**Chapter 16**

“Talk about what?” I knew Gareth was shocked at my list but I was stalling for time.

“What! A demon screwing an angel tier seven ability Storme!” Gareth said a little too loud for my liking. I gave him a hand signal to bring down the volume. “Storme, tier seven abilities don’t exist! They are myth, legend, things of gods…wait are you a god in disguise?” Gareth was studying every inch of me as if he had never seen me before and I was still formulating a response when he said, “is that why your,” he pointed at my crotch, “is so disproportionate to your body? Oh crap are you an Incubus? they have big…” he pointed at my crotch again.

I started speaking slowly, “What? No, I am just a normal boy.” I tried to look as innocent as possible. He grabbed the sheet and reread it, shaking his head as he did so, and then looked at me again focusing on my eyes with his own.

“Healing magic? Lightning magic? Past Life Memories? Tier 3 past memories, that is like 30 years of memories. What do you remember then if you were not a god or demon? Wait were you a woman? Is that why you never told me? Maybe an elf woman in your past life? Now that would be cool!” Gareth’s grin had turned fiendish but at least it was there.

“No.” I needed to play this well. I was surprised I had remained so calm, at least outwardly, “I was a cook and I went for a walk one day and fell off a cliff and died.” Yeah, that should work and Gareth could draw the proper conclusions.

Gareth sat down heavily in the chair, thinking for a moment, “That makes sense. That is why you are such an awesome cook and keep coming out with new meals. Where in the sphere did you grow up? Were you a human man?” Gareth was leaning forward in the chair focused on me. I could tell this was exciting to him and it looked like our friendship was still secure. I personally didn’t like being under the microscope of someone I counted my best friend over two lives. I didn’t want to lie to him so I would have to be general.

“I don’t have great recall about it. But I worked in a restaurant and I was a man." I stressed the last, "I don’t recall much about my family, city, or country. Most of what comes to me from my past life are my time in the kitchen at the restaurant.” He was nodding and gobbling it up. Ok, I could reserve the truth for another day, when we were much older. What I said was mostly the truth. My past life was fading. I could recall things if I really focused but it took effort.

“Ok when you remember more just tell me about it?” It was a question and I nodded. “So angel freaking lightning! When am I going to see you zap birds from the sky with bolts of fury?!” He was way more excited about this than I was. How did I get the lightning magic affinity anyway? I was positive I didn’t select it… Oh, a thought occurred. My mother had told the tale a thousand times about why I was named Storme. I was born under auspicious circumstances of a lightning drake attack and severe thunderstorms. Mother had said multiple lightning strikes were close by. Maybe this triggered the affinity somehow? Well, I had this bonus and I should not focus on how I got it but I should plan to get a lightning spell to make use of it.

Over the next three hours, Gareth relentlessly asked questions about my abilities and affinities, and past life. Every time I tried to steer the conversation back to him he cut me off, “Stormy you are our ride out of Skyholme! Let's make sure we maximize your potential!” **Maximizing potential** was something I always preached when we ran around the town and city doing jobs for the people. It kind of felt like he was throwing it back at me.

Eventually, I climbed to my loft and told him I needed sleep for tomorrow’s punishing regimen. I only managed to do seven aether core exercises and make some gold coins before passing out.

The morning brought a small surprise. Wynna and Ennet had stayed in Gareth’s house in his guest room. That they stayed was not such a surprise but that he had a guest room! Why had he made us sleep on the floor? Gareth had also gone all out for breakfast. The spread of fruit was amazing, many of the fruits I was unfamiliar with but enjoyed trying. My favorite fruit was something similar to kiwi in size, seeding, and texture but had a yellow-orange flesh and tasted closer to banana strawberry to my taste buds. It was called Bramble Fruit because it grew in a dungeon on a heavy vine with large thorns. The thorns were also poisonous according to Wynna. Wynna had brought the fruit with her. There was also something similar to coffee-flavored milk to drink. It was called Dark Milk. It came from something similar to a coconut from the way Callem described it. It was found in the tropical lands below and was a normal breakfast drink down there. It was another contribution by Wynna and Ennet. Soon after everyone finished eating their fill conversation broke out.

“So boys were you pleased with what your papers told you?” Callem initiated with his face impassive. I was hesitating, not sure what to say and Gareth saved me.

“Yes, Callem. I have the tier 3 ability giant’s constitution.” Ennet gasped while everyone else held their poise. Callem slowly nodded and then spoke.

“That is an exceptional ability. Increased size, fitness, and recovery. But maybe you shouldn’t reveal your abilities in front of our guests. I had just asked if you were pleased with the contents of the paper. A tier 3 ability with heavy combat implications, well a noble house would sacrifice quite a bit to get you under your thumb.” Gareth turned bright red at his error and at being rebuffed by Callem.

To their credit Wynna took her daughter’s hand, “I wish to see the fields and this training course they talk about. Let us go for a long walk.” They were soon out the door.

Callem intoned in a light chuckle, “Don’t worry boys they will not reveal anything. Having spent the last day with them I know they are honorable women.” I would have to use my access person on them when they returned I mentally noted to make sure. It was an ability I was constantly overlooking for its usefulness. “So, Gareth it is a formable ability. As you finish growing through adolescence it will get stronger. The only downside is you can expect to be somewhere between 6’6” to 7’ tall (1.98m to 2.13m) making you a clear target on any battlefield. It is a very rare ability to have at tier 3 as well for getting it as a human. There may only be a dozen men on all of Skyholme with a similar ability and most have it at tier 2.” He had a teacher’s pride on his face.

Gareth continued, “I have a tier 2 ability as well, vestibular movement sense.” Callem slapped the table so hard it cracked. He locked torn between being upset about the table and being happy hearing what was apparently very good news.

“I knew it!” Callem exclaimed. “Big and dexterous. You are going to the greatest weapon master of your generation!” Callem was beaming. “Anything else you wish to share with me?”

Gareth paused for a moment before saying, “The adaptive trait at tier 1 and skill affinity for melee weapons at tier 3.” Gareth intoned in finality. It was obvious this was all he was going to reveal but Callem’s mind was already churning a mile a minute. Gareth had revealed everything that would help Callem plan his training in his mind.

“All melee weapons? No specific branch?” Callem asked. Gareth nodded. “Damn boy that is pretty amazing. Adaptive is useful but pretty generic among humans and other races. But all melee weapons. We need to start expanding your repertoire in training to expand your arsenal. We definitely shouldn’t limit you to just swords.” Callem started pacing while shoving food into his mouth, planning in his mind. He was probably thinking of ways to torture us to bring out Gareth's potential. I snatched all the remaining Bramble Fruit before Callem could get to them and as a consolation prize for the months of pain, I foresaw ahead of me. Gareth was just waiting with a somewhat eager look on his face.

“Ok, we have quite a bit to work with. No aether core awakening?” Gareth shook his head no in response to Callem's question. “Ok. For the next eight years, we need to get you as many masteries as possible in melee weapons. We also need to be on the lookout for a defensive ability to add to your skill set. It is best if it came from a dungeon. The best we could afford is a tier 1 ability. Should cost between 8 and 10 platinum. I can make that in a few years.” The shock of his statement was plastered on both our faces. Callem was committing a vast sum to Gareth's future growth.

Callem smiled at Gareth, “Don’t look surprised boy. You are my legacy, I have maybe 15 to 20 good years left. My daughters are well taken care of but I have been searching for meaning out here and you have given me something to grasp onto.” He paused. “Is this what you want?” Gareth didn’t hesitate at all before nodding energetically with a sloppy grin. “Just don’t get cocky boy. Up here is Skyholme you will be the big fish in the small pond. Down in the lowlands of the sphere, there will be hundreds of thousands stronger than you.” Gareth seemed to take that advice to heart and was nodding at the wisdom.

I had been a bystander so far and I probably would have made the same faux pas of revealing my abilities in front of the women. Maybe because I didn’t want to be upstaged by Gareth I butted in with my own qualifications, “Callem I have one ability and two skill affinities. I have enhanced aether core at tier 2 and affinities for healing magic at tier 3 and lightning magic at tier 2.” That should be enough revealed to get some praise!

“For all the Hellspawn from the Red Moon!” Callem exclaimed. His face creased in worry, then thought. “The damn magi academies in the capital will fight over you if they knew that! Tier 2 aether core! You are practically an archmage already!” Ok, maybe I messed up revealing what little I did. “Anyone found with just a tier 1 core upgrade is married immediately into one of the Triumvirate families with it being so rare in humans.” He sat and started thinking.

He then started talking to himself, “Sebastian, no, he would just try and use you for his own goals and being around him is dangerous. Isaias is dead... Reid went to the lowlands, Bennett…no he is an asshole.” He refocused on me. “Sorry, Storme I just can’t think of any mages I trust to train you in your magic without pulling you into a viper's nest.”

I waved my hands, “No I am good with self-learning. I am doing fine. I think I just need time to learn spells on my own and maybe some help getting some spell books.” Callem slowly nodded acknowledging his defeat. Even though I was not his primary disciple he still looked pained at not being able to help me.

“What about another reading Storme? Wynna can read the potential size of your aether matrix. That should at least let you plan which and how many spells to imprint.” He looked hopeful I would accept his offer so I just nodded. He went to the door and yelled nicely for the women. Then went to his room and retrieved two large golds. Soon I was sitting with just Wynna in the private guest room. The room was very nice and had a full-sized bed and fresh flowers laid out in vases with their aroma lingering in the air. A small table with two chairs is where we took up residence for the reading.

Much like last time, it was going to be a secret blood reading. “Well, Storme here we are again.” She smiled at me. “I hope you didn’t reveal too much to Callem. He is a good man but secrets never remain secrets forever.” I took the moment to use my access person skill on her.

Wynna Erdre

Human Female

Age 63

Disposition Very Friendly

That made me much more comfortable. “Can we get this completed so I can begin practice today?” I said as nicely as I could and not wanting to be rude.

“Yes Storme,” she began without any further delay and the next unpleasant reading began. It was like spiders going throughout my body and my aether heartburn seemed to flare up in response. “Ok, it is finished. What you will find on the sheet is a lower and upper range for the number of spells you can learn. Your aether matrix is like a muscle, the more you work it the bigger it can become. I will leave you to look. My readings are fairly accurate, both marks should be within two of their actual. So plus or minus two points for both numbers” She winked and left the room.

Tentatively in anticipation, I looked at the paper.

Aether Matrix Size 22, Aether Matrix Maximum Size 103

Damn, that was huge. Guess I had more than one thing on me that was huge I smugly thought.

Each tier of an imprinted spell took up one count on my aether matrix. So right now I had 22 points, which was essentially the amount of a fully trained high mage from the books! And that could still grow. Perhaps I should be looking at tier 2 and tier 3 spells. Slow your horses Storme, I chided myself. Let's just get the two spells we have learned before proceeding with any big planning.

Wait, a stored bit of knowledge popped to the forefront of my thoughts, I read something about magic affinities and spell imprinting. It was something that the space required to imprint higher-tier spells was reduced if you had a certain tier of skill affinity. I would need to find that reference again. I think I remembered which book in Wigand's shop the reference was in.

I exited the guest room while inside my own head and everyone was staring at me. “It is good news,” was all I said with a slight smile on my face. Gareth looked relieved and Callem looked smug.

“Well, boys the ladies are staying here for the week so be on your best behavior. They plan to attend the carnival in the city." Callem looked happy at his revelations, was he interested in one of the women? "We have burned too much of the day already! To the yard!” Callem ordered his troops.

The women spent the day watching us train. My body was adapting fairly well to the training and I knew I wouldn’t be as sore this evening. Callem decided Gareth would forgo practicing the bow even though he was pretty damn good at it. He would let me continue though. Gareth had pulled out staves, maces, axes, polearms, and shields from storage during the day. They didn't match the quality of the swords Callem had but there were now another 38 melee weapons for Gareth to learn.

During a short break, Gareth asked me if it was alright if he got Freya a puppy for her birthday. Freya had always wanted a puppy but there was a tax on dogs in Skyholme, five large coppers every month resulting in 6 silver a year. I wasn’t sure if this was because resources were limited or if they wanted to limit large pets to rich people as there was no tax on cats or birds. So in essence he was asking if I would pay the tax? I agreed.

Callem was also a little more intense when we finally got to sword practice. It was a pecking order for sparring after training sword forms for a few hours. I would get beat senseless by Gareth and then Callem would beat Gareth senseless. I could see our fast progress as Callem was a great teacher. I was thankful when the long day finally ended and we were released.

That evening in the cold pool Gareth asked me, “Storme you did a smart thing holding back. I thought Callem needed to know the extent of my abilities." He sighed, "You are going to be the greatest mage Skyholme has ever known and I will be its greatest swordsman. You can rest assured I will be there protecting your back. And thank you. I know that this training is not your favorite thing but I recognize you are here to support me.” We shared a look, our friendship growing stronger.

Dinner that night was just slow-cooked barbeque chicken and coleslaw. It was very quick to get going for me in the morning giving me bonus free time to study. The conversation with the women at dinner was slightly muted to start but slowly warmed up. Nothing of importance was said other than learning the women were in fact hiding out. They were also enjoying the vacation from their readings in the capital. After dinner, I excused myself first.

That night I did some aether core exercises, made some gold coins, and then went to the spell books. I started with the cleanliness spell since it should be a little simpler than the mend flesh spell. Unfortunately, it was the same as the first time. The spell forms just made my headache. Frustrated I opened the mend flesh spell book for the first time.

My eyes seemed to be able to focus on the first page and it sort of made sense…the second page…I could see the connections to the first set…the third page…yes! Finally the fourth and final page…Ok, I could see how they all connected and they even made some sense. The healing spell was like reading Shakespeare in 8th grade compared to the cleanliness spell which was like trying to figure out how to speak Russian from an original Tolstoy work. I could really do this! It was extremely late when I finally went to sleep.

The next four days were groundhog day to me. Breakfast, stretch, set dinner on, obstacle course work, farm work, lunch, sword practice, dinner, and finally studying. Callem tried to vary things up from day to day but what I truly looked forward to was making some coins and then delving into my mend flesh spell book. The notes of the previous owner were very helpful as well. I had been writing out the four-layered spell form on paper as well and could feel myself getting close.

We got to know Wynna and Ennet fairly well at breakfast, lunch, and dinner as we became more comfortable with their presence. I also noted that Callem was possibly growing sweet on Wynna. I was happy for him. They were good people and their disposition had upgraded to Friends from very friendly. It didn’t hurt that they both loved my cooking. Wynna liked the pork fried rice the best and Ennet liked the pizza. I was still a burger guy and even made some passable French fries even though I didn’t have good ketchup yet. We learned Ennet had been married twice previously with no children from either marriage. Both marriages did not end amicably. Wynna’s husband, Ennet's father, had died in a shade shadow cloud encounter. A shadow cloud was a massive dark cloud full of shadow monsters that the island floated into during their orbits. It actually happened every seven years to the capital island but usually, the populace was prepared or evacuated to the other islands. They didn't offer how he died in the storm and we didn't pry further.

Well by the end of the training week we were all excited about the carnival. Callem was going to escort the women. Gareth and I would need to collect Freya. Her birthday was on 7th day of the week so we had 6th day to plan. Gareth also had to go get one of the puppies on the Gaskill farm for Freya’s birthday present. I needed to talk with my parents and get them some coins to cover the puppy tax.

We left as a large group after breakfast on the morning of 6th day. Me and Gareth each pocketed five large silvers from Callem before leaving. I had fused my gold into large coins and my pouch was extremely heavy. I should have given it to Gareth to carry but traveling with the adults I didn’t want to pass it off in case Callem noticed.

On the edge of town, Freya was waiting and rushed to me, giving me a hug. “Storme is this Callem and his wife?” It was the first time I had seen Callem embarrassed. The flush in his cheeks evaporated just as quickly as it had come. “I can't wait till tomorrow Storme! Can we go today! The carnival has been going on since yesterday. The other kids in town have already gone at least once already! I already know what I want to do too! You get 10 tickets for a silver coin and shows only cost a few tickets. Can we go today Storme! I can get my dress on and today can be my birthday instead of tomorrow!”

She was finally out of breath. Wynna spoke first, “Freya can you give me and my daughter a tour of your wonderful town? We just passed through a week ago and didn't have time to investigate all the attractions.” I nodded a 'yes' to Freya.

“If you do a good job Freya they might tip you!” I voiced loudly as they walked away, Callem reluctantly in tow.

I went home to find my parents and get permission for the puppy. I also needed to find the book on the *History of the Skyholme Navy* I had borrowed from Wigand and never read. I think Pascal had taken it. Pascal was home and like a petulant boy retrieved the book from his room and then left in heated anger. He would cool off eventually.

I found my mother at work and she was very open to the idea of the puppy. I gave her four large silver to pay for the dog’s taxes and food. She didn’t want to take it but reluctantly did. She then asked me a serious question. Was Gareth sweet on Freya? I had to think about that. It would be a good thing. They were the two most important people to me in this new world. I told her I didn’t think so, at least not yet. I told her I would have to get back to her in five or so years. Mother also asked me about the butter churn in the barn. She had cleaned it out and used it recently and wanted to know if I planned to utilize it or bring it to Callem’s farm. Freya had told mother I had purchased it and she had tried to make butter but it didn’t taste right because she had forgotten to add salt. Freya had thought she had done something wrong and thought I might be mad at her for leaving the 'bad' butter in the churn. I told her it was ok and for them to continue using it. I would have to find another way to age my coins or just risk spending them as there didn't seem to be any repercussions for spending the shiny coins. Once I mastered the *cleanliness* spell it would completely obfuscate the coin's origins.

My next stop was lunch in the pub. Gareth was there with a puppy. It reminded me of a Bernese Mountain dog pup but mostly white with some brown and light spots of black. Gareth was excited saying it would get up to 180 lbs (80kg) like his father. Oh yes, that was right, these big fluffy monsters were sheep-herding dogs. He would be a fantastic friend and protector for Freya and I told Gareth so. But I probably should get a few more coins to mother to pay for the food...no Freya should have to earn money for the pup's food. Who was I kidding though? All she needed to do was bring the dog by the pub and butcher for free scraps in town.

The rest of the day Gareth and I took the puppy to the river and played with him. I returned home to mom cooking chicken fajitas for dinner. I showed her how to cook them and make the cornmeal tortillas. Freya was proud and vocal about getting a silver coin tip today from giving the tour to Callem and the woman. The dinner was good and Pascal had mellowed from our earlier encounter. The dinner had a bunch of innuendo about Freya’s presents and she eventually went to her room in a huff totally missing the constant queues about the puppy. The entire family would be going to the carnival tomorrow. Gareth and I would have to supervise Freya.

In the morning Gareth brought the puppy in and used it to wake Freya up who screamed in joy, scaring the pup so much it peed in her bed. We laughed about it and Freya didn’t care. She wanted to call him Fluff Monster but eventually was talked into something more reasonable, Monty. Eventually, the dog fell asleep and was locked in her room with a bowl of water as we headed off to the carnival.