**Chapter 25 Gareth Part 3**

A loud knock woke Gareth. Before he realized it he stumbled out of bed and opened the door without the towel. Broderick stood in the doorway with a massive package that contained all of his new clothes and shoes. “They came late last night but I held them till early this morning for you. You sleep quite loudly according to Nina. I found her listening at your door after dinner service.” Broderick had a devilish grin on his face. “So, breakfast serving will be in about 15 minutes…” Broderick was studying Gareth, “You look pretty good for having downed five cups of my personal brew. I actually thought that you might be late for an engagement so I came to get you up myself.” Gareth nodded and took the bundle.

“Thank you, Broderick.” At least he had remembered the man’s name. Gareth’s body felt fine with his Giant’s Constitution but his head was still a little foggy. “I will be down when I am dressed…did I already pay for breakfast? I think I remember doing so.”

Broderick had a big grin on his face, “You did at that, double portion as well. See you in a bit.” He left and Gareth closed the door and unpacked his new clothes. He lamented the dress clothes, such a waste of coin just for a cover story but that was Storme’s plan. Maybe he could use pieces of the outfit as gifts for his family. His mother would love the yellow scarf.

He dressed in his ‘new’ common clothes which were extremely well made. Now that he had a chance to really look at himself in a mirror he thought he could really pass for one of those snobbish nobles in this outfit. The clothes fit his frame extremely well as he went through his basic movements. He did his stretching progression and found no issues. The best part of the clothes was the new underclothes. He wasn’t sure if it was the material or the enchantments but he now knew he wouldn’t be able to live without them in the future.

Gareth went down to the common room carrying a large bundle. He had repacked all the clothes including the set he had worn to the city. He got a lot of stares and felt like he was being evaluated again by the staff. “Don’t worry! the women approve. You look dashing Gaston. Your new threads cut your athletic figure extremely well. Well have a seat and Nina will bring your breakfast.” Gareth sat and placed his bundle on the chair next to him.

Breakfast was two large sausages, a big pile of scrambled eggs, a pitcher of cider, and a hearty rye bread baked with nuts and smothered in butter. Nina hung over Gareth as he ate which just made him eat faster as Gareth thought she was waiting to clear the plates. Following breakfast Gareth talked with Broderick, getting directions to the Mage’s Spell Emporium which supplied textbooks and spells to the Mage Academy near the citadel. Soon Gareth was out the door with his large bundle of clothes.

He needed to get a few good spells for Storme. But he had half a day to explore the city, how long could selecting spells actually take?

He went into a sweet treat shop and filled a bag for Freya and sampled a number of delectable items himself. Then he went into a pet store and got some toys for Monty. His next stop was a weaponsmith. They had a number of finished weapons on display. A few were rippled steel like the daggers Storme had made. The proprietor said the ripple was made by folding the steel. Before each fold, the metal was coated in aether crystal dust. This process made adding enchanting runes much easier. The broad sword he found that he was interested in was 15 platinum coins. It had a sharpness enchantment and thunderstrike enchantment. He resisted his urge to buy it but spent another hour looking at all the various weapons. Callem had taught him how to spot quality and 90% of the weapons in this shop exemplified those traits from his teachings.

Reluctantly he moved on and his next stop, the emporium for spells. As he was passing an elaborate storefront with two guards guarding the entrance a man came out in haste with a greeting, “Why, my young noble friend, are you carrying your own things? You need a porter or better yet a servant! Come inside and let’s see if we have something that fits your needs!” Gareth was going to walk past but something pulled at him…it was the crest etched on the building. He recognized it as the Bricio family crest. Was this a place they sold indentured contracts? Mostly from curiosity, Gareth considered going inside.

The man who was trying to lure him inside spoke, “Young lord what do you need? We have over 100 contracts up for sale at this site!” The man had a slimy quality to him. Gareth paused and studied the building. It was a large footprint but only two stories in height. The stone was white but had black wooden trim. The emblem on the double doors at the entrance was similar to the Bricio family crest but the colors did not match…so it was probably an offshoot or subordinate branch or maybe just a business enterprise. Maybe this was an adventuring or mercenary hall? “It is close to mid-day meal and I would be honored to offer you our hospitality.” Gareth was hungry again and he did have some free time to eat.

He decided to enter even with his reservations about the man. The man introduced himself as Danic Bricio. So he was a member of the Bricio family. He brought him to a modest room that was cast in rich furnishings and a long stage surrounded by tables. He seated Gareth at a table close to the stage and two guards entered and bracketed the archway that was his exit. Gareth wasn’t nervous but a little wary. Danic started in on the conversation.

“Forgive me for making assumptions but I am excellent at reading people. Not a reading skill just my mental aptitude at play. I see you are out for a shopping trip in the city and I see a renowned tailor’s mark on your bundle so I am assuming you come from a well-off family.” Gareth nodded at the man’s guesses making him smile. A servant came out and poured them some wine and left some heavenly-scented bread with roasted garlic dredged in an oil Gareth was not familiar with. “I assume by your age, 16 or 17 by my estimates, that you are enrolled in an academy in the upper city.” Gareth paused on his third slice of bread. What harm could there be to lead the man on so he nodded.

Giddy with excitement the man said, "Of the four academies, definitely not the Mage Academy. Not the Naval either or you would be in your common uniform. That leaves the Scholarium or the Adventurium academies. By your muscles and gait, it must be the Adventurium?” Gareth made direct eye contact and nodded.

“You are an excellent reader of people,” Gareth said as the servants brought out a pea soup with small cubes of fried meat in it. It was excellent and Gareth tried to show his best table manners by eating with a spoon instead of using the bowl like a cup.

“Very good! It is a fun game. I do not have any reader abilities so I try to puzzle things out.” Gareth gulped but remained poised. He should have thought of that. And there were skills used to detect lies. He was being careless. “Well, I see you are struggling to carry all your packages so I assume you are without a servant?” Gareth nodded as it was the truth. “Excellent we have some fabulous options for you! Are you looking for something long-term or short-term?”

Gareth had to process the words and recount what he had said. Did the man assume by his coming inside he was in the market for a servant? He was already eating the man’s food so he should play along so he said, “Long term.”

“Very wise! Most young people don’t understand that a servant can be an excellent companion to attend to your needs as you age. Training someone early is the best way to get the most out of a contracted. Any particular skills you are looking for?” The man had stopped talking to finish his own soup and it was clear that Gareth had to say something.

“I think a sparring partner would be great,” he thought hard what does a servant do? “They would have to be able to scribe letters I dictate as well,” he thought quickly. “They must be competent and trustworthy with my coin as well.” Well, maybe the last would be seen as an insult to the man. An entire roast was brought out and was carved for just the two of them. Some raw and cooked vegetables accompanied the meat as well.

“Hmm,” The man was thinking. “Good martial skills, and someone with good penmanship…maybe a calligrapher…someone well versed in the customs of the upper class and with a long outstanding contract…I can think of a few options.” He pulled out a pen and wrote down something and handed it to the servant. "Let us finish the meal and then we can sip some wine while the candidates are revealed. That is my favorite part of these working lunches, the big reveal!"

Gareth had three large servings of meat before he was finished and Danic made idle chat obviously trying to ferret out Gareth’s origins. Gareth gave obscure answers and focused on eating. With the meal done Danic clapped his hands and jumped up onto the stage. “My good man Gaston I have five excellent servants for you. The first is a man who has ten years left of his contract. He spent his early years as a duelist and then as a guard on merchant skyship.” He gestured and a man walked out in a simple beige top and pants with leather sandals. The biggest feature was the tattoo that covered the entire left side of his neck…no it was the mage mark for the indentured! He was essentially in a slaver's den. He studied the man. He was shorter than Gareth at 5’8” (172 cm) and Gareth could tell he was not a great swordsman by his gait. Not a good range of movement and his steps were heavy. Danic listed the man’s accomplishments but they were obviously drummed up. Seeing Gareth’s lack of interest he stopped talking about how well-read the man was and motioned for the second candidate. Gareth was already trying to figure out a way out of the compound. He should just see the showing to its conclusion decline every option and leave.

The second candidate was a younger tall man at 6’ (182 cm). His reddish hair and brown eyes made him look like a foreigner. Most people on Skyholme had dark hair or some shade of blonde. Gareth guessed him to be about twenty and he had some potential as a swordsman. Danic stressed the boy was the son of a merchant and was skilled with numbers and letters and had excellent handwriting. He was capable with a long sword and bow as well. Gareth let him finish his pitch. The man had seven years on his contract and if Gareth wanted it he could buy it for 10 platinum. Seeing Gareth not flinch at the sum had Danic grinning. The first candidate was led away and the second remained as the third was brought out.

Every candidate had the same tattoo on the left side of their neck. This man was middle-aged and a veteran. He had actually sold himself into indenture to give the money to his estranged daughter and grandson. He was fifty years old and his contract was 5 platinum for five years but could be renewed indefinitely. By Gareth’s estimation, he was fit and a good warrior. Seeing no objections the man stayed on stage as the fourth candidate came out.

It was a Wolfsguard! Gareth sat straighter in his chair and Danic noted his increased interest, “What we have here is a washout from the Blackguard program. The new laws allow them to be indentured for life. But don’t be fooled the wolfman here is a great swordsman, the Blackguard standards are just very high. He isn’t capable of writing though…but the status you would gain by having a Wolfsguard servant!” He paused, “In addition to his 25 platinum cost though there is a 5 platinum annual tax to Skyholme as long as he lives within the islands.” Seeing Gareth’s focus sharpen on the Wolfsguard Danic called for weapons and had the old man spar with the wolfman. The younger man was brought away.

Gareth was focused on the sword work and movements. Both were as good as advertised, if not better. The wolfman’s superior strength and speed kept the older man on the defensive though. Gareth knew at this moment in time he probably couldn’t beat either of them in a sword fight. Danic's inner child was screaming for joy as he saw Gareth’s intense focus on the contest. He thought he had finally found a buyer for the wolfman. Well, he had buyers but no one the family head would approve of. The annual tax had been a killer to other potential buyers as well. He wondered who this Gaston was attached to.

With the sparring done Danic tried to get a commitment from Gareth for the Wolfsguard but he didn’t bite. Maybe the kid's father wasn’t as rich as he had figured? Well, he had one more option. Maybe the boy would want a plaything for a servant? He didn’t think Gaston had the aura of wanting to dominate a woman and he was usually fairly good at judging this trait.

“I have one last potential contract you may be interested in. She is a half-breed but does check all your qualities. A good swordswoman, educated, she will be loyal as the Triumvirate has leverage on her.” Gareth's attention snapped to Danic. “She was part of the carnival a few weeks back. Her mother was taken in as a spy and her good behavior ensures her mother's survival. Also, she has a tier 5 mage mark…makes her more costly but…” he waved his hand and a half-elven young woman came out on stage. She had long silvery blonde hair, large blue eyes a very attractive face, lean athletic frame and stood at 5’9” (185 cm). Gareth's intense study of the young woman made Danic focus on the young man's reaction. The boy wasn’t lustful but perhaps infatuated. He would probably not like the cost. The girl did have a severe restriction on her file but for the right amount of coin, anything was possible.

“So this fair maiden was part of the tumbling troupe. When her mother was being brought in for questioning she defended her from two Wolfsguard with a rapier for a brief amount of time. She was almost as quick as the Blackguard according to the arrest record! Well, she was questioned after being subdued and found not to have any connection with her mother’s links to the Sadians. But she was put on trial for attacking the Blackguard and now has a contract for life! She does need some taming but I am sure you could handle that? The tier 5 tattoo should be invaluable for the training as well.” Gareth’s only thought, seeing the passion to be free in the young woman’s eyes, was freeing her. “Her contract is 45 platinum plus 5 platinum still owed in damages from the day of the incident.” Danic had put the number quite high to see if it was out of reach for the man and to have some wiggle room if Gaston decided to haggle a bit.

Fifty platinum! That was a lot but he had it. Wait. He still needed to get the spell books for Gareth. “I will need some time to think on it,” Gareth finally said after obvious introspection. “I may need to talk with my father as well as the expense is quite large.” The elf looked in her late teens but didn’t elves age slower and live longer?

“Well do not wait too long! Our next phase of program training is coming and the more skills we teach them the higher their contract sells for,” the man’s sliminess was in full force. The only indenture that had made continuous eye contact with Gareth had been the old man. If he had been here to actually get a servant he probably would have chosen him. The wine at lunch had been potent but Gareth’s constitution gave give good legs to do his final task. He left the compound, reluctantly shaking Danic’s hand and telling him he would be thinking hard about the servants he viewed today

Gareth’s mind kept returning to the girl at the Bricio compound and he nearly passed the entrance to the Mage’s Spell Emporium. The store was made of the same white stone most of the buildings in the city were made of. Behind the door, Gareth found an immaculate lobby with a half dozen men and women looking at tomes on shelves surrounding the lobby. Looking up the building extended two more stories with terraces overlooking the lobby. Gareth could see shelves lining the terrace walkways with a few people perusing them. A large skylight was directly over the lobby giving lots of natural light. Not that it needed it as there were more aether lights in here than he had ever seen.

A young woman interrupted his gawking, “Young lord how can we be of assistance today?” Gareth took the beauty in for another few breaths before turning his attention to the woman. She was dressed in simple finery and quite beautiful. Her blue-gray eyes made him pause as he took her in. Gareth was a sucker for eyes he was learning.

“Umm yes. Sorry just haven’t been here before. I am actually here for my younger sister.” Gareth got control of his overloaded senses and told the prepared story. “My sister just recently awakened and she has no spells so my parents sent me here to purchase a few. She has a skill affinity for lightning magic…” He paused lost in the woman’s eyes again.

“Oh, lightning affinity. That would be the fifth one in the last three weeks! It has been a pretty popular spell skill sphere so the cost for most lightning spells has increased recently. Supply and demand you know. Well since it is your first time here I will give you the tour.” She turned and motioned for Gareth to follow.

She led him around the first floor to each of the shelves and indicated the collection of books on each. The first floor contained lesson books for the Mage Academy and some books on general magic theory. No spells were actually on the first floor. She took him up the rear staircase to the second floor and showed him around. The second floor contained 1st and 2nd tier spells mostly divided by their sphere of magic affinity, a colored dot on the spine indicated the spell’s affinity. She told him some spells had multiple affinities and pointed out how that was denoted by multiple dots with the cross affinity. Inside the cover of each spell tome was a slip of paper indicating the price. The third floor had 3rd tier spells and a few 4th tier spells. She didn’t take Gareth up there.

Gareth thanked the woman but she just remained by him. Then she explained. All guests were escorted while on the 2nd and 3rd floors. Gareth just nodded and started looking at books. It took him a minute to find the obfuscate spell Storme wanted. It was in the darkness magical sphere. He opened the book and coughed, tier 1 spell, *Obfuscate Abilities*, 120 gold. Ok, this was the top priority on Storme’s list. There were seven copies of the spell but 4 copies had one author and the other 3 were by a different author. Gareth asked the difference and the woman briefly looked through both tomes. She then told him about the two authors in detail which meant absolutely nothing to Gareth. He then just asked her to recommend one of the spell versions and she lifted one of the books. The young woman asked if he would be purchasing the spell and he nodded. She made a gesture that she would hold the book while he continued to shop.

He spent some time walking through the lightning sphere magic spell shelves on the second floor. Tier 1spells for lightning were *phased lighting* (30 gold), *electrical transference* (25 gold), *lightning arrow* (50 gold), *static wave* (20 gold), and *lightning shield* (50 gold). There were a few copies of each spell with some books having different authors again. He left the tier 1 spells and looked at the tier 2 spells. *Lightning spear* (140 gold), *thunderwave* (120 gold), *lightning sphere* (250 gold), flash step (300 gold), and lightning rod (190 gold). Not as many copies or versions of these spells existed. Gareth was supposed to get one offensive and one defensive lightning spell. He pulled the thickest copy of lightning sphere and lightning spear spell and gave them to his escort to hold. All he had left on his list was to get a tier 3 or tier 4 healing sphere spell.

As he started making his way to the 3rd floor his escort halted him. “Sorry, sir the 3rd floor is restricted to members only.” Gareth looked confused and she clarified. “Sorry I didn’t tell you but I didn’t think you would get any 3rd tier spells for your newly awakened sister. We have a membership program. It gets you 10% off all purchases but costs 500 gold…” She paused, “and we only sell our tier 3, 4, and 5 spells to members. Do you want to purchase a membership for your sister?”

Gareth pondered what to do. The woman continued while he thought, “Your sister needs to be present to get her membership but…we could give you a token that she can present when she comes to the shop herself.” Gareth nodded and pulled out 5 shiny platinum coins and handed them to the young woman. The woman took them. “I will be right back.” She went downstairs and Gareth observed her from the terrace. She went to a desk and looked to be confirming the authenticity of the coins. Soon she rose and went to an older man and after talking to him briefly he handed her a large emblem. She came back up the stairs and handed Gareth a large copper emblem with something Garth assumed was runic script on both faces.

Gareth took the token and pocketed it. “Ok, he said I can take you to the third floor now but just this once. The owner said he would make an exception this time but generally, only the one linked to the token is allowed up there.” They walked up the stairs and Gareth sensed many eyes on him. He asked and was directed to the healing sphere section and uncomfortably looked at the tier 4 spells. *Infuse Vitality, Restore Amputation*, *Spirit Fortification*, and *Ranged Healing*. Gareth had no idea what was good so he just pulled the last spell book which was the thickest of the bunch, *Ranged Healing*. He looked at the paper inside the cover, 1000 gold!

He shakily handed the spellbook to his shadow. He figured that was enough but noticed another spellbook with the gold dot marked for healing spells and the silvery blue mark for lightning. It was a spell that combined the two spheres. He pulled out the book and looked at the title, *lightning reflexes*. He looked inside, tier 4, 1200 gold. Being a mage was really expensive.

He read the spell description on the first page of the tome. The spell greatly increased the mage's reflexes and reaction time. The healing aspect of the spell came from maintaining the body of the mage’s integrity from the accelerated speed. Maybe this spell could make Storme a better swordsman? More of a challenge for him? He handed the book to the young woman. She said, "This book has been here for a while. Not many mages would use four spell slots for a spell that essentially focuses on melee combat." The young woman slid the spell book with the others under her arm.

“I think that will be all for today,” Gareth said. He followed the woman down to the first level and to a desk. She slowly pulled each paper from the book and double checked the paper matched the title of the book. She got a sheet and tallied the total.

“So sir that will be 2,926 gold and 8 large silver. She turned the sheet so he could look at the math. 2,710 gold total with a 271 gold discount and then a 15% triumvirate tax and 5% capital city tax. Gareth pulled out 30 platinum coins. Their new shininess was clearly evident. The woman slowly confirmed each coin with a strange runic item. She explained, “No offense, we just confirm the platinum content of all new patrons to the store.” When she was done she carefully bundled the tomes together and wrapped them in a white leather hide and bound it with leather straps. Gareth was happy. He still had the 50 platinum if he returned to the Bricio’s slave market to free the girl.

Gareth knew it was the right thing to do. However, it would draw attention to him and be the exact opposite of keeping a low profile. Screw it. Carrying multiple unwieldy bundles he made his way back to the Bricio compound.