

90: Bottlenecks

“Would you stop handling it as if it’s a bundle of yarn made of glass?”

Scarlett flinched, losing control of the clump of fire magic that she’d spent the last ten minutes trying to carefully untangle, separating the thousands of strands of mana into dozens of barely noticeable clusters instead. All her effort went to waste as the clusters bundled together once more to create a dense throng of mana that she could scarcely tell one part from the other in.

She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath as she let the fire dissipate. She turned to her right, where the raven-haired woman was sitting on the porch.

“I was under the impression that you did not intend to give me any directions.”

“I wasn’t,” the woman responded. “Nor am I planning on taking on an apprentice, or teaching you any spells. But there’s a difference between that, and sitting here watching you make a mockery of my craft for two days straight. The least I can do is point out the basics that even a beginner mage would now.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. Neither Garside nor Kat had ever had anything to say about these ‘basics’. Both had mostly seemed impressed with her skills in pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis. And this came from two mages who were pretty skilled in their corresponding schools of magic.

“Then what is it you would suggest that I change?”

“I’m not ‘suggesting’ anything.” The woman shook her head. With the flick of her hand, a flame appeared beside Scarlett. “I’m saying that the way you are using your mana is fundamentally flawed, if improving your control is what you’re aiming for. It’s the equivalent of trying to tie a rope by separating all the threads and trying to tie them together all at once. No matter what you do, another thousand hands won’t grow out of your back just like that.”

Scarlett glanced at the flame dancing next to her, wondering if she was supposed to recognize anything special about it. It faded in and out of existence in cycles, as though a glimmering light.

“If you want more control, then learn to use the tools you have properly.” The flame faded away completely.

Scarlett turned back to the woman. “...I am not certain I entirely understand.”

“Then think about it for a minute,” the raven-haired woman said. She then looked back down at the book in her lap.

Scarlett furrowed her brows. She felt like she’d been making progress, though? She’d definitely gotten better at differentiating all the different strands of mana that made up her magic. And she hadn’t even been working at it for that long. She admitted that the idea of

individually controlling all those strands at the same time felt impossible, but she thought it'd be easier with practice.

Was that way of approaching things wrong, then? What was she supposed to do instead? Just give up on trying to learn how it worked and return to relying on her instincts as she had before? But that also felt lacking, when it came to bettering her control. Like using a sledgehammer to strike a nail. Her hydrokinesis in particular felt like it needed more than that.

Then what was the alternative that the woman was referring to? What tools did Scarlett have, other than simply 'shaping' the mana she had with the help of her skills?

Was she just supposed to go the middle way? Try to control clusters of mana instead? That felt more manageable, but wasn't that the same as trying to control all the separate strands, just on another order of magnitude?

Scarlett paused as she recalled the other thing she had been meaning to ask.

"May I pose another question?"

The woman looked up at her. "Yes?"

"What is your name? I have yet to have had the opportunity to learn it, after greeting you yesterday."

The woman considered her for a moment, then spoke. "You can call me Arlene."

"Arlene?" Scarlett repeated.

"Yes."

"I see..."

To think it actually was that simple. Maybe she'd overthought it. One would think that name would have been brought up in the game. It couldn't be fake, could it?

Whatever it was, it didn't matter much at the moment. Turning her attention back to the matter of magic, she began dutifully practicing again, like she had for the past one and a half days.

Following Arlene's words, she gave up on trying to separate the individual strands of mana and controlling them, instead trying to figure out what the woman had insinuated she do instead. Unfortunately, her progress was slow. Even with Rosa continuously recharging her necklace, and pushing herself to the limits, by the time the sun had started setting, she hadn't gotten much further in figuring things out. Arlene also hadn't shared any more words on the subject.

"It's getting late," the woman eventually said. "You should probably leave."

Scarlett stopped what she was doing, dissolving the remainder of her magic and leaning back in her chair. If she'd felt tired yesterday, then she felt like dying today.

While leaving this place made all the tiredness and mental exhaustion from the previous day disappear, maybe that wasn't exactly the same as it not having happened at all. She *did* feel like she'd been wide awake for several days in a row now. Doing this for another day might not be entirely feasible, so she might have to take some proper rest tomorrow.

But if she was going to have to waste a day resting here and there, it would significantly slow down her process. Even more so if she had to figure out these magic things by herself at the same time.

She waited for Rosa to come over and share some of her reinvigorating magic before forcing herself out of the chair, turning to where Arlene sat on the porch.

She eyed the woman for a moment, then looked at Rosa and Shin. "Can you give us some time to speak in private?"

Rosa gave her a curious look, but neither of them complained as they started walking over towards the center of the village square, leaving Scarlett alone with Arlene.

"Was there something else you wanted?" the woman asked.

Scarlett considered her for a few seconds longer.

From what she'd seen, the older woman had not left that chair for even a moment since Scarlett arrived, spending most of her time reading that book in her lap. As for which book it was, Scarlett had no idea. It was of a dark grey leather and had no title on the cover, nor had it even been expounded upon in the game.

"...Are you not curious as to why I wish to be taken in under your tutelage?" Scarlett eventually asked.

"I'm sure you have a good reason. But that's none of my concern."

The woman really didn't sound as if she cared much. As if it was a matter completely unconnected to her, and there was no point in her even trying to involve herself in it. Reasonable enough, maybe. But...

"I can fulfill that which you most desire."

Arlene's expression froze.

Scarlett met her eyes. "If you were to teach me, I could reach a state where I can carry out your true wish."

The woman stared at her, as if her words had brought up something that had long since been abandoned.

Several seconds passed, with neither of them saying anything. Eventually, Arlene shook her head. “You’re overestimating your own abilities. I’ve observed you enough these past two days. Your magic speaks of extraordinary talent, but there’s nothing more to it. You should be careful with those ambitions of yours, so that you don’t end up getting yourself burnt.”

“I say this wholly aware of the obstacles that stand in my way,” Scarlett said. “And I am well acquainted with my limitations. Yet I am still telling you that I can carry out your wish.”

“Then show me that with your skill.”

She frowned. The woman had no way of knowing about the system, or that she could upgrade her skills with skill points. And she couldn’t tell her about it either, so convincing her right this moment would be difficult.

“...Then I will do so,” she said. “Until then, wait. Watch and wait, and I promise that I will show you what it is you want to see. I promise that I will carry out your true wish. For this, you have my word.”

The look in Arlene’s eyes as she listened to her words wasn’t one Scarlett could decipher. Perhaps she was irritated. Or sad. Or pitying Scarlett’s naivety. It was a heavy gaze, nonetheless, that spoke much of the trust she had in her.

Scarlett studied the woman for a moment longer before turning around. “Then I will take my leave. We will meet again.”

She’d prove her words with action. Even if it may take its time.



Arlene didn’t say much to Scarlett when they returned the next day, other than a short greeting. There wasn’t much to speak about anyway, as, after that, Scarlett ended up spending almost the whole day fast asleep. Rosa had propositioned one of the villagers, who’d been kind enough to let Scarlett rest in their home for a time. She had only been planning on sleeping for a little while, though, but somehow she had slept for over twelve hours.

The sun had almost set by the time she woke up, and they ended up having to hurry back to the glade before she could even get back to her training.

At that point, she’d been worried she wouldn’t be able to enter Freymeadow again the next day, but thankfully the portal had still been open and they had returned once more. Arlene hadn’t been especially talkative this day either, but that didn’t stop Scarlett from spending several hours trying to figure out what the woman had meant with her words about her magic.

By evening, she was thinking she was onto something.

While she'd originally been under the impression that a good way of training her magic was focusing on the specifics of her magic and trying to micromanage things, it was indeed dawning on her that Arlene had been right about the futility of that approach.

Or perhaps futility was the wrong way of putting it.

But while there was nothing *stopping* Scarlett from trying to control the separate strands of mana that made up her magic, there was an issue other than the inherent difficulty of trying to manipulate so many things at once. One that felt somewhat obvious at second glance.

She had no idea what to actually do with those strands.

When she was just using her skills to do things, creating either water or fire respectively, it looked so simple. After all, she already instinctually knew what she had to do with her magic to create these phenomena, and the mana just moved according to her wishes in order to conjure it.

But after she actually spent some time identifying and separating some of these mana strands—a tiny number, compared to what it took to create even a basic Aqua Mine—she couldn't figure out how they worked. She had managed to completely remove them from their source, maintaining control as they just 'floated' in the air, but that was all. Unlike when she was usually using her magic, there was no instinctive knowledge or intuition that helped her here.

She had tried comparing those strands of mana to the ones she could observe in her own, functioning magic, to figure out exactly what they did to produce the effects they did, but she couldn't determine any pattern. Of course, it was very hard to tell with just her limited ability to 'observe' these things through the vague sense she had—relying on the somewhat ambiguous connection she felt to her magic—but it all just seemed completely random. Like it wasn't *how* the strands were arranged that mattered.

To test all of this, Scarlett had spent upwards of five hours repeatedly recharging the [depraved Solitude's Choker] as she had tried gathering enough of those strands of mana into the clusters that they seemed to form naturally. She'd essentially created a sphere of fire, then siphoned some of the mana that it consisted of into the air beside it, until she had grown a new lump of mana into a size where it could create a flame of its own. But it didn't seem possible without those clusters.

What this made her realize was that there was something inherent in clustering all these strands of mana together that even allowed it to be used for her magic to begin with. And it didn't *seem* to have anything to do with arranging the mana in certain ways, because it worked no matter how much she tried lumping the strands into disarray when she was working them one by one.

She couldn't figure out what the reason behind this was, though. Nor what it meant for her magic in general. Perhaps there was no point in even trying to figure these things out, and she should just go back to what she'd been doing before with her hydrokinesis already. It wasn't as if it hadn't been working. And upgrading her skills, later on, would no doubt make up for at least part of her lack of control.

But she felt like she had already dived down into this rabbit hole now.

Mages had existed in this world for literal millennia. As a craft, it was guaranteed that countless numbers of people had studied magic and figured out at least parts of how it worked. And that had to include the best ways of improving it. Even if pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis were skills that were relatively difficult compared to most normal spells, there were bound to be people who had figured out how to more efficiently make use of them. And judging from Arlene's words earlier, she was one of them.

Of course, Scarlett also wanted to make as good a use of her skills as possible, and improve as fast as she could as well. That was one of the reasons she was here to begin with, even if it wasn't necessarily the main one.

Well, she was saying that, but while she had made some discoveries during the day, she hadn't actually gotten much actual practice done because of it. And she still didn't know how to apply any of what she learned in the future.

Still, she continued for some time longer, until the time eventually came for Arlene to once more tell them it was time to leave.

Hearing the words, any thoughts concerning her magic disappeared from Scarlett's mind. She turned to Arlene, who had already returned her attention to her book.

That's right. It was already the fourth day here.

Her eyes lingered on the woman as Rosa and Shin walked over from the center of the village square. The bard used her magic on Scarlett so that she could move again, and Shin helped carry the chair back to the porch where Scarlett had taken it from.

Her gaze turned from Arlene to the two of them. Both had spent the last four days with her in this village, without a single complaint. While it seemed most of the villagers kept away from the square when Scarlett was practicing her magic, the two of them had started getting to know the kids and some of the parents.

Scarlett had given them a brief warning, but she should really have put a stop to it the second they arrived. Hadn't she told herself that she wouldn't even let both continue coming with her? Yet in the end, she had done nothing at all. Because it had been easier not to, and she'd delayed it trying to come up with a good excuse that would work in the future. She had perhaps been too focused on her training.

That had been negligent of her. It had been *lazy*.

And she still hadn't come up with an excuse that would actually make sense.

It seemed she would just have to do things the forceful way.

The two gave her expectant looks as they stood ready to leave. Scarlett turned back to Arlene. "Then we will take our leave," she said, pausing for a moment. "...We will see each other again."

The raven-haired woman glanced up at her. "I'm sure we will."

The same response as every other time.

Scarlett locked eyes with her, but the woman was as unreadable as ever.

Turning to leave, Rosa and Shin joined her as they quietly left Freymeadow, walking all the way out to the edge of the forest that enveloped the glade the village was in. Perhaps the two noticed that her exhaustion wasn't the only reason for her unresponsiveness this time.

Eventually, they reached the glade where the entrance to this place was. As usual, it was covered in a weak shade of red at this time of day, as the sun set over the horizon. As they approached the center where the portal was, the air in front of them rippling slightly, Rosa spoke. "So, how many times are we going to do this?"

Scarlett paused in front of the portal. "...I do not know."

The number of times you could enter in a row was random, after all.

"However many times it may be, though," she continued, "Neither of you will be joining the next time."

She didn't bother looking back as she stepped through. As usual, all the piled-up tiredness and exhaustion disappeared as she returned to the real world, where autumn reigned instead of high summer. But now, instead of the usual wet forest smell, there was a faint, ashen scent in the air.

Allyssa and Fynn were sitting on the ground a few steps away, where Allyssa had spread out a large blanket on the damp ground. Fynn's forehead furrowed as he looked up and sniffed the air, turning to look at the space behind Scarlett.

Scarlett glanced back. The air still rippled with faint waves as it had before, but now it had a dim red tinge to it, and it almost looked like there were traces of smoke on the other side.

"Huh? What's wrong, Fynn?" Allyssa asked.

A moment later, both Rosa and Shin appeared.

Scarlett watched the rippling space closely. It didn't disappear. Which meant there was at least one use left.

"Hey, what did you mean earlier?" Rosa asked as she looked at her. She paused, scrunching her nose together. "What's that smell?"

"Something's burning," Fynn's voice came from behind.

Rosa frowned. Both she and Shin looked back at the space behind them. "What's happening?"

“Nothing you have to concern yourself with,” Scarlett said. “And I meant exactly what I said earlier. Neither of you will join me the next time I return to Freymeadow.”

Shin turned back to her. “Why not?”

“Because it is no longer necessary. You have seen that it is safe, and there is nothing more for you to do there.”

The looks she received were filled with doubt.

“I don’t really know what you guys are doing on the other side all the time,” Allyssa spoke up. Scarlett turned to look at her. “But are you really going to go back right *now*?”

Scarlett nodded. “I am.”

The young woman pointed to the portal. “Is it *supposed* to look like that?”

“...Yes, it is,” Scarlett said. She turned around and made to move through the rippling air when both Rosa and Shin stepped in front of her.

She stared at the two, a hint of irritation rising up. “Move.”

Rosa eyed her. “...I think it’s best if we join after all.”

“This is not a matter that is up for debate. You will both be staying here.”

The woman shared a glance with Shin. “Sorry, but that doesn’t exactly lend us the most confidence.”

“That is irreleva—”

“I’ll go,” Fynn called out.

Scarlett turned around to stare at him. He had a determined look on his face.

“You will not,” she said.

Him joining was almost as bad as Allyssa coming with.

“Why can’t we join, if it’s safe?” Shin asked again.

Scarlett looked back at him. “Because I say so. You will stay. That is an order.”

The air turned silent.

“You’re sure there’s not suddenly anything dangerous there this time?” Rosa eventually asked, sounding more serious than usual.

“...I am certain, yes.”

The bard's eyes turned back to Fynn.

"She's lying."

Scarlett glared at him.

"I am not," she said. "There is a risk of danger, but it is miniscule, and unlikely to affect me if I do not actively seek it out."

At that, he turned quiet.

"Then, how about this?" Rosa said. Scarlett turned back to the woman, and paused. Rosa had a heavy, but somewhat familiar look on her face. It was as if her eyes were saying that she had seen through part of Scarlett's reasoning. "I'll come with you, and the rest'll stay here. If there's really no danger, that shouldn't be an issue. And with this, they won't feel like we're just abandoning you."

The bard showed a smile that belied the atmosphere. " 'Course, you can trust me not to go tattling about whatever priceless treasures you're trying to keep secret over there."

Her words were said in a playful manner, but Scarlett could tell she didn't think those were her real reason for keeping them away.

Scarlett looked at her for a long while. "...Are you certain?"

"When am I not?" Rosa grinned. "I am the most certainest person there is."

"And will that be acceptable to you?" Scarlett looked to the others.

All of them gave slow nods, though Fynn didn't seem fond of the idea.

She turned back to Rosa. "Then let us proceed."

The woman nodded. "Let's."

Shin moved to the side to let her through, and Scarlett stepped forward. Her surroundings warped, spreading out and morphing as she exited into the same clearing. But it wasn't the same as the previous times. It was dark, and the scent of burnt wood clung to the air. In the distance, above the trees ahead of her, dense clouds hung low, reflecting a deep red as smoke trailed up towards them.

"What's happening?" Rosa said in a worried voice as she appeared beside her.

Scarlett turned to look at the woman.

"A nightmare."