**Chapter 4 Freya**

Freya raced through the cobblestone streets to reach the candy maker. Her thoughts were on what a large steel coin could buy. She was definitely getting a honey sucker. They lasted hours. It was her favorite, even though Storme said she was rotting her teeth. What else should she get? The honey sucker was three steel. She suddenly stopped.

Storme had given her the coin, and she had voted in favor of Gareth. Was it a bribe attempt, or was he making up for not taking her to the bakery this morning? Storme was always saying she needed to slow down and think things out before acting. He called her impulsive! But Gareth had promised to bring her to the Gaskil farm to see the new puppies!

Well, she should have at least spent time comparing their two scripts before deciding. Storme had drilled into her the importance of ‘appearing’ fair and impartial. Wait. Her thought process reversed. It wasn’t a bribe. It was a trick to ditch her! Storme hadn’t put on airs of disbelief at her pronouncement of Gareth winning like he usually did. They were up to something.

Freya thought herself a tried and true companion to Storme and Gareth. She hadn’t told anyone of the time they had released old lady Beatrice’s chickens, only to walk down the road a few minutes later and offer to round them up for a few steel coins. Or the time the three of them went to Twin Rock Lake to go fishing since nothing was biting in the river by the town. It was the fact the blue pike they caught that day never traveled downstream that got them whipped. It was one of the few times Storme and Gareth were punished.

Twin Rock Lake was near the edge of the island, and sometimes large birds of prey flew up from below to hunt the pike in the lake. She never told anyone that Storme and Gareth continued fishing at Twin Rocks. They wouldn’t bring her anymore, but she covered for them in exchange for a few steel coins when they sold their catch. The blue pike was the tastiest fish on the island and could be sold for good coin in the city. Her mouth watered, thinking of the buttery blue pike Storme had once cooked for her.

Well, Freya decided she would make haste to spend her large steel coin and then find the boys. Well, haste for a nine-year-old girl was a matter of perspective. After buying her first honey sucker, she sucked on it while deciding what else to buy. She wasn’t impulsive! With a second honey sucker, two birch taffies, and a thimble of sweet water, she searched for her brother and Gareth.

She started at the gate out of town to the city to check with the sentry to see if they had headed to the city. It was the most likely scenario if they were ditching her. Yadam, the sentry on duty, said he had not seen them today. Her next stop was the miller. They delivered flour for him regularly around Hen’s Hollow. No luck again. She wandered through the small town, checking with the business owners they frequently helped but found no sign of them.

Storme and Gareth were well respected in town. They were industrious boys that were always eager to help in exchange for a few coins, making people’s lives easier. Freya also knew they did extremely well for themselves in terms of earnings. Two weeks ago, she had snuck into Storme’s tiny room at home and pried out the loose wallboard to see his horde. He had stacks of 50 coins wrapped in paper. He had seven tubes of 50 steel coins, one tube of 50 large steel coins, three tubes of 50 copper coins, some loose steel and copper, and 34 silver coins!

Freya eventually returned home and saw Storme’s fishing rod outside the barn. Today wasn’t the typical day he went fishing, so that didn’t surprise her, but it had been her last guess. She went inside and checked Storme’s small room, but nothing, and just to make sure checked his stash. Maybe they snuck into the city, avoiding Yadam, to go on a spending spree. After all, her birthday was coming up, so maybe they were out buying her something! But the coin roles were all still there.

It was getting close to the midday meal, so Freya went to the leather worker’s shop to see her mother. “Freya! Sweetheart! What has you so down?” Mother asked when seeing her. Freya tended to wear her mood on her face quite openly.

“Storme and Gareth ditched me this morning,” she said melancholily. Well, I guess if she really thought about it, she had ditched them, but who was splitting hairs? “Mother, I came by for lunch since Storme isn’t around to cook.” Storme was a great cook. He came up with the tastiest creations. His ‘cheeseburger’ had swept the pubs and inns across Skyholme, but an innkeeper in the capital had claimed credit for the grilled culinary treat. Everyone in Hen’s Hollow knew the truth, though.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry. Pascal and his friends are on the common fairground.” Freya gave her mother her best ‘death’ stare. She didn’t want to spend what remained of the day watching boys and girls hit each other with sticks and playing soldier. “Oh. I think Gwen and Sassy are at the tailor’s shop….” Mother tried again, and she turned up her death glare. Gwen and Sassy were the only other two girls close to Freya’s age in Hen’s Hollow. Gwen was the magistrate’s daughter and always talked down to Freya. Storme had called her a ‘stuck up bitch’ in private, and when Freya had repeated the phrase to her face, Freya had gotten a good spanking from her father after Gwen had told her father. Freya had never revealed that she had learned the phrase from Storme. Another secret she had kept!

Mother had gotten out her mid-day meal basket. Inside were pickled vegetables, rosemary bread, and some red apples. They ate in silence then something clicked. She hadn’t checked the barn. Sometimes they all hung out inside, usually just when the weather was miserable, but they could be hiding in there. She quickly kissed her mother and hurried off while munching on an apple.

Freya approached the barn through the high grass to be as quiet as possible. And when she was within three paces, she could hear them whispering. They were inside! How should she approach this? Should she scare them? Walk in like it was all a normal and fine day? Or should she try to listen in on their newest mischief? Not that she would ever turn them in but getting some ‘leverage’ on Storme would be great. She might get them to escort her to the city to the candy store there! They had a much larger selection.

She moved to the back of the barn, away from the windows and the stall door. There were cracks in the siding she could look through and see Storme and Gareth. That is, as long as they were not in the loft. Her movements were slow and careful, and soon the whispering became coherent. “Storme, try and make a dagger with these large steel pennies,” Gareth said. A few minutes passed, and then Gareth gasped and spoke louder, “Wow, that is an amazing blade. How did you get the ripples in the steel?” Storme responded in a whisper, and his back must have faced Freya because his response was too low for her to hear. She moved down a few boards and was able to see the pair. Gareth held a spectacular short dagger that rippled in the light from the window. Where did they get that? It must have cost quite a sum. “Storme, can you make another? We each should have one, and I will get sheaths from Master Aldrich.” Master Aldrich was the leatherworker that their mother worked for. He had to be very good to have earned the master title.

Then Freya saw something she couldn’t believe. Storme’s back was to her, but Freya could see one of his hands. He held about ten large steel coins. The coins then flowed together like water while he held them and rippled in his hand as they formed a dagger a little bigger than the one Gareth held just a few moments ago.

It took all her will not to gasp and give herself away. Her brother had magic, and he had awakened! Why didn’t he tell everyone? Why didn’t he tell her immediately? Was there something wrong with his ability to control metal? It seemed like a really useful feat. And they were told in the fables that there were no useless abilities. You just had to find a way to use them productively. She moved away from the barn ever so slowly, and when she was sure that they wouldn’t see her, she went into the house and to her room.

Freya thought for a long time, the longest she had ever thought about anything. She was not impulsive! Her brother was smart, very smart. He had his reasons for not telling anyone but Gareth. She would keep his secret, and hopefully, he would share his magic with her when the time was right. She heard her mother enter the house. It must be close to dinner time. Maybe she should ask Storme for a dagger for her birthday…