**Chapter 13 Vested in the Sword**

Gareth had to wake me in the morning as I hadn’t risen. My body was in full recovery mode. Callem had slipped out and was already in his fields, watering individual plants. He was wearing what I guessed to be a large oxen yoke and two massive buckets hung on either end. As he walked the rows he pulled a rope attached to each bucket releasing water. He noticed us in the doorway gawking. “Don’t worry boys you will work yourselves up to this. Your breakfast is under the cover on the counter.” He returned to watering.

We removed the cover on the counter to find an array of fresh fruit, muffin cakes, cold sliced ham, and hard-boiled eggs. A pitcher of sweet-smelling red juice was there with ice cubes floating in it. How in the hell did he prepare all this without waking either of us? We dug in after glancing at each other and quickly vanquished our shared enemy of the prepared food. I was happy to almost match Gareth’s caloric intake this morning. I knew healing magic typically used body stores to heal and I had had an awful lot of healing done yesterday. Satiated we both sat near the bedrolls holding our bellies.

I was dressed in oversized linens. My other clothes were completely ruined by the eagle and the blood. Apparently, the linens were from a prior trainee of Callem but would do for me until I could get clothes from home. My leather belt worked well to hold the linens to get a decent fit. I looked at Gareth. “Where do we go from here?” He looked a bit uncomfortable at my question.

“I want to stay here Storme. I talked to my parents when I tried to explain my reason for heading out here for three days with you and even though I fumbled the words I found in my heart I want to be here. I want to learn as much as I can.” Before I could respond Callem had returned to the house from the fields. He started talking with Gareth and I tuned them out as I began to think. I didn’t want to invest my remaining youth swinging a sword around all day. Three days a week had been my self-assessed limit. We needed to have a hard talk.

Callem was refilling the pitcher with the red drink that reminded me of a strong fruit punch but not overly sweet. I spoke, “Callem has Gareth expressed his interest in moving out here to stay with you?" I broke the ice, "We could help you full-time five days a week and return to Hen’s Hollow for two days to stay with our families." I took a deep breath before continuing, "I am not nearly as committed as Gareth but I will train with him for half the day before focusing on my aetheric studies.” I was preempting Gareth in hopes to control the situation and keep Gareth restrained a bit. I was pretty sure he would train every hour of every day if given the option.

Gareth was a little confused, his face kept transforming, first happy then contemplative then a little bit unhappy. I couldn’t really worry about what was going through his mind right now. Personally, I was thinking of Freya, she might never forgive me for this. Then there was my brother, he also probably wouldn’t forgive me. Father would support my decision as he always hoped his sons would aspire to a higher standing in the militaristic Skyholme Empire.

Callem slowly nodded. “I do not think you should have hidden what happened to you with the eagle attack Storme. But I have always been of the mind you need to make your own decisions, no matter your age. However, if your parents ask I will not lie for you.” I suddenly felt guilty. This man was good, he was probably either trying to decide on my character or build my character.

“Callem thank you. I will tell them what happened…but maybe not that I nearly died.” I said. He nodded at my reply.

“Good. You both can stay here and train. Before we get too far along I need to assess you!” He started asking us both questions. He wanted to get a fair appraisal of our knowledge, math, writing, history, dungeon lore, bestiary lore, and politics. We had strong responses to his test questions for the first two subjects and did ok with the verbal history exam. In the last three subjects, we could barely answer any of his questions. Well, the biggest animal threat on our island was the wild foxes which controlled the rabbit population. Well if you ventured too close to the edge of the island something from below could get you...like a giant black eagle.

His questioning lasted two hours and we were mentally exhausted by the end and embarrassed by how few questions we could answer toward the end. Callem voiced his assessment of our knowledge. “Ok, normally you boys would get most of this knowledge in the academy. You are expected to know basic numbers and be able to read before the academy and both of you far surpass that minimum." Gareth beamed at the compliment. I remained blank-faced waiting for the 'but'. "Though you are still a little behind the children in the Skyholme capital who have personal tutors as soon as they can walk.” He shifted his stance fluidly and started pacing. I knew this was what Callem had wanted as well, to get his hands on Gareth full time but from the outside, he seemed contemplative.

“You will stretch and work the farm with me in the morning. In the afternoon we will focus on combat training. In the evening we will spend two hours on books. I will purchase the required texts. You will have three hours after dinner to do what you will in your free time. If you had the mind to you could make it to town and spend an hour with your family before returning. As Storme suggested every 6th and 7th day you will spend with your families. I will feed you three full meals each day and pay you 1 gold per week to split between you.” He was trying to flip the script. He didn’t know money was not an obstacle for us. It was his final 'lure' attempt. Gareth didn't need any extra incentive and somehow I had convinced myself to remain with Gareth. Who was following who now?

Gareth had that pleading look on his face and his best puppy dog eyes as he looked to me to answer. Callem had made a good case. Outlining a schedule our parents would agree to and pay that should far surpass what kids our age could make. My portion would probably exceed what my mother and father made. I nodded to Gareth and he screamed “Agreed!” like a little kid afraid it was all just a prank or he would wake up from a perfect dream.

Well, the first day wasn’t as bad as I had thought it would be. We stretched as a trio then weeded the fields and continued clearing the obstacle course. Watering wasn't required as the morning had provided some rain. Usually, the island had a heavy mist in the morning that did a fair job soaking the earth. Only when the mist and rain were missing for two or more days did Callem need to water the fields. In the afternoon we actually learned about bows and not swords. Well not actually about bows but arrows. Callem drilled into us that the importance of archery was two parts, the bow, and the arrow. So we spent hours going through six bundles of arrows removing the bad ones and repairing those we could under his direction.

In the evening we went to the spring to clean off and pull the splinters out of our hands and forearms. The food the first day was plentiful and Callem muttered more than once he had erred in not considering the cost of food for two growing boys.

The evening found us having free time after we aced some math problems for Callem. Callem also stressed that we should just call him Callem and not Captain Callem. I went and worked through my aether core exercises that evening. I managed to understand the first seven and put them into practice. Fortunately, the text was very good at explaining what needed to be done during each step of the exercises. I might fail a few times before getting it but so far had encountered no major problems.

That night I made a stack of gold coins and had Gareth stash them in his pack. I still planned to take Freya to the city once a week and visit Wigand. I needed 50 gold coins to complete the transaction with Wigand.

The next two days were more of the same except my strength had returned and the intensity had ratcheted up. We spent just thirty minutes with bow practice before proceeding to sword forms in the afternoon. While I was mastering just one sword Gareth was rotating through different blades mastering the current sword form w were working on with each one. I settled on a saber as that was closer to a katana. A katana was thinner and lighter than a saber but Callem didn't have one for me. And it was the blade I felt most comfortable with since it focused on slashing attacks instead of the piercing attacks of a gladius. I hoped to obtain a katana eventually because of the samurai stories in my past life.

Well, truthfully neither of us was ‘mastering’ the blade after a few days but we gaining confidence and comfort with them in our hands. Callem let us use a salve that helped form calluses on our hands quickly which we were both thankful for. I managed to learn 18 of the 23 exercises for working my aether core. Like my first sword form, snapping tortoise, I was far from having mastery of the aether core exercises but I was slowly becoming proficient. Being self-taught from a book was probably much harder than having an experienced mage teach me.

The next day we were released to go home after a massive breakfast. Callem let us know he was going to the capital island to pick up some books and restock his pantry over the next two days. He said we should just stretch in the morning and relax with family on our 'off' days. I was going home to face Freya.

If we walked fast we could get home in a little over thirty minutes, it was about three miles (5 km) by my estimation to the edge of town. As soon as we entered town Gareth went to see his parents to convince them to let him live and train on Callem's farm. After a short search of my house, I found Freya out in the barn. She ran to me and hugged me. “Hiya Freya. Do you want to go to the city today? We have some things to talk about.”

“Yes! I was hoping you would say that! But you need to put on some actual clothes. You realize that you are wearing woman’s clothes?” This had me stumble a bit. The oversized clothes Callem had given me were women’s clothes?"Yes silly, the cut here and here is for breasts! And the sagginess around your waist is for larger hips!" She was laughing as she was explaining it to me. Well, at least no one in town saw me.

I went into my room and found the bed neatly made and everything on my shelves organized. Freya was in the doorway shortly after and stumbled on her words, “I uh had nothing to do, so I uh cleaned up the room.”

I looked her seriously in the eyes and asked, “Did you dust underneath the bed?” She turned crimson.

“I am sorry Storme I was just cleaning and came across the package and…I thought it was a pillow…yeah and so I…it is so pretty! I love it!” She came and hugged me again. “Can I wear it on my birthday? Gwen is going to be so jealous! I can not wait! Oh did you know there is a traveling troupe from the lowlands coming to the city? They will be there on my birthday! They have a beast menagerie, acrobats, games, bards, and master sword duelists. You will take me? It is 2 silver per person according to the posters. Please…” She had the same puppy dog eyes Gareth gave me when Callem had made his offer to train us five days a week.

“We can talk on the walk to the city. Can I change now?” Freya left and shut the door but I could feel her presence on the other side, waiting.

I got my best clothes on which were quickly becoming mediocre. I needed to buy new clothes today. Did Callem intentionally dress me in girl's clothes? No matter. I left the house with Freya in tow. We quickly found Gareth cutting wood. He was three days behind on his chores and hadn’t had the guts to ask his parents to move to Callem’s farm yet. Freya and I helped him finish his chores and we left for the city.

“So Freya, I have some bad news.” I had had some time to think out my approach to breaking the news to her. “You know when we turn 14 we go to the academy and live in the old barracks building at the edge of town?”

She nodded, “I know Pascal is going next year.” She had a concerned look on her face though, she was bracing for it.

“Well, Gareth and I are starting early. Next 1st day we are going to go live with and learn from Captain Callem.” It was best to rip the band aide right off. Then give some news to soften the blow. “We will come back every 6th and 7th day. And I and Gareth will spend one of those days entirely with you doing whatever you want.” Gareth’s eyebrow went up at that. Take that little bit of revenge Gareth for the extra stretching!

“Yeah I and Storme talked about it and we figured you would want to go to *Sweet and Treats* and *Madam Marget’s Tailor* shop. We are making decent coin and can get you a few things.” The bastard was setting me up as the grin was on his face. Ok, let's continue this volley Gareth. The clothing store had expensive dresses and accessories for women and girls. Supposedly the height of fashion from the capital.

“Yeah,” I gave him a sour look. “I will take you to *Sweets and Treats* and Gareth will take you to the tailor shop every week." Game set and match Gareth! Freya was sure to spend much more time in the clothing shop.

Freya responded with excitement, "You said you would both hang out with me so we all stay together in *Sweets and Treats* and at *Marget's Finery*." And the pass is intercepted by Freya and spiked in front of both of us. At least she wasn't as upset as I thought she would be.

We entered the city and I gave Gareth four large silvers after they dropped me off at Wigand’s. I found Wigand in the back and handed him 30 gold coins. Some of the coins had a shiny new appearance as I had not had time to age them. Wigand did seem to stare at them for a bit before depositing them in his lockbox. “So I haven’t seen my patron recently but I did have a note from her with the coins attached. She will be back in a week to get me the rest of the funds. She went to the lowlands for something.” I didn’t rush my words while spewing the lie.

I hoped to have a few platinum coins by then. My aether core was becoming more malleable and it had just been a few days of the exercises. “I was looking to get another spell if my patron allows. Can you get a copy of the mend flesh spell?” After nearly dying I wanted to learn some healing magic.

The mend flesh used the body's own fuel, mostly fat stores, to knit flesh back together, accelerating healing in a sort of stasis field created by the invested aether. The spell was tier 1 but the spell book was usually over 30 gold. Wigand looked thoughtful, “The mend flesh spell…very difficult spell to learn. Have you already learned the *cleanliness* spell Storme?”

I flushed red. No, I had given up on that until I could master the aether core exercises, and then I could progress to learning the spell imprinting process from the other book. “I’m getting close,” was my reply. He nodded and went to the massive index. After a short time, he responded. “I have a line on two versions of the spell. The first is 35 gold and is the generic spell book you can get at any mage academy. The second is an older spell book recovered from a wrecked Sadian skyship. Apparently, it was the ship's chief healer version of the mend flesh spell and it has copious notes handwritten in it. 42 gold. But it has been posted for over a year. If it is still available I should be able to get it for 40 gold if you are interested?”

I made my best sad face. "I will have to check with my patron as she hadn’t mentioned any new payments to us but I would like the forty-two gold version if you can confirm its availability. I will know next week. We have to finish our current tasks for her." Ugh, I was terrible at lying and it turned my stomach a little.

I left the shop and then traveled to the clothier shop nearby that specialized in boy's clothes. I quickly selected six comfortable outfits, three for working the farm and three for combat training and running the obstacle course. I added two heavy pairs of boots as well. I wasn’t looking forward to breaking them in. Maybe the salve we used for our hands would help with that? I had a large wrapped package of clothes, boots, and 18 pairs of quality socks when I left. The only thing in the package for Gareth was half the socks, his feet were extremely unsanitary, and sleeping next to him on the floor in Callem's living room had made me appreciate the fresh air outdoors all the much more. I had been thrifty, only spending 13 large silver on everything.

Gareth and Freya were still in *Sweets and Treats* when I finally got there and she had a big bag of candy. Gareth paid for the candy and we went to a restaurant in town for lunch. We then took the road home and went swimming. I spent my time focused on my exercises and tanning my upper body while the locals were swimming. I noticed Brianne was with Edward, a boy closer to her age and the son of the stone mason in town. I found it humorous that Gareth kept glancing at the pair, clearly jealous.

My one mistake was displaying my scar as I had my shirt off. Freya thought it was a tattoo and promised to keep my secret of getting a tattoo from our parents. Oh well, it was a good day and my body needed rest. I knew Callem would be cranking up the training soon so I would enjoy the moment. I fell asleep in the sun, enjoying my second chance at youth.