**Chapter 2 Aether Core Awakening**

After I was born, I was frustrated. My thoughts were slow and cloudy. I had my past knowledge but it was hard to grasp and hold onto. It was like trying to remember the plot of a book you didn’t really like from ten years ago. I also had to work hard at acting as baby-like as possible. Let’s just say I wasn’t a fan of soiling my diaper and crying when I was hungry. When my eyes developed enough, I was able to see my family. My father, Caleb, was a solid man with above average height and musculature and I figured out he was a town or city guard by his dark gray uniform. He wore his black hair in a short ponytail and his blue eyes seemed hard to me. My mother, Alurha, was average looking but had amazing blue green eyes, dark blonde hair and a brilliant white smile. My mother was a leather engraver. She was an artist at cutting images into leather pieces. I also had an older brother, Pascal, who was about 3 years my senior.

I managed to comprehend the language fairly quickly as my brother was in the process of building his vocabulary and I listened to his inquiries with intensity. I was named Storme. Apparently, I was born during a lightning storm while the island we were on was being attacked by a flight of lightning drakes. I heard the story many times as my mother told the story of my birth every time she introduced me.

I grew up soaking in everything I could. I quickly gained movement, crawling then walking. I learned the language extremely quickly. I started talking around 6 months and by 6 years old I had a good handle on my new existence and everyone commented what a bright boy I was. My biggest frustration was the foggy memories of my past life.

I learned many things. Skyholme was comprised mainly of eight large floating islands. The largest was the central island and that is where most of the nobility and high born lived. The other seven islands each had their own regional specialty. Our island trained soldiers, supplied armor and arms and had a minor agricultural development focused on grains that produced bread and beer. Large airships and skyships transported people and goods between the islands.

The difference between an airship and skyship? Well, a skyship relied entirely on magic to fly. An airship relied on some non-magical means to fly but this didn’t preclude an airship from using magic as well. My father was a guard on a skyship transport but usually spent his day at our tiny local port checking passengers and goods. My best guess as to the population of the Skyholme people was a little over 3 million people. Our island, Titan’s Shield, had about 500,000 people scattered in four large cities and twenty plus small towns. Our town was named Hen’s Hollow.

Magic was used to help expediate harvests in the fields and our diets were supplemented with food from dungeons to support the large populations on the islands. Our island was the second most populous island after the central island, Skyhold, the capital. We exported soldiers, guards, explorers, adventurers, armor smiths, weapon smiths and leather workers to the other islands and the outposts in the lands below. The lands below were called also sometimes called the lowlands.

Our fields produced large amounts of grains for bread and ale as well. Although the quality of the bread and ale was below that of another island that focused just on agricultural goods. Our small town was just one mile outside one of the cities and had a single skyship dock where my father worked. We shipped mostly low-quality ale and passengers to the other islands and cities. My father was usually on duty in the dock doing inspections, but every 7th day he rode the skyship transport on a 16 hour loop for deliveries.

The history of the Skyholme empire was mostly told through song. Singing was a pastime everyone contributed to. The assortment of floating islands were once a large single island about 3000 years ago and ruled by an arrogant avian race, the Haikarum. The island had moved in a massive circular orbit over the lowlands, following a prominent aether ley line. An arch mage from the Haikarum tried to draw the power of the ley line into the island which caused the catastrophic shattering of the massive island. The civilization was rocked into disarray and a group of adventuring humans in an old airship conquered the land. The killed the Haikarum without mercy. Of course, the songs that sung of their deeds made them sound heroic.

The various islands still followed the same path today, but no magic could pull the islands back together, they were locked in their new orbits. The adventurers from the original airship soon started a settlement and that grew into the nation of Skyholme over a few hundred years. At first it had been just a base where the original crew of the airship based their adventures from but it quickly grew in population as the islands were relatively safe compared to the lowlands. They had a large influx of immigrants seeking security. The Skyholme of today now controlled the eight largest islands and a few of the smaller fractured islands. There were a few dungeon entrances on the islands as well which made them valuable sources of aether crystals to power magic items and the skyships. The dungeons also supplied various goods for commerce.

Politically the Skyholme Empire was currently ruled by the Triumvirate, the heads of the three prominent noble families. Each of these three families had dozens of members but there was a maximum of 23 recognized in each true line of succession. Huh, the number 23 again. There were also 23 moons…or essentially planets that orbited inside the world sphere. Members that fell outside the 23 were demoted to a minor Nobles in the city.

The internal politics were supposedly pretty brutal based on conversation the adults had in my presence. Each family of the Triumvirate was in charge of one aspect of life in Skyholme; commerce, military or citizenship. The commerce faction, currently the strongest faction, was involved in all aspects of harvesting, dungeon delving, manufacturing and trade. They also controlled the Adventurers Guild who monitored dungeon divers on the islands and the dungeons in the lowlands. The military faction was focused on training the city guard, navy and battle mages. They were responsible for raiding, defending and guarding Skyholme. The citizenship faction was integral to maintaining the populace moral, education, religion oversight, acclimating immigrants and in charge of the rule of law.

Even though the Skyholme Empire was apparently xenophobic they still had an interesting military unit that was surrounded in mystique. As best as I could figure from the stories and tales, they were a werewolf half breed that looked more human than werewolf. Apparently, a wolf beastkin species lived in the lowlands in small villages and the females were captured from the villages and enslaved. One of the neutral minor royal families specialized in capturing and breeding the beastkin females with a human male. The resulting offspring were sterile, long lived, had superior physical skills but most importantly they had a high degree of loyalty if raised in a structured system.

This elite unit guarded the Triumvirate palace where the three ruling families governed. The rumor was the head of each family had a total of 200 family Wolfguard they could assign to guard their residence or individuals within their family. Beyond these 600 there was The Blackguard, another unit of the Wolfguard that was assigned to the capital’s palace where the Triumvirate ruled. This special guard had over 2000 Wolfguard and was supposedly a neutral entity in regards to politics.

Overall, the Wolfguard had very few mages but those that did manifest an aether core were usually regulated as personal bodyguards to the elite nobles of the families. Since a Wolfguard lived around 250 years they might serve across multiple generations. Outside the 3 triumvirate noble lines a Wolfguard could be bestowed on an individual only by a current member of the triumvirate and they had to pull them from one of their 200 limit. Failed or mutilated Wolfguards were usually put down but every once in a while, you might see the fallen ones doing menial jobs in the capital.

I once saw a Wolfguard on Titan’s Shield when I was 4 years old and in the city with father. He looked more human than wolf man but moved like an observant predator and my blood chilled when he made eye contact with me. I later learned he was guarding a minor noble from the military faction. They were visiting the local academy to select men and women to train in the naval academy on the capital island. This was typical. The central academies on the capital island were better funded and had quotas for number of graduates. They filled out their class roles from the top students of lesser academies on outer islands.

The academies were where every child went in their 14th year. There was a general academy that lasted just one year and then you entered a seven-year specialized academy based on your results from your first year of academy. You could also pass on entering academy and enter an apprenticeship with a master. Our small town had a very small 1st year general academy, it was an old unused barracks. When I would enter at age 14 my class would have 11 teens from our town. One thing about this world was people matured faster physically. My best guess was that by age 15 the people were physically mature to about age 18 in my old world.

After you completed your seven year academy training you would be 22 and have completed internships and education to be a contributing member of society, sometimes you would have some debt to pay off. Not so different than my past life.

Magic also played a big role in which academy you went to. If you had magic someone would sponsor you to attend a better academy. If you had magic it would manifest with puberty, around age 12. I was looking forward to my coming of age where I could start to access my magic and abilities I had selected. This would be between age 12 and 13 when my hormones reached a certain level and my aether core awakened.

I began playing regularly with children in my neighborhood at age 7. My best friend lived two houses down and was named Gareth. He was a few months younger than me but looked two years older. It was easy to tell he was going to be a very large man. With my knowledge of my past life I took advantage of my time with Gareth, forging a lifelong friendship.

Me and Gareth delivered food, messages and items in town to earn a few coins. Well, me and Gareth made good money for kids and we quickly became known in town for our speed and reliability. I also learned the currency. There was steel, copper, silver, gold, platinum, mitheril and adamanite coins. Each coin was the size of a penny and 100 steel equaled 1 copper, 100 copper to 1 silver, 100 silver to 1 gold, 100 gold to 1 platinum, 10 platinum to a mitheril and 10 mitheril to 1 adamanite. Each denomination also had a 10 piece that was the size of a half dollar coin from my prior life as well. A ten piece was also called a 'large coin' for short. There were also bars that were used by merchants for larger denominations. Values supposedly closely followed the rarity they were found in the world sphere naturally but I had my doubts. Well for our delivery work we started making 10 to 20 steel coins per delivery and on good days could pull in a few coppers each.

When Gareth and I reached our 10th birthdays we had more freedom and we sometimes even had a delivery to the city which was just over a mile away and we earned a few coppers for the extra effort. We usually spent half our income on food and drink to replenish our energy. Our one luxury item was a pair of fishing poles. The river that was outside of town had a fair number of fish and on a good afternoon we could catch enough for our family with extra to sell to a food stall vender in the city or at the local pub in Hen’s Hollow.

Gareth turned into a loyal companion and we spent our mornings studying with a few local kids under Gareth’s mother who was a scribe, learning letters and numbers, the days were spent running errands and in the evenings we got into trouble going on adventures. It was a happy time for me, living as a child. My older brother had his own crew and they played at soldier getting ready for academy. I also now had a younger sister, Freya, 3 years my junior who tried to tag along with me and Gareth. As long as we were not going to the city we allowed her to follow along on our deliveries and adventures.

I should take a moment to describe the World Sphere. The first odd thing was the day night cycle. Days, as close as I could tell, were 23 hours long. Yes, the number 23 again. We had 13 hours of day light, 9 hours of twilight split between morning and dusk, and one hour of semi darkness. The central sun had some dark zones which accounted for the changes in lighting based on its rotation. There were 23 also planets that rotated the sun as well. When a planet did eclipse the sun it was usually marking a certain special event. There were 12 months, each with 31 days and a five day holiday 'week' not included in the months to celebrate the past year and the coming year. This made the entire year have 8,676 hours. On Earth I had had 8760 hours in a year so it was fairly close to my past life.

The second odd thing was the fog and haze. The mornings almost always had a few hours of mist, like we were stuck in a cloud. I assumed this had something to do with our altitude. The third thing about the World Sphere was the sky itself. It looked like a pastel painting of greens, blues, whites, browns, and yellows. It was definitely pretty amazing to gaze on and I never got sick of looking at it, wondering about all the life and action happening in that marvelous prismatic sky. Not much was mentioned about the life inside the crust of the world sphere in the stories I learned as a kid. I did hear a few stories about traders from the *Dark World* who lived on the outside of the sphere. Most of the stories had to do with their strange mix of magic and technology.

The only respite I had from my childhood was the city’s bookstore. Every sixth or seventh day I would make it to the city and borrowed a book on magic theory for a week for a few hard earned coppers. It had taken me a while to develop a good enough relationship with the bookstore owner. It usually took a good portion of my funds to borrow books as Gareth was saving his own funds for weapons and armor.

Without access to aether I just read theory and puzzled out spell forms. Magic itself was fairly rare, about 1 in 10 people had enough aptitude and a large enough aether core to learn and cast multiple spells. Abilities were much more common and 1 in 4 people had an ability that manifested to draw on their aether.

I knew I had a large aether reservoir in my future. In my readings I found abilities were documented up to tier 3. Tier 4 abilities were considered rare, tier 5 was so rare if you manifested one you were guaranteed marriage into a powerful noble family, sometimes not by choice. Well, tier 6 had no recorded instances in the Skyholme Empire that I could find in my youth. Personally, I planned to keep all my abilities under wraps.

Spell books were very expensive and I had my sights set on three tier 1 spells from my initial readings.

*Cleanliness*, remove all dirt from clothes, skin and hair

*Mend Flesh*, repair damaged tissue

*Obfuscate Abilities*, shield abilities from inspection ability and spells

The first one was cheap for a spell book at 7 gold and was considered a tier 1 spell but was very complicated. It was a common spell and was a channeled spell which meant the amount of dirt removed and cleaning determined the total aether cost. The spellbook was the size of a magazine containing 20 thick canvas pages but fortunately the pages only had writing on one side. The second spell, mend flesh, was a tier 1 healing spell as well but the spell book was 34 gold, the book typically had 35 pages. The final spell I only found references in my readings and I figured I would have to obtain it on the capital island. It was a passive spell that required a very minor constant expense of aether. If you lost focus by sleeping or getting knocked out it would end. There was no cost listed for the spell in the store catolog but guessed it would be over 100 gold. This was more because of governmental control than the spell being rare.

I also learned from reading the access person ability I would obtain was a highly sought-after ability. I could live an easy life working for a royal family just using that ability as it gave a person’s true name. Using the ability gave the name, age, sex, race and their relative state of health, or some other similar scope of knowledge of the inspected person. Each person’s ability had some minor variance.

A few days after my 12th birthday my aether core formed and my magic finally came into being. I awoke sweaty and feverish. I immediately vomited the contents of my stomach and the previous weeks’ worth of meals it seemed. Or at least that is what it felt like to me. I wanted to keep my core secret so I suffered alone for hours. When my body acclimated, I could feel the core, like a second heart. Instead of circulating blood to my body it circulated aether. I was one step closer to living in luxury.