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

Unfortunately, my excitement kept me up most of the night. 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. At least none of them were nightmares of the skyship crashing or encountering a flight of dragons.

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 fruit juice this morning to celebrate the end of the week of training. He also had ten large silvers on the table. “Boys it was a fine week. Next week I want to build that new drying shed so I will get some dried lumber in town. I will get more of those spices and various peppers for the chili as well while I am in town,” Gareth moaned a little. He was probably sick of chili. Callem continued, “Weird name for a food, chili, it burns going in and going out.” He laughed at his own 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.

Callem had become more alive 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 for a second while I explained her ability to evaporate water from clothes. I told Callem that she worked in the bathhouse during the day and he was set on 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.” There was a good amount of barbeque-pulled chicken left from last night as I had used a very large bird. 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 he 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 on quick inspection, they look very similar.”

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 not quite sure what I would do.

Finally, I said to Gareth, “Why don’t you sew one of them into the inside of 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?

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

“Yes Freya, we will go today. I just want to drop off some butter and herb bread for mother that I baked. Gareth wants to go see his mother too.” I said smiling, happy to see her 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 5 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.

In the general store, I bought 40 pieces of paper, an ink well, and two simple fountain pens. 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. I also traded in my backpack for a bigger and much better-made one. This cost me 4 large silver coins even after the trade since it had durability runes sewn into it. 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. Gareth had shown us a few plants we could harvest that were edible and I planned to add them to our diet and season the 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. At Sweets and Treats she was very restrained today 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. The last time we had seen a traveling troupe was five years ago, I think. My parents didn’t bring 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 ok 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 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.

That night in my room I went with gold coins, 14 total shiny coins were made from my efforts. I also spent time on my aether core exercises and began focusing on how to imprint 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. In the morning I was up and stretching with Gareth before we made our way back into 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 he noticed three local kids following us so 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 of them 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 really 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 for a moment 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 there was an ordered stack of books, three trays of coins, a handful of rings, and a whole bunch of rolled-up scrolls. “Here,” he said handing me a coin he plucked out when 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 for the center of the coin was punched out and replaced with gold. I reached out with my metal shaping to get a clear picture of the coin and handed it back to him after I was confident I had gleaned everything I could. The coin had had a fair amount of silver in it too. I wondered if it was counterfeit. By my estimation, 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 and added the gold to the center of my platinum and matched the coin to the one I had just held. I wasn’t going to add the silver as I was still thinking that would make it counterfeit or not quite as valuable.

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 Wigand’s inquiry was accompanied by some anxiety in his voice. First, he was chewing his lower lip and sweat was beading on his forehead. Then my own anxiety kicked in and caused me to once again rush my fabricated words, “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 and pulled out a rack of tubes and proceeded to place 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 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 I could use this to my advantage…

“I will have the Creation book in three days Storme.” I heard Wigand say in crisp words as the door was closing. Clam down Storme, I told myself. I was self-aware enough to not 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 and 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 good 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. The kids from town had followed us partway down the road before returning. There were six of them now. They were too far for me to use my access person ability but the red-haired boy was definitely among them. 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. We talked about 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 entirely.

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

When we approached the farm the small farmhouse was alive with loud conversation. Callem had company? My first thought was he had convinced Edel to come out here. 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 being 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 we found time to leave the capital and come here in hopes of meeting 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 voice.

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

“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, and 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 are born outside the sphere you most likely would 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, that is 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 could also read your skill competency which would reflect your current knowledge and ability in a skill but we are not doing that today." She gave an irritated look 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 but nothing beyond tier 3 from my research was detailed.

I asked the first 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 try and do so and sometimes they succeed and sometimes they do not. Sometimes the failure is catastrophic, but not usually," she conceded.

"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 have a chance of running and ruining the image. This could damage the current abilities the person already has or even erase them completely from the painting. Everyone generally has one free attempt 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 two sixes 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, you will never have access to such a potion so put it out of your minds.” She added the last sentence with hardness. I caught a harsh look from Callem that caused Wynna to add the last bit.

“In terms of adding traits, well races and beasts have them 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 are never able to conceive or contribute to conceiving a child." She waited for her warning to sink in before continuing, "What is last, of 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 ended up being written. The process ended taking after 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 really 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 felt my secrets were exposed. Before I could make plans to deal with the repercussions she spoke, “Caught my surprise did you? Well yes, I have been doing this for years and I can feel the strength of a person 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 keep it secret no matter how useless or how powerful that ability is. Trust me in this?” She waited till I nodded. The woman looked tired and when Callem returned and 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 minds I suggest you burn the parchment. Understood?” We both nodded and rushed out.

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 and read and his eyes bulged. Soon his grin split his face before he handed me the paper.

Abilities

Giant’s Constitution, Tier 3

Vestibular Movement Sense, Tier 2

Traits

Adaptive, Tier 1

Charismatic Attraction, Tier 1

Skill Affinities

Melee Weapons, Tier 3

Riding, Tier 1

It was probably everything Gareth wanted with a cherry on top. I was shocked at how close Callem was to picking out his abilities just by watching him for a single afternoon! The movement ability was a step up from the generic balance skill we had 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

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?

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