

Chapter 1

Rhia closely watched the revelry with darting eyes as she took mental notes of the various party-goers and how they might be useful to her.

Thousands of people gathered at the wall of Tanelorn where a large podium stood especially erected for the ceremony. Nearby three recently emplaced sconces in the wall awaited the banners that newly enshrined Gray Knights would place there in honor of their pledge. Hundreds of tents and booths circled the podium and people drank, ate, and made merry in the darkness before the dawn.

"You're Rhia Buffalorider, aren't you?" said a voice at her side and she jumped and her eyes opened wide before she managed to gain control of herself.

Rhia looked down and spotted a young boy, perhaps eleven or twelve, with hair cropped so short that it was impossible to determine what color it was. He had a long blade at one side, a dagger at the other, wore a loose fitting, thick leather jerkin, long pants, and a pair of light moccasin style shoes. His face was smooth and almost beautiful, his complexion perfect.

"Who wants to know?" asked Rhia eyeing him carefully.

"I'm Mike," said the boy looking boldly back at her with a narrow stare. His eyes were a brilliant shade of green with little golden speckles. "You want to be a Gray Knight, right?"

"What's it to you?" said Rhia shrugging and turning her attention back to the crowd. It would be dawn soon and the ceremony would begin. A burst of girlish laughter came from behind a tent and seconds later the impossibly tall Jon Gray emerged with a young woman on each arm, a tumbler of beer in one hand, and a grin as big as the sun. It was but a twinkling of the eye before a dozen young men and women gathered around the little group while everyone else nearby looked on enviously.

Rhia turned, which put her back to the group, and also put the young boy behind her.

"You came with the circus, six months ago, right," persisted the young boy walking around to face her once again.

"Ok, fine, right," said Rhia looking at the little boy for a moment and shaking her head. "What about it?"

"I can help," said the boy smiling. It was a dazzling smile. All the teeth perfectly sized and lined up neatly.

"Help?" asked Rhia as she sized him up again. He had the look of an elf with all that beauty. Sort of girlish.

"Help being a Gray Knight. I work for Lofo Trul. He's a captain. I know that's what you want."

"You work for Lofo?" said Rhia, her eyes narrowing and looking at the young boy more closely. She knew of Lofo and understood he wielded a great deal of influence in Tanelorn. All her attempts to garner his attention over the last few months had so far utterly failed.

The boy nodded his head and smiled that dazzling smile.

"No really, do you know Lofo?" asked Rhia. "How old are you?"

"I'm fifteen," said the boy and put his hands on his hips. "I work for Lofo. We don't have time to mess about. Come with me if you want to be a Gray Knight." With that he walked off and eventually disappeared behind a large tent with red and white stripes that had the aroma of cooking meat.

Rhia watched him go, his frame was trim and lithe and he moved with grace. She shook her head and shrugged, "Why not?" It took her only a minute to chase after the boy and take up stride next to him.

They meandered through the crowd for about ten minutes before arriving at a large yellow tent where a large number of pies were on display although business seemed sparse. A pale girl with hollow eyes and scraggly red hair stood behind the counter not making any effort to attract customers.

"That's her," said the boy with a little nod of his head toward the red-head.

"Who is she?" said Rhia wrinkling her nose. The girl looked utterly washed out. No color. No life. No energy.

The young boy said, "Her name is Marianna. Her father died. Her mother took up with Pillswar. We're to gather evidence she is being abused and then rescue her."

"That's going to make me a Gray Knight?" said Rhia looking down at the boy. She was tall for a woman, a shade over six feet and the boy looked to be almost a foot shorter than she.

"It's doing work for Lofo," said the boy firmly his jaw jutting forward. "He is a captain; he can make us Gray Knights if we do enough work for him."

Rhia curled her lower lip under and nodded her head, "That makes sense. Why not just talk to her? She'll tell you if someone is hitting her. Who is this Pillswar guy? Why do we care?"

Mike looked toward a little table nearby where a heavy-set man with a wide moustache and a thick forehead sat at a table with an attractive woman. Around them were a few other people, all drinking and eating various fare.

"It doesn't work that way. That's Pillswar, the guy with the moustache. Now, wait here," said Mike quietly while looking back and forth and all around the area. "I want to hear what he's saying. He's as bad as they get."

Rhia looked closely at the man but didn't see anything particularly evil about him. He was clearly somewhat overweight with a heavy jowl and probably, like her, had orc blood in his heritage. The

woman with him was quite attractive and seemed to be having a nice enough time although this wasn't unusual in the hours before a swearing in ceremony.

Rhia turned her eyes to Mike and watched the boy casually stride over to a little serving area and start talking with the man behind the counter. He sidled to the end of counter to more easily eavesdrop on the conversation and Rhia admired his daring and nonchalance. He was graceful and seemed to blend in easily.

Rhia started looking around the area to see who else might be watching. Her eyes immediately gravitated to a massively muscled orc with strange little white scars all across his face and exposed arms. He was sitting alone at the table behind the Pillswar fellow, wore a heavy chain shirt, and had a thick sword at his side. He spoke with no one and was gazing directly at Mike with a look that made Rhia nervous. She started to sidle over in that direction when the orc stood quickly and moved with grace that belied his enormous frame. He was well over six feet in height with a barrel chest and arms that bulged with untold power.

He took three big but silent strides and suddenly stood next to Mike. He towered over the boy in both height and breadth. It looked more like a father standing over his toddler son than two men. Rhia moved more quickly now and she was next to them in a second, her own hand on the blade at her side.

"Move along," said the orc to Mike his voice a low grumble although he stretched out the syllables of the words.

"Why?" said Mike looking up and feigning surprise at the request.

"I said so," said the orc quietly.

"I'm not doing anything wrong!" said Mike spreading his hands and smiling brightly. "I'm just getting something to drink; you have no right to tell me what to do."

The orc spat a blob of brown juice on the ground and his face spoke of pain and death. He spoke slowly and clearly, enunciating his words carefully. "Do you think I am merchant?" he paused. "To be bargained with for better price?"

Mike's eyes opened wide and he took a step backward, "No," he whispered quietly and fear appeared on his face.

"Perhaps you think I am diplomat," said the orc with a shake of head, still speaking slowly and carefully. "To be negotiated with for favorable treatise?" said the orc leaning in close. Rhia could see his brown stained teeth and could almost smell his breath from yards away.

"No," said Mike again and this time his voice quavered.

"I am lion," said the orc and leaned even closer yet. Only inches separated their faces. "And although my roar is most fearsome, it is merely warning as to my bite. Go."

Mike seemed ready to flee for a moment but then suddenly regained his courage and stood up tall leaning in even closer, “I have every right to be here as much as you! You can’t tell me what to do! You can’t make me leave. I am a man of Tanelorn! I am a free man.”

The orc smiled, examined Mike closely, leaned in close to the boy, and inhaled deeply, “Man? I think not. But I see now what has transpired, little girl. Your mommy and daddy coddled you. They protected you from the realities of this world. They failed you. Now I am going to rectify that oversight but I wish you to know that I take no pleasure in what is about to happen. I do it merely to educate.”

“Whatever,” started Mike and stood on his, her, tiptoes to get a little closer to the orc’s height. Her hand went to the blade at her side and she started to pull it out.

The orc moved with almost casual speed and perfect certainty. He took her wrist in his hand and smashed it on the counter causing her to drop her sword. With his other hand he grabbed her around the throat and lifted her off the ground as a bird takes flight, easily and without effort.

Rhia pulled out her own sword and charged over, “Now hold on there!” she shouted.

The orc instead of backing away strode toward her, with Mike dangling in his massive paw, and slammed his forehead into Rhia’s face. Blood spurted from her nose and she found herself on the ground dizzily aware of what was happening all around her.

The orc spun Mike in the air and brought her down face first on a nearby table with a tremendous bang. The boy, girl, managed to turn her head at the last moment to save her nose from destruction. “Let me go!” she shrieked in a high-pitched voice and began to flail her free arm.

The orc brought his other hand up and pulled that arm back and twisted. Mike screamed again. He put his weight on her, which allowed him to free a hand, and with a swift motion pulled down her pants causing her belt buckle to burst.

“No,” she said as his weight drove the breath from her body. Her eyes bulged and she hissed in air as best she could.

“That’s enough, Adusko,” said a calm voice. “You’ve made your point.”

Rhia looked up from the floor and saw a tall man with a head full of brown hair to match a thick beard and moustache.

Adusko looked up and paused as he saw the man. He craned his head as if looking for someone standing behind him, but no one was there.

“You think you tell me when point is made, Nightwalk?” said Adusko in that slow, steady voice, and the orc grinned.

“Sir Sorus is correct,” said yet another voice and Rhia rose to a knee and saw it was the hefty man Mike originally intended to spy upon. “Sir Sorus is a representative of the current powers of Tanelorn,” said

the man stressing the word current. "He has asked you to cease. You will do so and you will apologize to the girl."

Adusko immediately took his weight off the girl and stood her up effortless by grabbing her collar and pulling her forward. He brushed off her shoulders and tilted his head slightly, "I am ... sorry."

"Now, young lady," said the hefty man at the table. "You say you are a free man of Tanelorn but you must remember an important point. Freedom isn't free. Someone else paid for your freedom."

Those around them murmured in agreement. "Sir Sorus, you can go, I'll keep my lion leashed."

Sorus nodded his head, turned, and walked back into the crowd.

Mike bent down and gathered her pants, pulling them up and holding them with one hand while shakily following Sorus. Rhia managed to get to her own feet, only now began to feel the burning pain in her nose, realized she was having trouble breathing, and joined Mike.