**Chapter 12 Sebastian**

The large bird grasped my right shoulder and left bicep in his talons. One talon pierced my upper chest on the right side. The momentum of the raptor took my left arm into a painful rotation, pulling it out of its socket and tearing ligaments and muscles. I was now pinned to the ground and looking up at a giant black eagle. It had a foot-long beak whose sharpness looked like it would make easy work of my tender flesh. When we locked eyes, I saw my end in its black eyes.

Gareth suddenly appeared behind the eagle’s head, flying through the air out of its line of sight. The eagle didn’t pick up on his presence as he landed on its back, wrapped his left arm around the neck of the raptor, and drew his dagger clean across its neck with his other arm in an instant. The bird tried to turn, but it was far too late for it to respond to the attack. Its neck tendons were most likely cut, and the large bird hung over me for a brief second before collapsing onto me, completely burying my body.

The death collapse movement wrenched my arm and shoulder more, and I felt the talon release from my chest, alleviating pressure but allowing my lifeblood to flow from the wound. The weight of the bird was not my biggest problem. The blood from Gareth’s attack flowed freely from the eagle’s neck, and the feathers were suffocating me. I was drowning in blood and suffocating at the same time.

It was a short time later that Gareth had pulled the beast away. I couldn’t speak; the only sound I could make was a rasping moan. My eyes were mostly out of focus, but I could see the panicked look on Gareth’s face. He fumbled through a pouch on his waist, produced the restorative vial he had purchased today, and poured it into my mouth. “Shit, still bleeding,” was all he said as he ran to my pack and dumped the contents out. Was it weird that I was more concerned with the rough treatment of my books than my ebbing life?

Gareth returned with the vial he had given me a few hours ago and again forced the liquid into my throat. How the hell was I still conscious? My mind was currently clear and, Oh shit! Two potions consecutively before the first dissolved! It was a simple thing told in a child’s rhyme. The dangers of combining two potions within the digestive tract. It was rarely a pleasant experience for the imbiber. It was a major error on Gareth’s part, but as long as they were from the same batch, I should be all right. At least, I hoped so.

A few moments later and Gareth finally relaxed. “It stopped bleeding, but your arm is all messed up. What should I do?” Well, I was in no place to give advice as my shock was starting to wear off, and the pain was doubling every second as my body figured out my condition. Tears started streaming from my eyes, and then I screamed. Well, it wasn’t a scream, as I now knew some of my ribs were broken. “Quiet Storme!” Gareth whispered urgently, rushing back to me, “The shadow eagles usually hunt in pairs.” He was scanning the sky now.

My thoughts drifted to shadow eagles. We learned about them in school. They had not been seen on the island in over twenty years, and Gareth and I had decided the stories of them were more to scare young children from venturing toward the edge of the island and risking falling. Even the tales said the eagles just targeted small children and livestock. Guess in the raptor’s eyes; I fell in that category.

“Ok, Storme. I need you to wait here. I am going to Callem. He is a little closer than if I went all the way back home. But I am going to have to move you beneath the ironwood tree by the water for cover. This is not going to be pleasant.” Well, it didn’t matter as Gareth’s first tug under my arms pushed me into unconsciousness.

I awoke with Callem kneeling over me, but I couldn’t open my eyes and just recognized the man by his voice. I wasn’t sure how long he had been there, but he was checking my body. I felt his hands inspecting my injuries gently. “It is not good, Gareth. The vial I gave him will deaden his nerves and keep him from feeling the pain. He is going to need a good healer from the capital,” he paused, “I have a friend who will come. We will get him back to the farmhouse first. Once he is safe there, you can go tell his parents.” I managed to shake my head somehow ‘No.’ Iron was in Callem’s tone of voice, “Fool boy. You are halfway to the grave, and if not that, you are probably going to be crippled unless you receive some upper-tier healing,” he sighed loudly. “Gareth, tell his parents what you will,” Callem said with some frustration.

Although I couldn’t think clearly, I still muttered two words before slipping away to unconsciousness again, “My books….”

I awoke and could hear three distinct voices talking. One was Callem, one was feminine, and the third was male. I kept my eyes shut and listened. The female voice was speaking, “…are you sure? I repaired all the damage to the flesh and bone. The scar on his right shoulder will not be difficult to remove. There is also no sign of any further infection.”

The unfamiliar male voice spoke next, “Nisil, that will be all. Callem wants the scar to remind the boy of what happens in your youth when you are foolish. Hopefully, he will learn from this little adventure. You can wait on the Wind Splitter.” I heard someone rise and exit the house.

The unfamiliar voice continued, “So, friend, you called me urgently out here on the communication stone to tend to this unremarkable boy. Who is he? I don’t see any resemblance on his face to you, so not a relation. I know you called me because Nisil was attached to me; she is definitely one of the better healers in all of Skyholme, but explain it to me in more detail so I can better ask a favor in return.”

Callem’s deep voice responded, “Geese Sebastian, you talk like a damned politician. Trading favors… The boy is one of a pair of disciples I took on in the sword arts.” His tone changed slightly: “The other boy will be exceptional, probably surpassing me in time. This boy will also be a fine swordsman, but I am mainly teaching him because the boys come as a pair. They are fast friends like you and me.”

“Fast friends, are we now? And you are mentoring boys to be master swordsmen now. I thought you said you would never do so again after your son…” the other man stopped in his speech as he realized his error. Callem’s son had died in a dungeon, or so my father had told me. He regrouped and continued, “Well, I suppose so. You might have saved my life a half dozen times... but then you ran here and left me to that viper’s nest in the capital.” I heard some movement in the kitchen. “I am parched, old friend. How about some of the 30-year-old vodka on ice with that red fruit juice you like so much?” His tone was lighter, and it was obvious he wanted to get past the blunder of mentioning Callem’s son.

“You mean the juice you like so much that costs me 20 gold to import from the Sabian merchants? And the vodka I made with my own two hands and aged in my own white sugar oak casks imported from the lowlands? What happened to the 5-gallon cask you took with you last time you were here to grow my tobacco?” It was the first time I heard Callem sound exasperated, but his voice had no malice. The mention of his son was now safely buried in the conversation.

“Don’t tell me how you get the juice! I might have to report you to the Triumvirate smuggling office!” Sebastian replied jokingly. “I still have some of that cask left, but the headaches of running the shipyards require a good shot every evening, so it is running low.” Movement in the kitchen paused the conversation, “Did you know Lord Leif Dintho has nearly doubled the cost in the last year of black cedar he is selling to the navy? I checked, and the general market price has barely budged. He is the only supplier, and when I told the Triumvirate in my monthly report, they just signed off on the cost increase. But you know what I did to spite the corrupt asshole? I redrafted our three standard ship hulls to reduce the inclusion of black cedar by half! You wouldn’t believe the hell storm that was created!” The man was extremely lively and passionate in his speech and laughing at his own cleverness.

“I am done with politics, Sebastian. You can save Skyholme on your own. I am just going to enjoy my years here. And you know that other boy, Gareth is his name, he might be the weapon you are seeking to stabilize the navy if you can steer him on a righteous path. I also want his abilities assessed. Are there any assessors or readers independent of influence? I don’t want his abilities spread to the houses or the Triumvirate until he can fend for himself.” Callem was steering the conversation away from politics.

The man sighed and, after a pause, said, “Wynna and her daughter Ennet. They are two of the better readers in Skyholme. They keep their readings private. At least I have not heard anything about them giving out information they have gleaned in my 72 years. That can’t be said of any of the other powerful readers. No matter how much they profess confidentiality, they are all in the pocket of one house or noble. If you are that worried, you can always take him to the lowlands for an assessment. I will even fly you there myself.” The man continued. I heard liquid being poured. When had Callem moved? I hadn’t heard him shift position. “This drink is fantastic, but it doesn’t settle our debt of you dragging me out here. I do have a favor to ask of you.”

Callem spoke immediately, “Name it, and if within my power, I will do it, friend.” I think Sebastian was finishing off his glass as there was a long pause.

“My granddaughter, Cilia, is in her fourth year at the naval academy. She wants to captain a ship as I did in my heyday,” he paused, sighing heavily, “Well, earlier this year, there was trouble at the naval academy,” he paused. “Another officer assaulted her in training.” I heard wood splinter from the direction Callem had been speaking. “I know this would have never happened under your watch. That idiot in charge of the academy always lets things slide and looks the other way for favors. I took care of what I could, Callem. The cadet was the son of Halifax Bricio. The cadet is 22nd in line to succeed the Bricio seat on the Council of Three. He is still enrolled in the academy, but Cilia has been moved back a year, repeating her 3rd year.”

Sebastian sighed, “I know she is being punished for his transgression. But at least she will not be in his classes any longer. I need you to teach her how to defend herself. Her martial skills are the only area she ranks low in at the academy. She can come here in 8 months and train with you for two months between academic years. The Bricio cadet also has two Wolfsguard with him at all times. While I could temporarily assign my Wolfsguard Nisil to her, it wouldn’t help. She needs to be able to stand on her own two feet in the navy. She is too stubborn to give up her dream. I have tried to convince her many times in the last few weeks. If this is too much, just say so, and I will hire others in the city, but her additional training will be noticed and may adversely affect her.” I heard an empty glass being set down.

Callem finally replied. “Cilia is the tall gangly granddaughter?” Master Callem was quick to reply.

“Tall, yes, and she has filled out. She is strong for a woman her age and a pretty good athlete, but her mind is sharpest. She has a small aether core and can only imprint a few spells.” Pride rang in his tone, “I will also set up an appointment with Wynna as payment.” Sebastian added, sounding hopeful.

“Two months. Not a lot of time. I will focus on hand-to-hand, and she can choose one weapon to focus on while she is here. The boys can help. Ok, it is a deal. Get me an appointment with Wynna as well,” he sounded like he was thinking hard, “for both boys. I doubt Gareth will go without Storme to see a reader, so make an appointment for two.” The pair sounded like they moved together and were shaking hands. “I will bring out three pouches of tobacco to the ship, but it is time for you to get moving. An extended and unexpected absence like this may draw eyes to me. And if you want more of the fruit juice and vodka, you can stop by anytime for a drink.” The door closed.

“So Storme, how much did you hear?” I nearly jumped off the couch but slowly sat up. It was work to even sit up, and I was lightheaded. “You can wipe the surprise from your face. You don’t snore but have a low pitch whistle when you sleep. Sebastian didn’t notice that it had stopped. I did.”

“Captain Callem, I woke shortly before Nisil left,” I said.

He was nodding, replaying in his mind what had been said. “Well, that was Admiral Sebastian Woodcraft. He is a powerful earth and nature archmage. I count him a friend,” he sighed, “one of the few I have left, alive at least. In case you are wondering, he changed his last name when he became recognized as an archmage, it had been Riffolk prior. Riffolk is a minor house of nobles in the capital that is known for…unsavory things.

He dissolved his bonds to his family when he reached the status of an archmage. Why do I tell you this? It is more for your safety. Even though he has cut ties with his family they are still like mosquitos around him. Keep your distance from Sebastian until you are old enough to fend for yourself. So do you know what a reader is?” Callem had moved to sit in front of me. I shook my head no.

“Well, man has always quested to quantify everything he lays his eyes on. I bet some mathematician out there has calculated how many blades of grass there are within the entire sphere.” He huffed, “I digress. By assigning numbers to certain descriptors, readers can access how strong, smart, fast, fit, and many other things you are. Depending on their power will determine how accurate their readings are. Some magitech devices do the same thing, but in Skyholme only the Triumvirate is allowed to utilize them. Readers are not outlawed yet. Some of the more powerful readers with tier 2 or tier 3 reading abilities can read others’ actual abilities, affinities, and racial traits. We do not have many in Skyholme, but many are in the lowlands. I believe your friend Gareth has the tier 3 ability, Giant’s Constitution. He also has at least one other ability that has improved his reflexes, but I haven’t been able to ascertain which yet by observation. If I can identify his abilities, I can serve him better as his teacher.” He was looking at me for approval—permission.

“How much do readings cost?” I asked. He misinterpreted my question.

“Don’t worry about it. I will cover the cost for both of you. If you choose not to reveal your abilities to me, I am also fine with that. I know your aether core awakened. Sebastian saw your books. He even offered a platinum coin for your *cleanliness* spell book. Quite the collector’s item, he said. Guess all of that particular author’s spell books are enchanted not to be able to be copied. You missed that part of the conversation.”

“Well, you should rest after you eat. There is plenty of food in the cold chest. I need to see Sebastian off.” Callem rose and looked a little older, if that was possible. He retrieved some pouches of tobacco and went outside.

I hobbled over to the fridge. I started in on a complete strawberry pie. I was surprised when it was completely gone. Next, I cut off some cheese and large slices of ham and made two sandwiches with a few slices of herb bread. While I was working on the second sandwich, Callem returned. “Gareth is back.” As if by magic summoning, Gareth burst into the house.

He looked me over intently, “Storme, you look good. Can you use the arm?” I moved it to show him I was whole and functional. “I told your parents and mine we were out here helping Captain Callem on the farm for the next three days for a gold coin. So I didn’t lie. I mean, I didn’t say who was getting the gold coin,” he grinned at his joke as technically we paid Callem a gold and were still working 9 hours for the lessons.

Callem interrupted our reunion. “Let Storme get some sleep. I will get you both some bed rolls, and you can sleep in my common room tonight. I believe you both have a sword lesson tomorrow.” I groaned, my body already shivering in anticipation of a new wave of pain.