

165: Upgrades and progression

“That’s better. You are starting to get the hang of this. It’s a lot better than yesterday,” Arlene said as the woman observed Scarlett conjuring a variety of elemental shapes out of water and fire at the center of the forest clearing they were in. Each shape balanced something on top of it, such as a twig, a stone, or any other small object found in the woods. Although ‘balanced’ might be too generous a word, considering they were, at best, gently slowing the descent of the objects. The fires were gradually having their pebbles and stones sink through them, while the water shapes required constant reinforcement and nudging to keep their objects afloat.

But Scarlett was impressed she could do even this much.

She had spent the majority of the last two days here in Freymeadow practicing her magic, focusing primarily on the technique Arlene had taught her to make her flames more substantial. Out of curiosity, she had attempted to apply the same technique to her hydrokinesis as well, but unfortunately, it wasn’t as effective there, so she’d had to go back to simply increasing the pressure and density of her water to reproduce the effect. However, Arlene had provided some helpful tips in that regard, even though it was outside of the woman’s expertise, so Scarlett felt like she was making progress on that front as well.

After maintaining her magic for a while longer under Arlene’s watchful eye, Scarlett finally released it and let out a breath, wiping the sweat from her brow.

The older woman studied her. “Without that bardic friend of yours here to rejuvenate you, it might be best that we stop here for now.”

Scarlett glanced to the side.

[Mana: 1673/11892]

She had used the [Tablet of Sovegrephor (Legendary)] to upgrade her necklace this morning.

[Depraved Solitude’s Choker (Unique — *Legendary*)]

{This necklace hungers for power and appears to suck in the mana around it, waiting for it to be unleashed. Enhanced by powers of old, it is now ravenous for even the slightest of trickles. 1132/9750}

The increase in mana was welcome, but it was also sort of unfamiliar. Like suddenly having longer legs but not the stamina to quite use them properly yet. That also meant she got all the more tired when she *did* deplete, which she was running dangerously close to doing now. It was easy to be fooled by how much mana was still left, but there wasn’t much of her own still remaining. And since she had already had it recharged once by Arlene since they arrived at this clearing, forcing any more than this would have her lying in the dirt within minutes.

Usually, that was when she relied on Rosa to lend her the energy to move around with her magic, but since they had also spent most of the morning experimenting further with Rosa’s new charm, the bard was back in the village, resting. Right now, Rosa was probably about as tired as Scarlett would be if she continued any further.

But Scarlett had taken that into account. There was a reason she had suggested to Arlene that they conduct their training in the forest for the afternoon.

“I will be okay for the time being,” she said. “I have made preparations for this scenario.”

She removed the [Depraved Solitude’s Choker] and reached into the [Pouch of Holding] at her waist, bringing out a crystal ball that contained a rainbow of colors swirling beneath an orange nebula of tiny stars. [Ittar’s Genesis]. Inside, she could feel the energy waiting to be released.

[Mana: 20541/22289]

Arlene stared at the artifact for a second, then at Scarlett. “That does not seem like something you should have in your possession.”

“I imagine there are many that would agree with you, but for the time being, it is mine.” Scarlett tested the weight of the sacred relic, heaving it up and down. “With this, I believe I will be able to continue for some time longer.”

The other woman appeared to consider her for a long while, then simply shrugged and returned her attention to the center of the clearing. “I won’t stop you. A word of warning, though. You should be careful where and who you show that to.”

“I am well aware.”

Scarlett summoned another set of elemental shapes and resumed her previous exercises under Arlene’s guidance. It was a lot easier to focus on the spells when she could rely solely on the mana inside of [Ittar’s Genesis] instead of tiring herself out by draining what little remained of her own.

Eventually, after twenty or so minutes of training, Scarlett dismissed her magic once again to catch her breath. As she stopped to pull out a flask of water to drink, Arlene suddenly spoke.

“You are a quick learner.”

Scarlett paused, slowly turning to look at the woman. Arlene rarely complimented her, especially when it came to her magical proficiency.

“Don’t give me that look.” Arlene walked over and sat on a nearby tree stump, disregarding the moss and dirt on it. “It’s the truth. You are absorbing what I teach you with surprising speed. Like a sponge.”

Scarlett simply stared at her, not entirely sure what to respond. On one hand, it felt natural to receive praise for her efforts, but at the same time, it felt strange hearing it from Arlene like this.

“...I am merely following your directions,” she eventually replied.

“And you’re doing so with impressive competence. It’s clear you have a natural talent for pyrokinesis, and hydrokinesis to a lesser extent, but this goes beyond that. I doubt most others would have made similar progress in your position.”

That...

Scarlett wasn’t sure how true that was. She *felt* like the woman had to be exaggerating. Most of the time, all she had to do was shape her magic according to Arlene’s instructions and remember the associated feeling from her mana. It was like learning a new sport, with an experienced teacher showing the right technique and form without her actually having to think about the *how*. It was far from a science on her end. If the game had had the archetype, she might have compared it with a sorcerer in contrast to Arlene’s wizard, but she felt like even that might be giving herself a bit too much credit here.

“I can tell you don’t believe me,” Arlene said. “Let me ask you a question. Do you know why most mages never progress beyond the basics of pyrokinesis in favor of using spells, and why they almost never even *touch* true pyrokinesis?”

“I believe we have already had a conversation similar to this.” Scarlett observed the woman for a moment. “...But if I were to humor you, I am aware that it is supposed to be a challenging skill to learn. Those who do so usually focus on it as far as it is necessary because some of its principles are useful for developing and casting higher-tier spells. As you yourself have mentioned, relying on pyrokinesis is also less efficient than spells.”

“That last one is the biggest factor, but the difficulty is definitely a large part. But considering that, why do you think that *you* find it so easy?”

Scarlett pressed her lips together. The answer to that was clearly due to her access to the system, but that wasn’t really something she wanted to bring up with this version of Arlene. The thought made her uncomfortable.

“I cannot provide an answer other than having a natural talent for it.”

“You do, yes. That, *and* you possess a strong sense of will and of how the world should be,” the woman said.

“...Truly?”

Arlene nodded. “Yes. Even if an ordinary mage eventually learns the basics of pyrokinesis, it is incredibly rare for them to master its ‘purer’ variant. That is, in part, because true pyrokinesis involves connecting more deeply with the essence of the element itself rather than merely manipulating fire on its own. As with all the primal forces in this world, to tap into them, a mage needs a strong will and a clear impression of the world, accurate or not. Skill *is* also a significant factor, but that is what you are currently developing. What matters most is that you already know what you want and have a clear vision of how *you* perceive the world.” The woman pointed at her. “This is the paradigm through which you interact with the primal forces, and it’s what grants you the impressive control of the element that you have been displaying since I first met you. How you *wield* that control may be far less impressive, but that is what we’re here to refine.”

Scarlett frowned. Her ‘will’ *could* be considered strong, in a sense, but wouldn’t that just be attributed to the personality and traits of the original mixing with hers? Furthermore, she wasn’t even sure *how* she ‘viewed’ the world, so she had no idea how that would relate to her magic.

“Don’t overthink it too much,” Arlene said, letting out a short sigh. “People always do that when I try to explain things to them. Just know that achieving such a strong connection with an element as you have usually requires extensive training and preparation, both of the mind and the body. Your will can be seen as the anchor that ties you to the element, while your perception of the world is the rudder. It doesn’t necessarily have to be correctly shaped, but if you have a strong image of how you want the world to be, it aids in making your magic shape it accordingly.”

“...I was not aware that played a factor.” Scarlett could remember Arlene telling her something about the importance of one’s will before, but the woman had never gone into much depth at the time.

“It’s not a topic that many people know much about.” Arlene observed her for a moment, then looked to the side. “Anyway, you are making good progress. Even while limited to pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis, I think you will be able to go far with what you have.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett glanced down at her own hands and the crystal ball she was holding. “I may ask,” she began, looking back at the older woman, “do you have any examples of *what* I might accomplish if I continue training with you?”

Arlene’s gaze returned to her, then she waved her hand. A collection of fire materialized at the center of the clearing, forming a miniature landscape consisting of fiery hills, intricately detailed ‘grass’ that seemed to sway in an imagined breeze, and a cluster of tiny buildings near the edge of the scene. Scarlett couldn’t help but be in awe of the precision with which Arlene controlled her pyrokinesis.

“If we’re simply talking control, then I would expect you to reproduce something like this one day,” Arlene said. “Once you achieve that, I can imagine you’ll be able to figure out plenty of interesting ideas on your own. Unlike you, however, I *don’t* have any experience with hydrokinesis, so I don’t know what you might be capable of there. That said...”

Above the model landscape, more fire took shape, forming an intense flaming star that twisted around itself in complex patterns and runes, turning a dark orange that almost seemed to radiate a heat on its own. Scarlett froze for a brief moment as she recognized the scene.

In the next moment, fiery tendrils coiled out from the star, covering the sky above the landscape and obliterating the entire scene within seconds. Then it all faded away.

“You won’t ever be able to accomplish something like this,” Arlene’s voice sounded out from beside her.

Scarlett stared at the empty air for a moment longer. Although it wasn’t real—it was just another rendition created through pyrokinesis—but she knew exactly what that had depicted.

She turned to look at Arlene. “That was a primordial spell.”

The woman arched an eyebrow. “You’re right.”

Maybe it shouldn’t come as a surprise, considering Arlene’s proficiency with pyromancy, but Scarlett hadn’t actually been aware that the woman knew that spell.

Arlene looked at her. “As you mentioned earlier, pyrokinesis simply isn’t as efficient as casting a spell. Barring that peculiar charm your friend has, pyrokinesis requires you to focus and sustain the entirety of your mana and magic yourself, while spells work autonomously after being cast. This means that spell will always have an advantage over pyrokinesis when it comes to scale. Something as complex as a primordial spell simply isn’t possible outside of that framework, and if you want to achieve a similar effect through pyrokinesis, you would need truly absurd amounts of power.”

“...Then where do you think my limit will be?”

“Your limit?” Arlene moved aside a lock of black-and-white hair from her eyes as she leaned forward to rest her elbow on her leg. “I think you’re underestimating me. I am saying it’s irrational to expect to reach that level solely through pyrokinesis, yes, but I am not saying that should stop you.” The woman locked eyes with her. “Don’t you remember what I said earlier about a strong will and perception of the world? Thoughts of limitations shouldn’t even be on your mind.”

Scarlett looked at her, standing there for several seconds as she absorbed her words.

This was another side of Arlene that she hadn’t seen before. The woman often seemed intent on ensuring Scarlett didn’t harbor any incorrect or overly ambitious assumptions about magic, but this was the first time she displayed such ambition herself. It felt like Scarlett was seeing a lot of new facets of Arlene’s character now that the woman was finally teaching her.

“I think this is the first time I have seen you smile since you arrived,” Arlene said.

Scarlett blinked, realizing her mouth had actually curved into a slight smile.

Arlene rose from the stump she had been sitting on and walked past Scarlett. “I assume you still have more mana stored in that relic of yours, don’t you? Then let’s get back to it. I still have a couple more things I want to squeeze into that head of yours before evening falls.”

Scarlett brought her mind back from the thoughts that had started moving through it, refocusing herself and turning around to follow the woman. She could think about other matters later. Right now, there was more training to be done.