**Chapter 10 Gareth, The Protégé**

We walked toward Callem, and before I could speak, Gareth spoke firmly and clearly, “Captain Callem, we are early and don’t want our instruction time to begin just yet. Storme and I will complete the daily stretches before we start. Is that ok?” Whoa. I stared at Gareth, who had his face relaxed and had his eyes locked with Callem. What the hell, Gareth! An hour of stretching…three hours of combat training…three hours of farm work. Adding an hour to our commitment? I felt betrayed as we had not discussed this, or had we? I did the same to Gareth sometimes, explaining my reasoning after the fact.

“That will be fine,” his deep voice intoned. He then proceeded to return to pulling weeds among his tobacco plants. Gareth was already walking to the packed earth training ground by the shed. I noticed six different training dummies set up in the yard that had not been there the last time.

“Gareth,” I intoned with irritation in my voice, “Why didn’t you tell me about this?” He looked at me without his normal grin and sighed.

“Storme, do you know who Captain Callem actually is?” What? No, you didn’t tell me anything, and why wait till now to reveal this? We were best friends, damn it! “Captain Callem is Commander Callem Dregalla. He was the *First Sword of the Skyholme*, recognized as the best swordsman in all of Skyholme for 17 straight years. The streak only stopped because he stopped competing in the Annuals. When he was promoted to oversee the training of all naval personnel and raised to Commander, he just stopped competing for the title.”

Gareth looked reverent in his eyes, “Freya and I went to the library in the city yesterday after *Sweets and Treats* and lunch,” he smirked and got his grin back, “She didn’t tell you about the lunch or the library trip?” First betrayed by Gareth and now my sister. “Well, I researched and read the news posts from when Callem was in his prime. He was unbeatable in combat duels and earned many accolades in combat. He single-handedly boarded a Sadain warship and killed everyone on board while in the midst of an aerial engagement.”

Captain Callem called in his booming voice from twenty paces away as if he was listening right next to us. “I hate that tale, boy. There were six of us that boarded that ship. Four of us lived, and all the credit was given to me because I killed 27 men and women myself. Get to your stretching, boys, and stop bringing up fables.” I was a little startled by his interruption. I started the progression of stretches with Gareth.

Gareth seemed reluctant to say anything else for fear of Callem overhearing us. We finished the stretches in quiet, well, almost silence. Gareth corrected my form every time I made an error. At the conclusion of stretching, Callem approached us again. “Ok, boys, let us continue with footwork. The next hour and a half were brutal for me, and my body was broken and abused. “Good boys. I have two weighted training blades for you.” He retrieved two heavy, dull blades and handed us each one; Gareth’s was bigger. “These blades are dull and useless in real combat but are perfectly balanced and twice as heavy as a normal blade their size. I am going to teach you the 23 master sword forms. Each form has 23 movements, and each movement has 23 variations.” That was like…it took a moment to do the math in my head 12,167! My face fell as I muttered the number. “Don’t worry, Storme. The variations are based on the blade. Suppose you stick to just one sword type, just 529 movements. The first form is called the Snapping Tortoise. It is heavily defensive and only has five of the twenty-three movements dedicated to attacking.”

The next hour proceeded as we practiced the first two movements. My arm was dead after just half an hour, but Gareth showed only eagerness. He rarely needed correction while I constantly did as we put the movements into muscle memory.

“Now I will attack each of you, and you will defend.” Wait, what? Before I could respond, Callem had another training blade in hand, swinging simple strikes at each of us. First Gareth, then me. My aching arms could barely hold the training sword, but I blocked the first six deliberately telegraphed strikes before the seventh bashed my own sword into my forehead, knocking me out. When I woke, I just heard the clang of steel. Gareth and Callem were still at it, but Callem’s strikes had increased in speed.

As I sat up, they stopped. “Storme, sorry about that,” Callem said with sincerity. “I had judged you capable of handling three or four more strikes. I am out of practice sparring with a student.” Sparring? I had been defending my life. I felt a large lump on my head. Did I crack my skull? “Storme, in the kitchen, there is a white cabinet. There are restorative vials in there. The small white ones will erase your injury. Go and drink one.” I walked jelly-legged to the farmhouse.

The farmhouse was actually quite nice on the outside. Twenty yards by fifteen yards and two stories built completely out of stone. The wood trim was in excellent care, and I entered the large front door and was stunned by the interior. The house was immaculate. White walls and clear, stained, fine woodwork were everywhere. The living room, kitchen, and dining room were one massive room. A staircase led upstairs, and the first floor had three doors to other rooms. No, one of those doors was under the staircase, so it probably led to the basement. The kitchen was small but had two cold storage boxes powered by a runic script and small aether crystals. I peeked inside and found one was a freezer and the other a fridge. The cooking top was also rune scribed for heat. All of them were very expensive luxury items. I found the white cabinet and opened it to find an assortment of neatly labeled vials.

I heard Callem yell, asking if I needed help. I had been dawdling. I grabbed one of the small white vials and drank. The taste was best described as sour apple. The elixir acted fast, and all the pain in my body vanished in just a few seconds. I headed back out to the yard, dragging my feet just a bit.

Half an hour later, I really wanted another elixir. I had a few bruises but nothing serious. With the lessons done for the day, Callem complimented us. “Storme, you did very well, do not think you failed today.” He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes, and I could tell he was serious. “I know you are not as motivated as Gareth, but I have worked with hundreds of boys, girls, men, and women, and I can honestly say you have the potential to be better than the majority.” His eyes and voice said he was sincere. “Gareth, do not get a big head, but I think you could surpass me in time.” So much for not letting Gareth get a big head. It was swelling before my eyes.

“Ok, you boys have some work to do for me. This way.” He turned and headed into the nearby woods. Gareth followed like a puppy. I hesitated and needed to consider. I was at a crossroads. I was sure Callem would continue to train Gareth if I bailed, but I didn’t want to abandon my friend on his journey. I didn’t care that he would far surpass me. I decided we would be taking the journey together, which is what mattered. I hastened after them.

In a clearing after a short trip through the woods, the site I beheld had me thinking about changing my mind. Gareth was puzzling out what he was seeing, but I knew. It was an obstacle course straight out of hell. Narrow beams ten feet off the ground, ropes, suspended bags, walls, a pond with rock hopes. I didn’t want to be on American Ninja. There was also an archery range on the far side…or did that mean he was going to shoot arrows at us while we did the obstacles?

Before I could do an about-face and return to the farm, Callem spoke, “The course is a little overgrown, so rather than work the fields today, we will clear the brush and check the ropes.” Callum had a devilish grin, and Gareth was tickled pink with the idea of the training course by the stupid look of joy on his face. We got to work and finished in just over three hours and were allowed to head home.

“Gareth, I think I am going to buy a cart,” I said after I had forced my body down the path for half a mile.

“Why Stormy?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“So you can pull me home after training,” I replied without humor in my voice.

Gareth had a response ready, “You should just get a horse or reindeer.” That wasn’t a bad idea, but it would draw attention to me as they were expensive animals to maintain. He suddenly went off-topic, “Tell you what, we race home, and the loser buys lunch for the next week.” Before I could reply, he was off. I didn’t chase him as he sprinted away. I was slightly fast than him over rough terrain, but his long legs easily beat me on straight paths. The only solace I took was that he was moving a bit gingerly, so that inhuman boy had felt today’s training a little, at least.

On returning to town, I went to the pub and gorged on milk, bread, roasted chicken, glazed vegetables, and beer cheese soup—all without Gareth. I rolled myself home and went to my bedroom after letting my parents know I had returned. Freya came in, and I quietly relayed the day’s tales, making sure she knew how gallant her brother was. I did tell her I was a little upset she hadn’t told me about the library trip and what they learned about Captain Callem. She then told me she had just looked at the picture books in the library and didn’t know what Gareth had been researching, but he did mention a Commander, somebody. Ugh. I gave her a lecture about paying attention to her surroundings and the absolute importance of sharing relevant information with her brother, me, not Pascal. She was a little huffy but seemed to acquiesce.

After she left, it took me a while to find a comfortable position to settle into. I generated the gold coins and stuffed them under my pillow, not wanting to travel the five feet to the secret cache in the wall. At least tomorrow, there was no training, and I could go claim my *cleanliness* spell!