**Chapter 14 Settling In**

Waking up in my own bed was nice, especially on a mattress and not a hard floor. I needed to confront the parents today. I could already hear Freya talking to my mother at the other end of the house. Shit. I forgot to tell her I was going to that myself at breakfast. I remained in my room as the house came to life and breakfast was prepared. Even if they said no, I would still be going. Hoping it will go well. I left my room to face the music.

I entered the kitchen. Breakfast was on the table, with buckwheat porridge and candied nuts to mask the heavy blandness. The nuts were local and common but had a bitter aftertaste that the candying did not mask well. Ok, the day was not starting well. Mother asked, “So Freya said you have a big announcement?” Well, she hadn’t broken the news yet, at least. Father stopped spooning the porridge into his mouth and looked at me. Pascal took the opportunity to pour half the remaining nuts into his bowl and then stopped to look as well.

“Yes, um. You know I was working for Callem, I mean Captain Callem, the last few days. Well, he sort of recruited, no, um, asked us if we…that is Gareth and me, if we wanted to work his farm and train on his farm,” My speech went from halting to fast-paced suddenly, “It would just be for five days a week. I would be back for the 6th and 7th days. And we will learn more than just fighting and tending his fields. And he is paying us and feeding us. It is ok, right.” I breathed deeply, unsure how I had become winded from those few words, but my pulse raced, and my aether core hummed and burned, responding to my anxiety.

Father was the first to speak, “Captain Callem is going to train you himself?” The words were cold and questioning, sounding doubtful. I just nodded, thinking he was upset, but then his face broke into the biggest-toothed smile I had ever seen from the man. “Alurha, we are going to have a master swordsman for a son!” He was soon up and hugging me. I was keenly paying attention to everyone to gauge their reaction, Freya was smiling, and my mother had a small grin, but that was apparently at seeing father happy as she was eying him more than me. Pascal had stormy resentful eyes and a darker facial expression. Well, 3 out of 4 was good, right?

Instead of going to work today, my mother started helping me pack. She put everything in my bedroom except one set of clothes in a crate and asked if I needed anything else. I said pillows and explained how it was hard to sleep when my body was so sore. She went out and bought me nine new super fluffy feather pillows! She explained that since she didn’t have to feed me, she would have extra coin, and spending it a little early on me was just common sense.

She also gave me a drying rack for clothes, detergent, three newish towels, some old dishes and pots, two of my dad’s old jackets, a needle and thread, and six sweet rolls wrapped in paper. I could see she was both proud and worried about me. Freya confirmed that I would be back for her birthday and to take her to see the traveling show in the city on her special day. Pascal was nowhere to be seen, clearly jealous I was training with Callem. I made sure my mother never saw my collection of mage books. It was not something I wanted to reveal yet.

Eventually, I had two large crates outside storing most of my worldly possessions inside them, and I found Gareth with a single overstuffed backpack walking toward me later in the day. His eyebrow rose in question at the crates, and I just shrugged, “Gareth, you remember when I said I would buy a cart so you could pull me? Well, that time has come!” I laughed my most evil supervillain laugh, and he actually edged away from me. Well, it ended up just being a large two-wheeled wheelbarrow. Gareth did, in fact, push it most of the way, and the one time I jumped in, he just stopped until I paid him a large silver, then he pushed me a few hundred feet before demanding another. I started walking, exclaiming, “Good and honest help is hard to find in these woods!”

It was late in the day when we did get to Callem’s farm and were shocked to find a new building opposite the training yard from the farmhouse. It was not very big, just 16 feet by 32 feet. It was stone, and we entered to find a common room and kitchen with ladders on each side leading up to sleeping lofts. The kitchen was fully furnished, and the common room had two plush chairs and a small dining table with four chairs. We investigated both of the doors. One led to a tiny washroom, and the other had stairs down to a fully stocked larder. The larder was very cold, and I noticed the runic markings on a stone in the center. Looking around, there was enough food to feed us for a year! Callem descended the stairs as we gawked at all the food on the stone shelves.

“Boys, good to see you are back. Called in a favor,” Callem winked at me, “From an earth mage to get this outbuilding done. We can’t have you two sleeping on the floor with the type of training we will be doing. The furnishings I retrieved from my storage unit in the capital.” He muttered under his breath, “I haven’t visited those memories in a while.” He recomposed himself, “The larder down here,” he hesitated, thinking what to say, “...well, you two need to learn how to cook your own food. I said I would feed you, not cook for you.”

Gareth excitedly butted in, “Storme is the best cook in Hen’s Hollow…” his voice died as I gave him a death stare. The last thing I wanted to be doing after working myself to exhaustion every day was to cook for three hungry men.

“Is that so?” Callem responded with a smirk and eyed me deviously. I swear he could read minds. “Well, I will prepare breakfast every morning, and you will eat in the house with me. Mid-day meal will be from the larder here, prepared by both of you. The evening meal will be a hearty stew that I will put on in the morning to cook all day and will be eaten here as well. You will clean all the dishes from each meal here.” Yeah, I would be preparing the mid-day meal by myself as Gareth was a terrible cook. He could make a baked potato taste awful. I surveyed the larder, making mental notes and putting together meals in my head.

“Now, boys, come to the house, and I will show you the new library!” Callem sounded excited and seemed much younger today by his enthusiasm.

The ‘library’ had two copies of twenty-one texts, each thick with pages. They covered beasts, dungeons, politics, law, culture, and trade. All the books were old, and Callem conceded he got them from the naval academies’ storage units. They were supposed to be handed down to lesser academies when the naval academy got the newest copies but had been packaged in crates and put into storage instead. Callem told us he had purchased them for a few coins since he knew the logistics officer in charge of the academy.

After all, was said and done, Callem produced his stew for the evening. It was a bit mushy, and when I asked how he made it and offered suggestions to improve it, I was named the new stew chef. Callem, the sly fox, had been waiting for me to criticize his cooking. So from now on, after breakfast and stretching in the morning I would be given an hour to prepare the dinner meal. At least I wouldn’t have to work the fields during that time. It wouldn’t have been so bad if not for Gareth openly laughing at my error. You should never insult a man’s cooking by saying you can do better!

The plush chairs in our living room, our new bunkhouse, were well-worn, well-made, and extremely comfortable. There were lanterns fitted with soft aether light stones. I marveled at the time, effort, and expense Callem had put into making us comfortable…well he was going to do his best to make us very uncomfortable during the day, I surmised.

The upper lofts were very comfortable as well. There was a loft on each side measuring 5’ by 20’ (2m x 6m), and each loft had two narrow beds, three chests under each bed, a long shelf over each bed, and two armoires. The beds were in the center of the lofts, end to end. So Callem could host four students here in his new guest house? Something must have happened, or at least I was forecasting Cilia would be coming with someone else. Gareth and I selected opposite sides of the loft, and I unpacked, hauling my stuff up the ladder. I knew all these pillows would be a godsend starting tomorrow night. I spent some time working on my aether core before falling asleep.

We had cold roasted pork, soft cheese, and a thick applesauce in the morning—no fruit juice this morning, just water. We stretched together, and they went to the fields while I went to the house to set up dinner.

I prepared lamb stew with potatoes, carrots, and red wine for the stew. After coating them in flour, I braised the lamb cubes to hold them together and seal in the juices while the stew simmered. I accessed Callem’s larder in the house and found a decent-sized distillery in the basement and dozens of full oak casks marked vodka with different dates on them. His larder matched the size of the one under the bunkhouse. There was no way we were going hungry.

He had twenty-two large casks of the fruit juice too, and three were empty when I taped on them. He didn’t have an extensive selection of wine, though, just 37 bottles; all were local vintages in Hen’s Hollow. There was no stigma in regard to kids drinking wine in the Skyholme culture. Most wines had very little alcohol and were very fruity.

After the stew was simmering over coals, I joined them in the fields, and then we began the real work…

Five days had passed, and not a single inch of my body did not hurt. Callem knew how to push us without quite breaking us. My favorite part of the day? It was falling face first into the cold spring we used to bathe a quarter mile from the dwellings. The cold water shocked me enough to forget the muscle pain. This morning was the absolute worst day so far. We learned there were actually 23 stretches.

The five we hadn’t learned were because they were for acrobatics. Callem didn’t seem to care, and so we started to force ourselves into being able to do a split. He did so without hesitation when we asked him if he could do a split. How could a man as square as him splay his legs and get his pelvis to the earth? I shuddered, thinking about how far I still had to go to match that feat of mobility. My only solace was Gareth had struggled as well.

Gareth splashed into the water a few seconds after me. It had been a productive week, as I reflected. I let the cold water numb my poor body. The bend in the stream here was shaded, and the natural sandy-bottomed pool here was perfect for us. It was actually the only place deep enough to submerge in the nearby stream. Tonight’s stew was a meat and bean chili with sweet peppers. It was the second time I had made it this week at Callem’s request. Callem had eaten over half of the first batch himself.

The man loved my cooking, and I couldn’t believe how much he ate. I had already scaled up my stew twice. I was now using the biggest pot Callem had in his kitchen. There was one good thing that came from cooking dinner and preparing lunch. I didn’t have to do the dishes! Callem and Gareth did all the day’s dishes together while discussing sword mastery after dinner. Gareth was outpacing me in learning the art of combat. It seemed I would only master one blade to his 23, but I was fine with that.

I was actually a decent archer when Callem had us practice with the bows. Gareth was better, of course, but only by a slight margin, and Callem could usually find and correct my faults. Just a few comments from him had me improving swiftly. We were working with smaller bows with low draw weight for now. And Callem had us making our own arrows as well. I was actually better than Gareth at fletching. It had absolutely nothing to do with me using my metal shaping skill to fit the arrowheads. Yep, that had nothing to do with it. Gareth wasn’t training us to be fletchers just to be competent enough to make arrows if we needed to.

The obstacle course, or the ‘course of ultimate pain’ as I liked to call it, was fun at first. Then Callem added weighted vests, shot arrows capped with leather balls at us, had moving obstacles on pendulums, and secretly changed the obstacles during the night to trip us up, and I mean literally trip us up. He said it was the first phase of teaching a soldier to be aware of everything in combat and expect the unexpected. He was definitely having more fun than us. Gareth was having fun because he seemed to recover three times as fast as me. Callem withheld salves and potions, saying I needed to train my body’s healing processes. Yeah, at least the cold water felt good as it sapped away the heat from my muscles.

The best part of the last five days was my aether core training. I had gotten all 23 exercises down and practiced them each night until I passed out from fatigue. I also never forgot to add to my growing horde of gold coins. To my surprise, the number of gold coins had increased to 14. I also felt, no, I knew, I was extremely close to being able to make just a single gold coin at a time which would mean I was close to making my first platinum.

“Stormy?” Gareth asked to see if I was paying attention.

“Yeah, bud, what’s cooking in your head tonight?” The cold water soaks had served as a time of reflection for us, but we usually relaxed and just talked nonsense. “You have a meal request?”

He let out a sigh, “No, I was just thinking I wanted to become an adventurer.” I was quiet, so he continued. “I want to see more than just Skyholme. I actually don’t think I want to live here, in Skyholme, that is.” This was Callem’s fault. He had revealed the corruption of politics within the capital in our nightly lessons. A fairly naïve boy like Gareth had not taken it well, but he worshiped Callem, so Gareth took everything he said literally during lessons.

“Gareth, we are 12.” I said emphatically, “It is too early to think about these things. Can we revisit this conversation after our first year of the academy?” I hadn’t soured on spending my life in Skyholme. I was sure I would find the old adage, ‘power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely’ would hold true anywhere I went within the sphere.

The mood mellowed, and soon we were walking back to the house, a little gimpy but clean. We talked about going home tomorrow and planning what to do for Freya’s birthday. Basically, we planned to escort her to all the various acts from the traveling troupe coming to the city.

At dinner, Callem ate so much chili I couldn’t believe he didn’t burst. I showed him to take the spiciness off the chili with a slice of yellow cheddar cheese and buttered bread. He ignored it and just ate the chili as if reveling in the spicy heat. I could only thank our fortune that we would not have to sleep in the same room as him tonight.

That night lying in my bed, something amazing happened. After my exercises and getting close to falling asleep, I decided to take another shot at making platinum before making the gold coins. I made two platinum coins and half of a third!