**Chapter 5 The End of a Long Day**

After Gareth and I enjoyed a good laugh at our impending good fortune, we got to work. “How many coins can you make in a day, Storme?” Gareth asked. He was serious now and probably thinking about all the things we could buy.

“Let me see how many large steel coins I can make today. The smaller value coins will be easier to spend without drawing notice. We will have to think about creating a reasonable enterprise to cover our growing wealth in the future. I am not sure to what extent we should include Freya in our plans,” I informed Gareth.

Gareth raised his left eyebrow. Yes, I had a soft spot for Freya, and if I didn’t include her initially, I usually caved after she begged and pleaded for a little while. I didn’t have any siblings in my past life. I was learning how to be an elder brother and genuinely cared about her. I wasn’t sure where the disconnect had happened with Pascal. I think it had to do with the fact he was a bit jealous of me growing up as I had learned things quicker and was really well-liked and praised by the townsfolk.

I focused and made my first steel coin. Well, a lump of…not steel. “Looks like iron ore, not quite as shiny as steel,” Gareth helpfully supplied, taking the small chunk. “Well, if you can’t make steel, the copper will do.” He was trying to placate me because of my obvious failure and my frown.

I thought for a few minutes trying to draw on my past life’s knowledge. Steel had carbon in it. My ability could only create metal. Well, Gareth was right; I could always make copper. I was disappointed, though. Then I spotted the crates of coal in the corner of the barn we used in the stove. I retrieved one lump of coal, took the lump of iron from Gareth, and focused on my ability to shape metal.

It was the first time I could feel myself drawing from the aether core in my chest as I blended the iron and coal. It didn’t help my constant feeling of heartburn. The metal lump flowed over the coal, and I could feel the iron responding to my will to draw in the carbon. I zoned out for a bit, trying to find the correct balance and make it homogeneous throughout the lump.

When I was finished, the excess coal fell away from my hands as dust. Besides needing to wash my hands, I now had a good lump of steel. I looked at Gareth, pride on my face. He spoke in a whisper, “That was amazing! It took you a few minutes, but I will be an orc’s cousin; you did it!” I turned the lump in my hand and focused on making it into a shiny new large steel coin. I flipped the coin in the air over to Gareth, who caught it with lightning reflexes. Yeah, Gareth was not only big but also a phenomenal athlete, quick, strong, had excellent balance, and while he rarely talked, he was also no dummy. “Stormy, we probably should dirty up the coins a bit. I mean, if we started spending shiny new coins all around town, that would draw attention, right? I don’t think I have seen more than a dozen coins this shiny in my entire life.”

I nodded and had been thinking the same thing earlier about the copper coins I had made. “Yeah, I know some basic magics can make coins clean and shiny, but it would be suspicious if we were always spending shiny coins and didn’t have the magic to clean them. Ok, Gareth, let’s see how much steel I can make.” I focused and started pulling on my aether to make a big lump of iron. I could feel the aether leaving my core again and focusing on my hand, pulling the most aether I had pulled to date. The ore ball grew, and I got distracted when the weight reached three pounds (1.35 kg), causing me to fumble and drop it, breaking my concentration. I had plenty of aether in reserve, but this was good for now.

I looked up to see Gareth’s jaw was slack, and his eyes bulged a bit. I picked up the lump and brought it to the coal crate, ignoring my friend’s dumbfounded stare. I found I needed to be fairly close to the metal work, my shaping skill on it, no more than 20 inches (50 cm), before the effort became unwieldy, like trying to tie down a tarp in a wind storm with thin twine.

The iron flowed through the coal as I felt out the best balance between hardness and brittleness. To make my feat even more impressive to Gareth, I formed the new steel into 48 new large steel coins. This took a few minutes as I had to do the first few individually before figuring out a trick to make them in batches.

Gareth was right there when I was done picking up each coin and inspecting it. “Damn, Storme, we are going to be rich.” While he was focused on our new wealth, I tried something new. I was combining my two abilities. I tried to create copper and create it directly into a large copper coin.

Success! I turned over the shiny new copper coin, feeling the weight. Gareth interrupted me, admiring my work, “Can you make other things? Armor or swords? Storme try and make a dagger with these steel coins?” He grabbed a handful of coins, pushing them into my hand. Huh, that was a good question.

Did I need to have knowledge of blacksmithing, just know the shape or the end result I wanted? My metal shaping skill was much more powerful than I had realized. It gave me a ‘familiarity’ with the metal as I worked it, allowing me to balance the alloy or additives and eliminate impurities. I took 11 of the large steel coins Gareth had pressed into my hand and started working it into the shape of a large kitchen knife with a full tang. I had previously helped my mother replace the wood and leather wrap on knife handles, so I knew what I wanted to make.

 The knife was 10 inches long (25 cm). “No, Stormy, make a dagger instead,” Gareth whispered, focused on my work. He was hypnotized by the flowing metal. I altered my thought, and with a thicker blade and tang, the two-edged dagger was now just 8 inches (20 cm). I then remembered watered steel from foggy memories, Damascus steel, folded layers. Could I do that?

I restarted and folded the metal. It looked like a puddle in my hands to Gareth, but I was working hard to fold the steel. Two, three, four, five—compressing the metal after each fold. The 5th fold started to require effort. The 7th, and I could feel myself needing to invest some aether. I could have gone further but stopped after 11. I then reformed the short dagger with the full tang and handed it to Gareth. He gasped and spoke with excitement, “Wow, that is an amazing blade. How did you get the ripples in the steel?”

I was pretty tired and not sure how much aether I had left. I needed to experiment more to find my capacity. I spoke very lightly, “It is just watered steel. Folded steel. The master weaponsmiths in the city do it this way in order to add aether dust to enchant the blade.” I admired the dagger with Gareth for a while before he spoke again.

“Storme, can you make another? We each should have one, and I will get sheaths from Master Aldrich.” I nodded and grabbed 10 of the large steel coins in each hand. I focused on one hand and then the other working the metal again. This dagger was much larger than the last, 13 inches (33 cm). When I was finished, I handed the new dagger to Gareth.

He now held both blades. “You know, Stormy, both of these blades are fine works of art. I will purchase sheaths and handles for them. But I think I should get the larger of the two. You know, since I am bigger, after all.” His grin had returned to his face. I was kind of spent, but I did have a good comeback after my morning bath reminded me of something.

I cracked a big smile. “Yes, Gareth, the bigger of us should get the bigger blade,” I said, reaching for the longer dagger. His face contorted in confusion. Well, even though I had fragments of memories from my past life, Gareth was still just twelve years old and didn’t process my comeback.

Well, even though nudity wasn’t so taboo here, we still swam in our undergarments because the girls were usually there as well. So my friend didn’t realize, even with his large size, that he was outclassed. “Nevermind. Take the daggers to get them sized for sheaths and handles.”

Gareth hesitated for a bit before starting to slowly turn toward the door. He probably didn’t want to miss what I would do next, as today was highly entertaining for us both. “I am just going to meditate for a bit and try to figure out my aether core. I promise I won’t do anything exciting without you.”

The ‘Gareth grin’ lit his face, and with his back to me said, “Well, just don’t get into any trouble without me.” With Gareth gone, I spent some time getting dirty. I cleaned up the barn a bit. My focus was cleaning out the loft to create a decent workspace. I managed to get filthy and blew out lots of dirty snot as dust invaded my nostrils. I was going to need another shower and my clothes cleaned again. The upper loft was eventually cleared, and the old family couch was mostly cleaned. I had it positioned on the far side of the loft with a short table in front of it. That way, we could sit by the tiny window at the back of the loft and not risk getting walked in on while I worked in the future.

It was getting close to dinner, and my mother and father would be home in about an hour or so. I decided to run down to the river and wash up there rather than go to the bathhouse, which would be crowded at this time. Also, Edel would probably press me to meet her niece again. Oh, Edel! We hadn’t gotten her soap in the city today. Ugh.

I grabbed an old leather backpack from the barn. The city was about a 10-minute jog. I would swing by Master Aldrich’s leather shop and hopefully catch Gareth. Otherwise, I would make the run myself. My reputation was important, so I had to get the soap today.

I had missed Gareth, and Master Aldrich was examining the daggers when I arrived. His gruff voice stopped me in my tracks as I was leaving since I had not seen Gareth, “Storme! How did you two come across these fine blades? I offered Gareth 80 silver for each, and he turned me down, saying they were yours.” His eyes were going back and forth from me to the daggers.

“Yeah, they are, but I am giving the smaller one to Gareth. Are you making the handles and sheaths?” I replied, anxious to get the soap job done but not wanting to be rude to Master Aldrich, who employed my mother. I also thought 80 silver was way too light a price for the daggers.

“Yes, I agreed on 2 silver and 50 copper with Gareth for both sheaths and another silver for wooden grips,” he replied evenly. Damn, Gareth, you should have negotiated that down to 2 silver total. Gareth sometimes got excited and forgot to think things through, or maybe he just didn’t care because of my new ability. Small sheaths were made from leather scraps. I pulled out three large copper coins. One of the coins was a shiny new one I had made earlier.

“Here is a deposit Master Aldrich. Do you know where Gareth went?” I was already backing out of the workshop after placing down the coins. He eyed me up and down. It was obvious his mind was working.

“Gareth was off to the Perault farm to get some sausage,” he said. Damn, that was in the wrong direction from the city. And their sausages were not as tasty as the ones in the city that his mom liked. I yelled thanks before increasing my pace to a fast jog. I would have to go to the city without Gareth, and he would probably be upset.

The run to the city was a straight road lined with small industries, farms, and orchards. The trip gave me time to think about other metals. I should try silver and gold tonight. We should also start forming a reason for our increased wealth.

My first thought was daily work trips to the city to cover the increased coins. My second thought was maybe to cover the wealth by finding an old cache of coins left by the Avian race that used to rule the islands. There had been a book in the bookstore that had pictures of hundreds of coins. Even in this realm filled with magic, coin collecting was a hobby. Though the hobby was not well received on our island. The book had been in the discount bin if I remembered correctly. I slowed to a walk. I tried to create large copper coins while I walked. No issues, and by the end of the trek, I had 21 more large coppers in my money pouch. They were too shiny, though. I had come up with a plan to use them in the bookstore.

I went through the outer city and straight to the soaper. The packages of soap were ready, and I carefully packed them in my backpack. The pack was really heavy for me alone, and my back was already aching as I got to the bookstore.

The proprietor was named Wigand Goodholme. I developed a relationship with Wigand by delivering and picking up books for him that he was commissioned to repair. I had borrowed every cheap introductory book he had on magic for just a few coppers over the last two years. These books sold for between 50 and 200 silver, so he was doing me a big favor when he charged me a large copper to borrow a book for a week. He would loan me another as long as I brought it back in the same condition.

“Hi, Wigand! I have a favor to ask. Do you still have that old beat-up book on the different dungeon, kingdom, and adventurer guild coins? I found some rich woman who was looking for something like it, and she gave me a few coins to purchase it.” My speech came out a little rushed, and I needed to slow down when I talked. According to Gareth, that usually happened when I was lying.

Wigand flashed his bright smile, “I believe so. How many coins did she give you?” He was an entrepreneur, but I knew he wouldn’t overcharge me. He was already going through a stack of books in a rack marked as discounted.

“Two silver. And she gave me a large copper to run the errand for her. If it costs more, then I can just return the coins to her.” I said, this time forcibly controlling my speech. Wigand opened the front cover and started taping his finger on the page, thinking. The prices were usually inside the front cover.

Finally, he said, “It is four silver. Hmm, ok, I will take the two silver. This book is over forty years old, and I don’t think it will sell unless I bring it to the capital, and I don’t plan on a trip there anytime soon.” He focused on me, “But if your new patron needs another book, you will send her here? I can procure almost anything from my contacts.” I nodded eagerly. I pulled out the 21 shiny large coppers and handed twenty to him. He was clearly puzzling out what kind of patron had access to newly minted coppers.

“Does your patron have a name?” He was obviously more than a little curious. Maybe I had already miss-stepped?

“She is a foreigner from the lowlands but didn’t look like an adventurer. At least she didn’t have the guild’s medallion around her neck. She cleaned the coins with her magic.” My speech quickened, “I think she was just exploring the islands, and I mentioned the coin book I saw in the city,” I had definitely rushed my speech again. Damn it, Gareth was right.

Fortunately, Wigand nodded and took the coins. I packed the book in with the soap. “Wigand, how much for a lesser light stone?” It was the simplest bit of magic runecraft, a light stone that gave off light with a simple on/off control and could be recharged by someone with an aether core. He looked me over and pointed to my last large copper coin. I nodded and dropped the coin lightly on the counter. I swept up a light stone from the basket full of them on the display case. I said my thanks as I headed off. I knew the light stone usually cost 30 copper, so he gave me another discount.

Shortly after exiting the city proper, I was on the road back home. Four figures lounging by the side of the road stood as I got closer to them. Shit. It was one of the local kid gangs. Three boys and one girl around my age. I usually had Gareth with me and was never bothered. I could see them whispering to each other as I approached. The apparent leader, a tall thin, red-haired boy, took the lead as the others spread out. I had no chance to outrun them with the backpack I was hauling. It was probably due to the fact I had a heavy backpack that they stopped me.

The leader finally spoke in a high-pitched voice, “This is a toll road. 20 steel to pass unmolested.” It was a simple shakedown. Unsurprisingly, the city kids probably had a lot of free time to cause mischief before they entered the academy at age 14.

I wasn’t going to pay. An adult should pass by soon. I looked down in both directions, and no one was in sight. Damn it. I turned to face the crew, who spread out and circled me. “Don’t make this hard,” the leader said with a more level voice. He was gaining confidence, but I guessed this was probably his first time trying this. I looked each bandit in the eyes, memorizing their faces. I wouldn’t forget these kids anytime soon. I then used my *assess person* ability on each of them.

The red-haired boy:

*Leon Mogensen*

*Age 13*

*Human Male*

*Disposition Unfriendly*

The black-haired girl to his right:

*Gudrun Busk*

*Age 13*

*Human Female*

*Disposition Neutral*

The fat kid with dark brown hair:

*Lornom Coalrock*

*Age 12*

*Human Male*

*Disposition Unfriendly*

And the last boy looked very nervous, and his face indicated he was related to the leader:

*Honmik Mogensen*

*Age 11*

*Human Male*

*Disposition Neutral*

I decided to try to scare the group. I put my pack down. I reached into it as they watched me like hawks and manifested a simple short blade of iron with a slight curve. They all took a step back and looked at each other for direction as I spoke confidently, “There is a five silver bounty for the heads of bandits in the city. Who is first?”

Well, I felt pretty cock sure with a weapon in my hand, and then a fist-sized stone slammed into my shoulder and ricocheted up into my head. Two more stones hit me, and I wasn’t sure from which direction as I was already dazed. The pain told me one hit me in the left thigh just above the knee, and the other connected with my sternum. The head graze had me seeing stars, and by the time I oriented myself, I found the four racing to the city. I was bleeding a little from the head, but other than that, I would just have some nasty bruising.

I ended up limping most of the way back to Hen’s Hollow. I forced myself to walk as straight as possible when I reached the sentry. It was Yadam, and he knew me well. I headed straight for the bathhouse. Once there, I pulled out the soap, and Edel stopped her washing for a minute to extract two cubes of soap and also produced the promised coins. She mentioned something, but I didn’t catch it as my eyes surveyed the bathhouse. Mostly old men and no sightline to the women’s side. I waved to two business owners I knew before leaving. I could probably get some jobs if I socialized a bit, but I needed to rest. It had been a long day.

I stopped by the pub. They had meals to go. Tonight was a loaf of bread with olive-seasoned paste, soft spiced jerky sticks, and boiled yellow carrots. I packed the food in the pack and headed home. It seemed to take longer than normal to get there.

My family was in the kitchen eating dinner. I told them I had eaten already and was heading to bed. I was sure to keep the bloody side of my head out of their view. I was filthy, and I noticed my parents’ slightly concerned looks. In my room, I realized that I must have dropped the impromptu short blade I had conjured when trying to scare off the city kids. The rock must have given me a concussion, and I dropped the blade. I went to my tiny room, stripped off all my dirty clothes, and fell face down into the waiting blankets. It was only a few seconds before I was fast asleep.