

1 - Training

Rohan Drake swung his wooden training sword in wild oversized strokes. Each blow glanced off his stubborn opponent, a thick mannequin cut from dense oak. He was rewarded each time by strong vibrations travelling up his already aching arms. The morning was typical for the sizeable city of Damora, light drizzle due to rolling grey clouds. The drab greyness suited the fourteen year old boy's sombre mood. He didn't want to be here, at the King's military training school on the outskirts of Toneth Castle's Keep. Depression flowered within the boy as there was little he could do about the situation.

The drill instructor, Sword master Valentine Delarue from the distant land of Ibon, walked with purpose amongst his students. He carried his ever present short wooden sticks, known as petit batons. Seemingly at random he would strike a leg, arm or any other part of a student's body he thought lax or in the wrong position. Like a snake the Sword master descended upon the trainees. Crack, crack would echo throughout the courtyard followed immediately by grunts of pain. Delarue always accompanied each blow with precise instructions, highlighting the student's error to all and sundry.

The few who counted Delarue friend knew his teaching technique seemed harsh, however time and again it had produced strong results. He took the responsibility of turning boys into fighting men of at least some competency, very seriously.

"Break for water!" shouted the Sword master in his crisp accent.

Rohan shuffled over to the small adjacent hut with the other boys. He collapsed onto the ground next to his best friend Mattias Elderwood. Mattias was presently lodging with his Uncle Richard and Aunt Sara in a small abode a few streets across from his family home on the commons. Luckily their house was also on the same side of the Great River.

Mattias father was Ron Elderwood, a well known woodcutter. He was leader of one of the logger teams working the Darkshade forest located on the western side of Saleese. Mattias often spoke of growing up amongst the woodcutters. It surprised Rohan his friend was so level headed, for surely no other vocation produced more statements of vast exaggeration than woodcutter.

"Only another hour till lunch Roh" stated Mattias with his seemingly endless enthusiasm.

Sometimes the effervescent optimism grated on Rohan's nerves and this was one of those times.

"By the Gods Matt I ache all over, especially my leg" explained Rohan as he rubbed at a particularly sore bruise point from an all too recent strike of the twin vipers.

"The master archer does seem a bit fairer, he's more interested in our ability to hit targets than anything else" said Mattias pointing over to his instructor, Archer Tobias Winfred as he busily reset the Archery range.

"I wish I had your arms and back" said Rohan referring to Mattias heavy frame.

Although Mattias was the same age he could already draw back a short bow; something Rohan had simply no hope of doing.

"The Gods must have something else in mind for you my friend" replied Mattias.

By the time the Sword master blew his whistle signalling the end of the break, the drizzle had turned to showers.

"No rest for the wicked" said Mattias as he picked up his bow and quiver.

He wandered off toward the range, whistling to himself as if the dreary surrounds and prospect of further training didn't bother him in the least.

Rohan stood slowly and carried the practice sword up over one shoulder, copying the fashion the other boys employed.

"Form up, two lines, twenty paces apart" said Delarue.

The boys added a quickstep to their pace and moved their wooden swords to the salute position, pointing straight up from the right hip. The Sword master walked slowly, pausing in front of each boy, studying them in considerable detail. Occasionally he pointed out a slouched shoulder or what not. Rohan could feel sweat mixed with water drip down the small of his back. He stood as tall as he could although his aching leg made it quite painful. As Delarue approached he realised, with a sense of dread, the pain must have shown on his face.

"Leg hurt?"

"No Sword master!" replied Rohan, not really knowing what to say.

"Never lie to me boy. As a soldier your body is everything. It provides strength and when trained right will keep you alive. You will all learn to respect your body and treat it right. Now again, does your leg hurt?"

Rohan hesitated causing the Sword master to raise one of his batons. That soon got his tongue moving.

"The muscle is corked" said Rohan anticipating the worst.

"See that wasn't so hard now was it. Always speak the truth to your betters. Name?" asked Delarue for the latest recruits had only been at the school for two weeks now.

"Rohan Drake."

"There are two treatments for a corked muscle. The first is a poultice combined with specific herbs to ease the bruising and extended rest. Second is a steady flow of blood through the damaged muscle. I prefer the latter as it means you'll become fit and return to training faster. ... Run the course until lunch. Lieutenant Brine will supervise, go!"

"Your will Sword master!" replied Rohan as he turned and hobbled toward the arduous training course.

As he moved past the range, Mattias gave him a wave and a quizzical smile. The course was known by the students as the backbreaker. Encompassing a full acre of open land, the complex layout had been commissioned by Delarue when the school opened nine years prior. A series of climbing, jumping, crawling sections meant the boys had to maintain absolute concentration. Each stage offered risk of injury or the embarrassment of a face full of bog mud.

Rohan's older brother Ingel had graduated from the school two years ago, choosing to enlist and serve King Toneth in the regular Army. He now lived out at the King's barracks, a full day's ride to the north west of Damora. He came home one weekend in four and spent most of his free time socialising with Captain Natas, general of the King's city guard, usually in one inn or another.

Ingel had always been bigger than Rohan and like Mattias he had grown into his body while still young. He had held the best time on backbreaker for a whole year until another promising student Criss Maddeson, had beaten it by a full fifteen seconds. Since then Ingel and Criss had become close friends, always trying to best each other, especially in the presence of girls.

Rohan's daydreaming caused him to slip off a small ledge and fall into the bog. Crawling out of the stinking slop he was all too aware his mother Eliana would again be none too happy when he arrived home at day's end. Lieutenant Gavan Brine, a retired City Guardsman who walked with a noticeable limp, let Rohan know exactly what he thought of the boy's mishap. He was just as vicious as Delarue however he preferred to lash students with his tongue rather than crude physical blows. Rohan repeat the course for a second time before the bell rang for the merciful one hour lunch break.

For the rest of the day the Sword master put Rohan on light duties. During the afternoon he held an oversized wooden shield while the other students practiced basic sequenced attacks. Much to Rohan's relief he had quickly learnt there wasn't a mean boy amongst the small troupe of forty odd. In fact whenever the Sword master wasn't looking they would weaken their blows to give his throbbing arms and shoulders a break.

By the time the training day came to an end, Rohan was numb from exhaustion. He dragged his feet over to the back of the open tray cart and looked like he might collapse. Mattias had to help him up, lifting his friend above his head with only one short intake of breath.

As was customary, the Lieutenant and a few other milling soldiers ran through drills with the Sword master until the sun went down. It struck Rohan, as the cart jerked to a start, just how elegant Delarue looked as he danced in and out of the circling men. His batons moved in a seemingly constant blur.

"You alright?" asked Mattias looking as fresh as when they had arrived in the morning.

"I guess so. I can't feel my arms and shoulders anymore. I think I might sleep, wake me when we reach the commons" said Rohan as he lay down and quickly closed his eyes.

"Sure" replied Mattias as he leant back against another student.

The woodcutter's son watched the glorious city of Damora around him, occasionally waving to a pretty girl here and there.