

## Chapter Nine: Sword Training - Part One

They rounded the side of the tavern and came to a wide dirt path that led into the back alleys of Toolin. A warped and chipped wooden fence ran along their right, with the backs of various buildings on their other side.

Sam and Evan walked ahead, but James fell behind, his legs weakening. The heat of the day, combined with his nerves, caused him to sweat profusely. *It's just a training session*, he told himself. *I need to know how to use a sword, anyway*. Reminding himself he was from a warrior race of men, he urged himself forward, strengthening his strides.

"For the purposes of this training session," Sam said, "we'll avoid any magical powers and stick strictly to physical movements."

The pathway opened to a docking bay lined with parked trucks and a retracted crane. A few bo'Breih workers in oil-stained overalls passed by, chattering in their broken language. A large mechanoid stomped behind them, its thick forearm blocks and giant hands swinging with its long strides. The squares of light on its domed head turned to them as it passed, emitting a series of beeps and pops.

James watched the powerful mech turn a corner, and wondered what its use was. They used a few mechs on the Rimas construction sites he'd worked on, but he had never got along well with any of them. The idea of a mindless being that only existed to follow orders had never sat well with him. Maybe it was his own similarity to a mech that made him uneasy, he realised. *That's not like how I am, though*, he told himself. *Even if I do follow people and mostly do what they tell me, I'm still in control of my life*.

Sam led them around a grey building to a smaller parking station. Under a metal overhang lay a corroding two-seater spacecraft, its red paint chipped and faded. The glass was missing from its curved window frames, and a section was open on the side, revealing a mess of cables and circuitry. The idea of space travel had always intrigued James. One day he would leave Carnan. A part of him knew it. He tried to ignore the sense of dread that came to him in that moment, thinking of the galaxy out there, and what else was in store for him.

James considered removing his grapple hook so it wouldn't get in his way. He eventually decided to leave it on his belt, guessing that he should get used to moving around with it on.

"You know," James said as they came to a stop, facing Sam. He ran a thumb over the grooves of the grapple hook. "This thing would have come in handy in the Grillock Caves, jumping across that bridge. If I'd remembered it at the time."

Sam shrugged. "Learning to use a grapple hook is a whole other matter. You wouldn't want to use it for the first time with a dark chasm below you. Besides, small jumps like that are no bother for Oneron."

"Right," James said. He did use it in the caves though, just not the way it was meant to be used. He still remembered the jolt up his arm as he shot the hook into the chest of that charging grillock.

Sam drew his sword, and nodded for James to do the same.

"We'll start with the basic grip," Sam said. "Evan, feel free to add any pointers you may have, although at the risk of confusing James, it's best we keep things mostly focused on the Oneron techniques."

Evan nodded and remained silent. He kept his large sword sheathed.

James held his sword up. There was a blue-tint to the silver blade as he turned it in the sunlight, finding it both heavier and somehow more manoeuvrable than he thought. The wrapped handle was padded and easy to grip.

Sam grimaced as he twirled his sword through the air.

"Is your shoulder okay?" James asked. "Are you okay for this?"

Sam nodded. "It's fine. I'm fine. I can still move it well enough. I'm a fast healer." He switched the sword to his left hand. "Another thing for you to know. All Oneron are ambidextrous."

James raised his brow. His mind flickered with several random moments that came to him. "Is that right? I never realised. At least... well... I've never thought about it, but I think you're right."

"Some think it an evolutionary development," Sam went on. "Or maybe just training from a young age. We need to be, anyway, from swinging on our grapple hooks and wielding a sword. Or using magic while fighting with a sword, and so on."

They positioned themselves beside each other, keeping a wide gap between them.

"Okay," Sam said, raising his sword. "Elleanor here is a longsword. Long handled to support a two handed grip. Your Tridonite sword is a side-sword. Shorter handled and a slightly thinner blade. While it's designed for a single grip, you can also hold it with two hands, which may be easier for you to start with. Normally we'd be using a waster, or sometimes called a djoucrature, a wooden or plastic practice sword. But for you, my soldier friend, it's straight to a bladed weapon. Now, grip the handle firmly, but do not squeeze. No need for any unnecessary exertion, but at the same time you don't want it knocked out of your hand."

James did so, unsure exactly how tight his grip should be.

"We'll be going through the Fiogro, a basic movement with the sword. The key is arcs." Sam moved as he spoke. "Step forward and bring the sword down across your body. Twist your body with the blade, keeping your elbows by your sides and your head forward."

James attempted to do as Sam said, moving slowly to match his speed.

"Make that step solid. It holds your balance. Stand strong; put your weight on it."

James stepped again, conscious of every movement. He adjusted the sword sheath on his waist and said, "This is getting in the way a little. Can I take it off?"

Sam shrugged a shoulder. "You should get used to fighting with it, but for training purposes, you can remove it if it helps."

James noted that Sam still had his own sheath on his waist. "I'll keep it on."

Sam smiled, returning to his sword stance. They went through the motions. After several repetitions, Sam broke from the stance and faced James.

"Good," Sam said. "Now we move to the second and third strikes." With the sword in position by his left side, Sam curved the blade up and across his body, ending by rotating the handle again to a similar pose on his other side. He stepped and swung a third time, diagonally up to his other side.

*Okay, that doesn't seem so bad.* James attempted the triple strike alongside Sam.

"Where are my feet?" James asked.

"Loosely planted, on the balls of your feet," Sam answered, watching his movements.

"Widen your foot on the step, give yourself more balance. If you're off balance for a second, your opponent will use it against you."

Eventually, James began to feel more confident with the actions and had to think less to get them right.

"Do not forget to breathe," Evan said from the side. "You hold your breath at times. Breathe out when you strike."

James nodded to him and resumed the strikes. He felt his cheeks grow hot from Evan's constant watch, but tried to focus on the training.

Sam and James moved together again.

Something strange happened to James. He was focusing on his movements, but at the same time, at some point, his mind had cleared. He moved without thinking, and yet he was in full control. With full purpose. He hadn't realised he had fallen into a strange trance until he snapped out of it.

"Good," Sam said, relaxing his stance. He rubbed his injured shoulder, pausing a moment.  
"Now, face me."

James hesitated, before doing as he was told. Despite the mild activity, his heart was racing.

Seeing the tense look on James's face, Sam smiled. "Same moves, with me. Slow."

They stood facing each other and went through the stances, with Sam moving his sword to tap James's blade on each strike.

James's scratched shoulder began to throb, almost causing him to miss a swing. He grimaced through the dull ache, focusing on the sword actions. He had only been scratched by a claw, but Sam had a grillock sink its teeth into his shoulder and neck—he must be fighting through a lot more pain than him. Pain that James was responsible for.

"Faster," Sam said, moving swiftly.

Quickly getting into position, James met Sam's sword and moved with him for the other strikes. And then again, and again.

"Good," Sam said, finally stopping.

James wiped a hand over his sweaty brow. "Going through these moves is one thing, but in the heat of battle, it's something different, ain't it?"