**Chapter 7 Weapons Training**

Pascal was up early, and his obnoxiously loud voice was obviously meant to get the entire house up. When our mother called for breakfast, I dressed slowly to annoy him. With all my life experiences, you would think I would be above such petty brotherly antagonism but no.

“Gareth has been waiting outside for an hour,” Freya whispered to me when I finally got to the table to eat. Well, apparently, not just Pascal was excited. I turned in my chair to look out the window, and yes, Gareth was sitting in his regular spot on the stone wall across from the house. Mother had probably asked him not to disturb us until after we had finished breakfast. Not because he was unwelcome but because he could eat like there was no tomorrow, and she didn’t make big spreads at breakfast.

Pascal was grumpy. I was taking so long, and Freya was also showing some glumness since she had to go to instruction alone today. Caleb, my father, took my slowness as hesitation and obviously didn’t want to push me. He had long been trying to get me interested in martial skills, and this was a crack in my armor. He finally spoke, “So, Strome have you decided on a weapon?”

Finishing the blackberry jam spread on simple bread, I replied to him, “No.” A simple response and the truth. Disappointment clouded his eyes, so I decided to follow up. “Maybe the saber or scimitar,” I said. Wait, wasn’t that what Gareth had been deciding between? He nodded with a smile shadowing his face and nodding.

Soon he offered his advice which I knew was coming, “Callem taught me the basics of the long sword, spear, and short bow at my first year of the academy.” Oh no, I hoped this wasn’t going to become one of his academy stories. They were entertaining, but I had heard them all at least four times. I got up from the table, and this spurred Pascal to speedily do the same, heading out the door to the road. I emerged shortly after, and Gareth waved. His grin was plastered on his face, and he was wearing his dagger on his new belt. I had forgotten to put mine on as it was not yet engrained into my routine.

Father took the lead, with Pascal right next to him, talking excitedly. I fell in behind Gareth and whispered to him, “Thirteen.” His eyebrows shot up.

“Holy angelic fervor Storme." Doing the math in his head, “You could make over a gold every week!” his enthusiastic voice carried, but we should be far enough behind Pascal and my father. I shook my head no and handed him my coin pouch, wanting to see his reaction. He poured the contents out into his hand in anticipation. Eight steel coins, three large steel coins, two coppers, and three gold coins. He immediately fumbled the coins dropping the lot on the dusty road. He quickly dropped to his knees to pick them up like he had accidentally dropped the queen’s jewels.

My father stopped and turned to look but was fifteen paces ahead of us. “I was just paying back Gareth for something yesterday, and he dropped my coin pouch,” I said straight-faced without mischief coating my voice. Gareth had thrown the coins and a good portion of the road into my coin pouch, hurriedly hiding the massive amount of wealth.

We regained our stride behind them, and Gareth finally whispered, “Thirteen gold? You are not playing with me?” I was silent, and he spoke again a few minutes later. “You can magic up a year’s wages in a day.” I was just quiet as I let Gareth ponder the implications. A year’s wages? I think my father made less than twelve gold in a year after his taxes. He did have a two gold annual stipend for his equipment, so yes, I could make more in a day than my father did in a year.

My mother made eight or so gold in a year, by my estimation. Sometimes she would get a large project like cutting the sigil of a minor noble on a handful of leather armor for their house guard. That might take her most of a month and earn her an entire gold or two for the effort if the work was intricate enough. Our family was in the lowest economic class in the Skyholme social hierarchy. Gareth interjected on my train of thought, whispering again, “So what is next?”

Well, I had given it a lot of thought, and I needed some spells. I had my eye on a difficult tier-one spell, *cleanliness*. “I think I want to set up the mysterious benefactor from the lowlands as a cover story in the city after I make twenty large golds. Before that, I would like to get a spell to practice so I can develop my spell craft.” I paused before asking, “What do you want, Gareth?” I left it open-ended for him. Gareth wasn’t simple, and he would think hard about it. We walked in silence, and finally, the small farm came into view with the tobacco field to the right and the potato field to the left. Captain Callem was in the tobacco field and waved to us. Suddenly Gareth spoke.

“Stormy, I want you to make me a watered steel blade of my choosing and get it enchanted.” Even using my nickname, I could tell he was serious and had given this profound thought. Gareth was a fighter at heart, but his friendship with me had pulled him from his nature. He had had his opportunities to get into a fight every once in a long while, and his dominance in those fights had scared the other children from provoking us as a pair.

“Done,” was my response to his request. I would put all my effort into giving him the best sword I could manage in order to repay his friendship.

Captain Callem approached our group. He was a square man that moved with a cat-like grace for his size. His thick hair and beard were snow white, and if it wasn’t for his advanced age, I might have felt like a mouse under a cat’s gaze. His most striking feature was his golden yellow eyes. From my father’s stories, I knew he had one ability, perfect sight. It was a tier 2 ability that allowed him to see in most conditions with near-perfect clarity. According to my father, he had developed the ability to be exceptionally observant, and no doubt he was sizing us up. Pascal was practically hopping out of his shoes in anticipation of starting.

My father exchanged a handshake and some private words with the Captain before turning to us. “Captain Callem is an arms master. If he were to charge you for his time, it would be at the rate of one gold per hour. He will spend the next three hours with you boys, so pay attention and use it well.” My dad had his sternest face on and his command voice going. He didn’t want us to embarrass him. I knew the Captain was giving his time for free. And we all knew people traveled from other cities and even the capital island to learn from him. These people had passed through our small town occasionally while they were on their way to his farm.

Captain Callem brought us to a well-trodden practice yard next to his farmhouse. First up, Captain Callem went through sixteen limbering exercises because the range of motion and ease of movement were the important factors in combat. Just from these exercises, I knew I would be terribly sore tomorrow. It was like weight-resisted yoga. After that, we were all led to the far side of the combat yard behind the small farmhouse. There was a small shed with one side open. Inside there were racks and racks of weapons. I could see my brother and Gareth drooling, almost literally. I was trying to think of a quip when Callem said the next step was safety and care of weapons. When this was finally done, we had just one hour remaining. My father sat on a stone wall smoking a pipe with blue-white smoke coming out of it and watched us the entire time.

“Ok, boys, it is time to try to find the weapon you wish to train with.” This released the hounds, and Gareth went right for one of the two sabers. Pascal took a longsword. It took me a minute before I selected the gladius. Even this was too heavy for my current frame. The next hour had us practicing footwork with our selected blades. We never fought each other, but we definitely digested a large amount of knowledge. I felt I could now hold the blade properly and move with the short sword in my hand.

The lesson even ran half an hour over before my father said it was time to go. We thanked Captain Callem and started walking back. I turned around and said I had left my pouch by the fence and was going back to retrieve it. It had been intentional as I had given my following action some serious thought after watching Gareth’s joy today.

I found Callem in the tobacco field and went to him, grabbing the pouch by the fence as I approached him, “Captain Callem. Is it true you charge a gold per hour for instruction?” I asked patiently.

“Yes,” he paused, appraising me anew. I had been by far the worst of the three of us, and my mind and focus had wandered more than a few times. “What do you seek of me?” he finally asked.

“I wish to come three times a week with my friend Gareth for training. Hopefully, you have time on 1st, 3rd , and 5th day after the mid-day meal to train us. We have book lessons in the morning so cannot come any earlier. But I ask that you do not reveal this to my father or brother.” I put on my most hopeful look.

The powerful persona of Callem stared at me with his white hair blowing in a strong breeze that had gusted. Before replying, he digested what I said, “Yes, that can be arranged. You will be here after mid-day meal all of those days, and I will train you for three hours,” I looked about to interject, but his severe look and eye contact gave me pause, “Then you two will help around the farm for two hours.” Ok, he probably thought I didn’t have enough coin to pay. “I don’t train students for less than three hours at a time. Any shorter, and the muscle memory doesn’t take hold,” he explained, “Also if I have another student here during that time, don’t expect my full attention. In addition, I expect one gold coin per week for payment. The more you sacrifice for something, the more you will be thankful for it.” He finished.

I just nodded and started looking around the farm. It was only an acre of tobacco, half an acre of potatoes, and a small raised bed of herbs by the farmhouse. His face lit into a bright smile, reading my mind. “Oh boy, there is plenty to do around here. A mage friend in the capital visits me every other month to fertilize the fields and grow my tobacco with aether. I also was thinking of building a new drying barn.” He motioned to the shed holding the weapons racks, indicating it was his current drying barn. I puzzled out that he must remove the weapons to hang the leaves. The shed had that sickly sweet smell of tobacco when we cleaned weapons today.

“Agreed,” I said, reaching out with my right hand to shake and pulling a gold coin from my pouch with my left hand. After shaking on the deal, I placed the gold coin in his hand, which was much larger than I had thought, “Here is the first week’s payment!” I turned and left the man in shock. He obviously hadn’t thought I had the coin on me and that I would try to negotiate the price further down. The coin was shiny and new, so I would have to make sure we aged the coins in the future, at least most of them.

Catching up to the group, I fell into stride with Gareth. My father and Pascal were talking a few paces ahead of us, and Pascal seemed happy, but he obviously had wanted to spar by the few words I caught. He had learned enough to gain a significant advantage over his friends. Now, our father had taught him some basics, but for the most part, everyone in his friend group was on equal footing in terms of swordplay knowledge.

“Gareth, I got us lessons with Captain Callem. We will go to him three times a week after lessons with your mother.” I considered withholding the farm hand part of the agreement but decided not to. “We will get a three-hour lesson each of those days, but after, we have to help on the farm for two hours.” I looked over at my friend. He had a grin so big it split his face. He just couldn’t stop grinning.

After a few minutes, he regained his composure and said, “We should get there early each day to do the stretching. We don’t want to waste any of the three hours of instruction.” He was dead serious. He wanted this. We had done everything I wanted since we were 7, and Gareth followed my lead without question. It was time to balance the scales.

When we got home, Gareth and I went to the barn while Pascal ran off to show off his new skills to his friends. Father went to have lunch with my mother at work. I was a little shocked when we entered the barn. Some dust still hung in the air. Freya was filthy and pushing a crate across the floor. “Storme! How did training go!” She burst into excited words. Standing and showing off the space she had apparently worked all morning on. I had moved a few things to make getting up to the loft easier, but not really organized. Freya had packed, stacked, dusted, and apparently thrown out some junk. Besides the dust in the air slowly flowing out the open door and windows, the place looked pretty good.

“I had Brianne help for a bit, but she went home sneezing. But I did promise to put in a good word for her with Gareth,” she rushed through the words. Brianne was the cobbler’s daughter and had a crush on Gareth. She made this plainly known to anyone who listened. She was almost 14 and had a plain prettiness to her. Gareth hadn’t taken an interest. He had liked one girl, Casrine. Well, every boy had been infatuated with Casrine. To his credit, she was the prettiest girl in town, but when she had finished her first year of the academy last year, she had attracted a benefactor to pay for her to attend a merchant’s academy in the capital. Personally, I doubted her benefactor was doing it purely out of benevolence.

“Are you going to take me to the city tomorrow?” Freya asked. I had promised to take her if she helped out. But for the life of me, I couldn’t remember what I had asked her to do. It definitely wasn’t cleaning the barn, but she did do a good job.

“Yes, Freya, after breakfast tomorrow, you can come with us to the city,” Gareth’s eyebrow cocked in question. “You did a fine job in here,” I added, giving her some praise. “I have some business at Wigand’s, and Gareth can take you to *Sweets and Treats*.” It was her favorite candy store in the city. Well, only two candy stores in the city and one general store in Hen’s Hollow had candy. Her expression was furrowed, “And I will give a large steel coin. You, my dear sister, are going to rot your teeth.” She just burst into a bright smile as she ran and hugged me. Ugh, she transferred some dust to me. Not that I was very clean, and her nose wrinkled at my body odor.

The three of us retired up to the loft, and I told Freya about our upcoming lessons with Captain Callem. She would have to cover our absence which wouldn’t be too difficult as we frequently spent all day on our various enterprises. After figuring it out, she was even more upset that we would be gone six to seven hours three days a week. I appeased her, saying we would bring her to the city with us every 2nd day of the week, and I would give her ten large steel coins to save or spend. That was the upper range of what she made ‘helping’ with our various errands every week.

We all went to the river to swim so we could clean up. There were other town kids there, and soon, we were all playing in our underclothes in the water. Things briefly got interesting when Brianne showed up and talked privately to Gareth out in the middle of the shallow river before leaving in a huff. I was curious about the exchange, but Gareth wouldn’t tell me what it was about. He just blushed and didn’t respond. The misty evening clouds denoting twilight moved in, and we meandered home.

I made dinner that night. I fried something similar to polenta, adding a white cheese sauce with chunks of bacon, and made a salad with sweet peppers, red onions, and a simple oil and vinegar dressing. Pascal delighted in relaying his tales of sword practice with his friends and his ‘outstanding’ victories. I remained silent through dinner other than mentioning me, and Gareth would bring Freya to the city tomorrow.

I lay in my bed later that night. It was time to manifest some coins. I decided to go with silver this time. There was a lump of silver on my chest when I had finally depleted my aether stores. It was quite heavy. I started turning the lump into large silver coins. In the end, I had six large silver coins and enough remaining material for six regular silver. So the total value of the silver was just two-thirds the value of a single gold coin. So I had made much less than the value of gold. In terms of ounces, I could make 1.3 ounces of gold compared to 6.6 ounces of silver. So was my ability a multiple of five? Could I then make two platinum coins? I would have to wait till tomorrow night to find out. I added the six silver to my pouch and the large silver coins to my stash. My dizziness from draining my core soon faded, and sleep embraced me.