

Chapter 69 – Classing up!

I opened my eyes to see Librarian, cracking a huge smile at me.

“Yay! You’re back!” She bounced over, giving me a bone-cracking hug.

“I’m back! I seem to have free time to read as well, no getting in anyone’s way!” I cheerfully declared. “Barring us slipping up for the first time and someone getting horribly mauled, I’m not needed for anything either! It’s *perfect*.”

Librarian facepalmed.

“Damnit! You just had to jinx it didn’t you!”

My hand flew to my mouth.

“Damnit. You’re right. I jinxed it.”

“Yup.” Librarian said.

“Directly to the second floor then?”

“Yeah, let’s just go right there.”

Librarian and I walked up the stairs to the second floor, seeing the staircase in the middle of the room to the third floor blocked off again.

“Weird how it was open last time, and it’s closed now.” I commented.

Librarian shrugged.

“Just the way things are.”

I looked around at the tables, in neat rows, neat columns. Each one was a standard library “reading table”, with four chairs, two on each side. In front of each chair was a book, almost every single one in the room having a red cover.

“Let’s start with the non-Fire classes.” I decided. Advanced classes away! Librarian went and grabbed them.

[Artemis’s Enthusiastic Pet - Water] was first. I glared at Librarian. She gave me a sassy smile back.

“You did ask for the non-Fire classes.” She said gleefully.

My gods. Was I that obnoxious? I must be. I resolved to be a little less literal, a hair less annoying.

[Queenly Minion - Dark] showed up. Role playing like that was enough for a class? Sheesh. It was good to keep that in mind, if I wanted to move evolutions in a certain direction.

[Purificatress – Pyronox] was next up. I took a quick flip through it. Mostly relating to burning out infection and disease with cleansing flames. I already had that with my **[Constellation of the Healer]** class though – I didn't need more healing, the whole point of this class was the added utility. This class, while cool on cleaning, cleansing, and disease destruction, overlapped horribly with my first class. I looked carefully. There were a few things this class could do that my healing class couldn't, primarily around setting up sterile fields and curse-breaking, but I quickly determined that added too little to my kit to justify an entire class dedicated to it.

Would've been useful back when I was treating Lyra.

[Escape Artist – Earth] was up next, giving me a different way to try and escape bindings.

I'll admit, I wavered. After my experience at the hands of the mercenaries, after the pain and torment they put me through, I never wanted to be at someone else's mercy again.

Then again, with solid skills, a good class, I wouldn't be captured in the first place. Getting kidnapped just to level up seemed like a poor decision, and would push me towards getting captured, not away.

[God-Touched Flame-Bearer of Papilion – Mist] – the usual chance to become one of Papilion's minions on Pallos showed up. How did a class described as Flame be Mist aligned? A mystery I wasn't eager to explore first-hand. Interesting that it was now God-touched, instead of Goddess-touched. Was it what Papilion was feeling at the time I entered the realm? When Papilion made the class? Or something else entirely?

I was slightly curious at how many stats it gave me, having not checked since I'd seen the class for the first time.

+400 Free Stats per level.

I cursed. Papilion knew how to make his class attractive.

I took a deep breathe in, then out, letting my self-control assert itself over my greed, letting my rationality take over.

Freedom, not godly minion.

“Let’s look at the Fire classes now.” I said. I hadn’t expected to change elements, to no longer be Fire, not so early on. It was worth a check, and an easy way to filter out some choices.

I’d accepted Fire. Pallos wasn’t a kind place, a nice place. My youthful naivety had been burned out of me. I’d wanted to be a healer, someone that cured others, that fixed them. I’d wanted to do no harm, and I still stuck by that.

But Swimmer and the others had hammered home that even in towns, other people were threats. The Ornithocheirus attack had reinforced that humans were puny little things in the food chain. We’d worked out that the Nothasaurus had likely been driven away from another zone. The highest level thing I’d ever seen was too small a fish to survive elsewhere.

I needed to be able to protect myself. I needed to be able to defend myself. The conversation I’d overheard from Julius and Maximus reminded me that while I was a Ranger right now, when this round ended, I’d be at Ranger Academy. I wouldn’t be here anymore, I wouldn’t be protected by this team. A **[Pretty]**, healer-tagged girl? I needed firepower. Mom had amazing foresight to insist I get **[Vigilant]**.

Look at Artemis. The only free, independent woman I knew, and it seemed to be virtue of her massive firepower.

I’d had long talks with Artemis and Maximus about different elements, different methods. Apart from Metal and Earth, most of the elements were a fairly nasty way to go.

Wood could do solid balls of wood, but it had a similar problem to fire, in that it was less-effective. Instead, Wood mages tended to have ‘death by a thousand cuts and splinters’.

Water blasted decently well, but at the end of the day its lethal method was usually drowning, which took significantly longer and was harder to pull off than Fire.

A dinosaur wouldn’t stop short of a lethal attack.

Wind was low down on the lethal chart as well, short of being very close range for nasty cutting attacks. Good if you wanted to be up close and personal, and to quote Maximus – “Excellent for hamstringing someone in a fight, then running a spear through them.”

Bit of a mixed bag there, but a spellsword could use Wind to great effect. I wasn't a spellsword.

Light was right out as an offensive element.

Dark was like a stronger, more lethal Wind. Get close to a Dark mage, and they could just *vwooop* critical parts of you away. Higher vitality made it harder to just directly... remove... someone from existence, but it could be done. And you didn't need to remove the entire person, just, say, their wrist. Or their necks.

Kinda like what I'd done to lola.

It was still painful. I'd come to terms that taking a life in defense of my own would never be pretty, clinical. Fire spoke to me, there was no other way to describe it, and Maximus and Artemis had encouraged me to keep walking down the path I was on. My other two options were a restart, or a side-jump. A restart would have me start over from scratch, and there were no promised that path would be better, prettier, cleaner. A jump would come with a fairly significant loss in power, and it would ripple through my entire choice.

Like how **[Shadow Healer]** was so much weaker than **[Light of Hope]**, and all of its offered classes would be at least a tier below what a “committed” path looked like.

Evolving Fire into something cleaner, into something that wasn't as messy though, was on my list. I didn't like burning animals and monsters to death. I recognized the needs, that was all.

Inferno. Steam. Storm. Lava. Pyronox. Radiance. Ash. Those were the advanced forms of Fire I could look forward to, that I could hope to evolve it into.

Maximus wasn't sure what Fire and Metal combined into. Only hole in his elemental knowledge, he claimed.

There were non-offensive Mage options. Wood and Water were solid at that, binding roots, water prisons. It barely slowed down people who could attack me from a distance, and would require me to get up close and personal to kill them with my own two hands. Doing it from a distance seemed better.

One day, I might not have a team of people that had my back.

I started to walk through the room, just glancing at titles. It was a fairly efficient system – there was no way I could read all of the books here (Ok, fine, I could happily read them all, but I'd jinxed it and didn't have the time, and half of them were probably just subtle variations on each other). However, what was incredibly obnoxious was the red titles on the red covers, almost the same shade of red to boot – it made me really squint to see the title of each book.

[Hellbelle]. [Inspiring Spark]. [Flame-scorched Healy-bug]. I raised my eyebrows at Librarian at that one. She shrugged at me. Must be something to do with Artemis always calling me healy-bug, and my current class being [Firebug]. Moving on.

[Grill Mistress] caught my eye, just due to the absurd name. Cooking food that boosted healing. And provided some other temporary buffs. Ack! Another healing-related class slipped in here.

It was clear now that my evolutions were strongly impacted by my Celestial class and tag. Good to keep in mind for the future!

[Roaster] I initially assumed was another cooking-class, but when I started reading it, it was more of an insult-based class. Insult someone badly, and the burn would become physical, real. I could literally taunt someone to death.

[Flamebearer]. [Burning Devourer]. [Arsonist]. Burn down towns, get levels. Next please!

[Firehand]. [Pyromancer]. [Spark of fire]. [Mango-mad Pyromaniac].

[Friendly Fire] was somewhat interesting, in that the flames were all completely harmless. It was more like an appearance-related class, working off of **[Pretty]**, than a "point-and-blast" mage. I suspected some healing elements might eventually work their way into a future evolution as well.

I don't think the saber-tooth cats would find me attractive enough to skip a meal.

[Emberstorm]. [Flame of the Traveler]. [Guiding Flame]. [Emberbug]. [Butterfire]. [Flambee]. What was up with all of these bug-related classes!?

Right, **[Firebug]**.

[Lady of Fire]. [Flame of memory]. [Torchbearer of remembrance]. [Burning Revolutionary]. I decided being a revolutionary while being a member of the army was a poor life choice.

[Firecracker]. [Firebrand]. [Thermophridite]. [Brand of Fire]. [Flameseeker]. [Thermophile]. Pick Greek or Latin endings, and stick with it damnit!

[Guiding Flame]. [Flame-Kissed Witch]. [Firebender].

The holy grail. **[Ranger-Mage].**

“Is there a better class than this one?” I asked Librarian, looking around at the dozens of other Fire-related classes being offered.

“Define better.” Librarian asked me, hands on her hips.

Mmmm good point.

“Can evolve into me flying. Has fireballs. Will help me survive. Will help me contribute to the team.” I thought a moment more.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.” I finished up. “Unless you have other ideas on aspects I might need?” Time to see if I could game the System at all.

“How about stats?” Librarian asked. “There’s another class that doesn’t do some aspects as well, but has slightly better stats. It’d be good long-term thinking. Also, **[Ranger-Mage]** is also available later on – it’s not just a level 32 class. It’s also a 128 and 256 class.”

Oooh, that was attractive.

“Let me see both of them.” I asked.

Librarian brought the books to me, as I sat down to look through them.

[Ranger-Mage] Requirements: Mage Class. Ranger’s Lore at level 60 or higher. A member of the Republic of Remus Ranger’s. One of the elite guardians of the Republic, roaming around to solve problems the locals can’t. Defending the meek. Protecting the weak. Solving disputes, and being justice incarnate. Take this class, solidify your identity. +3 Free Stats, +2 Strength, +3 Dexterity, +3 Vitality, +3 Speed, +5 Mana, +4 Mana Regen, +4 Magic Control, +5 Magic Power per level.

[Pyromancer] Requirements: A deep, burning love of fire. Fire-based Mage Class. All Fire-related skills maxed out. You yearn for it. You desire to burn, to blaze, to

see the flames roar up. Take this class, and **Burn**. +5 Free Stats, +14 Mana, +8 Mana Regen, +14 Magic Power, +8 Magic Control per level.

Gods, this was a harder decision than my 128 class-up, when I got **[Constellation of the Healer]**. They were so close to each other! It wasn't like one was an Inferno element and the other was an Ash element – they were both Fire. They were both mages, and so close to each other.

“What's the difference between the two? I need help.” I asked.

Librarian shrugged.

“Ranger-Mage is more flexible, it has more miscellaneous utility skills, and obviously it's more physical. Pyromancer is more 'point-and-blast' mage. They're both as easy as each other to level up – Ranger-Mage will reward you for doing Ranger things, while Pyromancer will reward you more for playing with fire. It's a toss-up.”

I puffed my cheeks out, blowing air through them. Fine. Research time.

I sat down with both books, Librarian bringing me pen and paper. Bless Librarian, able to get me a pen here. There were no pens or paper in Remus, it was so much easier than wrangling with bamboo and charcoal.

I checked the skills, those that I could see. **[Pyromancer]** was a bit more direct, a bit more blunt, more magical. **[Ranger-Mage]** was a bit more subtle, a bit more conceptual. All in all, a draw in that category.

Out of a fight: **[Ranger-Mage]** was probably a bit more useful.

In a fight: **[Ranger-Mage]** was more useful if someone got close to me. **[Pyromancer]** was more useful if I was with my team, and I was behind them, protected, sheltered.

Future me, assuming I lived that long: **[Pyromancer]** gave better overall stats, by a not-insignificant chunk. It played into, and synergized, with my current build, with my current direction.

However, **[Ranger-Mage]** neatly fed my physical stats, freeing up those free stats to allocate how I wanted.

But I would either put them back into magic stats – a net loss against Pyromancer – or I would be putting them into physical stats, potentially splitting myself too far. I was no Maximus, able to somehow make hybrid stats work – and I barely had any use for them,

apart from baseline survival. I wasn't supposed to be in physical fights, I was supposed to be protected.

But that protection could – and had – failed at times. When I was punched in the face, I needed to be able to do more than stumble back.

Let me try phrasing this another way. **[Pyromancer]** was a higher-risk, higher-reward pick, while **[Ranger-Mage]** was a low-risk, low-reward class. Could I stomach the risk?

Let's see. Goblins had attacked us while we were on the road, but we'd handled that neatly. The terror from the skies had also tried to eat us for lunch, but we handled it well. The Nothasaurus had been tricky, but we actively went to hunt it. The damn adventurers had hunted and attacked me, but if I had stuck to Kallisto like I should've, that wouldn't have happened. Or at the very least, we'd have given a much better showing of it.

There were constant random, low-level attacks from dinosaurs and other monsters that didn't quite realize where they stood in the food chain, and they usually graced our pot.

Most of that was before my Fire class even showed up, and my Fire class had been kinda useless until now. If this was my healing class, I needed practicality and healing. This wasn't my healing class. This was an almost-free secondary class that I had time to grow into something powerful. **[Ranger-Mage]** would help me today. **[Pyromancer]** would help me tomorrow. I believed in Artemis, in my team. I would make it to tomorrow, and reap the benefits from having **[Pyromancer]**.

"I just realized. Ranger-Mage was offered to me at level 8, right?" I asked, confirming.

"Right."

"But it's now being offered again."

"Yeah – your Ranger's Lore is high-enough level. The class will keep being offered every time, and the higher Ranger's Lore is, the stronger the class becomes."

"Stronger than Pyromancer?" I asked.

"Stronger than most things you could be offered."

"Alright. I went through Ranger-Mage, I saw the skills, but I wanted to check with you – is there any skill in Ranger-Mage that Pyromancer doesn't have, that could justify me taking Ranger-Mage over Pyromancer?" I was leaning towards Pyromancer strongly, I wanted to check. I wanted to be thorough.

“There’s a body-strengthening and enhancing skill.” Librarian replied. “Best thing it has over Pyromancer.”

That did it. My decision was made.

“I’d like to check this book out please.” I said, handing my choice over to Librarian.

She looked down and smiled.

“I approve.”

We went through the motions of going downstairs, returning my old class book, checking out my new one.

“Goodbye Librarian. I hope to see you soon!” I said, giving her a hug which she returned with enthusiasm.

“Goodbye Elaine. I’ll be waiting for you!”

I left through the door, opening my eyes, and groaning.

Arthur was lying down in the *Argo* next to me, glowing lines around him. I recognized them as Origen’s healing field, not that he got much of a chance to use it with me around. Arthur was moderately badly injured, lines of blood coming out of a dozen different holes from his chest, legs, and arms. The smell of burnt hair and ozone filled the air.

I had totally jinxed it.

I leaned over, touching Arthur, pumping **[Phases]** through him, watching his skin re-knit.

“Nice of you to rejoin us.” Julius said drily.

“What happened?” I asked, thinking about Arthur’s injuries. They didn’t look at all like a saber-tooth cat attack, nor any other monster attack.

“Well, Artemis is now officially on chore duty for a month once we get out of here.” Julius started. I looked over to Artemis who had a mixed look on her face – guilt, horror, and relief all warred on her face.

“In short, I went to pee, almost got jumped by one of the cats, blasted the hell out of it, and Arthur justMightHaveBeenRightBehindIt.” Artemis said, the last bit in a rush.

Julius glared. “More or less, yes.”

“Hey, I was actually under attack!” Artemis protested. “Arthur would’ve been fine anyways, even without Elaine being here.” She pointed out.

I thought back on his injuries. They looked awful, but they hadn’t been life-threatening, even before Origen’s inscribed healing field kicked in.

Arthur sat up.

“How many times have I asked you to check your line of fire for me!?” He yelled at Artemis.

“You’re bloody hidden most of the time! How the fuck am I supposed to check for you!? Especially when a monster is trying to take my head off!?” Artemis shot back, clearly feeling like the wounded party, guilt in her voice indicating she knew she screwed up.

Or didn’t screw up. Depending on your point of view.

“The worst part is, I had a ton of money riding on ‘No Artemis friendly-fire incidents’ on this stretch of the road.” Julius griped.

Artemis turned to look at Julius, her face *priceless*. A mixed look of shock and anger, of betrayal and outrage.

“You – You –“ She sputtered, pointing at Julius, at a loss for words.

“Right, I’m going to dodge whatever’s about to happen.” I said to nobody in particular, going to a corner and throwing up **[Veil]**.

I did not want to get mixed up in whatever happened next. Time to see my new class!

[*Ding!* Congratulations! You’ve upgraded your second class – [Pyromancer] - Fire]

[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Pyromancer] has leveled up to level 33! +5 Free Stats, +14 Mana, +8 Mana Regen, +14 Magic power, +8 Magic Control from your Class! +1 Free Stat for being Human! +1 Strength from your Element!]

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[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Pyromancer] has leveled up to level 39! +5 Free Stats, +14 Mana, +8 Mana Regen, +14 Magic power, +8 Magic Control from your Class! +1 Free Stat for being Human! +1 Strength from your Element!]

[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Fire Affinity] has reached level 33!]

[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Fire Conjunction] has reached level 33!]

[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Fire Manipulation] has reached level 33!]

[*Ding!* Congratulations! [Fire Resistance] has reached level 33!]

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