**Chapter 3 Abilities and Secrets**

I was excited to try out magic for the first time. I raced out of the house in the morning to the lone public bathhouse in Hen's Hollow. I paid the older woman who was the attendant 2 copper coins. This got me a hot bath, cold shower rinse and my clothes washed with scented soap and also dried. It was a splurge on my part but I knew that creating unlimited wealth was in my future. Normally our family would spend 25 steel coins for just a cold shower with soap for all five of us.

I was the only person in the bathhouse this early, most people showered in the evening before bed. I soaked in the large heated copper lined tub and used my access person skill for the first time. The female attendant was barely visible beyond the screen working on washing my clothes. Not knowing what to do I focused on the back of her head. Suddenly it clicked and it was kind of like an instant cold ice cream brain freeze. I didn’t get a blue screen to appear in my vision but just knew the following information.

Edel Swallowhorn

Age 49

Friendly

After clearing my mind from the gutter in regards to the woman’s last name I tried the ability over and over on her and on the 6th attempt finally received a little more information and the brain freeze had also lessened quite a bit. Now it was just a brief, light chilly feeling behind my eyes. The maximum range of my skill at its evolved state was about 10 yards.

Edel Swallowhorn

Human Female

Age 49

Disposition Friendly

Intuitively I knew this was the extent of my ability to give me information. The amount and range of information varied for the ability and this was mine limit. My access person skill would still be extremely useful. I got a person’s name, age, race and their disposition toward me. At least now I would never risk forgetting someone’s name.

My aether core was still a bit painful, like constant heartburn. It would take many years of puberty to form completely and for the pain to subside. I think my pain was more intense than the books had suggested. Maybe I was just a wimp. I decided it would be worth it in the end, after all… magic.

I scrubbed in the tub with a grainy soap and a soft bristle brush and asked a question of the attendant, “Edel, how long have you lived in Hen’s Hollow?” She stopped scrubbing my clothes to answer.

“Storme, I grew up in Haven’s Fjord but moved here with my husband some 30 years ago.” She paused, “If you have time later today could you and Gareth make a run to soaper in the city for me? I will give each of you a free cube and 80 steel each.” She waited patiently for my reply. I hadn’t known her name before today, or if I had I had just forgotten it. We had made runs to the city for her before and usually received about the same and we got a free cold rinse shower for the effort. If I was going to the city later today I should try to line up some other jobs as well as bringing in Gareth.

“Sounds good. How many blocks?” I replied distractedly as I was sorting my thoughts. I once again thought about asking about the origins of her last name but decided to pass.

Edel replied with a sly smile, “Eight blocks, two hard soap and six scented soap.” Damn that was twice the normal haul. Each block weighed about 5 lbs (2.2 kgs) and was cut into 64 cubes. Normally I would have negotiated more before agreeing but the idea of developing my magic was clouding my head. I got out of the tub and headed to the shower stalls for my rinse. There wasn’t a huge taboo on nudity so I wasn’t surprised when Edel stood and walked around the screen to hand me a towel since none had been put out this early. I did notice her line of sight drop to below my waist briefly and her eyes widened briefly. She regained her composure and returned to her work. Well, definitely no shrinkage from the bath and I had made my reincarnated form well-endowed but my vertical growth hadn’t kept up with my horizontal growth. I was just 12 and a little under 5’6” (1.68m) so I had almost a foot of growth ahead of me if I remembered correctly.

I took my cold shower rinse and went to get my clothes from Edel. Edel had an ability that allowed her to evaporate water quickly. It gave her a career drying plants for the herbalist and drying laundry in the bathhouse. Not a world breaking skill but she did well and her husband was the town's wood carver. “Storme, my lovely niece in the city is turning 14 in two weeks. Would you be available to escort her to her party?” She asked sweetly. I immediately flushed.

I responded quickly, “Miss Edel, I must apologize but I believe I will be engaged in other activities.” I took my clothes from her, dressed quickly and left.

I went to the common square where there was a large water fountain with a lion and sat on a stone bench. The square was where most town celebrations were held. It was still early and I sat and thought. My first thought was how good my clothes smelled. Edel had used the vanilla soap on them as she must have remembered it was my favorite scent. Focus Storme. I needed to master my metal creation ability. I needed to purchase some spells. And lastly, I needed to go to the apothecary to see if they had something for my aether core heartburn.

I pulled out a copper coin and tried to mentally duplicate it. Not luck but my metal shaping ability cut the coin in half when I had applied my will. Well, I guess that counted as my first use of magic. Ok maybe I should try without a coin in my hand. I focused on the idea of copper, the color, smell, taste. I got a brief sense of vertigo and a light weight entered my palm. I looked at a lump of copper metal in my hand.

Success? I turned the shiny orange-red lump in my hand…maybe an ounce (28 grams)? Now I needed to make coins. I took a newer copper coin out of my pouch and studied it. One side had the triangle with images at each corner, sword and shield, scales, and two men holding hands. The opposite side had the silhouette of the Skyholme palace, Skyhold, where the Triumvirate resided and had the date the coin was minted below. I studied the coin for twenty minutes before forcing my will and attention to the copper lump I had created. The lump flowed like water into 10 coins in just a few seconds. I breathed heavily in excitement and a tiny bit of fatigue.

I was startled when the baker passed me with a sack of bread meant for the pub. I was sure he hadn’t seen my efforts but I needed to be extremely careful in the future. My stomach was roiling with hunger so I followed him.

The pub had a few customers already. They usually served a heavy gravy with bread, a small bowl of boiled oats with heavy cream and weak ale in the morning for a large steel coin. I ordered two servings and used one of my new copper coins to pay, getting eight large steel coins in change. The gravy didn’t agree with me but the two bowls of oats and cream filled me. I didn’t like the weak ale either as it tasted sour. I left the pub to head to Gareth’s house.

In the morning today I had lessons with Gareth and six other children from the town including Freya, my sister. I found Gareth outside his house cutting wood. Gareth, even though he was younger than me was already just over six feet in height. He ate three times what other kids his age ate and was starting to fill out as well.

“Stormy!” He called when he noticed me walking toward him. Yeah, I hated that nickname. My mother had added the ‘e’ to my name to make it unique and when me and Gareth were first learning letters he pronounced the ‘e’. He knew I didn’t like being called Stormy but he continued to do so. However, if another kid called me Stormy he made them stop by word, threat or force. “Ready for numbers and transcription this morning?” he asked when I was within easy talking distance.

Yeah, I was good at numbers. It was mostly basic arithmetic with some light word problems thrown in. Transcription was kind of boring. Each student spent time copying a book word for word. Gareth’s mother bring a scribe thought it was a good way to learn. Well at least the books were always stories of heroes, monsters and faraway lands. The stories were usually parables though, teaching some ethical principle or moral lesson. “I bet I can finish the numbers before you today.” I replied with a smirk. Gareth knew he had no chance of finishing before me unless he wanted to get most of the answers wrong.

“Yeah, not a chance. How about we let Freya judge our script from the transcription?” His typical grin appeared on his face. My younger sister was usually tagging along with us and was frequently called to choose a winner in our spur of the moment competitions. She was mostly fair but sometimes she got mad at me which tilted the scales toward Gareth. I nodded and we went inside the house to the classroom. My sister Freya was there and she gave me a cross look. Oh shit! I forgot I had promised to take her to the baker for a breakfast cake this morning. I had promised her last night before bed but forgot in my excitement.

Even though my script was neat and was at least equal to Gareth’s I knew I had no chance of winning now. I had been played. Gareth’s grin only got bigger as we sat down.

The tiny woman that had somehow birthed the monster of Gareth entered and the other kids took their seats. I raced through the numbers problems certain I hadn’t made any errors. We had twenty pages to transcribe today. It was part of the tale of Farrod the Warrior. He was a solo dungeon delver and the tale focused on how his greed and lust of coin led him to an early grave. I put effort into my script as the texts were eventually sold by Gareth’s mother for a small amount of coin to pay for her time. She walked around the room and asked questions of the tale depending on where each student was in their transcription. It was to make sure we were reading and understanding the words and not just copying letters. Soon she announced time was up and six kids got ready to sprint out of the room. Gareth hadn’t forgotten the bet and was whispering with Freya.

I walked to Freya to interrupt their conspiracy, “Freya, sorry about this morning. Here is a large steel so you can get some honey suckers.” Gareth immediately looked betrayed, his grin fading thinking I would now win.

Freya grabbed the coin from my hand yelled, “Gareth’s letters were prettier,” and ran out the door. Gareth’s grin returned immediately. Shit, so much for bribery.

We turned and started to walk out together. Gareth put his hand on my shoulder as we walked. “What is on the list for today? Mother was hoping we could get some spiced sausages in the city that she likes for her today. She gave me a copper to do so.” Gareth always had suggestions on things to do but always followed my lead.

“Well, I made a deal with the bath house lady to get soap in the city. But we will need our packs as it is 8 blocks. I also wanted to show you something in private. Let’s go to the barn.” My parents’ house had a stable with two stalls, but we didn’t have any horses or farm animals. The space was more for storage now and a hangout for me and Gareth and sometimes Freya. My older brother, Pascal, had a group of friends that played with wooden swords all day so the space was secure.

Once we were secure in the building I turned to Gareth, “It happened last night. My awakening.” It took a brief second for him to process before his eyes bulged.

Excitedly he asked, “Can you do anything? Did any abilities manifest? Are you stronger? Faster? Can you throw lightning bolts? Fireballs?” Magic was rare and abilities that utilized aether were tracks to gain entrance to better academies.

“I can do a few things. But this will be the biggest secret I have ever shared with you. You cannot let anyone know, not even my parents. Agreed? Blood bonded brothers?” I said it an even and serious tone. Blood bonded brothers was our oath to each other to never betray each other and come to each other’s aide if needed no matter the circumstances.

“Blood bond.” He said in all seriousness. He was rarely serious so I nodded accepting the oath.

“First, I have the access person ability. You read to me as, Gareth Highguard, Age 12, Human Male, Disposition Loyal.” His mouth fell open. We had discussed many abilities from books, fantasizing which ones we might get lucky to get so he knew about the access person ability.

“No way!” he squeaked out in his hoarse voice. “You can work for the inquisition’s office!” His eyes shown pride and joy for me. Well, he was going to be shocked in a few moments.

“I can also shape metal.” His left eyebrow cocked up, his facial expression for skepticism reminding me of Spock from Star Trek. I pulled a copper coin from my pouch and proceeded to shape it into a tiny cat figure, an ugly cat figure but you could see it was a cat.

“Wow a dog!” Gareth rasped out before collapsing in laughter. It was a cat damn it. He thought my failure at sculpting was more humorous than the enormity of the ability or the implications of my shape metal ability. I quickly changed the CAT back to a coin and handed it to him. “Angelic saviors Storme,” he muttered. Well at least I knew he was being serious as he used my proper name when he was no longer joking. “You are not going to tell your parents?” I shook my head no. “You have hundreds of paths ahead of you, my brother.” He was still examining the coin when I held up my empty palm closed it and opened it to reveal a lump of copper. Gareth partially collapsed to the ground. “Did you just? Is that real? You teleported it right? Sleight of hand?” I just slowly shook my head. “You can create copper,” he paused, “real copper? Is it temporary?” his voice was weak in disbelief.

I finally spoke, “It is real and permanent. And I think I might be able to do other metals as well.” He was still in shock so I gave him a few moments to recover before speaking again, “So now we need to start making plans.” He looked up at me and our eyes met and both of us had huge grins and started laughing in unison.