

237: Arrayed for success

Despite her expectations, Scarlett found herself in Freymeadow more than once in the week following the Hallowed Cabal and the Tribe of Sin's attacks on the empire. The busywork back home that she'd anticipated wasn't *absent*, but Lady Withersworth's timely presence and guidance in the relief efforts proved effective in freeing up Scarlett's time for other matters. These included dealing with barony-related issues, recurring discussions with Beldon, the odd communication with Raimond, magic training, and the list went on.

Evelyne was still bedridden, even after Rosa and other healers had tended to her, so Scarlett couldn't relinquish barony duties quite yet. Rosa had assured Scarlett that the prognosis for the young woman's health was mostly positive, and her life wasn't at risk. However, it was still unclear how long it would take her to heal and recover.

What was certain was that, even if Evelyne could work from her bed in her current state, Scarlett wouldn't let her. Even she found herself surprised at how willing she was to enforce this on Evelyne at the cost of her own increased workload, especially when they'd barely seen each other since Scarlett returned because of the strange mood.

The fact that she could—at least partly—slip away from those self-imposed responsibilities of hers by going to Freymeadow maybe helped a bit. It felt almost ironic how her time in the village had become a bit of an escape, even though her time spent here was far from relaxing with the despotic Arlene overseeing her magic training.

It might have only been in Scarlett's imagination, but she felt like Arlene had been even harsher on her in recent loops, pushing her mana supply to its limits to the point where even Rosa's charms barely sufficed to keep Scarlett moving by the end of the day. Maybe it was just a natural response to her growing skills, with Arlene recognizing that Scarlett was improving and increasing the difficulty to match.

In particular, the woman had been focusing a lot on Scarlett's hydrokinesis lately. This included developing new ways to apply it in combat, refining techniques, using it to counter Arlene's pyromancy spells, and more. Scarlett had always struggled with hydrokinesis, so she didn't mind spending more time on it now that the skill was at a higher level. That said, she didn't think it would ever surpass her pyrokinesis.

One day, after a particularly grueling training session in the forest clearing outside Freymeadow, Scarlett sat on the ground with her back against a thick tree, a soft blanket spread out under her, looking up at Arlene in front of her.

Without much else to say, Scarlett found herself asking about one of the topics she had been looking into recently. "How arduous do you believe it would be for me to learn spells at this point?"

The raven-haired woman stood with crossed arms, turning from where she had been gazing towards Freymeadow. "As arduous as learning any new skill. It's all a matter of time. I was under the impression you didn't have enough to spend, however." She eyed Scarlett with a questioning look. "What brought this about?"

“It is simply something I have been contemplating lately,” Scarlett said. “Some of my research has involved the Zuver and their texts, and included in this are many of the characters that comprise contemporary magical scripts and runes. I have found myself becoming increasingly familiar with these and wondered if that knowledge could be applied when learning ordinary spells. That is all.”

“Knowing runes and their construction is part of spellcasting, that’s true,” Arlene replied, her brows furrowing. “But it’s not enough on its own.” She studied Scarlett closely, eyes narrowing slightly. “Have you really learned to read runes?”

“The Zuverian equivalents, at least.”

“That would be impressive if true.”

“You sound skeptical,” Scarlett said.

“I’m cautiously optimistic. You did not seem the type to study the ancient Zuver.”

“I imagine that there is much that you do not know about me. My recent acquaintance with the Zuver language is only one example.”

Arlene raised an eyebrow. “You speak as if it’s a recent development.”

Scarlett moved her shoulders in a light shrug. “Perhaps it is.”

The woman fell silent, considering her for several seconds. Then she unfolded her arms and, with a wave of her hand, caused a glowing rune of fire to appear in the air.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Scarlett observed it closely. “...’Tizark’. It means ‘ignite’.”

Arlene’s eyes widened slightly before a hint of a smile touched her lips. Another rune replaced the first. “And this?”

“’Korlath’,” Scarlett said. “It can roughly be translated as ‘shield’. Presumably, that rune is used for defensive spells.”

“Among other things, yes.” Arlene nodded as a third rune appeared.

Scarlett frowned. “...I do not recognize this one, but it seems to combine the symbols for ‘sea’ and ‘flow’.”

“You’re close. It’s called ‘Aqualis’, and it’s a common component in most modern hydromancy spells.” Arlene motioned with her hand, causing the rune to flare up and disperse. “Usually, casting a spell doesn’t require materializing the runes, but it can help beginners.”

“I see. That does make sense.”

Arlene eyed her for another moment.

“Is there something you wish to say?” Scarlett asked.

The woman shook her head. “No, I’m simply surprised. You continue to surprise me.”

“I presume that is a compliment?”

“If you want it to be.”

“Then I will take it as such.” Scarlett rested her palms on her lap. “Anyhow, so simply being familiar with runes will not be enough on its own. In truth, I had already surmised as much. However, it should still be of aid when learning spells, no?”

“It would make things easier for you, yes,” Arlene said, then paused. “...But I think it’s best if you don’t spend too much time trying to learn traditional magic. You should focus on what you already excel at.”

Scarlett looked at her with mild surprise. “And why is that?”

“Despite some disadvantages to your approach, you’re already working on addressing those. Your talent in hydrokinesis and pyrokinesis is impressive, and I think your potential with them far surpasses what you could achieve with traditional magic in the same time.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett considered the woman’s words. It was roughly the same conclusion she’d come to herself, which is why she hadn’t invested too much time in this endeavour after confirming that Thainnith’s legacy couldn’t teach her actual spells. If she had wanted to become a proper mage, she should have started months ago when she first arrived in this world. She wasn’t lamenting that fact too much.

It was just a shame since it felt like she wasn’t fully utilizing everything the legacy offered her.

“...That is not to say there aren’t ways for you to use that knowledge of yours,” Arlene continued after a while. “Depending on *how* familiar you are with these runes, there are arrays that you can set up even without extensive experience in casting spells. While they won’t come close to what you can achieve with your hydrokinesis or pyrokinesis, if you use the runes properly and have a sufficient mana supply, they could give you some results.”

Scarlett blinked. It was as if the woman had read her mind. “What kind of arrays would these be?”

“That depends on you. It’s not enough to simply know how the runes look, but in theory, you could establish very primitive defensive formations, assuming you have the time.”

So things like fire barriers and the like? Even if she couldn’t replicate more complex effects like her Aqua Mines, that could be useful. Especially if she could set up those formations around the estate and use the Loci to supply mana.

“You would teach me this, then?”

“Under one condition.”

“And that is?”

The atmosphere suddenly shifted, and Arlene’s expression turned serious. “From now on, you must give everything to our training,” the woman said firmly. “I agreed to teach you, but this is not your home. If you can’t handle the demand of being my pupil, then you shouldn’t return after you leave tonight.”

Scarlett stared at her.

What was she talking about? Arlene spoke as if Scarlett was slacking with her magic, but if anything, she was pushing herself harder here than anywhere else. She was regularly on the brink of mana exhaustion. So for the woman to put forth that condition, stated so seriously, felt strange.

Scarlett looked into Arlene’s eyes, a sense of uncertainty bubbling up at seeing the intense gaze there.

...Actually, maybe she *had* been slacking, in a sense. Not in the effort she was putting in, but in her mindset.

She wasn’t really sure when it had happened, but at some point, she’d almost stopped thinking of Freymeadow as a quest location and an obstacle to overcome and more as a fixture in her current life. She’d begun to view Arlene as an actual teacher, even though this place and the woman’s position were only temporary.

Arlene wasn’t teaching Scarlett out of kindness. The woman had her own goals in making Scarlett stronger. Had this version of the woman somehow noticed this shift in Scarlett’s attitude? So this was her warning not to lose focus in the middle of it all?

...Was this perhaps a sign that her time in Freymeadow was coming to an end?

It was true that, by this point, Scarlett *had* probably been here for longer than you were in the game. She had visited Freymeadow more than expected, but when she finished Arlene’s quest, her main reason for coming here would be gone. Yet lately she hadn’t thought too much about what came next after that, even though she knew it was inevitable.

It likely wasn’t a coincidence that much of Arlene’s focus in these past visits had been on improving Scarlett’s hydrokinesis to counter her own magic in their spars.

Scarlett honestly wasn’t sure what to feel about that at this point. With time, it was natural to feel some hesitance, right? Was that so in her case? Or were her other personality traits overwriting that? As always, it was hard to tell.

Did it really matter? She had been determined from the start and wasn’t going to back down now.

After several long seconds, she spoke. “I understand. You have my word that I will fully commit to my training while under your tutelage.”

Arlene's gaze remained on her for a while longer, as if probing her determination, then she finally gave a single nod. "I believe you."



"You know, I've never thought of it before, but why do witches in stories always have black cats? What's wrong with tabbies?" Rosa's musings came from Scarlett's left.

"I love tabbies," Allyssa chimed in.

"Right? Who doesn't? If I were a witch, I'd have a house full of them. Just all of the tabbies."

"I prefer dogs," Fynn said.

Rosa gave him a playful pat on the head. "No surprise there."

"Personally, I am partial to Abyssinians," said the older woman sitting opposite Scarlett in their carriage.

"Oh?" Rosa's eyebrows lifted with interest. "Now *that's* a take I haven't stumbled upon in any taverns. You've earned my tip of the hat. I suspected you had refined tastes."

Lady Withersworth smiled gently. "You're too kind, dear. But please, continue. Flattery is a crucial part of aging gracefully."

"Well, I usually reserve my praise for our stoic leader here, but I suppose I can spare one or two more." Rosa raised her hand to her mouth and cleared her throat theatrically. "My Lady, your taste is as impeccable as a dragon's hoard — only you manage to do it without the flames and scales. Your sense of style could turn even a humble carriage ride into a royal procession."

Lady Withersworth laughed softly. "Oh, I'm beginning to understand why some of my peers employ minstrels for their entertainment. That is rather different from the usual flattery I receive. It's quite delightful."

"But of course," Rosa replied with a sly grin. "As long as the gold's good, us traveling songsters would sell our shadows to a phantom."

"I do hope you don't, dear." Lady Withersworth turned to Scarlett with her smile. "Baroness, you do have an interesting troupe around you. I'm sure you're never bored with these around."

Scarlett looked at her, then at Rosa, and back at the woman. "...Indeed. Never."

Beside her, Rosa shook her head while clicking her tongue disapprovingly. “Take note, Fynn. This is what we call ‘sarcasm’.”

Fynn frowned, as if mulling that over.

“I’m not sure that counts as sarcasm,” Allyssa said, pressing a finger to her chin. “It sounded more ironic? Or maybe just flat?”

Scarlett sighed as her companions debated the tone of her response, while Lady Withersworth continued smiling at her. “You should ensure to enjoy these eventful travels of yours while you can, Baroness,” she spoke in a quieter voice. “Before you know it, age will have you waking up with aches in your back as well.”

“...I will see what I can do,” Scarlett replied. She turned her head to look out the window at the passing buildings. The roofs and streets were covered in thick blankets of snow, and there weren’t many people out at this time of day, with the sun slowly rising behind grey clouds. Some signs of damage still remained in Freybrook, but not much in these parts.

They had departed from the mansion early in the morning and were currently heading towards the Kilnstone.

Usually, having six people in the carriage was a tight fit, especially for an older woman who had only recently recovered from injuries, but not this time. Although it had taken a while, the new carriages Evelyne had commissioned for the barony had finally been completed, and this was the maiden journey of one of those. The new carriage was much roomier and more comfortable than the last one, and it was even enchanted to be more durable and resilient. Not to mention that it was even fancier.

That last part was probably of extra relevance considering where they were going.

“Do you know if your family will be present in Elystead as well?” Scarlett asked after a while, turning back to Lady Withersworth.

“My daughter will be, but my son has returned to our lands to oversee things while my oaf of a husband involves himself in the capital’s chaotic messes,” the woman answered.

“It sounds like they will be rather busy.”

“Absolutely, but for who does that not apply these days? I would be surprised if even a quarter of the nobles show up for the conclave.”

Scarlett nodded slowly. “True.”

Beldon had told her much the same when she spoke with him. While the Cabal and Tribe of Sin hadn’t launched another empire-wide assault yet, reports of monster attacks from various settlements were still increasing, keeping most nobles occupied in their lands.

In light of the crises the empire was facing, a general conclave had been called in the capital for nobles to meet and discuss strategies for handling the situation. Attendance wasn’t

mandatory, and Scarlett knew that a lot of important decisions had already been made outside of it, but it would still be a gathering of many influential individuals.

Initially, she had considered not attending, but Lady Withersworth had recommended she go. The woman believed there was much Scarlett could gain from being there, and since the conclave wouldn't last as long as the Light Fest had, Scarlett wouldn't have to spend too much time in the capital either. Which was good. Beyond everything else she was currently dealing with and her visits to Freymeadow, there were still loose ends that she wanted to tie up. Mainly on the Rising Isle.

"It is a shame that your sister couldn't join us," Lady Withersworth remarked, peering out the window at a young woman they passed by who was removing snow from in front of a small shop. "I know how exhausting it can be to stay cooped up in bed for hours on end."

Scarlett's gaze lingered on the shopkeeper for a few moments. "She will manage."

"Oh, I'm sure. You Hartfords seem to be made of hardy stock, as my husband would have said. But since she saved this old lady's life, I can't help but be worried."

"...I see. I believe she will appreciate your concern."

Scarlett didn't say much more, and neither did Lady Withersworth. The woman had been subtly probing into Scarlett's and Evelyne's relationship during her stay at the mansion, clearly trying to get a better grasp of it, but she never pushed too far.

The carriage continued rolling through the streets of Freybrook, eventually arriving at the large circular square where the city's Kilnstone was located. Unlike when Scarlett had left for the Rising Isle, there were no queues here now. Instead, large tents and temporary shelters had been set up at the edges. People in red robes moved among them, with groups of workers carrying crates and supplies back and forth.

These were part of the relief efforts partly organized by the Followers of Ittar through the Kilnstone network across the empire. Technically, that meant some of the people moving about were likely working for Scarlett as well since she was cooperating with them here in Freybrook.

Lady Withersworth's attention seemed to stay on the camps for a while as their carriage approached the Kilnstone. There, two officials approached to check their credentials before allowing them through. Nobles were basically the only ones permitted to use the Kilnstone for personal trips like this, and even then, only under specific circumstances.

Their carriage rolled into the structure housing the Kilnstone, stopping in front of the ancient artifact. The officials performed their final checks before stepping back. Then, the Kilnstone activated, absorbing all light around them and transporting them to their destination.

Soon, they arrived in Elystead.