**CHAPTER 46 Elites Assemble!**

**After getting over my disappointment at seeing the obstacle course we made our way to the barracks building. Aelyn asked, “So what am I going to be doing while you guys are in training for the next year?”**

**My mind turned over. Callem had not mentioned anything but I was sure he had a plan, “I am sure Callem has something figured out.” Aelyn seemed slightly uncomfortable at not knowing her fate. I was sure in the capital at the fancy first-year academies students could bring servants but I didn’t know if that applied here and I didn’t want Aelyn to think of herself in that way.**

**Gareth was already at the building. I was curious about the renovations. Since the building was essentially abandoned when not in session we had explored it before. Half of the building was two long bunk rooms on either side of a hallway. They led to a large dining room in the center. At the other end were the six separate classrooms, one served as a makeshift armory.**

**The exterior of the building looked exactly like I remembered so where did the money I created for Callem go? We entered the large doors by the bunk rooms and paused. The hallway had a new tile floor, new paint on floors and ceiling, and aether lights in the hallway and the hallway had more doors than I remembered. We opened the first door and it was a small room 10’wide and 20’ deep. The room had a bed, armoire, desk, and chair on each wall. It was like a college dorm room from my old world.**

**Gareth was excited as he thought he would have to sleep in a room with a dozen other boys. Now he just had to share a room with his blood brother, “Storme this is awesome! It is just like the academies in the capital! We get to remain together and get some privacy.”**

**My mind was in turmoil. I was going to have to listen to Gareth’s loud sleep breathing every night for an entire year. Maybe I could commute from home? It wasn’t generally allowed but it was just a 5-minute walk. And Gareth’s stinky feet…**

**Gareth moved into the room inspecting everything. The furniture was new and had the smell of freshly sawn wood. The beds didn’t have mattresses or linens. “Let's check the other rooms Gareth. Maybe some of them have a different setup.” I moved down the hall with Aelyn behind me.**

**Aelyn whispered with a chuckle, “I know there are magical earplugs that block out loud.” She had seen my face when I realized I would be bunking with Gareth. Due to the narrow room and the beds being across from each other it meant I would be sleeping about 6 feet apart from Gareth…too close.**

**There were 15 rooms in total. All had the same furnishings with some having a few extras like armor stands, lock chests, and shelves. The furniture was still being delivered and I assumed every room would eventually have the same. Some rooms had mattresses and linens and were fully furnished. The two rooms at the end of the hallway that led into the dining hall looked to be larger and they even had a large window. I did some quick measurements and yes a little over 12 feet wide. Two extra feet away from Gareth’s noisy sleeping wasn’t much but at least it was something.**

**Gareth caught up to Aelyn and me as I was checking out both of these rooms on opposite sides of the hallway. One window faced the ship dock monolith and the other faced the training yard. Not wanting to look at the training yard I moved into the other room. “Gareth what do you think about this room? It is larger and we can see the skyships coming and going from the window.”**

**Gareth walked to the window and looked out and up, “Nice thinking! And we are right next to the dining room so it will be easier to sneak a late-night snack.” Aelyn chuckled. I was already thinking about getting some type of silence spell to make the next year more bearable.**

**We checked out the dining room next. Once again the floor was new and the walls and ceiling had been painted. All the furniture was new and had a fresh coat of urethane on it. There were five long tables with seating for eight at each. This was a total of forty seats and there were going to be a total of 30 beds. So I guessed the instructors would be eating with us.**

**Another hallway was on the far side of the dining room and led to a kitchen with stairs down to the larder which was empty. The remaining rooms in this hallway contained classrooms, four in total. Each classroom had twelve seats facing a large desk and chalkboard in front.**

**Outside was a brand new privy, the training yard, and the new obstacle course. It looked like there were a large number of training dummies also stacked in a shed. The goal of the first-year academy was basic education to make sure kids could read and write and know some history. But the primary reason was to teach the new 14-year-old adults how to fight. You had a choice of attending the academy or going straight into an apprentice position for a trade skill. The sphere was a dangerous place so most parents required their kids to complete the one-year course before entering their apprenticeship anyway.**

**We moved back to the room we had selected and settled in while Aelyn took a bed in the room across the hallway. “So Stormy we haven’t talked about tomorrow. When we fight in the finals against each other we should give the crowd a good showing. You know, make it entertaining.” I was still thinking of how to get out of the additional fights.**

**“Gareth you don’t know that I am going to win my match,” I started to say.**

**“Oh please, Stormy! These guys are all terrible compared to us. I may be better than you by a fair amount but no one in our little corner of the island is a match for you. We should talk about choreographing our fight.” As if by magic Aelyn appeared back in our room. She had been listening in.**

**“I have a few suggestions,” she said excitedly. One of Aelyn’s shows in the carnival was a choreographed fight against a multitude of opponents. Both Gareth and Aelyn were super excited and without input from me began to discuss how the fight should progress. I lay on the somewhat uncomfortable mattress and closed my eyes scanning my dimensional space.**

**I should start thinking about what my next spell should be. I narrowed the list to either the *Aether Shield* or *Lightning Reflexes*. Both were reward spells from a dungeon so were a little easier to learn. *Aether Shield* was a tier 2 spell and I now had confidence in learning it fairly quickly. *Lightning Reflexes* was a tier 4 spell but its affinities overlapped with lightning and healing so I might be able to learn it after a few months.**

***Aether Shield* was a pure defensive spell while *Lightning Reflexes* could be used offensively or defensively. I summoned both books from my space and paged through them while Aelyn and Gareth were starting to act out the choreography in the small room. Gareth just kept asking if I was paying attention and had any input. I just nodded and continued to read through the spell books trying to make a very important decision.**

**“Come on Stormy!” Gareth pleaded. “This is for your own good. I want you to look as competent as possible in our fight in the final!” I looked up from the book and slipped both books into my space.**

**Well, Gareth just made my mind up for me. Maybe the *Lightning Reflexes* spell would give me an edge in our future combat sparring and bring down my friend’s hubris a little. Even though I wanted to get some sleep we all moved into the dining room and moved some tables and practiced the mock fight. Of course, I felt this gave me some pressure to win my first match tomorrow night.**

**We slept a few hours and then continued. It actually got a little fun…well fun because I started mixing in things that Callem would pull his hair out at. Things you would never do in real combat like flips and rapid blade exchanges. Aelyn contributed a lot as she had a repertoire of moves that she knew the crowd would love. My stomach growled and I called an end to the preparation. Having fought with Gareth for months I felt it would be a pretty good show.**

**We traveled and then to meet to Ennet’s house to meet with Callem and Wynna. The town was planning another mass exodus to the city to watch their two prodigies. Callem smiled as we entered the house. “Ah, boys and Aelyn are you ready for the festivities tonight?”**

**We nodded and Gareth spoke with fervor, “Callem the academy is fantastic! How many students are you expecting? We counted 30 beds.”**

**Callem laughed, “Twenty-eight currently and after Mia, we turned away another seven last night. Your exploits in the tournament have drawn some attention to Hen’s Hollow.”**

**“Will you fill the other two beds?” I asked while looking for some snacks. The tavern’s food had been a little bland. I found something like grapes and helped myself.**

**“We are leaving the two beds open for anyone else from Hen’s Hollow who decides to go. Twenty-eight is a large number and I am still trying to pull in two more teachers.” Callem said slowly. “I have recruited Elora Cassior. She is a famed master of the staff and well versed in dungeon delving.” Gareth perked up and Callem held up his hand to stop a bevy of questions. “My second teacher joining us is Aldon Aethon.” Callem paused hoping we would recognize the name maybe. “Aldon is Leda’s uncle a famed enchanter in the city. He is doing his niece a favor to take some time off from the family’s business and come out here and teach.”**

**My eyes bugged out. Callem held up his hand to stop my questions this time. “Aldon will also be teaching history. The other two teachers I am seeking have not committed so I will wait before revealing them.” Callem’s eyes twinkled at our excitement.**

**“I have also taken some actions against Fazal Balkar. He is going to be replaced for this evening's festivities. Mason Torrent, the city magistrate’s son is going to administer the final duels himself.” Callem finished with a new serious tone. Callem must have been hiding his anger well at the petty tricks they had tried in the early rounds. Callem had professed to not have any pull in the city so I assumed he had found a friend who did have some influence.**

**“Don’t look too excited Storme. Your opponent is Mason’s nephew. But the Torrent family is fairly honorable so I don’t believe anything deceitful will happen.” Callem finished. I remembered that Aelyn was in limbo so asked about her.**

**“Thank you for everything Callem. Sounds like we are going to have some of the best teachers of any first year academy in Skyholme. What will Aelyn be doing during the year?” I asked politely. Aelyn's ears twitched at her name.**

**Wynna answered, “Aelyn will be living in town with us. We are preparing a room for her. I think Callem was going to ask her if she wanted to run the student's conditioning program. She might like to be in charge of you boys.” Gareth's eyes flashed in panic as he and Aelyn were quite competitive and he had been smack-talking her a lot. Aelyn let lose a ferocious grin.**

**“I would like that!” She chirped and looked at Gareth.**

**“Thought you might,” Callem laughed. “I have been working on some new surprises for the obstacle courses and have two long runs mapped out. We can talk more in the stands at the arena this evening. Knowing looks were exchanged between the two. Guess Gareth’s competition with Aelyn was going to do as much damage to me as him, probably more.**

**Soon we were pacing up and heading into the city. I asked Callem if he could stop and purchase me a half dozen heavy staves. I would drop them in my dimensional space to have them in the future.**

**Gareth and I went directly to the arena and there were massive lines waiting for tickets. I hoped my family could get in. What was I thinking? I really didn’t even want to fight…well maybe I did. I just couldn’t decide. I really thought the play fight me and Gareth would put on would be fun for the crowd…so that is what I wanted. I didn’t want to fight but I did want the adoration of the crowd. I wanted to be the center of attention.**

**I tried to use my focus exercises to dispel this need from my psyche. It didn’t work. I would need to work on this.**

**At the arena, we were let in with the other two competitors. The two 14-year-old boys didn’t mingle with us so we waited by ourselves. A mage came by and inspected all four of us and asked us if we planned to utilize any spells. I just noted my *cleanliness* spell and my *mend flesh* spell. He asked to examine our weapons and I was still waiting on Callem for a replacement staff so the other three went first. Gareth’s opponent had a shield and broadsword. He was a square young man, strong but not as tall or nearly as agile as Gareth. My opponent was a Torrent. The Torrent family was one of the three controlling families of the Triumvirate but my opponent was very far removed from the line of succession in the city. He was a very minor noble just sharing the name of the ruling family.**

**The mage waited impatiently for my new staff to arrive and when it did he quickly examined it before handing it to me. Callem knew my preferences and this staff was made of dungeon wood and had thin metal bands around the ends.**

**We watched as the arena filled with spectators and the food hawkers were very busy. The arena was packed beyond capacity with many people standing. I noticed a lot of familiar faces in the crowd of town. I could only see one-half of the arena stands so I wasn’t surprised when I couldn’t find our families and Callem.**

**With the stadium packed Mason Torrent spoke, “Welcome all to this grandiose exhibition of the next generation of heroes of Skyhomle!” Cheers erupted at his pronouncement and I soaked in the applause even though they could not see me in the holding pen under the stands. “Tonight we have entertainment aplenty. The first act will be the Marvelous Ferouzzi Troupe performing the last battle at Axe Helm keep!” More cheers.**

**This battle was a mythic tale told of the bravery and steadfastness of where a dungeon-delving team of six who defended a small village against wave after wave of insectoid monsters in the lowlands. It was a bit strange they did not choose some Skyholme heroes to reenact. “Then we will have….” Mason continued to set the schedule. First up would be Gareth then another act, this one a magical display of illusion mastery. Then it would be my turn to fight. After my fight would be the singing act of a famous singer from the capital. Who I later found out was Mason’s wife. Then the finale…the championship match, maybe it would be Gareth and I.**

**I didn’t watch the first act as I was getting familiar with my new staff. Callem had gotten the length and weight correct it just needed a little breaking in. Cheers erupted as the troupe finished and it was Gareth's turn as he was announced. As Gareth was leaving he patted me on my back, “Don’t lose.”**

**Gareth prolonged the fight. At least I assumed he did because the crowd cheered for a long time at the sounds of swords clattering. My opponent sat and tried to stare me down, psyching me out. Of course, that wouldn’t work on me.**

**Gareth entered and I was shocked to see he had two cuts, one on his cheek and one on his arm. I quickly healed him while the illusion display started and Gareth explained, “I was trying to make things more interesting. The cut on my arm was planned but this,” he pointed to his face, “was not. I slightly underestimated my opponent’s reach.” He shook his head disappointed in himself. “Callem is going to punish me for my stupidity. I saw his disapproving look in the stands. Well Stormy it is up to you, Don’t lose!” Gareth took his seat and soon the illusion show was over and our names were called.**

**I stood across from my opponent and was finally able to see my family. Ok, this was some motivation. When we started my opponent pressed and he was very good. He was the third-ranked fighter from the evaluations after Gareth and Zaneth. He didn’t have many weaknesses other than the fact he was not familiar with fighting against an opponent with a staff.**

**I was able to keep him at bay using both ends of my staff as I backpedaled and studied his movements. It was clear he trying to bait me on some openings in his form. I had been tricked way too many times by Gareth to fall for them though. I suddenly thrust my staff at his midsection taking him off guard and scoring a hit on his solar plexus. He stumbled back surprised at the force of the strike. My staff was heavy and I had put my mass behind it.**

**He was smarting from the strike and his pressing attack slowed my next strike aimed for his knee which he blocked down but I pivoted my staff to bring the other end toward his head sensing victory. To save himself he rolled forward to avoid the blow to his head but I was able to adjust my target ad got him solidly in the back causing his roll to turn into a stumbling sprawl in the sand. He managed to recover but not before I got two solid strikes on his torso.**

**If I had been wielding a sword, a weapon the young man was familiar with this would have gone differently. I probably could have won but it would have been different. I saw the defeat in his eyes now. He knew he couldn’t beat me and it was just a matter of time. I gave him face and let him exchange with me three more times before surprising him with another quick thrust to his solar plexus. This put him over the edge as even with his leather armor two strikes to this spot of nerves crippled him. He couldn’t move well and soon yielded.**

**I shook hands with him, not quite believing I had won. I had a great teacher and skilled training partners in Gareth and Aelyn so maybe I just underestimated myself a bit? A smiled at the cheers raining down upon me as I headed to the holding room.**

**As I entered the room with Gareth he hugged me and said, “Knew you could do it! That was classic defense and opportunistic attacking! So are we still on for our little show?” I nodded and thought why not. I healed both of us completely as a beautiful song was sung outside. The crowd remained quiet listening.**

**We were called out by Mason Torrent, “Storme Hardlight and Gareth Highguard will represent our city in the Annuals this year at the capital!” Cheers came and we both grinned at each other. “But we would still like to crown a champion tonight! These two will battle for the opportunity to dine with me and my father in the magistrate’s estate! And the winner will be awarded a large gold coin and this!” He raised a small ring in the air and we both looked at the fancy ring. “This is a ring of strength to help them achieve success in the capital!” The cheer erupted again, this time for Mason’s generosity. It was generous as the ring might be worth two or three platinum.**

**He whispered to both of us, “I hope this is enough motivation to put on a good show boys.” When he was seated our combat display began. We went at each other exchanging a series of twenty weapon blocks before one of us disengaged with a flamboyant summersault or tumble. The crowd was eating this up based on their cheers. I was sure only seasoned warriors would realize what a farce our combat was.**

**We continued for almost twenty minutes and with both of us breathing heavily and tired…well, I was tired…Gareth was probably faking it…we engaged for the last time and it finished with Gareth’s sword at the back of my neck. I of course yielded and the crowd went wild. We both found our families in the crowd and Callem did not look angry with us. He looked amused.**

**I left the arena and headed to the stands while Gareth went to meet and receive his prizes from Mason Torrent. I got lots of claps on my sweaty back as I sat with my family and next to Callem. Callem leaned into me and whispered, “Quite the show. Didn’t think you were going to give it this much effort. A bit flashy at the end but I can understand why you both did it.” He patted me on my back.**

**“Oh Storme, one more thing. One of the teachers I was hoping to come and teach at the academy has agreed. Archmage Sana Velin will be taking a one-year vacation from the lowlands to spend some time in our small town.” Callem looked extremely smug. Sana Velin was a spell researcher of quite some renown and had authored my *cleanliness* spellbook.**

**I missed the ceremonies processing the words Callem had said. I was going to have a teacher for my magics. And not just any teacher. “Who is the other person you are trying to get to teach at the academy Callem? You said there were two more.” Callem looked at me appraisingly.**

**He answered, “He is a famous monster hunter that let Skyholme when my son was lost. He trained my son and his friends. I haven’t been able to track him down yet but I am assuming he is still alive.” Callem looked off into space. “Sebastian recruited Sana Velin for me when I asked for him to get a mage mentor from outside of Skyholme to teach you. She grew up in Skyholme but moved to the lowlands a century ago. She wishes her return to be kept secret. She is coming back to check on her descendants mostly but Sebastian has piqued her interest in you.”**

**This was going to be a very interesting first year of the academy for all the young men and women in Hen’s Hollow.**

***END OF ARC ONE***