**Chapter 8 Captain Callem**

Captain Callem was up early to walk, weed and water his fields. He had a lot of pride in working the land after spending his life serving the citizens. He was once Commander Callem, overseeing all the naval training for Skyholme. Under his guidance, the navy had built and crewed more ships than ever in its long history. The new administration had since slowed its growth due to bureaucratic hurdles.

The survival rate of marines had also increased during his time. This was due to the improvements he instituted at the naval academy. But as with all good things, that had come to an end. The first lord councilor to the Triumvirate’s Military arm was retired with a dagger in the back. His death had not been made public knowledge.

The man had been a friend and supporter of Callem. The intrigue of the three ruling families was outside his duty to the realm, but his friend’s assassination had hit him hard. Callem had two daughters to worry about and five grandchildren. If he made waves, he risked them coming under scrutiny by the unsavory politics of the capital. It wasn’t long till Callem was asked to step down to a lesser role or retire. Callem had too many friends and too much influence in the capital for the new lord council to trust him. He did neither and was demoted to Captain and sent to Titan’s Shield to oversee the barracks in Hen’s Hollow.

Barracks? Now that was a joke. Nine men, five were assigned in rotation to the town gate and the other four to the airship dock. Also, not a single one of them lived in the barracks. The only good thing was the barracks served as the first-year academy for the town, which meant he could watch the training of the fourteen-year-old kids coming of age. His input completely overhauled the training and expectations at the small facility. He wasn’t permitted to teach since he was on active duty, but occasionally, he would selectively mentor one or two students. One of those students was Caleb Hardlight. And today, Caleb was bringing his son out to his farm in the morning for a lesson in swordsmanship.

He looked over his farm with pride. He had enjoyed smoking tobacco. After much research, he had gotten ahold of a strong strain of sweet tobacco whose seeds had been harvested in the dungeons in the lowlands. Most seeds from dungeons were difficult to grow since they required aetheric soil. He was fortunate to have a friend who made it possible.

His tobacco, when prepared, gave off a pleasant blue-gray smoke and had the added effect of increasing one’s reaction speed for a short time after smoking it. The tobacco had the side effect of staining the smoker’s teeth with a blue tint. For Callem, it was a pain to get the special toothpaste from the town’s apothecary to keep his teeth white and healthy from his tobacco habit.

He suddenly seethed, looking over his cash crop as he had a flashback. The bastards in the capital had given him a Captain’s pension even though he had spent 42 years as a commander. A sizable difference, nine gold a month compared to thirty gold a month. Oh, it was still a sizable sum out here in the poorest regions of Skyholme, but after everything he had given Skyholme, he hadn’t expected to be shorted.

Well, the joke was on whatever bureaucrat had shorted him. He sent his pension to his two daughters now and lived off his efforts on the farm. He had been retired for six years and earned nearly 200 gold in profit annually from selling tobacco harvests about five times during the year.

A lot of the credit had to go to his mage friend, Sebastian. He was a war mage specializing in earth and nature magic. When he first moved out to Hen’s Hollow, Sebastian had cleared the land, built the house, and came by every other month to accelerate the field’s growth. In exchange, Callem had a fermentation and distillery in his basement, making a fantastic vodka using the three varieties of potatoes he grew. His vodka was excellent, but he only made five gallons every month and stored the product in special oak casks in his cellar to age it. He also grew sweet potatoes to sell in town and consume himself. Technically he didn’t have a license to make vodka, but he dared the brewer’s guild to object.

His other venture and pastime were training young men and women in combat. His remaining friendly contacts in the capital city would send their children to him before entering their first year of the academy, and he would take a large gold for every three days of training. Right after he had built the farmhouse, he had been training two or three children every month. Now as time distanced himself from the capital, he only had four or five come to his farm every year.

His musings ended as Caleb came into the clearing walking beside a boy. Two more boys followed the pair, one quite large, and Callem wondered if he was still under 14 years old. Callem walked to Caleb, and the two separated from the boys to speak privately. Caleb started, “Thank you for taking your valuable time today to work with the boys. The large boy is my younger son’s friend, Gareth. My eldest, Pascal,” he gestured with his head to indicate the non-descript boy with excitement in his eyes, “has gotten the basics from me and practices every day. My younger son there, Storme, is probably only here because of his friend.” Callem had a unique ability, true sight, which allowed him to see extreme details and clarity even in the dark. This allowed him to glean dozens of details through observation. Over the years, he had been able to sort and refine what he was seeing. He assessed the boys as they walked forward.

Pascal was particularly fit but had a poor range of movement. His eagerness would also get him into trouble in a fight by overestimating his abilities. The big lad moved surprisingly well. He probably had manifested some ability because he didn’t have the marks of a trained fighter. The smaller boy, Storme, was distracted, and it was obvious his heart wasn’t in today’s session. It also looked like he was nursing some injuries or strained muscles from his movements. “I will do my best to get them self-aware in the next three hours,” he told Caleb.

Caleb turned to the boys, “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 is going to spend the next three hours with you boys, so pay attention and make good use of it.” Well, that sounded about right. Caleb had been a good student, but Callem could see from the man’s movements that he had not been diligent in his practice.

He first brought the boys back and showed them the sixteen basic facilitated stretches for joint and muscle movement. The big lad was by far the most limber of the three and could probably make a good acrobat if he had the mind to.

He now needed to teach the boys weapon care and safety and to see who had good focus and attention to detail. He demonstrated to the boys how to clean, store and do minor repairs and then set them to it. Once again, Gareth was at the top of the class, meticulously cleaning the weapons in his charge, tightening wraps, and carefully stowing the weapons when finished.

Now came the fun part for the boys, “Ok, boys, it is time to try to find the weapon you wish to train with.” The excited boys wandered through the racks, and Gareth immediately pulled a saber—the better of the two sabers, Callem noted. Pascal, after a brief hesitation, went for a long sword. The weapon would be too heavy for him at his age and development—a poor choice. Storme moved among the shorter blades. He was smart, but he should have sought a spear or staff. He pulled a gladius and joined the other two. “Okay, staying on your feet, boys, is the most important thing to know to stay alive in a fight. We will now spend the next hour drilling proper movement skills with your selected weapons.”

The next hour was very enjoyable. None of the boys complained, and Gareth rarely needed to be corrected twice. This boy would be an amazing swordsman if he devoted his life to it. It had been a long since he had seen someone with such potential. Pascal was doing well enough as well. Once he fixed his mobility issues, he should make a passable swordsman. The last boy, Storme, had some potential as well. He was obviously fighting through some discomfort from injuries but didn’t complain and worked hard to try and match his bigger friend. The lesson ended up going a little long, but that was ok.

“Good work today, boys. Remember the stretches and do them at least once a day. Practice the footwork with or without weapons. Balance will be key to attacking and defending. “You all did well,” Callem said, leaving the boys after shaking Caleb’s hand and telling him he had good boys. As Callem walked back, he began thinking of ways to get Gareth out here regularly. It would be a shame to waste such innate talent.

He was surprised to see the smallest boy returning and grabbing a small sack by the fence post. He must have forgotten it, but then he approached. “Captain Callem. Is it true you charge a gold per hour for instruction?” What did he want private instruction?

“Yes, what do you seek of me,” Callem said, trying to run out the possible conversation possibilities before they were spoken.

“I wish to come three times a week with my friend Gareth for training. Hopefully, you have time to train us on the 1st, 3rd and 5th day after the mid-day meal. We have book lessons in the morning so cannot come earlier. But I ask you not to reveal this to my father or brother.” Storme said with a hopeful expression, but on the inside, Callem was jumping for joy, but that joy did not show on his face.

Don’t seem too eager. He reprimanded his inner mentor. He needed to bring the price down to something the boys could manage too, “Yes, that can be arranged. You will be here after the mid-day meal on those days, and I will train you two for three hours,” he said, and before the boy could object he continued, “then you two will help around the farm for two hours.” That should be something they could manage. “I don’t train students for less than three hours at a time. Any shorter, and the muscle memory doesn’t take hold. 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 was about to add if they didn’t have the gold, they could work for three hours on the farm, but the boy just nodded.

Storme started looking around, probably trying to imagine what he would have to do. “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 tobacco. I also was thinking of building a new drying barn.”

The boy’s hand shot out to shake, and he said, “Agreed.” Callem covered his surprise when the boy slipped him a coin. “Here is the first week’s payment!” Seeing that it was a gold coin, his jaw dropped a little, and the boy was already off to rejoin his band.

What were the gods working at? He wanted to train Gareth so bad he was ready to do something extreme, and instead, the boy was hand-delivered to him. He could also use the labor on the farm to train the boy’s muscles. If he was correct, Gareth would be one of the best swordsmen of his generation. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be foolish and run off and get himself killed in a dungeon. That thought pulled at his heart. His only son had died in a dungeon.

Callem’s mind began to forecast what he would need to train Gareth. He should have them start by rebuilding the obstacle course in the woods…

Two days later, the boys were walking into the farmhouse clearing wearing packs and having a lively conversation.