charge of military affairs. Anything you might have proposed to the king you can tell us freely enough."

Jon nodded his head and smiled broadly at the pretty elf woman. She wore a light leather jerkin that hinted at a delicate figure and her blue eyes watched the newcomer closely. "Very well," he said. "Sir Sorus and I were contacted by my brother Valari while we traveled up the coast from Tarlton."

“The City in the Sand?” said Granatz casually while moving the food around on his plate with a fork. “My understanding was that they were ruled by desert warriors and not such as you.”

“My apologies, Regent,” said Jon. “My father rules a small nation to the west of here, near the center of the continent, called Tanelorn. I was in the southlands in a nation called Elekargul on other business and returning from there when I got the message from my brother.”

“I’ve never heard of Elekargul,” said Sharwene a little smile on her face. “Where is it?”

“It is on the Dorian peninsula,” replied Jon. “Sorus is from there and I’m sure he can tell more about the region than I.”

“I’ve heard of Doria!” blurted out Silenia the soup in her bowl untouched and her silverware still neatly lined up in its starting position. “They have Spider Wizards who spin their own silk and eat their young!” Then she covered her mouth with her hand and stared down at her plate, her entire body slightly trembling.

“You can’t believe everything you hear,” said Jon with a smile at the girl. “I didn’t see anything like that in Doria although I’ve heard that story just about everywhere I’ve been. Sorus, you used to believe that as well, if I remember correctly. At least you believed as much until we got to the city on our return journey.”

Sorus nodded his head and smiled, although not as broadly as his companion. “Jon’s right,” said the bearded young man in an accent even more atrocious than Jon’s. “That’s something I don’t say all too often,” he said and Jon guffawed loudly. “I was a naïve young lad in those days only a few years older than Prince Jerichi.”

“How old are you?” said the prince looking up from his already half-finished bowl of soup.

“I’m probably close to seventeen,” said Sorus, “and Jon is eighteen perhaps even nineteen by now. It’s been a long journey and it’s not always so easy to keep track of time when you pass back and forth over the equator.”

“I’m eleven,” said Jerichi and sat up straight in his chair. “I think.”

Granatz, Sharwene, and Glengarias all looked back and forth at one another with quick glances although none of the three said anything.

“You think?” said Jon breaking the momentary silence, tilting his head slightly to the side with that irrepressible grin on his face.

“My father, King Cawl, found me on an island. I don’t really remember much. I was little. Anyway, it’s been five years since then. So I guess I’m about eleven.”

Jon nodded his head, “That sounds like an interesting story.”

“For another time,” interrupted Granatz in a firm voice. “You were telling us why you’re here?”

“Of course,” said Jon shoveling a spoon into his mouth and gulping down the broth. The soup was plain and consisted of a thick broth with a distinctive fishy flavor. “We were returning from the southlands when my brother contacted me via magical means. When we arrived in Sea’cra he told us to visit this island and seek an alliance with King Cawl. You’ve recently gained independence from the Merchant Executors, I gather. When last in the region I knew there was some sort of conflict between you two, but I have been gone for well over a year.”

“We did,” said Glengarias. “King Cawl led our navies to victory and independence about nine months ago. But, your Tanelorn seems a great distance from this nation and I’m not sure what sort of alliance our two countries could form.”

“Nor do I,” said Jon with a shrug as he managed to take in several more huge gulps of the delicious soup. “My father seeks alliances with freedom loving people. That was one of the purposes of my visit to Elekargul, although those two nations are even further apart than Tanelorn and Cawl. I’ve had some similar success in Doria and with the nomads of Tarlton. Your newly formed nation is named after the king I gather?”

“Yes, a mistake as I see it,” said Granatz shaking his head. “You can’t imagine the confusion it causes when trying to have a simple conversation with the king.” Everyone laughed at this although Glengarias watched the newcomer closely. “You said the alliance with Elekargul was one purpose of your visit to that kingdom?”

Jon looked over at Sorus and thought about the Staff of Sakatha securely hidden in their gear. “Yes. There was another matter that I’m not at liberty to discuss.”

“Is there another matter also involved in your visit to us?” continued Glengarias, leaning forward in his seat and fixing his intense blue eye on Jon.

Jon paused and then nodded his head, “Yes. I’ve only limited information from my brother you must understand. I probably cannot provide you with the details you require.”

“Go on,” said the admiral.

“There is a worship that I’ve found in many places.”

“A religious matter then,” said Sharwene.

“Perhaps,” replied Jon. “This worship seems to have common elements but different names. The Sword of Water, The Single Sword, The One Sword, and other names as well. Many races worship it. They think of it as a God of sorts.”

Granatz looked at Glengarias and Sharwene but both of the elf warriors shook their heads.

“Fell Flume, he means,” suddenly interjected Silenia with her little voice. Her eyes were bright and her auburn hair already was beginning to unravel from its tidy bun.

“Of course,” said Glengarias and slapped his forehead with his hand. “Fell Flume! There are many such legends on this island about that blade. To Silenia’s people, the swamp dwellers of Serapis, it is one of their chief deities along with Snake Fang.”

“Not really,” said Silenia quietly and with a large smile on her face. “I mean,” here her face seemed to brighten like the reflection of the risen sun on a high mountain lake, “we don’t worship it as a god. It was a weapon wielded by a god, Helkus the Warrior of Water. We worship him. It was given to him by his mother Silenia, that’s who I’m named after,” said the girl and started to look down but managed to keep her gaze on Jon with a concerted effort.

“Tell me more,” said Jon leaning forward across the table and towards the girl although he did not neglect to keep his spoon moving as he shoveled the soup from bowl to mouth.

Silenia brightened even more and her brown eyes glowed in conjunction with her smile as she gazed at Jon, “Silenia was a water elemental. Hovslaag, the Blacksmith of the elementals, fell in love with her and he made her the water sword, Fell Flume. They got married and had a son, Helkus, and he wielded Fell Flume all his life and ascended into the heavens as a God! He lived right here on this island! It had a different name back then, I guess,” said the girl in a rush. “I’ve read lots about him in the libraries. I like to read.”

“What happened to the sword?” asked Jon, his spoon hovering poised by his mouth, as a piece of fish fell to the plate below.

Silenia blinked her eyes rapidly and then looked down at her plate, “I guess Helkus took it to the heavens with him, I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“The legends don’t say?” persisted Jon.

“I don’t know,” said Silenia in almost a whisper. “If we went to Serapis and talked with some of the priests they might know more. I’m sorry,” with this last she almost sobbed and her shoulders shook.

Jon boomed out a laugh, “You did just fine! Thank you, Silenia the Younger.”

The girl suddenly flushed bright red but couldn’t repress the big smile that sprang to her face although she eventually covered her mouth with her hand.

“So it’s Fell Flume then,” said Glengarias leaning back in his chair and nodding his head. “A relic from ancient times. I remember the rumors now, The Gray Lord, your father, he collects such things.”

Jon leaned back in his own chair and smiled but not so broadly and nodded his head, “My father is somewhat ... unknowable,” he said. “But, yes, he is collecting relics from the Old Empire and beyond.”

“To what end?” said Granatz once again joining the conversation, his intense black eyes staring at the boy.

Jon shrugged and shook his head, “To keep people from using them,” he said after a long wait.

“Not for his own use?” said Granatz. “Such a collection of weapons would be formidable.”

“No,” said Jon firmly. “Not that. He’s sworn never to use them.”

“To destroy them then?” said Glengarias leaning on his elbows with his teeth and fists clenched.

“Those relics might be important again someday,” Sharwene said. “Destroying them would be a terrible mistake.”

“Not to destroy them,” said Jon. “Just to keep people from being influenced by their ... their ... evil.”

“And you father thinks he is immune to this influence?” said Granatz.

“I cannot speak for my father,” said Jon. “He is his own man and taught us to be the same.”

“Us?” said Jerichi breaking his silence as he stared at the man in gray.

“My brother Valari, my sister Jane, and me,” said Jon.

“You have a sister?” said Jerichi.

“My twin,” said Jon.

“Your mother must be a woman of great fortitude,” said Sharwene with her eyes running up and down the massive torso of the young warrior.

“She’s a tough one, my mother,” said Jon.

“Who’s older?” asked Silenia; with her own four siblings she knew the importance of this simple question. Jon’s face went stony for a moment and Silenia laughed, “I know who’s older!”

“She’ll be ruler of Tanelorn someday,” said Jon. “Which means I don’t have to be king, so that’s just fine.”

“Women can rule in Tanelorn?” said Sharwene, her delicate eyebrows raised high over her beautiful eyes.

“The capable can be rulers in Tanelorn,” said Jon. “Nothing else matters. Jane is capable. She’s better at leading than I am. I, sometimes, I don’t like to follow the rules,” this with a shrug and a grin. “Jane is good at that stuff and she’s a better soldier than me.”

Sorus snorted, “Jon, no girl could be a better soldier than you.”

Jon turned to Sorus and smiled while spreading his hands wide, “You haven’t met her yet.”

Sorus shook his head, “She’s a girl.”

Jon smiled and shook his own head in turn, “Well, one day you’ll meet her. If we live long enough, that is.”

“You won’t die!” said Silenia her eyes wide and suddenly misty.

“What makes you think Fell Flume is here on this island?” asked Glengarias steering the conversation back towards the ancient weapon.

Jon shrugged again, “I cannot answer that question. Valari sent me a message and here I am.”

Glengarias then looked towards to Silenia, “You remember nothing of the legends?”

The girl shook her head with a stiff little motion and her eyes opened widely, “I mostly ... just ... practice magic. Only men can be priests. My brothers might know more but ....”

Granatz gently prodded the girl, “But ...”

“My brothers, they don’t like me very much. They ... they can be mean. My mother, we have different mothers and mine died. I never knew her,” the girl’s eyes now began to water and she sniffled.

Jerichi watched her for a moment and then became aware of the intense gaze of Jon Gray upon him. He looked up the huge young man and Jon gave the slightest little nod with his head and flicker of his eyes towards Silenia and suddenly Jerichi knew what to do. He put his arm over her shoulder, “It’s ok, Silenia. You’re here now, with us, and I’ll take care of you.”

She looked up at Jerichi, smiled a little smile, and sniffled again.

“It’s good to have friends to take care of you, but it’s also important to learn to take care of yourself,” said Jon.

“Yes,” said Jerichi glancing at the tall young man and nodding his head vigorously. “Sometimes no one’s around to help you, you have to help yourself. That’s exactly what my father says to me.”

Silenia looked up at Jon with sadness in her teary eyes, “They’re all bigger than me, you ... you wouldn’t understand.”

“True enough,” said Jon with laugh that roared through the dining chamber like cool breeze through a stuffy house. “We all must find our own strengths, our own way in life. My father always tells me that I control my own destiny and I give you the same advice, Silenia of Serapis.”

“How can I stand up to my brothers and sisters when they all hate me? They gang up on me and my father lets them,” said the girl with her little fists clenched against her legs below the table.

Jon shook his head, “I can’t help you with that. You have to find your own way sometimes, as Jerichi said. His father sounds like a wise man,” he continued with a nod to the young prince.

“Jon, she’s eleven years old,” said Sorus putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You can’t expect her to behave like a grown woman. If it’s true what she says about her father, what can she do against that?”

"I can expect her to take control of her own destiny. Did you come with me to the Mountains of the Orc? Did you stand up to those Brokenshields at the mayor's house when they offered you forgiveness if you would betray me? How old were you then?"

Sorus shook his head, "I was sixteen and a boy," he replied. "She's just eleven and a girl."

"I can take care of myself," interrupted Silenia blinking her eyes rapidly. "You don't have to stick up for me!"

"That's the spirit," said Jon with a smile and Jerichi patted the girl on the back. "Better to learn now that life is unfair," said Jon. "There is no sense hiding the nature of the world from children. Silenia, your brothers and sisters will always hate you no matter what you do. Your father, I don't know him, but it sounds like he will never support you. Life is like that. I've had every advantage in the world and that's not fair either. Life is what you make. It's not handed to you by someone else, by the so-called gods, or anyone else."

"Jon," said Sorus with alarm in his voice.

"What?" said Jon. "You remember that little girl. Ariana, no older than Silenia and carrying the Black Sphere. She understood and so should Silenia."

"You say, 'so-called gods'," said Granatz leaning forward in his seat suddenly, his smoldering eyes glaring at Jon.

"Jon ...," repeated Sorus in a low tone. "We are guests here, on a mission, dependent on the goodwill of these people."

"I'll not hide my feelings. I owe it to Ariana, if she's still alive," said Jon.

Sorus shook his head, "Jon, you need to learn restraint."

Jon suddenly laughed out loud as everyone else watched the exchange in silence. The big young fellow laughed again and nodded his head, "Sorus does have a point."

"Perhaps we should get back to the subject at hand," said Granatz leaning back in his chair and using a mellow tone. "However, sometime in the future I would like to hear more about this girl, Ariana." He turned to Glengarias. "Did you have any questions for Jon?"

Glengarias swiveled in his seat and turned again to Jon. "I also am interested in the idea of 'so-called gods' but for now I would like to understand exactly what your brother communicated to you. He must have given you some reason he thinks Fell Flume is here, in Cawl, on this island."

Jon looked at the warrior and shook his head slowly back and forth. "Sorus doesn't know my sister and you don't know my brother. Valari is ... an unusual man. He's not like me, or Jane, or our parents. He was born almost a month early and with a deformed foot, but it's his mind that is strangest of all. He doesn't think the way I do, the way most people do, he says he sees behind the veil of the world."

“The veil of the world,” repeated Sharwene leaning forward, her mouth partially open and her eyes gleaming as they stared at Jon.

Granatz took the moment to sit up straight and fixed his gaze upon the boy.

Jon shrugged his shoulders, “You have to understand Valari. He thinks about everything, imagines every possible scenario, he ... he considers. He doesn’t speak in absolutes. It might be or the evidence suggests or a reasonable person might think. That’s his way of talking. It’s not easy to understand and you don’t even know what he really thinks even after he’s been talking for hours. And trust me, he can talk for hours. He tried to explain it to me, but that was years ago. I was young and didn’t care. I just wanted to learn how to fight. I guess in the end he always said that people see the world not for what it is but for what they want it to be. That he saw the real world, the world behind that veil.”

“The table is a table,” said Sharwene and pounded her fist into the stone table on which her plate rested. “What more is there than that?”

“I wish Valari was here,” said Jon with a shake of his head and a rueful little smile. “I don’t really think I ever understood what he was talking about but people, people don’t really see, they don’t hear, or taste, or touch, or smell things. Each sense is its own slow staccato and what we think is reality is merely our interpretation of that drum beat. I know, it doesn’t make much sense but that’s Valari for you.”

“People believe what they want to be true. The trick is to convince them that what you want is what they want,” said Silenia looking up through eyes red from the tears but now dry and clear.

“What was that?” said Sorus looking keenly at the girl as he turned his attention away from his hot-headed companion.

“That’s what my father says,” said Silenia her voice suddenly clear and strong. “That people are stupid. You just have to make them believe what you want to be true, is true. Then you can get them to do anything.”

“He is clever,” said Glengarias looking to Granatz while slowly nodding his head. “He is a manipulative ruler out for his own benefit, but he is quite intelligent. He would undo all that King Cawl accomplished these last five years just because it was not he who gained us our freedom from the Merchant Executors.”

“He wants to kill the king. He wanted all of us to spy on Jerichi!” interrupted Silenia. “He told us that things would change if I spied. That I’d be treated with respect and they would make a statue,” here she choked back a sob, “a statue to my mother. He was lying. He always lies. He’s so good at it, but I’ve learned. You can’t tell by his face or his eyes or his tone of voice. He can lie like your brother can talk,” she said to Jon waving her hand around and around. “But I know how to tell he’s lying now. It took me a long time but now I know!”

“How can you tell?” said Jerichi his eyes wide as he looked at the girl.

“Because he’s being nice,” said Silenia her eyes staring fixedly ahead, her lips pursed tightly, and her little fists clenched in front of her. “That’s when he’s lying.”

“There are many in the world filled with hate,” said Granatz to no one in particular.