**Chapter 23 Gareth Part 1**

The morning sun came and Gareth woke before Storme. Gareth was the heavier sleeper and rarely got up before Storme. He quietly lowered himself down the ladder and dressed. If you were late for breakfast Callem usually was a bit harder on you during training. Well on Gareth anyway. The one-time Callem made Storme do extra work during training Storme made a very bland dinner the next day in retribution and that was enough for Callem to minimize his punishments for being late for breakfast. For Gareth though, the sparring in the evening was more intense and required more healing from Storme. It was Callem's attempt to ingrain in Gareth that being on time was important.

He heard Storme stirring just as he quietly shut the door. Damn, Storme wouldn’t be late but that was ok as he would still get the best portions at breakfast. Storme said he had an internal clock that got him up on time every morning which Gareth assumed had something to do with his magic.

Gareth entered the farmhouse and started helping Callem and Wynna lay out breakfast. Blueberry pancakes with butter, fried eggs, greasy pork sausage, and some iced tea. Iced tea was another invention of Storme. Tea was supposed to be hot but Storme added some ice cubes, lemon juice, and sugar and made it a great drink to pair with meals instead of something you sipped after a meal to soothe digestion.

Almost all of Storme’s culinary creations were great except when he started kicking up the spiciness of dishes. He made a ‘five-alarm chili’ for Callem two weeks ago and Gareth still hadn’t forgiven him. Callem loved it but the chili burned going down and coming out for Gareth. If Storme wanted he probably could have made a fortune establishing a restaurant. Maybe he could convince Storme to buy a restaurant where Gareth could eat for free whenever he wanted. He would have to wait for the right time to bring this up.

After setting the table Gareth pulled half the pancakes to his plate just as Storme entered. Storme liked blueberry pancakes and his annoyance showed on his face, especially after Callem and Wynna took all but one of the pancakes quickly after Gareth. The air carried the smell of vanilla into the room from the door. He was a bit envious of Storme’s spells but he had his own gifts. He was progressing at a phenomenal rate according to Callem. In another year Callem said he would be unbeatable by anyone his age. Storme was also doing well with the sword and had learned a lot of movements of the sword forms but Storme had not mastered them. When they sparred with swords Gareth had to hold back enough to make it interesting and still improve himself. Storme was closing the gap due to physical growth but his skill development would never equal Gareth’s.

Both boys were growing quickly and Gareth was now 6'1" (1.86m) to Storme's 5'8" (1.72m). Both were boys were tall for boys their age and Gareth could pass for 17 or 18 years old, well, Storme maybe 14. Storme's body type was a bit gangly compared to Gareth's thicker frame. Both boys were well-muscled but Storme had a leaner build. Gareth was worried about what his Giant's Constitution ability might turn his body into. Callem had assured him that it would just make him a larger man and not turn his features to mirror a giant. Both boys ate enough for three boys and sometimes they made it a competition at meals, apparently Storme was not playing the game this morning as he ate sparingly.

During stretching later that morning Gareth started needling Storme about his inflexibility, well his inflexibility compared to Gareth. Storme returned the favor by needling him about Brianne. It was a sore subject for Gareth. He had let slip a few times about his jealousy over Brianne hanging out with another boy in town. Brianne had offered to teach Gareth how to kiss and practice kissing with him. Gareth was nervous at the moment she asked and declined her invitation while they were swimming together and had regretted it ever since.

Brianne was two years older than him and was fairly attractive in his opinion. Brianne had stormed off and not talked to him since he declined her invitation. He just hadn’t been prepared for her forwardness. He hadn’t told Storme but Gareth was pretty sure he had figured it out. Gareth had taken a much greater interest in girls and young women in the last few months. The only woman Gareth had seen Storme ogle over was the elven woman from the play. She caught Gareth’s eye as well with her lithe figure and charismatic glow. Gareth had been a little concerned that Storme didn’t like girls for a while. Which was ok with him but Gareth was definitely only interested in girls.

Stretching ended and Storme went inside as Callem and Gareth bombarded him with suggestions for dinner tonight. Callem directed Gareth to the fields to finish planting the tobacco and watering both fields. Gareth was able to do three times the amount of work now compared to when they first moved to the farm, a mark of his improving fitness. The hard morning continued as Storme joined Gareth on the obstacle course. They had three timed runs today for Callem. They usually completed against themselves by competing against the clock. Gareth was just too fast for Storme to compete with when he went all out.

Storme improved his time for the C course from 7:44 to 7:19 on his first run. His second and third were 7:55 and 7:58. He put in an amazing effort to achieve his new best time. And after each run, Storme came up to Gareth clean as if he just stepped out of the shower and smelled of vanilla. The vanilla scent was a little over the top for Gareth. It was pleasant for sure but after a certain point, he would get sick of it. Gareth had improved his best time as well today. 6:32 was his previous best and he ran 6:27, 6:31, and 6:39. Callem praised both of them.

Gareth was filthy after working and training the morning. He looked forward to lunch as he had burned a lot of his energy stores but Callem made him wash up a bit before entering the house. Lunch was bacon sandwiches which Gareth had three of. He tried to uncover what Storme was preparing for dinner but he had taken to hiding it so it would be a surprise. Gareth tried to get Wynna to reveal the upcoming meal but failed. Storme and Wynna had definitely bonded a bit in the kitchen.

The early afternoon was staff practice. It was something that Storme was actually quite good at. Storme could hold off Gareth even when he went full tilt. Storme even scored a hit or two in sparring. They were just glancing blows but still counted as hits. After staff practice, Storme went to study for a bit while Callem did some advanced sword training with Gareth.

The special training was all about reading the opponent's movements. Eye movements, muscle movements, shifting clothing, and unfortunately feints. Callem was his subject and the man could make it impossible to read him if he tried but as Callem got further and further along Gareth was finally getting it. That was until Callem introduced feints and Gareth’s nightmare for the last few days began. Deciding on whether something was a feint, distraction, or actual movement was impossible. He got it right maybe 10% of the time when they started. To his credit, he was already up to 25%. Yes if you do the math just guessing he should be at 33% but this was Callem and you couldn’t guess or maybe Callem was changing the movement partway through based on Gareth's own reaction? Gareth had to read, decipher and then react in a split second. After every engagement, Callem would question him on his thought process then make suggestions and reveal what his actual intentions had been.

Soon the sword practice came to a close as Storme rejoined them. They were now working on wrestling, hand-to-hand combat, and restraints. Wrestling was just hand-to-hand combat without punching or kicking. Restraints were about subduing your opponent and also breaking from an opponent's hold. At first, Storme was the victor in the wrestling to Callem’s surprise. Although Storme was smaller, he was wiry and later told Gareth he had some experience in his past life with wrestling. Well after a week Storme’s advantages faded but he was still a very tough competitor. Gareth’s skill affinity didn’t extend to wrestling or hand-to-hand combat so he had to use his superior agility, speed, and strength. Today Storme won three bouts out of ten which meant he was having a very good day. What annoyed Gareth the most was after each bout he would use his cleanliness spell on himself and complain about how bad Gareth smelled. Unfortunately, there was no hand-to-hand combat training today. Gareth usually won every bout in that discipline.

After they finished Storme healed them both up then they engaged in a handful of sword duels to help Storme's technique. Callem actually let Gareth do the teaching now. Callem just corrected Gareth on his ability to facilitate improvement in Storme’s forms. Storme had trouble chaining the different forms together in a fluid act. He was still completing Tortoise Shell completely before switching to Fox’s Lunge. Couldn’t he see he only needed to do about 80% of the Tortoise Shell defense form before switching to attack in a fluid motion with Fox’s Lunge? He also rarely chose the optimal sword form based on what Gareth was presenting to him. Well, a sword master wasn’t made in a day…unless that person was Gareth. He smirked to himself and almost let Storme pass his defenses to graze his thigh.

Sword practice ended and they had time to clean up. Storme still loved swimming in the cool waters so they went together. As they were in the pool Storme swore. “Fucking shit.” Gareth was on alert. “No, no worries. My cleanliness spell advanced to the 5th level and I wasn’t paying enough attention to focus on the evolution. Give me a second while I figure out what the new evolution now does.” He sounded pretty upset and two minutes later Storme sounded much happier, “Actually it is not too bad. It appears my healing affinity must have aided in the evolution a bit. I didn’t realize that could happen…”

Before he could ramble on Gareth interrupted, “What did you get!” Storme grinned and relaxed into the waters.

“It is a skin renewal and hydration effect. Basically, it makes my skin appear like I just came out of the shower and used a body oil rub.” Storme said with a cocky grin.

“You mean like a noblewoman?” Comparing Storme to a woman always got him irritated so Gareth did it often. What were friends for if not to keep you grounded?

“Let me demonstrate this new power I have and see what you have to say after.” Storme had some iron in his tone. He stood and a few seconds passed and I suppressed my reaction as he did look quite a bit better. Healthier, attractive, and fairer looking. I held my face in check then answered.

“Let me know when you cast the spell,” Gareth said. Storme looked crestfallen but before the trickery could continue Gareth continued, “No I am kidding, your new evolution works as you advertised. You look much prettier. You should be able to find a good man if you use your spell prodigiously!” Gareth started laughing and Storme joined in after a few seconds.

Dinner tonight was Philly Cheese Steak sandwiches with a fruit salad and fried squash. He wasn’t sure why Storme insisted on calling the steak Philly, wasn’t that a young horse? And who would eat horse meat? But the sandwiches were awesome and it was the third time Storme had made them since we moved to the farm. He kept wanting to get feedback on the bread. He wasn’t sure if it paired well with the sandwich. Wynna had baked it to his specifications so Gareth wasn’t going to say anything other than saying it was perfect. Never insulting the chef was his motto...unless Storme needed some grounding.

After dinner, they had our lessons with Wynna. To Gareth's dismay, it was the recent history of the Skyholme Triumvirate. It was a boring subject but Wynna wanted to make sure they understood the political climate so she circled back to this subject at least once a week. After their time with Wynna he sat with Callem for a bit of weapons knowledge while Storme went off and did his magic thing. Callem brought out weapons and quizzed him on how to defend against them and what advantages they had vs various weapons Gareth might yield. He was already starting to puzzle out some things without Callem telling him which was making him very happy. Gareth went back late to find Storme still up.

“Hey Gareth I made three platinum today even with all the healing I did today,” Storme said to Gareth from his loft.

“Even with all the prettying up, you did today as well on top?!” Gareth retorted with his grin. “So are you close?” He asked in anticipation.

“Yep, I have 107 platinum coins ready. Sixth day is two days away and I should be able to get you another four and add to the gold count I have,” Storme paused thinking, “Six large gold and 19 regular gold coins right now.” Gareth still hadn’t quite grasped what an immense amount of wealth that was.

Gareth was just thinking in two days he would be off to the capital and could explore the sites he had only read about in books and discussed with Wynna, Storme, and Callem during meals.

Two more days…he fell asleep thinking about his coming adventure.