**CHAPTER 44**

**Things do not return to normalcy. The farm became fairly quiet in fact. Wynna moved to Hen’s Hollow to stay with her daughter Ennet. Callem left every morning to go to Hen’s Hollow to supervise the rebuilding of the old barracks that were used as the first-year academy for those kids coming of age, their 14th birthday. I suspected I was in fact funding a portion of the reconstruction as Callem had asked for 50 large gold coins from me. It left the three of us to train on our own.**

**Gareth for the most part supervised us in the weapons training while I supervised the strength and conditioning. Aelyn was responsible for making sure Callem’s crops continued. The three of us took a day off to go to the funeral of Mera and Fera’s grandparents. Death was not that uncommon with the World Sphere. We were definitely sheltered living up on these large floating islands but we had learned there were just so many warring factions in the sphere that death in battle was commonplace.**

**Still, I had a lot of sympathy for the twins. Their grandparents had protected their two younger brothers who hide in the root cellar when the mercenary ogres attacked. I wasn’t certain but one of the ogres might have been the swordsman we let get away. I didn’t harbor guilt due to this since it was seven ogres who had attacked their farm, looted it, and then retreated in a skyship.**

**At the funeral, the bodies were burned in a ceremony to return their ashes to the sphere. A lot of nice things were said about them. I learned that their grandmother had been a dungeon delver and had settled in Skyholme over 60 years ago. It was their grandfather who had been the farmer. The twins thanked Gareth, Aelyn, and me for coming and we had a grand meal to celebrate the lives of their grandparents after the burning.**

**I was a little surprised when the twin's father came and sat next to me while I was picking at some food. “Storme Hardlight.” He said as looked at me. “Thank you for getting my daughters to safety.” I was waiting for him to say more and when he didn’t I responded.**

**“No problem sir. I just got them to the safest place I knew.” Of course, that was not the case as the ogres had rampaged the farms in the countryside, stripping a lot of them of flock and stores. Callem had said one night this was a coordinated attempt by the Sadians to reduce our numbers and food.**

**“My daughters…” The very tired man spoke slowly. “They said you have magic and are a good fighter. That captain Callem taught you and your friend to fight and defend yourself?”**

**I was puzzled but I think I knew where he was going. He was going to ask me to marry one of his daughters. The man continued, “If I sent my two girls early to the academy do you think captain Callem could do the same for them?” Well, that burst my bubble of self-confidence a bit.**

**“Callem is a fantastic teacher sir,” I said and then paused. “If you want them to learn from the best and be able to defend themselves then sending them to the academy early can only be a good thing.” I looked over at him and he still seemed to be thinking about it.**

**Finally, he rose, “Thank you for coming Storme. We didn’t expect such an outpouring from the town and surrounding community. As Gaskill’s we mostly keep to ourselves. As for your advice on captain Callem. Thank you. I will try to convince my wife. If Mera and Fera do attend keep an eye on them.” We both looked over at the twins having a lively conversation with Gareth. He was probably telling me how he had destroyed me on the obstacle course this morning and how I fell ten feet into the mud pit with Gareth’s assistance.**

**“I will sir. It should be a lively class. Callem said over 20 this cycle.” I added. He nodded and walked away. Gareth would be happy with the news.**

**Two days after the funeral Callem came to fetch us to go to the city. Gareth had wanted to join the Annuals. He was keen to test his mettle against other boys. Well, Gareth looked more like a man than a boy. Callem escorted us to the city of Solaris. Tryouts were in a small arena. There must have been 100 boys here trying their luck. The captain of the city watch was in charge.**

**The contestants who wanted to vie for one of the two slots from our city first needed to be screened. The top 32 from the screening would go into a tourney bracket. Over the next week each day, a new round would be held. I scanned the group and saw him, Leon Mogensen. He hadn’t seen me yet. It looked like he was here to compete. This was the one thing that could have gotten me into this silly test of masculinity. Gudrun Busk, another of my ambushers was also trying out.**

**“Hey Callem you can sign me up as well,” I said staring at two of the boys who had left me for dead in the alleyway.**

**Callem studied me for a while before nodding and went to my name to the rolls. I sat with Gareth in the stands and point out Leon and Gundrun to him. There were two other young men in their group, probably also trying out. My assessment skill couldn’t work at this distance. My brother walked into the stadium with our father and also went to register and they came and sat by us.**

**My father spoke, “So Gareth is probably the favorite, I mean he looks like a seasoned fighter just sitting here!” I don’t know if it was my father praising Gareth or something else but felt the need to reply.**

**“Gareth we will one of the two slots from the city. I will probably take the other.” Pascal and father looked toward me.**

**Pascal spoke, “You are competing too? I thought this was beneath you?” He sounded a little worried and ticked off. He had taken an arrow and a small fireball during the Sadian attack but had been healed to full health already. He also knew I was a better swordsman than him if I tried.**

**“Yeah, Gareth convinced me,” I said as I stared across at my enemies. They had noticed me and Gudrun had pointed me out for Leon. They started calling names to a private room.**

**The private room was just for a pair of soldiers to assess how competent you were with a sword or other weapon. You could only wield a sword, spear, staff, or mace. All other weapons were off-limits. Of course, there was a lot of variance in these weapons.**

**This testing went very quickly. Gareth and Pascal went before me and when my turn came I had chosen to use the staff. The town guard who tested me had a sword and shield and was overconfident when he saw me. I managed to clip his unprotected shin in short order. When he attempted a reprisal the captain of the guard halted the exchange and sent me back while calling for a healer.**

**When all the testing was done the guard captain came out and read off 24 names. I was not on that list. I was shocked as both Pascal and Gareth were. Leo, Gudrun, and one of their associates, Terraz Shide, were included. There appeared to be a lot of upset people and some angry voices. Two men flanking the man tapped their spears on the platform, creating an echo to silence the crowd.**

**The guard captain then announced he was going to read off eight pairings. Each paring would fight for the final slots in the Solaris pre-academy annuals. Bringing the total number to 32.**

**I was paired with one of the few women trying out, Mia Silverstone. Callem sat next to me as I stared at the young woman, “She is good Storme. Did you see the way she walks? Good grace there. I can only assume the guard captain has some bias against women. Of the 13 who came today only one was in the 24 selected and four have to earn their way in, eight didn’t make it past the selection stage. Don’t expect an easy fight.”**

**Callem was right. Mia was a head shorter than me but thick of body. But other than soft breasts the rest of her body appeared hard. She was also studying me intently. Her weapon appeared to be a thin short sword at her hip. She was clearly at a disadvantage to my longer-reach staff. Then a young boy came running into the stadium with a spear and handed it to her.**

**So the captain had intentionally put Mia at a disadvantage against me hoping she would get knocked out. The sour look on his face confirmed it. You were allowed to change weapons. But you were only allowed one weapon into combat.**

**I half-watched the first three matches as I waited for mine. Soon I was standing across from Mia. She was not pretty at all. A flat face, square shoulders, and a scowl so deep it appeared frightening. She was definitely out for blood. I wished I hadn’t bragged to my father about making it to the final two. If I got knocked out here I wouldn’t even make it into the mini-tourney.**

**A mage came and cast a dulling enchantment on her spear tip. We then faced off and the combat began. I was heavily on the defensive as she came at me fast with stabs and sweeps. It was my ability to predict her movements by her feet and muscle tension that saved me. I guess what Callem had been teaching us worked. After a dozen exchanges, she was getting more and more frustrated. I could tell she was good with the spear but it was not her preferred weapon.**

**Confident I had learned her patterns I countered her thrust with a downward slash and sidestep. She saw the fault immediately and tried to retreat and reset but my follow-up sweep was too fast. She tried to duck under but once again her timing was off and I hit her in the side of the head. She crumpled to the ground. The healer rushed out and thankfully she was all right. She was carried away and I could see the guard captain smirk and gave me a nod.**

**There was something else going on here I thought. When I sat next to Callem he told me. “Been talking with a few of the city folks in the stands. That girl Mia is the daughter of Haggrim Silverstone. He is a silversmith in the city. The guard captain,” he pointed at the guard captain who was supervising the next bout, “is Fazal Balkar. He has a son over there,” Callem indicated a boy already in the bracket. “Mia turned down his son's request for betrothal. So some bad blood there. Fazal isn’t known to be a kind person so I am guessing his son is the same.”**

**Gareth butted into our conversation, “If I get a chance I will put him in his place.” Gareth was eager to play the knight in shining armor for the girl he never met.**

**“I doubt you will get the chance Gareth,” they were already putting up the bracket of 32. Gareth and the boy, Vazneth Balkar were at the top of each bracket of 16. “Most likely the guard captain put all the lesser opponents in his son’s side of the bracket.” I noticed my name was there. I would have to fight him in the second round. So the guard captain didn’t think too highly of my skills.**

**The guard captain stood and announced, “This evening we will hold the first round of 16 duels. The winner of each duel will receive a large silver for their victory!” Some cheers went up from the crowd. “The city lord has also been generous and the loser will receive a silver coin as well!” Some very subdued cheers. “The contests will begin in two hours! Tell your friends and let us fill this arena to cheer on the next generation of warriors of Skyholme!” The cheers came subdued as most people were already filing out.**

**As we walked out Aelyn congratulated me on my victory. Callem and Gareth lectured me on what I did wrong and what I could improve upon. We ate in a small tavern. Callem seemed to know the busty middle-aged waitress and our food and drink were brought out promptly.**

**“Not as good as what you make Storme but extremely palatable.” The food was seared steaks with a creamy butter sauce. Callem continued, “So in this farce of a tournament you need to knock out your opponent or get them to concede. The healer mages are decent enough but death is still possible. So protect your heads.”**

**I thought about poor Mia and the solid blow I gave her in our match. Gareth spoke, “Callem are all tournaments like this? Rigged by the people who set them up?” Gareth and Callem had been talking about the brackets on the walk here and I hadn’t paid much attention. My father and Pascal walked in and sat with us as Callem ordered them food from the waitress.**

**“Usually yes. The Annuals in the capital is a seeded tournament but the seeds are determined by one of the lords. Pat him enough gold and you can be seated in a favorable bracket.” Callem said as he chewed on his steak.**

**“So the key is to show as little as possible in your victories,” my father inserted himself into the conversation. “If your next opponent doesn’t know what to expect or the man seating the brackets doesn’t know your true ability you have the best chance. Gareth showed a lot in his evaluation so he got seated first.” Gareth blushed in embarrassment. “Don’t worry Gareth. I don’t think there is anyone in the city pre-academy group that can challenge you. But you should be aware that whatever you show will be relayed to your opponents when you travel to the capital for the Annuals. Also, I have the prize list here for this tourney.”**

**Father unrolled a parchment and it showed each victory got you a large silver. A defeat a single silver. If you won your bracket you got 1 gold. And if you won the entire thing you got a large gold. A large gold is about what my father made in a year after his promotion.**

**We talked about strategy during the meal and I half-paid attention as I worked my new *alarm* spell. The spell allowed me to set a temporary point. If a living creature came within 20 feet of it I would get a mental alert. For the first evolution, I altered the alert to give me a mental flash of the creature approaching the alarm. For my second evolution, I made the alarm spell give a loud beep to alert others when a specific action occurred. This action was currently very broad and I needed further evolutions to make it more specific. I was currently spamming the spell to get it to level 3 and reach my third evolution. There were quite a few useful evolutions and I hoped to get the spell to level 11 in the next few months.**

**When we returned to the arena there was an entrance fee of 5 coppers per person. As participants, we didn’t have to pay. Gareth was first to fight and we didn’t even need to cheer him. Using a broadsword Gareth easily overpowered the poor boy. The boy had some speed but even larger, Gareth was faster. I was happy to see two of Leon’s minions get eliminated in his Gareth’s side of the bracket.**

**When we started the fights on my bracket side Zaneth fought first. He was big and Callem said he was probably closer to 15 than 14. He was a decent swordsman but I was able to see multiple flaws in his style, at least compared to Gareth. I thought I might be able to match. But first I needed to win my next match.**

**It was Gudrun Busk. I looked up at the bracket board and his name was there. But I had thought someone else had been placed there before we went for dinner. I looked in the crowd and Callem looked perplexed as well as he remembered the same thing I had. Well they had recognized me so maybe they had some pull. Then I noticed a red haired guard in the crowd…I assessed him. Logain Mogensen. It was Leon’s brother…the same one who had stood guard at the entrance of the alley when the robbed and nearly killed me.**

**Maybe they thought Gudrun would knock me out. But this is why I had entered this little tournament, personal revenge. Plus Callem was here in the stands so I felt protected.**

**Gudrun was using a buckler and scimitar. He was very fast was his slashing attacks but I had range on him and we were equal in size. My footwork was also superior. The trap did spring as he released some glass dust into my path of advancement. It had been concealed in his buckler arm and appeared to be regular sand. I rolled away from his onslaught, cast my cleanliness spell to eliminate the glass dust. I needed to do a touch of healing to my eyes as I retreated.**

**Gudrun pressed his attack thinking I was disabled. My staff shot straight out into his groin. A surprised look on his face was turned to pain. He hadn’t surrendered so half a beat later my staff was slamming into the side of his skull. It was a much harder strike than Mia had taken and the boy crumbled like all his bones had been removed from his body.**

**I was declared the victor and gave the upset Leon a stare before returning to my seat. Unfortunately, there was a conference. The mages observing the fight had seen my magic. With Callem and my father, I had to go answer some questions as to what magic I had used.**

**The proctoring mage confirmed it was the cleanliness spell a healing spell. Both were legal but I had failed to register them as part of my combat repertoire which made them illegal to use. At least that was the argument I was facing. It was Callem’s turn to play the hero. Callem knew the rules of the Annuals better than anyone. Defensive spells didn’t need to be registered, just offensive spells so the proctoring mages could better prepare to intervene in a life-or-death situation. After nearly 30 minutes of arguing, I was declared the victor of the match. Callem also made a point to record the brackets so they could not be altered again.**

**Gundrun didn’t face any reprimand for his attempt to blind me with the glass dust. My father brought it up but since the boy lost the point was considered moot by the guard captain.**

**I got my large silver coin reward. I placed it in my pocket and moved it to my dimensional closet. This was not a coin to me but a trophy of vengeance.**

**I was happy to see Gudrun have trouble walking, even after the healing. That brief bit of revenge was sweet and I hoped there was more to come. On the walk back to Hen’s Hollow Aelyn was the most excited of any of us. Pascal had also won his first bout and was in my bracket. If I beat Zaneth tomorrow and Pascal also won we would face each other. Pascal was scheduled to fight Leon and I was torn as to whether I wanted him to win or lose. If my brother lost I would get me chance at revenge.**

**Of course, when we got to our house Freya was upset that she didn’t get to see her brother and Gareth fight today. She thought we were just registering. She spent dinner trying to get permission from our parents to go tomorrow. They eventually caved and she would be escorted by Mother, Wynna and Ennet.**

**Tomorrow I hoped to get some revenge for Mia and put the guard captain’s son in his place. I was sure there would be some other trick that I would have to overcome to win. That seemed to be the nature of this tourney.**