

96: Teachings

When Scarlett and Rosa returned to Freymeadow the next day, Arlene surprised them as she stood from her chair and stepped down from the porch as they approached.

“Follow me,” she told Scarlett as they stopped in front of her, then turned around and started walking away.

Scarlett shared a look with Rosa. “I will see what this is about. You may remain here.”

The bard glanced after the departing woman. “...If you say so.”

Scarlett followed Arlene. They exited the village square, walking past the simple wooden and stone buildings that made up these people’s homes as they made their way towards the wall that surrounded the settlement. Eventually, they reached a point where a small gate in the wall let out near where the villagers kept their livestock. Arlene continued through the gate and past the enclosure where the sheep grazed, and Scarlett upped her pace to keep up. Two men tending to some of the animals watched them as they walked by, but neither seemed to offer any greetings.

Soon they reached the edge of the forest, where Arlene stepped into the thick underbrush without an ounce of hesitation. Scarlett followed, trying her best to avoid errant thorn branches and other obstacles. They trekked through the thicket for several minutes until they finally reached a small clearing where rocks and dead trees littered much of the ground.

Arlene stopped near the opening of the space, turning back to look at Scarlett. “Alright. Show me what you’ve got again. Give it your all this time.”

Scarlett eyed the raven-haired woman for a moment. This wasn’t exactly the best place to test her abilities... But if this was what she thought it was, she couldn’t very well say no.

“Don’t worry about the surroundings,” Arlene said. “Just focus on your own work.”

...Alright then.

Scarlett raised both her hands. First, she summoned a dozen medium-sized Aqua Mines; the limit of what her current hydrokinesis would allow her. Each blazed like a tiny miniature star, centered on a large tree trunk nearby. She detonated all of them in order. Splinters blasted away with each impact as pockets of steam burst out, leaving the trunk with several large chunks missing when she finished.

She threw a look towards Arlene, who held an impassive expression as she observed the display.

Taking a deep breath, Scarlett regathered her focus. Four giant spheres of fire flared into existence, each a few meters in diameter. A wave of heat drowned the clearing. If Scarlett hadn’t activated [Sidhe’s Flowing Garbs] right before starting, she probably wouldn’t have been able to handle the increase in temperature.

The flames were a dark red at first. As she concentrated, their color turned lighter and lighter. Soon, they passed a whitish orange into an almost bright white. Scarlett kept them as they were for a few seconds, narrowing her gaze as the image burned into her eyes, then moved all the spheres together, morphing them into a behemoth of a ball that would have swallowed even an elephant.

Arlene started walking towards the fire.

Scarlett paused.

“Keep it up,” the woman said.

Scarlett blinked, then returned her attention to her magic. Sweat ran down her brow. This was eating through her mana supplies quickly, but she could keep it up for a bit longer.

Arlene stopped in front of the giant ball of fire, apparently not bothered by the heat at all. Scarlett blanched as the woman then stepped *into* the flames.

Still, she maintained her magic.

After a few seconds, Arlene reappeared from the fire.

“That’s enough,” she said.

Scarlett immediately dismissed her magic.

A warm gust blew across the clearing as the temperature quickly lowered. None of the nearby trees or grass seemed to have been affected much by her fire, except for a small segment precisely beneath where her spheres had been.

Arlene walked up to her, not a hair out of place. Even after she’d walked into a *literal* fire.

To be honest, Scarlett hadn’t been expecting her magic to be at a level where it could do much to the woman. But that it would be completely worthless point-blank like this? When she was giving it her all? That felt insane.

It was a good showing of how powerful Arlene truly was. Not that Scarlett actually knew her level.

In the game, certain characters had question marks instead of numbers for levels when you first met them, and Arlene was an example of that. This didn’t necessarily mean they were incredibly high-leveled. Just that the game simply wouldn’t tell you their actual level at the time. But there were instances—like Arlene—where you never learned their real level even after completing the game. As such, much of what Scarlett had to go off when it came to the woman’s strength were just context clues. There was just one occasion where you actually saw a level for Arlene, but she was pretty sure it was artificially lowered at that point.

“You’ve got some drive behind your flames, but there’s too much flair.” Arlene stopped in front of Scarlett. She held up a hand, and a small fire appeared above it. “What do you see?”

Scarlett inspected the flame dance in the air for a few seconds. “I see nothing beyond a fire.”

A frown grew across Arlene’s face. “You haven’t learned to perceive mana?”

“I have not learned spells of any kind. That includes ones who would aid me in observing mana.”

“That shouldn’t be possible.” The woman went quiet for a moment, her brows furrowing further. She lowered her hand, her fire dissipating into the air, then looked to the side and waved. “Alright. You conjure a flame instead.”

Scarlett summoned a basic ball of fire.

“You seem fond of spheres,” Arlene said, pointing at the flame. “What do you see?”

Scarlett glanced at her. The woman had realized Scarlett had a way of perceiving her own mana, at least. She turned back to her fire, scrutinizing it closely. What was it she saw?

“Beyond the fire, what I see is an accumulation of mana.”

“And what does that consist of?” Arlene asked.

“...Clusters of mana.”

“And those?”

Scarlett went quiet. Next would be the strands of mana that made up those clusters, but was that what Arlene was asking?

“Are you perhaps referring to the mana itself?”

“Yes. What does it consist of?”

“...I do not know. If I were to speculate, I would say it is some form of energy.”

“Energy?” Arlene raised her eyebrows, seeming to consider the answer. She nodded her head. “That’s about as good an answer as any, I suppose. Then, how would you say that mana—or energy—creates fire?”

“I will admit that I am at a loss in that regard.”

“...You aren’t much of a mage, are you?”

“I have never claimed to be.”

Arlene shook her head. “It’s a miracle you can do as much as you can. You can release your mana for now.”

Scarlett did as she said.

Arlene raised her hand again and performed a simple motion. “What do you think the difference is between this—” A small flame appeared in the air. “—And this?” Another flame appeared beside it.

Scarlett eyed the two flames. She couldn’t *see* a difference, but that didn’t say much. “One is evanescent magic, and the other is manifest?”

“Wrong. One is evanescent, and the other is true pyrokinesis. The same thing you are doing.”

Both flames disappeared.

“The difference between manifest magic and pyrokinesis is miniscule. They could even be said to be variations of the same technique, depending on which mage you ask. What they aren’t, however, are *true* manifestations of their elements.”

Arlene looked over at Scarlett. “Have you ever heard the term ‘true pyrokinesis’ before?”

Scarlett shook her head. “I have not.”

“What do you think it means?”

“...Does it refer to pyrokinesis which creates actual flames?”

“The opposite.” A small smile grew on Arlene’s lips. “The nomenclature among mages isn’t always the most describing. In truth, manifest magic and pyrokinesis are the closest thing you can get to actually *recreating* the elements which they are based upon. A flame created through normal pyrokinesis will hold almost no difference compared to a real flame. It also shares the same limitations. *True* pyrokinesis, however, isn’t bound by those laws. It draws upon the origin of the element itself, and only a true beginner would claim that the *element* of fire is the same thing as actual fire. True pyrokinesis is shaped more by the will and skill of the user than anything else.”

“If I am understanding you correctly, this means that it is a superior variant of pyrokinesis?”

“Not necessarily. It’s more difficult to use, yes. I’ve only known a handful of people capable of it. But most times, you could compare it to using a sword to cut bread — when a knife would both be more precise and efficient. Still, it has its uses. Mainly when it comes to the development and application of some higher-level spells that bend the laws of the world and wouldn’t work without it.”

“Like primordial spells?”

“Exactly like primordial spells.”

Scarlett nodded slowly, thinking over the woman’s words. “If so, why have I not heard of true pyrokinesis previously?”

“Have you ever spoken with a mage about it before?”

“Of course.”

“Then they likely didn’t know the difference. Some mages never learn the correct theory. Look at yourself.”

“...Very well. Let us say that is the case.” Scarlett looked Arlene in the eyes. “What does this mean for my magic?”

“It means you’re holding yourself back trying to learn unnecessary things?”

“What?”

“It is as I said. There’s a difference between pyrokinesis and true pyrokinesis.”

Arlene considered her for a moment, then turned to the side. Another bright-red flame appeared in the air, with no special movements from her end this time. “This is normal pyrokinesis,” she said, gesturing at the fire. Its color intensified, shifting towards a bright white before finally reaching a bright blue. “What do you think this color means?”

“It has reached a higher temperature, has it not?”

Although Scarlett was far from an expert on the subject—only barely remembering some minor details—she at least knew that temperature was one of the main things that affected a flame’s color, along with the kind of fuel that was burning and different chemicals. What she’d learned already as a kid, when she had thought it cool to run her finger through living candle flames, was that blue equals hotter.

“You’re...mostly correct. Though I suspect not for the right reason. It *is* hotter. But more importantly, when using mana as the source, this color shows you’re utilizing it more efficiently. You’re cycling the mana as you need to, and you’re ensuring it gets the air it requires to breathe properly. You’re taking these factors and several more into consideration in order to make sure there is less waste.”

Another flame appeared beside the first, bearing an orangish, bright white color.

“This one is the same temperature as your fire was earlier. So, which one is hotter?” Arlene asked.

“The blue one, no?”

“The other one is twice as hot.”

Scarlett raised a brow.

The white flame suddenly changed shades, turning a clear yellow. “Now, which one do you think is hotter?”

“...The yellow flame, I presume. Although I cannot claim to know why.”

“It’s three times as hot as the blue one right now.”

Arlene dismissed both of the fires, turning back to Scarlett. “Like I said, true pyrokinesis isn’t bound by the same laws as manifest magic and normal pyrokinesis. Yet you’re treating yours like it is. That’s no different from tying your hands behind your back when riding a horse and trying to steer with your legs. This is your most fundamental error, but there are many others.”

Scarlett eyed the woman for a few seconds. “Can I take this to mean that you have decided to teach me, despite your previous words?”

“You’re asking if I’m willing to take you in as a disciple?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. But after seeing the change between the you two days ago and the you today, I decided it would be a sin to let all that potential be wasted on basic mistakes such as this.” Arlene’s look turned darker. “But I think we both know that having me as your master wouldn’t bring anyone much good.”

“I disagree. I believe it would be beneficial for the both of us.”

“You’ll most definitely want to take those words back one day.”

“We will see.”

The woman gave her a long look. “Yes. We’ll see. For both questions.”

Scarlett glanced to the side.

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Her earlier display had been a bit wasteful. But now that they were here, she didn’t want to go back just yet. She turned to the center of the clearing and conjured another small flame. “For now, perhaps you can tell me what it is I can do to improve. I would not want to keep my hands bound forever, after all.”