

## 95: Back to the grind

“Were you hiding your abilities yesterday?” the voice asked from the side.

Scarlett smothered the two large spheres of fire she’d been focusing on, turning to look at the nearby porch. Arlene was looking at her closely.

“I was not. Since then, however, I have had a realization of sorts.”

**[Name:** Scarlett Hartford]

**[Skills:**

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Superior Pyrokinesis]

[Hydromancy]

[Greater Hydrokinesis]]

**[Traits:**

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

**[Mana:** 3453/4646]

**[Points:** 2]

**[Skills Menu:**

**Upgrades**

[Superior Pyromancy] (25 points)

[Major Pyrokinesis] (50 points)

[Greater Hydromancy] (10 points)

[Superior Hydrokinesis] (25 points)

[Superior Mana Control] (25 points)

**New skills**

[LOCKED]]

After getting back to the mansion yesterday, she’d taken the opportunity to upgrade her pyrokinesis. She had to admit, the boost it gave was somewhat intoxicating. The upgraded skill felt several times more powerful than before. And while she didn’t know exactly what the growth rate of these skills was, she was pretty sure it wasn’t linear, at the very least. Previously, she’d been going around with what was essentially a level 30 skill in the game, but now it’d probably be somewhere closer to level 50.

Not that things translated that neatly into this world. For one thing, all her other ‘attributes’ were significantly lower in comparison. But *actual* skill was also an important factor. That is, her proficiency with the magic.

Her previous experiences had shown that, sometimes, one could get a lot more out of these skills than one would think at first glance. Consequently, there were also times when one could barely get anything out of them if used incorrectly or against the wrong enemy.

As for where the limit of [Superior Pyrokinesis] lay, she wasn't sure yet. All she knew was that *she* wouldn't want to stand at the other end of what the skill was capable of.

"I've seen many go through breakthroughs in my life, but none this extreme." Arlene studied her. "That must have been one special realization you went through."

Scarlett eyed the woman for a moment.

Of course, all of this must look incredibly odd to her. The last time they'd been here in Freymeadow was before they left for Darkshore. For Scarlett, days had passed since then. But for Arlene, it must have seemed like she had left the evening before and come back in the morning several times stronger.

"This is what you should come to expect of me," she said. "I am far from your common practitioner."

Arlene raised both brows, giving her a disbelieving look. The woman returned her focus to the book in her lap without giving a reply.

Scarlett's eyes stayed on the woman for a moment longer, before she returned her attention to her training.



**[Mana: 187/4646]**

Scarlett let out several deep breaths, glancing at the mana that remained. She'd been at it for several hours now, cycling from shorter and shorter training sessions to longer and longer periods of rest. For the time being, her focus was only on familiarising herself with her upgraded skill. She had barely touched hydrokinesis today, except for the occasional wetting of the towel she used to wipe her face.

She peered up at the bright blue sky, where the scorching afternoon sun blared down on her and the dirt square around her. The perpetual summer in this place was nice at first when compared to the rather chilly winds that were starting to go around Freybrook, but she really could do without the extra heat when she was already experimenting with so much fire.

She *had* taken this into consideration when visiting this time, bringing along a lighter set of clothes consisting of a loose white shirt and grey cotton pants. But it was sweltering even with those on. If possible, she would have preferred wearing nothing more than a short skirt

and something to protect her modesty, but there was no way she could bring herself to wear something like that in a public setting. The sensibilities inherited from the original Scarlett cried out at the mere idea.

Slowly, she brought up the towel to clean her face, sighing as the relative coolness of the fabric touched her skin.

There were still several hours left before sunset. Still, she would need to take a good long rest before she could get back to her training again.

What she'd done during this time on the previous days here in Freymeadow varied depending on how tired she was. If she had the energy, she would often read some book or other to further familiarise herself with this world. At other times, she would try to find a place with shade and rest there. When she had been the most tired, she'd sometimes just stay in the chair and do nothing, even though it wasn't the most comfortable of positions.

She had never realized it before, but subjecting herself to this endless cycle of training and exhaustion had taught her how nice it could be to sometimes just do *nothing*.

The spoiled modern person in her would have balked at the idea a few months back.

She wasn't *quite* that tired yet, though. For now, she would prefer if she could at least find a suitably refreshing spot before she started resting. She couldn't very well waste any of her mana to keep herself cool.

Her gaze moved to the porch where Arlene sat.

Actually, why couldn't she just move there? There was plenty of space, and a low wooden ceiling jutted out from the building behind the porch to afford nice protection from the sun. She'd avoided the porch before, not wanting to annoy Arlene more than necessary. But was there any real point to that? She would have several more tries to convince the woman in the future, and it wasn't as if Arlene would remember events like this after everything reset in a few days.

Shakily standing from her seat, Scarlett picked up her chair with an inward groan. This was harder than she thought it'd be. Still, she maintained as steady a poise as she could, walking up to the porch.

This is where it would have been nice if she had allowed Shin to join, so he could deal with these minor inconveniences. But things would turn into a pain then with how she would have to explain things, so it was what it was. And calling Rosa over for something this minor felt unnecessary.

Arlene glanced up at her for a second as she placed the chair on the floorboards, but said nothing against it.

Okay, Scarlett had definitely been overthinking things.

She sat down, relishing in the coolness that came with the shade here on the porch. In fact, this was a lot cooler than she had expected. It was almost unnatural how perfect the temperature was here.

She looked at Arlene. Was the woman doing something?

Whatever the cause, she had no complaints.

Leaning back in her seat, Scarlett closed her eyes, enjoying the relative peace. She might have dozed off for a while because the next time she opened her eyes it was to several cheerful cries ringing out from the village square ahead of her.

Near the platform at the center of the square was a gathering of the village kids, along with Rosa who seemed to be in the middle of sharing some tale or other as she taught them how to tie wreaths out of a pile of grass and sticks lying on the ground. The children must have been out and gathered all the materials for quite some time. Scarlett hadn't seen them when she was practicing earlier.

She kept her eyes on Rosa as the bard looked over a green wreath a small blonde girl had made.

It still surprised Scarlett how willing the woman was to interact with the people of Freymeadow, even after what she'd seen. She hadn't even questioned Scarlett when she said there wasn't anything they could do to help these people. She just accepted the situation as it was, keeping up a smile around the kids in spite of that.

Did she have that much trust in her? Or maybe she was thinking there *was* actually some way to save the village, and that Scarlett either hadn't told her or found it yet.

Scarlett was hoping it wasn't anything like the latter. She had no intention of truly 'saving' Freymeadow, nor any idea of how she would do that, even if she did. What happened to this place was terrible, yes, but as far as she was concerned, it was already history.

Suddenly, Rosa pointed towards her.

Scarlett frowned as the girl turned around and started walking over in her direction, wreath in hand. Soon, the girl reached and climbed up on the porch, stopping a step away from her. She held out the wreath with a timid expression.

Over in the distance, Scarlett could tell Rosa was enjoying the situation. That blasted woman.

She eyed the girl for a moment, trying to relax her harsh expression. "You have made this for me?"

The girl slowly nodded her head.

"I see." Scarlett reached out to receive the wreath, examining it in her hands. It wasn't that well-made, with much of the grass hanging loosely around its frame, revealing the branch skeleton underneath. But the girl looked proud as Scarlett looked it over.

What was she supposed to say here?

"...Thank you."

Was that enough? Or should she lie about how beautiful it was?

It seemed to satisfy the maker at least, as a smile grew on the girl's face. Still, she didn't leave. Scarlett was uncertain what else to say as the girl looked at her intently. Was she expecting more?

"Your gift has made her embarrassed. That means she likes it." Arlene's soft voice reached them from the side. "She's probably tired from all her work, though. You shouldn't bother her for too long. Go back and play with your friends."

The girl turned to look at the woman, staring at her for a short while. Then she spun around and started trotting back towards Rosa and the others.

Scarlett glanced at Arlene. "It appears as if you get along well with the residents."

"I make do." The woman turned a page in her book. "I could say the same of you. The kids must like your little performances."

"I do not believe my relationship with them is anything of note. This was most likely a result of my retainer's ploy. While she is proficient at socializing and ingratiating herself with the young, she also has certain predispositions that I do not always approve of."

Arlene looked up, gazing out at the children gathered around the bard. "I can see what you mean." The woman's eyes stayed on them for a while. There was a tenderness in that look, though the woman's appearance in general didn't quite fit the image.

"...You seem fond of them. The children," Scarlett said. "This is not the first occasion I have seen you watching over them."

Arlene's response was a gentle chuckle. "Who doesn't like children? Could you say you don't, after receiving that gift?"

Scarlett looked down at the wreath in her lap. She didn't really know what to do with it. It wasn't as if she had any use for it. And most items you brought with you outside this place would just disappear.

"I can, yes."

For now, she placed the wreath on the floorboards next to her chair.

"In general, I am not especially fond of children. I do not mind them; I simply have never been proficient in their handling."

Arlene let out another short laugh, one that felt slightly more genuine. "You remind me a lot of another noblewoman I knew. She was terrible with kids, and never minced words, no matter the occasion." The small smile on her face lessened somewhat. "There also wasn't anything she would let stand in her way."

Scarlett raised a brow. She couldn't recall ever telling her she was a noblewoman. Although she wasn't exactly hiding it either, with the way she acted, and walked around with a retainer.

“But these are good kids,” Arlene continued. “The more time you spend around them, the more you’ll be able to tell. They have bright futures ahead of them.”

Scarlett paused at those last words. She studied the woman as she looked over the children with a wistful face.

“...You say that, yet you are the one who does not intend to allow them that future.”

Arlene’s expression froze.

Scarlett wasn’t sure what had prompted her to say that. But now it was too late to take it back.

“You’re right.” Arlene wore a dark smile, head turned down as she traced her hand over the book in her lap. “If you know that much, then... I must seem like a monster to you, don’t I?”

“...Yes.” Scarlett couldn’t deny it.

“Then why don’t you stop me?”

“I would if it was within my ability. I believe we are both acutely aware of what would happen were I to try.”

“Then there’s not much to say, is there?” Arlene’s smile turned solemn.

Scarlett stared at her, then shifted her gaze towards the square. “Perhaps you are right.”

Neither of them exchanged any further words after that.

Scarlett continued observing Rosa’s merrymaking with the children for a while longer until she felt she had recovered enough to get some more training in. At that point, she picked up her chair again and moved to step down from the porch.

“What’s your reason for wanting to learn magic?” Arlene suddenly asked.

Scarlett stopped, looking back at the woman. “I suppose necessity is the prime culprit.”

“I can see that. What is it you’re trying to run away from?”

Scarlett frowned. “I am not running away from anything. I am preparing myself to face it.”

“Often the two are the same,” Arlene said.

“What is the reason you are asking me this?”

“I want to know the reason you sought me out.”

“I was under the notion that you did not intend to help me.”

“I’m free to do whatever I wish.” The woman eyed her for a moment. “At the moment, I was curious about you. It’s clear you’re having a hard time grasping your new abilities.”

Hard time? Scarlett hadn’t noticed any real issue with getting used to the upgraded pyrokinesis. Yet there was an issue that was obvious enough that Arlene could tell this much?

“...Are you referring to anything in particular?”

“What do you think?”

The woman didn’t elaborate as Scarlett looked at her, and eventually, Scarlett turned back to the square. “If that is all, I will return to my activities.”

She was hoping the woman was starting to crack.