**Chapter 15 Abilities, Traits, and Affinities**

Unfortunately, my excitement kept me up most of the night. I had made 250 gold worth of platinum! That was damn amazing. I don’t think I had ever seen a platinum coin before now…its silvery shininess made it look like silver. I would have to check and see if there was something about platinum coins that made them unique—short periods of sleep had my dreams wandering again. This time I was dreaming mostly of traveling the skies of the Sphere in my own skyship and shooting down giant black eagles in petty revenge.

On waking, Gareth dragged me to breakfast. Breakfast was rosemary bread with hard cheese baked into the loaf. The sliced bread was slathered with butter and a potato and egg salad. Callem had also brought out the expensive fruit juice this morning to celebrate the end of the week of training. He also had ten large silvers on the table for us.

“Boys, it was a fine week. Next week I want to build that new drying shed, so I will be getting some dried lumber in town. I will get more of those spices and various peppers for the chili while I am in town,” Gareth moaned softly. He was probably sick of chili. Callem continued, “Weird name for a food, chili. It burns going in and going out and isn’t cold at all.” He laughed at his joke, and we ignored the quip. I had used the spiciest peppers I could find when I cooked the last batch in hopes of turning Callem off to the chili stew, but it only heightened his passion for it. The man had a cast iron digestive system, something neither Gareth nor I shared.

Callem had become more lively every day as Gareth had made quick progress. I attributed his liveliness partially to enjoying the new ‘delicacies’ I had been making. He was also more passionate about his tobacco fields. He said he was trying to improve the quality of the leaves to earn more money to pay for the prodigious amounts of food we were consuming.

I thought of something, “Have you ever used Edel to dry your tobacco? She does that service for the town’s herbalist all the time.” Callem looked at me, confused momentarily, while I explained her ability to evaporate water from clothes and dry out herbs. I told Callem that she worked in the bathhouse during the day, and he was interested in meeting her today.

“Hmm, I think I will walk with you boys to town this morning to meet this ‘Edel.’” He looked at us and decided we were not thrilled at the prospect, “Well, maybe I will wait till after lunch to go to town. There were leftovers from last night.” As I had used an enormous bird, a good amount of barbeque-pulled chicken was left from last night’s meal. I had been planning to use that as a pizza topping, but Callem had quite the appetite, and none would be left after his lunch today. When we trained, he worked twice as hard as we did, and I think the old man was leaning out even with his increased food consumption.

Our walk to town was without Callem, and I had the opportunity to show Gareth the coins, “Platinum, Storme! Princesses ransom right there, well maybe enough for a princess’s handmaiden.” He was still looking at the coins.

I expressed my concern at their similarity to silver to him, “Yeah, I don’t know how Skyholme denotes it from silver. I can feel the difference with my metal shaping skill, but they look very similar on a quick inspection.”

Gareth flipped one of the coins in the air and caught it, “It is definitely heavier than silver, though. Do you think we can spend it in the city? Are you going to try to use it at Wigand’s?” I thought for a while while we walked, unsure what I would do.

Finally, I told Gareth, “Why don’t you sew one of them into your shoe? I will remove the imaging on the faces to make it a blank coin. It can replace the gold you have there as your emergency fund.” That gold had been upgraded from silver just a few days ago at Gareth’s request.

While pocketing the coin, Gareth said, “Nah, I will just put it in my other shoe.” I just smiled as he grinned. I had been drilling into him the importance of keeping a low profile, and I think he was more cognizant now of his actions and spending. Maybe I should take my own advice? Maybe it was time for my mystery benefactor to leave Skyholme.

We found Freya waiting at the edge of town. Since we were not around to escort her, she was limited in how far she could go. She could only go to the town limits. She ran to us smiling. “Are we off to the city?” She bounced around excitedly.

“Yes, Freya, we will go today. I just want to drop off some butter and herb bread I baked for our mother. Gareth wants to go see his mother too.” I said, smiling, happy to see my excitable sister as well.

Mother was busy with a large order, engraving 36 sword scabbards for a branch of the city’s constables, but she was happy to see me. We talked for a short while about my training. After seeing her, I went to the general goods store in town and bought a few things with my fifty silver. It did feel better spending the silver I had earned from all the hard work I had done for Callem. It was an extremely high wage based on what my parents and most of the people in Hen’s Hollow earned. A normal farmhand might make five silver coins a week if he was also given room and board. We hadn’t priced out what Callem got for his tobacco, but it must be substantial. I also guessed Callem didn’t realize what a vast sum he was paying us.

I bought 40 pieces of paper, an ink well, and two simple fountain pens in the general store. I wanted to start on my spell soon, and one of the ways to imprint it was by copying the spell forms over and over on paper. I also traded in my backpack for a bigger and much better-made one. This cost me four large silver coins even after the trade since it had a simple durability rune sewn into it with silver thread.

I hemmed and hawed with the proprietor about the investment to act like the coins were a lot of money to me. I also bought twenty-two small sacks as well. Callem had shown us a few edible plants we could harvest, and I planned to add them to our diet and season our food. I also added two glass bottles. One would be for garlic-infused olive oil and the other for vinegar. We needed more veggies in our diet, and salads were in our future!

I dropped everything off in my room at home and found Gareth doing chores. Gareth was an only child, so with him gone, more had fallen to his parents. I helped him, and Freya did as well when she eventually showed up. Where had she gotten off to? When we finished the chores, we headed for the city together. Freya bombarded us with questions as we walked, and we took turns answering her. She mainly wanted to know what we were doing to become master swordsmen.

We eventually reached the city and went straight to the candy store. Today at *Sweets and Treats*, she was very restrained, spending just two large coppers of my coins. At *Marget’s Finery,* she got a blue scarf and hair ribbons, all to match the dress I was giving her on her birthday. We did see numerous postings in town for the coming troupe. I was surprised our small city had drawn them. I think the last time we had a traveling troupe was five years ago, and it was not this extravagant. My parents hadn’t brought us to town to see it, so this would be my first experience.

We went to a relatively pricy restaurant, and I volunteered Gareth to pay with some of his large silvers we earned from Callem, as we had each taken five. The food was only average for the price. I had the pheasant stuffed with herb-infused rice. Gareth had a dungeon steak and buttered lemon-coated vegetables. Freya had three desserts. During the meal, Freya commented that I had gotten taller. I would have to confirm that myself, as I was desperately waiting for a growth spurt.

Freya also said she had started doing my old deliveries in town. This was fantastic for her as it would teach her responsibility and allow her to save some coins on her own. I told her I was proud of her. When Gareth said she could pay her own way at *Sweets and Treats* next time, she gave him a dirty look. Ha! Gareth would be on her naughty list for that jab. The walk home was pleasant, with Freya zipping around us, burning off her sugar high.

I did check when I got home, and I had grown a bit! This put me in a fantastic mood, and I put together a nice dinner for the family of braised pork loin with an apple chutney sauce and red wine vinegar cucumbers. Pascal was still quite upset with me by his expression and treatment of me at dinner. He had asked our father incessantly, pleading that he should join us for the training with Callem. Father gave me a chance to capitulate, but I didn’t. Fortunately, my father didn’t press me further.

In my room, I created gold coins, 14 in total were made from my aether. I also spent time on my aether core exercises and began focusing on imprinting a spell. When we returned to Callem’s, I would begin the process, but I would hopefully have two spells to choose from.

I had a heavy and restful sleep with no powerful dreams. I was up and stretching with Gareth in the morning before we returned to the city. Gareth wanted new boots, and I needed to get to Wigand’s bookstore. We parted in front of the bookstore, and Gareth said I should wait for him to return. I hadn’t noticed anyone following us, but after he pointed out two of them, I was certain one was Leon Mogensen, the red-haired leader from a few weeks ago. I told Gareth I would definitely be waiting for him to escort me.

Wigand looked up as I entered, and his face showed something I hadn’t seen there before. His forehead was creased in concentration as it looked like he was trying to puzzle me out. It soon evaporated to his normal salesmen’s smile. “Storme, it is so good to see you! What news do you have for me in regard to your fortunes?”

“Wigand, it has been a fruitful week, and I have seen my patron. She has given me the coin for her book and some extra as well. It was an advancement on her part for a long list of tasks I have yet to complete, though.” Wigand closed his eyes momentarily like he was looking inward for the proper question. I interrupted his contemplation, “I do have a request. I have never seen a platinum coin. Do you have any I could look at? Someone said they look just like silver coins.” My question seemed to sidetrack what he had been preparing to say.

“Platinum? I have two in my vault in the back…” he paused, looked frightened for the briefest second, then smiled again. I was definitely not a criminal and wouldn’t be stealing from him. He started to his backroom before pausing. Then waved me to follow. His back room was as I remembered it. The model ships, tables, benches with books he was repairing, and shelves with neatly ordered books. “Storme, the platinum coins in my lockbox are not actually mine. They are a down payment on a book I am procuring for a client.” He went to the vault.

It looked like a modern steel safe but with a key lock instead of a combination lock. He pulled out the key and opened it. Inside was an ordered stack of books, three trays of coins, a handful of rings, and a bunch of rolled-up scrolls. “Here,” he said, handing me a coin he plucked out while I had been focused on trying to read the titles of the books inside. His visage turned hawk-like on me as I studied the coin. The coin had the same markings except that the center of the coin was punched out and replaced with a small circle of gold. I reached out with my metal shaping to get a clear picture of the coin and returned it to him after I was confident I had gleaned everything I could. The coin had a fair amount of silver in it too. I wondered if it was counterfeit. I estimated it was 80% platinum, 10% gold, and 10% silver.

“Thank you. I just wanted to make sure the coin my patron had given me was really a platinum coin.” His eyes bulged at my statement, and he carefully put the coin away. I could see he was checking on the other platinum coin he had before closing his vault. During this time, I reached into my pocket, added the gold to the center of my platinum, and matched the coin to the one I had just held. I added the silver as well.

I handed the new shiny coin to Wigand, and he studied it for a good while before saying, “I don’t see many platinum myself. Newly minted like yours sure makes them look pretty, though. Where did you say your patron exchanged her coins?” Wigand prompted. Was he testing my story?

My heart suddenly raced a bit as some anxiety in his voice accompanied his inquiry. Then my anxiety kicked in and caused me to rush my fabricated words again, “Oh, she has been to all the islands, I think. Started in the capital and has been visiting the other islands, even the smaller ones.” Wigand was waiting for more, but I clammed up after that.

He studied me, but he let it drop. “Just give me a moment to confirm the coin.” He went to a desk, pulled out a rack of tubes, and placed a drop on the coin. “Huh, it is genuine. Ok, Storme,” He studied me again. “Tell me the truth.” I braced myself. “Your benefactor is from one of the ruling families, no?” Unsure of what to do, I nodded slowly, confirming his guess.

“Oh, Storme!” he shook his head. “You are probably being prepped to be some pawn in their machinations. Did she promise to pay your way through one of the academies in the capital?” I was still in shock at Wigand’s guessing, so I nodded. He sighed heavily and sat down behind his counter. “You shouldn’t have revealed your aether core to her, or did she find you by another means? Wait! Don’t tell me. I probably know too much already. Be careful, boy. The games of houses are not safe. Be wary of anything she asks of you. That is all the advice I will give.”

Wigand was lost in thought but returned to the present, his sweaty face now dry. He had been worried about me. He was still worried about me by his look. I wondered what had happened to him in the past but decided not to ask at this time.

“I have your spell book over there. I procured it two days ago, trusting you would be back. Don’t look surprised. If you hadn’t shown up, I had another buyer lined up. So that is 40 gold plus 20 gold for the book of aether creation. That means I owe you four large gold. Is there anything else you need before I get your change? Another spell? Is your patron seeking another specific book?” I felt a little uncomfortable, and Wigand’s normal smile felt like it was now pitying me for my predicament.

“None of the tasks I have assigned by her are regarding books,” I sputtered out. “If I do need another, I will come directly to you.” He was appraising me. I think he wanted to say something but held it back. The air was getting heavy in the backroom as Wigand finally retrieved the four large gold from his vault and handed them to me. I took them and my new spell book and quickly left the store. Yeah, and I had been telling Gareth to be careful, and now Wigand thought I was the pawn of some powerful and wealthy noble from the capital island. Well, maybe it was not a bad thing. It did explain the shiny coins.

“I will have the creation book in three days, Storme.” I heard Wigand say in crisp words as the door was closing.  I was self-aware enough not to wander from the entrance of the bookstore and awaited Gareth’s return. He came by thirty minutes later with a cocky grin on his face. His two old boots under his arm and a pair of new dark brown boots on his feet.

I started walking, and he quickened his pace to fall in beside me, “Nice boots,” I said, knowing he wanted the praise. We had a good amount of back and forth as I explained my interactions with Wigand. And yes, he did call me out on the hypocrisy I had been preaching to him about being reserved in our spending.

Gareth was intrigued with the idea of making our mysterious patron some noblewoman from the capital, a beautiful and young noblewoman like in the stories. We both decided to head back to Callem’s today, after getting a massive meal at a tavern we liked, *The Maid’s Folly*. It had good, prodigious amounts of food for a reasonable price. They even served cheeseburgers. Gareth beat me by consuming five medium cheeseburgers to my four and a half, but I claimed victory based on body weight.

With full stomachs, we headed back to Hen’s Hollow. We did spot the kids from town again playing near the gates. Leon was with them and gave me a staredown from a distance. Yes, the city was becoming uninviting. Gareth and I decided after taking Freya next week to see the carnival we would try to avoid the city going forward. There was not any real threat within the city, but the road to Hen’s Hollow was wooded and didn’t receive much traffic. We discussed the possibility of getting airship tickets to visit one of the three other cities on Titan’s Shield or even another city on another island now that we had the funds.

We said our goodbyes to our families and gathered our things back in town. We could be back at the farm and still have a few hours before making dinner.

The small farmhouse was alive with loud conversation when we approached the farm. Callem had female company? My first thought was he had convinced Edel to come out here to dry his tobacco leaves. We slowly ventured to the door and knocked. Callem’s voice boomed, “Boys, if that is you come in!”

We entered and saw an older woman and a middle-aged woman at the table with Callem, with a spread of meats, cheeses, and sliced bread between them. A pitcher of red fruit juice was there as well. “What luck you are back tonight instead of in the early morning, boys!” He stood and made a half-bow to introduce the women, “This is Master Reader Wynna and her daughter Master Reader Ennet.” Not sure what to do, I bowed and elbowed Gareth to do the same.

Callem smiled, so I guess it was the right thing to do. “They are visiting Hen’s Hollow on Holiday and are in incognito.” He said as if it was a well-known joke, and the women smiled. “Well, sit boys, there is much to talk about and much to do so these women can be on their way.”

The older woman, Wynna, spoke first, “Master Callem spoke with us a few days back about two exceptional boys he would like us to read. We were so intrigued that we found time to leave the capital and come here, hoping to meet these boys. So I pushed up your scheduled reading and decided to come to you.” The younger woman scoffed.

“Yes, mother, it had nothing to do with Lord Garaie sending his servants for the tenth time this month to recruit me to his household,” the younger woman said with icy humor in her tone.

“Well, if you want to marry his third son, daughter, you have my blessing.” The slightly comedic exchange ended as they both smiled at what seemed like normal banter.

“Ok, down to business. Callem has paid our price, and we are here for a reading. Boys, do you know what a reading is?” The older woman asked. We both shook our heads no. She turned and gave Callem a disapproving look. He just shrugged in response. The woman got us seated and comfortable at the table, and we started picking at the food while she spoke.

“Well, readers are capable of reading a person’s soul imprint. What is written on the soul, to be exact. Some readers can only gleam tidbits of information, and some can read a person like a book. What can they read, you are asking yourself? Many things, depending on their aptitudes. Some things include how long they will live, their strength, fitness, intellect, fortitude, reasoning, what abilities they have been blessed with, the size of their aether core, what traits they have, what skill affinities they have, what skill competencies they have, where their passions lay and many other things.”

She took a breath to continue, “Callem has asked us to read your abilities, traits, and skill affinities to help you in your training. Abilities are what you are born with and are formed from your connection to the aether. If you were born outside the Sphere, you would most likely not have any abilities or just a single tier one ability if you were extremely lucky. Traits are also aether linked but revolve around your bloodline from your race and ancestry. Finally, we will read your skill affinities: your ability to learn certain things faster. Some people are more effective at performing those skills beyond what should be possible. Some say skill affinities are residual advantages gained from past lives, but I digress. We can also read your skill competency, reflecting your current knowledge and ability, but we are not doing that today.” She looked pointedly at Callem.

Callem muttered something about how they wanted all his gold. The older woman had finished and waited for us to digest everything she had said. We both knew about abilities, traits, and affinities. We had spent days fantasizing about what we would have when we reached puberty. There were books talking about hundreds of affinities and traits. All the books only listed tier 1 and tier 2 abilities, nothing higher.

I asked a question, “Can you gain new abilities, traits, and affinities after you are born?” The woman arched an eyebrow at Callem. I took it as a sign I had asked a very introspective question.

“That is a very interesting question, and the answer is yes. The wealthy pay vast sums to do so. Sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes the failure is catastrophic, but not usually,” she concluded.

“In terms of abilities, imagine your soul to be a beautiful painting of a landscape with a lake, trees, and mountain. Every time you try to add something new to the painting, the colors can run and ruin the image. This could damage the current abilities the person already has or even erase them completely from the painting. Everyone generally has two free attempts to add something new to their soul, but after that, you are playing Death’s Dice.”

Death’s Dice was a game if you rolled doubles of any number, you would lose all your points up to that point in the game. She continued, “There are exceptions, though. A dungeon elixir, for example, could add an ability, which would be like painting a beautiful swan upon that lake in the painting without disturbing the painting at all. Of course, the Triumvirate confiscates all dungeon essences, so put it out of your minds.” She added the last sentence with hardness.

“Regarding adding traits, races and beasts have different ones for a reason. You can add them via strong aether magic or dungeon elixirs, but your body will change too, add *cat’s grace*, and you might grow a tail and whiskers, for example.” She looked at us sternly and warningly, “And most likely, you will never be able to have children. 90% of those who have changed thus can never conceive or contribute to conceiving a child.” She waited for her warning to sink in before continuing, “What is last, oh yes, skill affinities! That is the easiest to gain, but each person’s soul can only hold so many affinities. Once it is full, that’s it. A person can have three, perhaps four affinities at most.” She stopped to take a long pull of the juice.

“Now Callem has paid for us to read both of you. We are doing abilities, traits, and skill affinities today. That will be all. This is typically a private matter of the individual.” Callem rose and left the house. Gareth and I stared at each for a moment and nodded.

“We have no secrets between us,” I said. The women smiled at us.

The younger woman, Ennet, picked up the conversation, “So we will be doing a blood reading on each of you. How this will work is one at a time, we will cover our hands over yours above an enchanted parchment to collect the blood. We will activate our abilities, and you will bleed onto the parchment below, and everything will be written out for you to read in a script you are familiar with. It is a bit of a messy method, but it is how our ability works best.” Neither of us was squeamish as we had to bleed many times under Callem’s tutelage.

Gareth went first, and the woman prepared as they had mentioned but also put a small blanket over the clasped hands so they could not see what was written in his blood. The process ended up taking about three minutes. Gareth’s blood dripping onto the parchment seemed to drip in a steady cadence before Ennet announced it was finished. Both women smiled at Gareth as he secreted away his parchment.

I was up next, and the experience was unpleasant. It did feel like someone was crawling through my soul and reading it. My palm burned briefly, and I felt my blood being pressed out of my skin. The sound of it dripping on the enchanted paper was more disturbing than I had thought it would be. It took no longer than Gareth’s reading, and the older woman did cock one eyebrow in surprise for the briefest instant. She had definitely caught something about me during the reading. I stored my paper in my pocket without looking at it, and my angst rose slightly.

“Boy, Storme, correct? Come talk with me.” The older woman, Wynna, said. We went off to a corner of the kitchen, and I thought my secrets had been exposed. Before I could plan to deal with the repercussions, she said, “Caught my surprise, did you? I have been doing this for years and can feel a person’s strength during a reading. My daughter has not reached that height yet. What I felt, Storme was something stronger than I have ever felt before,” she pointed at my paper. “I have felt tier 4 powers before, so I know what is written on that paper is probably tier 5. Whatever it is, I suggest you keep it secret no matter how useless or powerful that ability is.” She waited till I nodded. The woman looked tired from doing the readings, and when Callem returned, we all ate a little, but Gareth and I were anxious to read our papers.

“Boys, you can go. And boys, you have no obligation to share anything on those papers with me. After you burn the text into your mind, I suggest you burn the parchment. Understood?” We both nodded and rushed out to the bunkhouse.

We sat in our living room in the comfy chairs, looking at each other and seeing who would break first. “Fine!” Gareth yelled fairly quickly, “I will go first.” He opened his parchment and read, and his eyes bulged. Soon his grin split his face before he handed me the paper. I took it slowly, realizing the trust my best friend was putting in me.

Abilities

Giant’s Constitution, Tier 3

Vestibular Movement Sense, Tier 2

Traits

Adaptive, Tier 1

Charismatic Attraction, Tier 1

Skill Affinities

Melee Weapons, Tier 4

Riding, Tier 1

It was probably everything Gareth wanted, with a cherry on top. I was shocked at how close Callem was to pick out his abilities just by watching him that first afternoon! The movement ability was a step from the generic balance skill we read about. Both of the traits were well-known and common. The adaptive trait basically meant a person could get comfortable in new environments and learn slightly better than the average person. The charismatic attraction meant he had a strong natural charm for others of his race. He was going to be a ladies’ man for sure. His first skill affinity of melee weapons was a bit unfair, to me at least. EVERY melee weapon, I mean, come on! The second was new, as neither of us had ever ridden any animal. Looks like I would be buying Gareth a horse, no, a pony.

It was my turn, and it’s not like there would be any surprises for me, so when I read through the paper once, twice, and then a third time very slowly, Gareth got impatient and swiped it.

Abilities

Aetheric Conversion to Metal, Tier 7

Greater Aether Core, Tier 4

Metal Sculpting, Tier 3

Long-Lived, Tier 1

Assess Person, Tier 1

Traits

Past Life’s Knowledge, Tier 3

Skill Affinities

Healing Magic, Tier 4

Lightning Magic, Tier 2

Cooking Tier 4

There were two items I wasn’t expecting. The lightning magic was one, but the other was my past knowledge being revealed. And that was considered tier 3? It must be based on how valuable the information I retained was rated. I figured I remembered maybe 10% clearly and another 20% foggily.

Gareth finally spoke after reading it, “What the hell, Storme! We need to talk!”