

163: Educational bouts

Scarlett hurried to activate [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs] just in time, as the arrows of fire slammed into her chest, almost causing her to fall over.

Were those really just made of fire? [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs] was enough to block any real damage, but other than simple heat, she'd actually *felt* that blow.

“What are—!” she began, but Arlene sent two more fiery arrows flying towards her. Scarlett tried using her pyrokinesis to seize control of them mid-flight, but it was like trying to stop someone's fist with a pair of chopsticks. The arrows struck her in the chest once again, though this time she was better prepared and didn't stumble back as much.

She gritted her teeth. As Arlene conjured another set of fire arrows in the air and stepped down from the porch, Scarlett raised her hand and summoned spheres of water to intercept them. A sizzling sound rang out as steam escaped.

It had been a while since she was in a real spar, but her practice sessions with Kat and Garside hadn't been for nothing.

Arlene raised an eyebrow. “True pyrokinesis *and* hydrokinesis? That's a curious combination.” The woman waved her hand, and the water spheres were in turn swallowed by larger flames.

Loud cries of excitement and awe erupted from the children gathered at the center of the village square at the sight.

Standing close to Arlene, Rosa wore a slightly worried expression on her face, but Scarlett reassured her with a gesture.

Just then, a cage of flames appeared around Scarlett, the heat pressing in from all sides, even through the protection of [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs].

Scarlett activated the [Charm of Expeditious Change] and swiftly equipped the [Tiara of Lost Benediction]—Rosa could laugh at her later if she wanted—[Fireguard Knife], [Chromacloth], and the rest of her gear. The heat immediately became more bearable as the enchanted pieces increased her fire resistance and strengthened her defense. Her focus also sharpened, as her own pyrokinesis grew slightly stronger.

Arlene shaped even more fire into larger arrows that launched towards Scarlett. Scarlett conjured a mixture of water and fire barriers to intercept their paths. The water barriers absorbed some of the power from the arrows as they were pierced, while her fires actually managed to steal and swallow some of the incoming flames as well. The defense consumed more mana than she would have wanted, but she successfully stopped all the attacks before they reached her.

Meanwhile, she had summoned eight Aqua Mines that surrounded Arlene. She couldn't identify the woman's weak points through the [Charms of Apperception]—the woman was

too strong—but the Mines still packed a punch as they burst into clouds of steam that struck Arlene from all angles.

Not that the woman seemed to care much. A thin, almost see-through shield of fire appeared in a split second, covering her and blocking all the attacks without Arlene even flinching.

“That is certainly an interesting method of blending those two elements,” the woman commented as she continued walking towards Scarlett. An intense wave of heat emanated from her, piercing through Scarlett’s protections and forcing her to move back. “Unorthodox, certainly, and there are no composite spells for the two schools, which makes it a questionable choice to focus on both, but you’ve circumvented that weakness by focusing specifically on pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis. You’ve sacrificed efficiency, though. Nevertheless, it’s probably the optimal combination to battle a fire mage like myself.”

Scarlett frowned. It was hard to tell which of the things Arlene was doing were spells and which were applications of pyrokinesis. She recognized the fire shield from earlier as a spell called [Flame Veil], but Arlene summoned it without any gestures or words, unlike most other mages.

Arlene went quiet for a moment. “Perhaps this is what they call fate.”

A tiny spark materialized above the woman’s head, rapidly spinning and growing to the size of a basketball. It radiated a bright yellow light, like the sun, even as it continued to increase in intensity.

Scarlett didn’t wait for whatever that was to finish. She focused all her attention on launching a barrage of attacks against Arlene’s defenses. Aqua Mines, spheres of high-intensity fire, cages of flame — she gave it her all. At the same time, she tried to weaken the miniature star above Arlene by dousing it with conjured water and absorbing some of it into her own fires, but nothing she threw at it seemed to overpower it.

Arlene remained unfazed. This time, she hadn’t even bothered casting [Flame Veil] to protect herself, instead enduring the full brunt of Scarlett’s attack with her body. Scarlett briefly worried she might accidentally injure the woman, but those concerns quickly vanished when Arlene stepped through it all without even a graze.

“That said,” the woman continued, “you would have had more success using your hydrokinesis for offence against me. Although you don’t appear to be that proficient at it yet.”

The fiery vortex above Arlene seemed to reach critical mass, creating a whirlpool of air as it whizzed and spun. Scarlett realized there was nothing she could do to stop that attack now, so she abandoned all ideas of offense and instead channeled everything she had into blocking whatever would come at her. She summoned layers upon layers of dense water to encapsulate the tiny sun, its powerful light creating a mesmerizing reflection through the liquid as Scarlett produced even more elemental barriers between her and it.

Then the vortex exploded into a chaotic burst of beams that tore through everything in their path and arched towards Scarlett in an array of dazzling incandescence. It didn’t matter what she summoned to defend herself, as nothing slowed their advance for even a moment, and her heart stopped just as they were about to reach her.

Instead of impaling and burning dozens of tiny holes straight through her, however, the beams dissipated into nothingness right before they touched her. As did all other magic in their surroundings.

Scarlett stood there, sweat dripping down her brow, while Arlene calmly observed her.

“It seems like I have my work cut out for me,” the woman remarked, though a slight smile played on her lips. “We’ll get you into shape eventually, I’m sure. It might just take a bit of work.”



“No, that’s wrong. Focus on *this* part and let the mana flow through it, as if you’re squeezing a drenched towel,” Arlene instructed Scarlett from beside her.

Scarlett heaved a heavy breath as she concentrated on the flame floating in the air a couple of meters in front of her, taking the vague shape of an arrow with a somewhat bulky and uneven shaft. She tried following the woman’s words, shifting the mana flow as she forced the fire into a more defined form.

“That’s better, but it won’t feel like more than a mosquito bite as it is right now,” Arlene said.

Above Scarlett’s fire arrow was another, larger one, with streaks of blue fire running through parts of it, highlighting how Scarlett should use her own mana.

“Making the fire *look* like an arrow is easy,” the woman explained, “but it’s pointless unless you also want it to have the same impact as a real one. Now, gather more of the mana at the back, where the fletching would be—like this—and increase its intensity. That’ll help when you want to give it speed. The most important part is the arrowhead, though. There is a little trick to it if you want the fire to feel like it has actual mass. This is what you should focus on the most, because this technique will come in handy for you in the future as well.”

Scarlett continued following Arlene’s instructions until she had something that the woman was satisfied with. Then she launched the newly forged fire arrow into the ground in front of the porch where they were sitting. A small cloud of dirt rose into the air, leaving a barely noticeable scorch mark on the ground.

“Acceptable, for now,” Arlene said. “Although a normal arrow would probably be more useful.”

“Unfortunately I do not always carry around a bow in my pocket,” Scarlett replied.

“Haven’t seen many noble ladies who do.”

“I am afraid I would have difficulty drawing one even if I did, so I am quite content with this as an alternative.” Scarlett brought out a handkerchief to wipe her forehead while placing a hand on her chest.

She still felt a bit sore after the earlier ‘sparring session’ with Arlene. It had all been rather sudden—not to mention that the woman had forced her into even more bouts after that to further ‘size her up’—but it had been bearable. Kat had also been a bit on the forceful side back when Scarlett had been sparring with the Shielder as well. Maybe this could even be considered tame in comparison.

Although, knowing Arlene, Scarlett wouldn’t be surprised if things became a lot tougher in the future.

For now, however, the woman had been satisfied with teaching her some actual magic after Scarlett had rested up a bit. They had started with those fire arrows Arlene had used in their first exchange. They were apparently what one would consider the ‘basics’ when it came to pyrokinesis, not that Scarlett had ever found a book on the subject or someone who had even nearly as much experience as Arlene.

Scarlett hadn’t even been aware that it was possible to make the fire feel like it had actual weight to it without causing an explosion of some kind. She wasn’t even sure how that worked, but Arlene had explained that this was one of the perks of working with true pyrokinesis rather than regular pyrokinesis. It kind of did what you wanted it to do, as long as you wanted something ‘reasonable’.

In her opinion, that explanation was pretty confusing and ambiguous on its own, but what mattered was that it seemed to work. This fact alone opened up a lot more possibilities for the future.

She looked at Arlene. “Apart from those fire arrows, which other techniques of the ones you displayed earlier were applications of pyrokinesis? Was that miniature sun also an example?”

That was what had caught Scarlett’s interest the most, frankly. She would love to be able to recreate that herself.

The woman shook her head. “That was a spell called stellar inferno. The name is a bit exaggerated, but it’s an interesting spell. Unfortunately for you, it’s not something you’re likely to learn.” She eyed Scarlett. “Unless I’m wrong in suspecting you’re incapable of casting spells?”

“No, you are correct,” Scarlett said. “At the moment, I am only capable of using pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis, and those are likely where my focus will remain in the future. It surprises me that you were able to discern as much this quickly, however.”

“It’s apparent enough after seeing how you handled yourself earlier. It’s certainly *odd*—I’m curious how you got yourself to that level—but it is something I can work with. I have enough experience with both traditional spells and pyrokinesis.”

“Then is there no way to reproduce that ‘stellar inferno’ spell using only pyrokinesis?”

“There technically is,” Arlene answered. She shrugged her shoulders, gazing out at the currently empty village square. “But it wouldn’t serve much purpose. There are countless other ways you can use pyrokinesis to get a similar result that won’t cost you even nearly as much mana.”

“Such as?”

The woman leaned back in her chair and held up a hand. An array of tiny flames was summoned above her fingers, arching around each other like miniature rays. “The spell is essentially another means of conjuring multiple attacks at once. It’s designed to make use of a magical phenomenon known as ‘thermal resonance’—I won’t bother explaining what that is since you won’t have any use for it—which allows it to progressively draw upon the elemental root of fire and intensify itself with relatively little mana expenditure. So it has a low cost, but it takes a while to prepare. If you wanted to achieve the same with pyrokinesis, you wouldn’t be able to replicate the same effect and would instead have to continuously feed it with your mana to keep it going, and even then you would likely achieve a subpar result. Using those fire arrows I just taught you would be a better alternative, or that other technique you had.”

“I call those ‘Aqua Mines’,” Scarlett said. “So you believe they are an effective application of my mana, then?”

“They are interesting, if anything,” Arlene replied. “As I mentioned earlier, pyromancy and hydromancy are an unorthodox blend of schools, but you clearly found ways around that. I imagine there are some wizards who would be very interested in seeing how you did that in order to create an actual spell from it.”

“Truly?”

It was unlikely that Scarlett would ever bother pursuing that avenue when she had so much else going on, but it was interesting to hear. It *was* true that Adalicia and other mages she had encountered often gave her intrigued reactions when she displayed her skills.

She observed Arlene for a moment. “If I may, there is one question I have been wanting to ask you that is tangentially related to this.”

The woman closed her hand, causing the flames dancing above it to fade. She turned to look at Scarlett. “And what is that?”

“I believe there is no doubt that you are an experienced and powerful pyromancer,” Scarlett began. “However, what I find slightly odd is your proficiency not only in theory and spells but also in the pyrokinesis you are teaching me, and especially how it can be applied in combat. I have spoken to several mages and wizards before, but I have yet to meet any who possess experience with pyrokinesis or its equivalent from other schools beyond the basic applications. It is my understanding that everyone considers traditional spells to be superior in combat.”

She had even asked Dean Godwin about this, and he had mentioned that, while he was decent at aerokinesis, he essentially only utilized it for lifting things around and looking cool, though he didn’t use those exact words.

Arlene was the only mage Scarlett had met who *actually* used pyrokinesis in combat.

The woman in question studied her for a few seconds. “Do you know why manifest magic is more common among higher-level spells than lower-level ones?”

“It is because manifest magic is usually more complex to perform, no? So it cannot be used by less experienced mages.”

Manifest magic referred to magic that directly affected and manipulated the world itself. The alternative, evanescent magic, created temporary effects without altering the world in any way. The effect of an evanescent spell might affect its surroundings, but it was a pretty significant distinction.

The way Scarlett understood it, and based on Arlene’s own words, manifest magic and normal pyrokinesis were essentially the closest one could come to creating real fire with magic.

“Complexity is certainly a factor,” Arlene said, “but there’s another reason. Perhaps it’s not something you’ve never had to encounter yourself, considering you only use true pyrokinesis, but manifest spells’ main advantage over evanescent ones is that they are far more challenging to counter.”

Scarlett nodded her head. She did know that, actually. She had witnessed it firsthand when she and Kat were ambushed by Cabal Adepts during one of their excursions. The Adepts’ weapons had been enchanted to dispel the Shielder’s spells, so Kat had switched to using manifest magic to get around that. After all, a weapon made to cut through magical constructs—even if they were in the *shape* of a stone—would have a harder time slicing through an actual physical object.

But it was true that this had never been a significant concern for Scarlett herself, because she was already using something that was equivalent to manifest magic. In fact, *true* pyrokinesis appeared to come with some added advantages, like being more effective against ghosts and other entities that traditionally have resistances against magic.

Arlene smiled faintly at her. “It seems you understand what I’m referring to.”

“I believe I do, yes. But how does that relate to my question? You yourself know manifest spells, do you not? You would have no reason to use pyrokinesis, if so.”

“It’s a simply a matter of flexibility,” Arlene explained. “In duels between experienced mages, manifest spells are always crucial, but spells are, by definition, unmalleable. They are a schematic telling your magic to ‘do this’, saving you the trouble of having to do that yourself. They have set uses and limited adaptability. Knowing the right spell for the right occasion is a mark of a good mage. But pyrokinesis, especially true pyrokinesis, offers much more versatility. It’s faster and more malleable in combat, as long as you don’t want anything more complex. In return, you sacrifice mana efficiency and power, but that can be compensated by having significant reserves.” The woman smirked. “That is something I have never lacked, and that is also why I have mastered both. I’ve only known two others who have bothered to do the same.”

“I see...” Scarlett’s forehead creased in thought.

That wasn't too different from what she had experienced herself and heard before, though she had never had it put this way. As for when it came to the mana costs, it was true that her low capacity had always been her biggest limitation. While [Ittar's Genesis] could help with that, she could only afford to bring it out on specific occasions. Her only other mana-increasing item, [Depraved Solitude's Choker], provided only a fraction of what [Ittar's Genesis] did.

She had been considering upgrading the necklace using the legendary-grade [Tablet of Sovegrephor] that she had acquired from the Sanctuary of Ittar, but she had also been saving that to upgrade her [Charms of Apperception] again so that it would work against higher-level enemies for when she would be facing those, as she heavily relied on the artifact's effect.

She *did* know the locations of a few other items with similar properties to the [Charms of Apperception], though, so it might be worth upgrading [Depraved Solitude's Choker] now just to have that immediate mana boost. In truth, she was pretty curious to see how much mana the upgraded item would provide. It had originally been an item meant for players around levels 20-30—it was strong for that range—so upgrading it to legendary grade would be akin to bumping it up 30-40 levels.

It wouldn't be as strong as [Ittar's Genesis], which offered 20 000 mana and even recharged itself, but it still held promise.

Her attention turned back to Arlene. The woman was watching her quietly.

Well, there were a lot of things that held promise at the moment. And she supposed she could only wait and see how things panned out.