Chapter 139 Freya Awakens (POV)

Freya stirred in her soft satin sheets, and stretched.  Monty was taking up half of her bed on his back and looking up at her upside down.  “Not today, boy.  Still nothing.”  The massive dog closed his eyes and went back to sleep.  Freya still had not awoken her aether core.  Every morning she woke, she expected today would be the day, but she was met with disappointment.  Without an awakened core, she would not be able to do magic unless she had a unique ability.  She yearned for an awakened core.

She absently rubbed Monty with her feet and did the exercises for manipulating an aether core.  Most exercises were pointless without an actual core, but she did her best anyway.  After an hour of effort, she stopped as the morning flights had started.

Freya went to her room’s window to watch the skyships departing and landing across the plaza.  Since her family had moved to Aegis City, this was the best thing about her new room.  It was massive, half the size of their entire old house, and had this envious view.  She couldn’t understand why people had not taken advantage of these warehouses like Storme had and converted them into the most coveted apartments in the city.

It was partially for the view and partially for the amazing food offered in the Shiny Platinum.  People came from all over the islands to eat there and look at the massive murals in the restaurant.  Storme had even started something called a gift shop.  Small items you buy for others to bring back with you.  He had miniatures of the monster paintings made from bone, wood, or metal.   Cigars from the tobacco on Callem’s farm.  Plates copying the artwork of the monsters.  Bottles of mead made by Mera.  Mother inscribed belts with the monster images for sale and backpacks as well.  Playing cards depicting the monsters was the most recent addition.

Storme had mentioned edible figures made from chocolate molds.  And at her own request, chocolate molds of some of the monsters were now sold as well.  Since it was her idea, she was quality control in the bakery where they made them.   You wouldn’t think these items would sell particularly well in a restaurant, but keeping them stocked was impossible!  Storme was making a fortune!

Unfortunately, since moving to the Aegis City, Freya’s own fortunes had tumbled.  She was still overseeing the contracts in Hen’s Hollow for foodstuffs for the Shiny Platinum, but Remy had diversified suppliers, and although the amount coming from Hen’s Hollow remained steady, it only accounted for about one-third of all produce, milk, eggs, and meat that the Shiny Platinum used.  Still, Freya’s parents were almost ten gold a week, which she mostly saved.

Mother was cooking in the kitchen, and Monty’s nose sniffed the air, and his massive tail started thudding the bed.  Freya groaned, “Fine, Monty.  Let’s eat.”  She slipped off the bed in her nightshirt and entered the kitchen and dining area.  “Mother, you could just grab stuff from the bakery below us.  I can smell the bread and honey buns.”

Her mother glared at her, “You need something more substantial than sweet bread coated in honey.”

Freya sought to change the topic, “Is Storme back yet?  He has been gone seven days already.”

“No,” a tone of worry entered her voice.  “I am sure Storme is fine.”

Freya nodded and started helping with breakfast.  Storme was amazing.  He was named a High Mage of all of Skyholme!  Plus, he promised to teach her magic.  If her core did not awaken, he promised to get her a dungeon essence to forcibly awaken her aether core.  No, Storme was fine and just probably found something interesting to do.  One day, she would join him and explore the Sphere at his side.  Mother asked, “Do not eat too much.  Mia has you for sword lessons in the morning.”

Freya groaned.  Bleiz was a much better teacher, even if he was harder on her than Mia.  Mia was more concerned with becoming friends than truly testing her skills against Freya.  Just another woman yearning for Storme to notice her.  Mia just had seeded bread toasted with sweet preserves and a good chunk of honey ham.   A second serving of ham found its way under the table to Monty even though Monty had finished his bowl of scraps.

Freya made her way to the second floor to train with Mia.  Mia was always smiling, which was kind of annoying.   She was also attending the Guard Academy.  Mia told her about her investigative work classes and interrogation techniques as they practiced through the simpler sword forms.  Mia found her classes fascinating and liked to talk about them with Freya.  Freya, not so much.

Mia was patient and gave at least excellent demonstrations and explanations on the sword forms. It made listening to her stories at the Guard Academy bearable. Freya was planning to attend the Dungeon Academy like Strome.  When the two-hour session ended, Mia rushed off to her Academy.

The next part of Freya’s day was spent with her tutors.  Storme had paid for them and thought he was helping.  Well, the math and accounting tutor was good.  But history, law, and literature?  Ugh, she suffered through three hours of lectures and short readings in her apartment.

She then ate lunch at the Shiny Platinum with Mera and Fera.  Mera got her favorite, a sourdough roll with a charred hamburger.  The hamburger had a spicy relish that burned your tongue long after eating it. Mera ate slowly as the conversation inevitably moved toward Storme, “Any word?” Mera asked of Freya.

Freya shook her head, “No, father checks with the capital every day to see if Storme returned to the Black Spire. I am sure he is fine. It is Storme, after all.” Freya’s voice did not have the confidence, though. Seven days was a long time for Storme to be gone.

The three women were joined by Isla. She landed heavily in the chair and quickly ordered a milkshake and fries. Isla liked dipping the salty fries in the milkshake, Freya did not find the salty-sweet taste appealing. Isla was not as fun company as Mera and Fera. The blonde twins liked to talk about clothes and boys. All Isla ever talked about were the projects she was working on for Storme. Storme had not ever taken Freya to the Black Spire yet!

Thankfully, they all got to eat in the function room, away from the noisy and packed general seating room. As they were about to leave, Remy came and sat next to Isla. Freya looked at Isla and then at Remy. Yep, they were definitely sitting a little closer than normal. Fera noticed too, by the look in her eyes—envy.

After lunch, Freya had her last tutoring session, to the relief of both her and Monty. They were now free to till dinner tonight. Freya stopped in her mother’s shop. Mother was busy etching belts for the gift shop. She told her she was headed Hen’s Hollow, and her mother reminded her to get guards.

Since Bleiz was with Storme, she was not allowed to go to Hen’s Hollow without an escort, so she had two of the Shiny Platinum guards accompany her. The Shiny Platinum had a contract for two of the local transport ships, so the cost was only one silver each. Normally, the ship would have just landed at Solaris City, but it dropped them off in Hen’s Hollow before heading to the city. Everyone seemed to be willing to do whatever it took to keep High Mage Storme happy. That and Storme had probably healed half of Skyholme by now. A lot of people visited the Shiny Platinum to thank him by ordering his food.

Her two guards were familiar with her and trailed her through her visits to all the farms that supplied the Shiny Platinum. Freya didn’t need to do this but liked getting back to Hen’s Hollow to see her friends and visit the farms. Especially today since Remy had approved a ten percent increase to the compensation. Freya would accompany the news with a stress on the quality needed to be delivered. Storme had brought a lot of prosperity to Hen’s Hollow, which could be seen in new homes being built and paved roads with stone quarried from dungeons. She doubted Storme was aware of how much coin his enterprises were funneling into the small town.

With her job done, she talked to the local shops, picking up bone miniatures from Antal to sell in the gift shop, leather bags from Master Aldrich for her mother to engrave, and two crates of dried tobacco leaves from Edel. Callum’s tobacco farm was still running as Fera got out here twice a week to maintain the fields. Callem had not visited in months but was still collecting most of the revenue. Not that Fera complained. Callem had deeded the land to her, and she got a percentage of the sales. Fera was going to be as wealthy as her sister.

They had a large pile of goods in the skyship platform and left one guard there while she and the other guard walked to Solaris City to charter a skyship. Cilia and Leda normally pick her up, but they were with Storme. The only skyship available was an old boat that would take nearly two hours to travel the one hundred and twenty miles. She did not have a choice but was even more upset that he was charging five gold for the trip. She would either have to wait for another ship to return from a run or the daily public skyship. She ended up paying, knowing that Remy would pick up the expense.

The old skyship was poorly maintained and even had some rotted planks, which the captain said was due to the Saldian attack. His ship had been in the sky and gotten hit with spells that caused it. Freya doubted it. Even the tone mile trip from Solais to Hen’s Hollow took minutes as the captain worked the aged controls. She was sure the deck had a slight tilt to it as well, meaning the runes on one side needed refreshing. It was expensive to maintain a skyship. They landed heavily on the platform and loaded the crates. One of the guards questioned the wisdom of trusting the skyship to get them to Aegis City.

Freya waved him off. It was just one hundred and twenty miles, and skyship runes failed gradually, not instantly. As long as they remained over Titan’s Shield Island, they had little to worry about. The captain kept the ship extremely low as they moved across the islands. That did make Freya nervous as she skimmed just a hundred feet over the trees. Even though the ship was moving slowly, the closeness of the trees made it feel like they were going much faster.

They landed two hours later in Aegis City. The small skyship settled with an audible groan and snap. The captain swore and raced below deck to see the damage. As the two guards unloaded the crates from Hen’s Hollow, her father walked up to the cradle where the skyship was.

“Freya? What are you doing on Captain Clive’s old boat?” He asked with some concern in his voice.

Freya shrugged, “Only charter available this late in the day.”

He frowned and yelled up, “Captain Clive! Full inspection today!” Freya shook her head. Her father was responsible for all the skyships coming into Aegis City now. She looked down on the Shiny Platinum across the plaza. The massive depiction of a hydra fighting adventurers met her. She scanned it, and it was impressive. A symbol not just of the Shiny Platinum but a landmark for Aegis City.

She noted the adventurer’s likenesses. Talia, the red-robed mage casting an ice lance from a distance. Sammie, with her oversized axe, hacking at a head. Gimble, the elf, directing the combat. Aelyn, the half-elf, dodging a head. And lastly, there was Gareth, fighting up close to the beast with his sword. The original sketches had six people, but Storme removed his own likeness from the mural. Everyone joked that he was still there but on the other side of the beast.

Her eyes went back to Gareth. Gareth was Storme’s best friend—and hers, too. She could not imagine them not being together. She was a little mad at Storme for replacing Gareth with Bleiz, but she liked Bleiz too. She was more mad at Gareth for not talking to her since he had left the Shiny Platinum! The big oath was too concerned with his new dungeon team and his trollups.

She heard her father talking animatedly with Captain Clive. “You will never take my daughter on this piece of junk again, Clive. I have no idea how you have not crashed this rotting hulk, but steer clear of my daughter.” The rave continued, and Freya rolled her eyes. She could make her own decisions; she was twelve. (Reminder to readers: this is about 15 years old on Earth time-wise and physically about 17 years old).

She spent her evening with Remy going over the cargo from Hen’s Hollow, and then she was upstairs in their apartment to have dinner with her parents. Mother preferred to still cook even though the restaurant would prepare just about anything they wanted. Tonight was fajitas, one of Storme’s favorite things to prepare. Even her brother, Pascal, was coming. The meal proceeded in some silence before Pascal spoke.

“Not as good as Storme’s, but still excellent mother,” he said softly. Another day, without word from Storme, people considered the worst had happened. Storme was fine. I do not know why they were worrying.

Father noted, “This is good, Alurha. Storme’s was just a little spicer. Otherwise, I can not taste the difference.” He focused on Freya, “And Freya, you are not fourteen yet. I never want to see or hear you traveled on Clive’s skyship again. The thing will drop out of the sky any day now.”

Freya was not in the mood to argue and just nodded. Freya not arguing was a sign to the whole table that things were not okay. Pascal spoke up, “I will be joining you in the docks. Forty people from my class are serving assigned as part of our academy class. I will be on the second shift on the first, third, and fifth day.”

Father nodded, “I know. Congratulations. I reviewed your profile yesterday from the Academy. You are seventh in your class.” Pascal beamed at the praise from their usually restrained father. “I need to account for over a hundred new Academy guardsmen trainees and Navy cadets. It is a huge headache for opening trade with the lowlands. And all the extra work and just a five silver a week raise.”

Alurha berated him, “Oh, don’t complain. We have no wants or needs since moving to Aegis City. We have more coin than we know what to do with, and Storme does not charge us for this apartment.” Mentioning Storme got the mood sour again. Freya snuck Monty some chicken and then went to her room. Father and Pascal were in a deep conversation about the duties he would be doing on the skyship docks.

She wished Storme was here so she could play with the cats. Kiara, the white one, was extremely smart. She took a shower with hot water and marveled at where she lived again. When she was in clean clothes, her mother knocked to check on her. “Freya. How are you doing?”

She looked at her mother, “Fine.” Her tone betrayed her, and she ran to her mother and cried into her chest. Her mother rubbed her back as she cried. It was now more than seven days since Storme left. Monty was rubbing against both of them, trying to comfort them as well.

Freya slept restlessly that night. She was starting to imagine all the things that could have gone wrong. Why did Strome think he could even fight pirates anyway. He had plenty of coin and dungeons to explore. There were dragons and monsters out in the Sphere. He should have waited until Freya could help him!

She woke in a thick sweat and felt extremely nausaus. She rolled off her bed onto carpeted floor, crawling toward the bathroom. She did not make it before she vomited. It was like everything she had eaten in the last year was trying to come back out. Monty was nervous and barking. Soon, both her parents burst into her room worried, and one of the guardsmen was knocking on their door. Freya was just smiling with dribbles of vomit on her face and all over the floor. Caleb and Alhura were smiling, too. It was obvious that she had awakened her core. Father went to the door to send the guard away while mother helped Freya to the shower to get clean. The foul stench of the vomit and sweat permeated her room. She would have to pay a mage to come clean it as Storme was not around.

She smiled; Storme would have to come back now. Her core had awakened. She was bouncing around in the shower. Tomorrow, she will meet with Ennet and Wynna to get her reading. She would be happy if she didn’t get any abilities as long as she had a strong aether core. She couldn’t sleep and eventually snuck out and went to Ennet’s apartment.

A very sleepy Ennet answered the door. It only took a look before the middle-aged woman smiled at her, “You awakened?” Freya nodded energetically. “Excellent. I take it that is why Monty was barking, and you can not wait three more hours for the morning?” She nodded rapidly again. “My mother is in the capital with Callem. We will go first thing tomorrow so you can get a joint reading.”

Ennet started to close the door, “I will pay for a charter right now!” Freya burst out.

Half an hour later, Freya had paid twelve gold for a charter skyship to Skyhold. Mother was coming with them, and they landed at the Naval Academy with permission. Edel was woken, and Callem was happy for Freya, “Congratulations Freya. Any news on Storme?”

Alurha answered, “Nothing. I figured you would know more than us. You would know if the Maelstrom returned to the Black Spire.”

Callem’s face was hard, “No, he has not landed there. They are keeping the High Mage’s absence quiet. He did not tell anyone where he was going. Just that he was hunting pirates.”

Wynna broke into the conversation, “Enough talk about our adventurous young mage. You are here for a reading? Let us do that!”

Soon, Freya was sitting across from Ennet and Wynna in a private room. A heavy white parchment was under her hands while the two women performed their magic. It was going to be her blood writing out the words as she wanted to see them. Every format was different based on the will of the one being read. Freya knew what she wanted, but she could not change the content of the words. The ceremony was completed, and Ennet and Wynna stood, rubbed her head reassuringly, then left the room to let her read the parchment.

With trembling hands, she revealed the writing to her eyes.

**Freya Hardlight**

Abilities:

Empathy, Tier 1

Ice Fortress, Tier 2

Traits:

Adaptive, Tier 1

Combative Mind, Tier 1

Skill Affinity

Persuasion, Tier 1

Water Magic, Tier 1

Aether Core

Current 8

Maximum 78

Aether Matrix

Current 4

Maximum 9

Her breath quickened. She could learn magic! She was not certain about the ice fortress ability. Empathy was common and just meant she could read the emotions of people and animals. But ice fortress? Could she make a castle of ice? She would have to look it up. Combative mind trait, she smirked. It meant she was resistant to people influencing her, and that was certainly the case even before she awakened.

She even had an affinity for water magic! She didn’t have a lot of magic. She was more than an average mage for certain, but her aether core was short of becoming an archmage. Also, she could only had only four spell slots and a maximum of nine. That was disappointing, but only about one in eight people could even cast spells. She should be happy with having an awakened core.

She slowed her breathing. She could always improve her maximums with the right dungeon essence. Storme would…. Storme was not here to help her. She would have to do this on her own.