

## 120: Perspectives

Smoke trailed up into the dark red sky around Scarlett as she and Rosa walked through the burning ruins of Freymeadow. They passed by dozens of bodies, charred remains of the people that had lived here, as well as scorched traces of the villagers' daily lives; tools, hammers, clothes, toys, and much more.

This would never grow to be a pleasant sight, no matter the ambivalence Scarlett felt about the horror of the scene itself.

The two of them moved quietly this time as they proceeded deeper into the dying village. The bard's hard expression spoke magnitudes of her thoughts, witnessing all of this again. Yet she had still chosen to join Scarlett, despite that.

It spoke of an impressive determination in and of its own. Probably more than Scarlett would have had, had their positions been reversed.

Eventually, they reached the village center. There, they were faced with the same sight as the previous time they'd been here, with piles of burnt corpses spread out around the space like a scene from a nightmare. In the middle of this was the burning wooden platform with the strange black stand on top of it, sinking into the planks beneath it. Arlene was kneeling on the ground close to the platform, back turned towards them as her raven-black hair covered her trembling shoulders.

Rosa sent a wordless look at Scarlett before the two of them started walking over, sidestepping the bodies that blacked the way. Arlene didn't notice them at first, head aimed down at the ground as Scarlett stopped in front of her.

"...Is there really nothing we can do?" Rosa almost whispered as she paused next to Scarlett, staring down at the woman.

"There is not."

Arlene's shoulder stilled. Slowly, she turned up to look at them, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes locked on to Scarlett, filled with a mix of rage and anguish that Scarlett doubted she would ever understand.

Soon, red embers bloomed into existence around them, floating gently through the air. A faint haze followed it, spreading across the square and enveloping them. It turned denser as their surroundings morphed, and soon, strokes of colors and shapes filled the world as things changed.

Just like last time, Arlene was the last remaining figure of the previous scene that remained, her gaze fixed on Scarlett until the last second. Then she, too, was absorbed into the web of colors that inched in, leaving only Scarlett and Rosa.

For a short while, there was complete silence. Then the colors became clearer, taking on the hues of the forest surrounding Freymeadow. As the last piece of the changing world locked

into place around them, both Scarlett and Rosa found themselves back in the clearing outside the village, with Shin, Allyssa, and Fynn waiting nearby.

Scarlett gave the three of them a short nod before turning back to Rosa. “With that concluded, shall we continue?”



Taking several deep, calming breaths, Scarlett raised a flask to her mouth and took a deep swig of the liquid inside. The cool water felt nice as it soothed her parched throat.

She really wished it didn't have to be summer *all* the time here in Freymeadow. It got tiring real quick. Especially when all you did was train.

At the moment, she was sitting up on the porch along with Arlene—the magical air conditioning here was nice, at least—after having spent a few hours moving back and forth between her practice and resting sessions. Rosa was god-knows-where, having already been convinced by—or convinced—the village children to go off on some adventure or other.

This would be the third loop here in Freymeadow, and it had started much like the other ones. They had arrived earlier today and Scarlett had introduced herself to Arlene just like the previous times, asking the woman to take her in as a disciple. And just like before, the woman had denied her request.

She had to admit, she'd thought there was a chance of succeeding this time. But apparently, she still wasn't quite up to standard for the woman.

At least it wasn't *as* bad as before.

Inadvertently, she found herself glancing over at Arlene. The woman's straight, dark hair hung gently over her shoulders as her head was turned down at the book lying on her lap, its pages partly hidden from Scarlett's view by the cover.

“Is there something you want to say?” the woman asked, not looking up from the book.

Scarlett blinked. Did she have eyes on the side of her head or something?

Remaining silent for a while, unsure of what to say, Scarlett eventually decided on an avenue of approach related to something that had caught her awareness.

“It did not escape my notice that you were paying attention to my practise sessions earlier,” she said. “On more than one occasion I saw you observing me, despite previously having expressed no interest in my affairs here. Could it be that you have changed your mind after seeing what I am capable of?”

“I took a few glimpses, yes.” Arlene gave a slow nod. “But I wouldn’t say I saw anything particularly interesting.”

“No? Then, if not, what did you see?”

The woman turned a page in her book. “What did I think, you ask?”

“Yes. I am still in the process of familiarising myself with magics and my own talents. It is only recently that I have come to understand that what I am doing could be considered different from ‘normal’ pyrokinesis.”

“I can tell,” Arlene replied, slight amusement clear in her voice.

“I have been told that I focus too much on the minute details,” Scarlett said.

“That doesn’t surprise me. Whoever taught you magic was a fool.”

“I am self-taught.”

“Then I suppose you are the fool.”

Scarlett frowned at the woman. She didn’t know what to respond to that.

Arlene looked up, studying her for a moment. “An ignorant fool is still a fool, like any other. If a healer fails to save a patient because they didn’t recognize an illness, then that patient still dies. The healer’s ignorance simply serves as an excuse for why the fault doesn’t entirely lie with her.”

The woman turned away and gazed out over the village square before them. “I don’t mean to offend you, but it is the truth. Intent has always been subordinate to results. Taking it into consideration has and always will be a privilege. One that too many squander.”

She turned quiet, and a heavy atmosphere fell between them.

“...I am not here to question your judgement on this topic,” Scarlett eventually said. “Quite the opposite, in fact. But what, would you say, is it that I am ignorant about, first and foremost?”

Arlene turned back to her. She stayed silent for a few seconds more, seeming to consider her. “It depends. Are you talking about in regards to your use of true pyrokinesis, or your magic in general?”

“Both.”

“...Then we’ll start with your outlook.”

Arlene waved her hand, and a flame appeared in the air between them. “To begin with, observe how I’ve separated the mana here to—”

“I cannot see what it is you are referring to,” Scarlett said. “I can only sense the composition of the mana in my own magic.”

The woman paused, sending a long look towards her. Then she waved her hand again, and the flame split into dozens of thin, fiery strands. Soon, they started moving around each other in complex patterns. “We’ll do it like this instead, then.”

Scarlett observed the flames’ dance for a while, trying to see any similarities it might have to how her own magic was constructed.

“The very first thing one has to understand with magic is that, as a discipline, it requires an exhaustive and holistic perspective to be properly understood,” Arlene said. “This demands a method of thinking that is difficult for most people. It can be unintuitive, strange, and sometimes even blasphemous to some. But it’s necessary, nevertheless. It might be possible to become a mage without it, since you can always learn the spells by relying on rote memorization, but you will never become a *wizard* without it.”

Scarlett watches as the thin strands of fire started moving faster and faster around each other, forming a complicated mesh that got harder and harder to follow. At the same time, she felt the air around her turn hotter as waves of warmth started washing over her like someone had turned on a heating fan.

Arlene gestured towards the magic hanging in the air. “Explain to me how that works.”

Scarlett knitted her brows. If she knew how things like this worked, she wouldn’t be so confused by magic in general.

“This is not a spell, if that is what you’re thinking,” Arlene said. “It’s nothing more than a basic application of pyrokinesis. What I am asking you to do is tell me *why* it had the effect that it did.”

“...I presume there is a purpose to the specific movements?”

“Of course there is.”

Scarlett observed the complex array of fire in front of her even closer. Then, was it *literally* just functioning like a heating fan did? It didn’t *look* like a fan. Was there some other magical bullshit behind it?

“...If I were to present a hypothesis,” she began, “it would be that the movements of the fire act to circulate the surrounding air, heating it in the process as it sends the air towards me.”

That was about as descriptive as she could be. She didn’t actually *remember* how heating fans worked, but they couldn’t be that complicated, could they? It was a fan with a radiator in front of it, basically.

“That’s close enough to what the *purpose* is,” Arlene said. “And the purpose is always one of the most important things to know when dealing with magic. Oftentimes it might appear to be the most obvious factor, but that’s only when you’re looking at it from the top-down. When

you're creating your own spells or working with pyrokinesis, you don't always have that luxury."

"So, are you instead asking me how the specific movements of the flames create this effect?" Scarlett asked.

"Essentially." Arlene gave her a curious look. "Do you know?"

"...I do not."

The woman nodded her head. "Good."

The flames disappeared, along with the warm air.

"Why is that good?" Scarlett asked.

"Because trying to understand why it worked as it did is a fool's errand," Arlene answered. "It's possible. *I* know how it works. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to replicate the effect by only using pyrokinesis. But that was only possible because this was—on the grand scale of things—an incredibly simple use of magic. I just warmed up some air and sent it your way. Despite that, you would have to search for a long time to find any other wizard capable of even that much. Had I instead tried to heat all of the air to the exact same temperature and tried to send it your way so that every single part of you was hit by the same uniform heat, it would be several orders of degree more difficult to recreate. Practically, it would be impossible."

"...This much I already understand," Scarlett said. "In my own attempts at improving my skills, I have realized the difficulty in trying to control all parts of my magic. What I have yet to understand, however, is how one is supposed to achieve greater feats through pyrokinesis without knowing how the underlying building blocks function. Originally, I thought that intent was perhaps enough to fashion the magic as you wish, but I have been led to believe there are better ways."

"Why would you need to understand how the building blocks work?" Arlene asked.

"In order to manipulate them as I wish."

"You don't think you can otherwise?"

"Perhaps I can, but it would be easier if I understood them, no?"

Arlene gestured with her hand in front of her. "If you tie a knot out of a piece of rope, one as long as you are tall, how would you go about untying it?"

Scarlett eyed her for a moment. "...If it is tied in the appropriate way, I would be able to untie it by simply pulling at the right parts. I suppose that is what you are trying to say applies for magic as well, then? However, that begs the question of how to tie the knot to begin with."

"You don't. The knot has always existed."

...That was not much of an explanation.

At her doubtful expression, Arlene continued. "If you have a tree in front of you, you won't think 'how do I get the tree to grow *exactly* like it is now, with the same number of leaves and branches?'. You will be thinking, 'what is the best approach to making a tree like this grow by itself?'. "

The woman met her eyes. "Do you know why?"

Scarlett shook her head, gesturing for the woman to continue.

"Because the tree is already an existence unto itself. An arrangement of interlocking ties and elements that, no matter the time you spend on it, you won't ever *truly* comprehend. You might know how to plant the seed, give it a suitable habitat, and keep it nurtured as it grows, but the tree does the rest. The tree is a system, and the best way to interact with it is by identifying the points that have the most influence in this system. And there are such points. There always is, for everything. I could bore you with an hour-long lecture about why that holds true, but I won't. Simply know that it is."

"...I believe I understand what it is you are trying to illustrate," Scarlett said. This kind of thinking wasn't entirely foreign to her.

"Do you?" Arlene eyed her scrutinizingly. "Do you, truly?"

"At the very least, I have a sense of what you are attempting to convey, though I cannot say for certain that I would know how to apply it to magic."

"I would certainly hope not. If you did, I would be genuinely fearful of whether or not I was dealing with a human."

Scarlett arched a brow at the woman.

"Hidden inside my words just now are what my master liked to describe as three 'truths', observable to anyone with enough time to waste," Arlene continued. "My master always used to say that these truths were an essential part of what any wizard had to accept if they truly wanted to understand magic and what it is capable of. Do you have any idea what these truths are?"

Scarlett shook her head. "I suspect you intend to share them, regardless. There is no point in my aimlessly fumbling for them, if that is the case."

The older woman's mouth rose in a small smile. "That's what my sister told my master when asked that. You can imagine that she was not pleased with the consequences."

"You were of another opinion?"

Arlene let out a low chuckle. "No. I was simply wise enough to keep quiet about my thoughts." The woman waved her hand in the air as if that was unimportant. "But I was in the middle of boring you to death, so unless you're too ungrateful to appreciate me telling you even this much, I'll continue."

She held up three fingers. “Three truths. First of all is the fact that everything is an imitation. A representation. A model. You can describe it in however many ways you want, but what matters is that you understand this: nothing you see is the true reality of the world around you. This is true both for what you perceive with your own eyes and for what you perceive in your mind. And before you start misunderstanding and think I’m saying that nothing is real, listen to the rest of what I have to say.”

Scarlett gave her a patient look. “I am listening.”

Arlene gave a satisfied nod. “The second truth is that these imitations often conform well with reality. You see the image of a tree with green leaves because a tree actually has green leaves. You hear the sound of a woodpecker nearby because there is one nearby. A river seems to flow faster because the current *is* faster. But, if a child dropped a stone in the river, they might be surprised to see that it doesn’t flow along with the current. This is due to the third truth: these imitations that we perceive the world through often fall short of representing the world fully, and as such, we can never *fully* understand the world. Like the ignorant child, we often draw illogical conclusions from accurate assumptions, because what we see is only the flowing river, failing to understand that the ‘river’ doesn’t actually exist. The river is simply a system of interlocking relationships and elements that work together and create an effect whose existence we perceive as a river.”

The woman considered Scarlett for a moment. “For another example that might be more familiar to someone like you, you can think of the Graenal empire. Just like the river, the ‘empire’ doesn’t exist. And if you plan on arguing with me over that statement, you can leave right here and now.”

Scarlett stayed quiet.

Arlene continued. “The ‘empire’, as it is, can, just like anything else, be described as another complex of interlocking relationships and elements, working together towards an overarching goal. What value people ascribe to the nation and its history is simply another example of those relationships, and the cities and villages of the empire are systems unto themselves, subservient in part to the empire and its existence. This is where we may compare it to your magic.”

She gestured to the open square before them, as well as the surrounding buildings. “Say you were the village head or reeve of a village like this. You’ve been so for long enough to know every single villager, every house, every farm animal here, as well as all of the relationships that exist between these. You are so familiar with all of these things that you can predict *exactly* what consequences it would have if Witter the Blacksmith woke up one hour earlier a particular morning, or if Mira the Weaver went to the nearby town for a week. Even for a small village like this, a feat like that would be incomprehensibly difficult. But perhaps it’s possible, in theory. However, let’s say you were instead a baron or a count, with a town or city inside your fief. Or a duke, with swathes of land, as well as towns and cities, within your domain. Now, not even the most accomplished of legendary heroes would be able to keep track of all these details.”

“I would like to say you don’t see any dukes running around like headless chicken, trying to keep track of it all, but perhaps it would be better if you did.” A short scoff escaped the woman. “Anyhow, what’s important here is that, while it might be possible to understand

relatively simple existences like a minor village or the magic I previously showed you, it quickly becomes unfeasible as they grow more complex.”

Arlene closed the book on her lap, tapping her finger on the cover a few times. “In theory, you could attempt to *map* these existences; make comprehensive notes of its purpose, every single element inside it, as well as all the relationships that affect it. This is essentially what spells are. But this is incredibly difficult. Many of these elements and relationships are invisible and never reveal themselves until they become relevant, and by then, it is often too late. Humans are terrifyingly ignorant. Both our young and our most learned are ignorant. The acquisition of knowledge is nothing more than the revelation of our ignorance, and if there is one thing that I have learned in my life, it is that our growing understanding of the world first and foremost serves to instruct us that it is greater than our grasp of it will ever reach.”

Scarlett observed the woman for a while. “...I do believe I understand what it is that you are trying to convey, and I see the merit behind your words. However, if I am to be truthful, that kind of thinking appears somewhat superfluous to me in the majority of cases. While it may certainly be beneficial to consider entities such as towns and cities in the manner which you described in some cases, what would be the point in emphasising that a tree that I see before me is, as you put it, an imitation? I cannot speak for how it is with the discipline of magic, but I see no scenarios where how I view or interact with mundane existences such as the tree will have any real bearing on things.”

“It *is* superfluous,” Arlene said. “Just like pointing at the sky and saying that it’s blue is superfluous in any conversation between two individuals who share the same view. But that is also *why* it’s important. I am not telling you all of this because I want to completely change your worldview, but because if you cannot accept the simple truth that the ‘tree’ as you see it isn’t real, even when that fact holds no significance, then you stand little of a chance of applying this perspective where it matters.”

Scarlett pursed her lips as she looked out at the village. “Such as in regards to magic.”

Arlene nodded. “Like with magic.”

“Then how *does* one apply this to magic?”

“How does a child learn to understand that a rock doesn’t float down a river?”

“By throwing one in.” Scarlett looked at the woman. “I have already made several attempts at understanding my own magic. While I am making progress, I do not think it is as fast as it could be.”

“That’s because you aren’t throwing rocks. You’re throwing pebbles, hoping that the ripples on the water’s surface will tell you enough about how the river works.”

“Are you saying that I should throw in larger rocks?”

“No, that’s now what I am saying.” Arlene shook her head. “Although I suppose it’s my fault for leading you into that. But that line of thinking comes from another misunderstanding you



have about magic. It's a common misunderstanding, relevant to a lot of other disciplines as well."

"And what might that be?" Scarlett asked.

Arlene went quiet, observing her for a few seconds. "There is a chaos inherent in working with magic. Some people might feel the inclination to compare magic with more 'natural' disciplines—whatever that is supposed to mean—such as mathematics or botany. They might want to use linear relationships and models to describe magic, because for some reason, they think that is how the world works. Linear equations are solvable. Linear systems are modular. You can take these things apart and put them together again, and all the pieces will add up."

An almost dismissive snort left the woman. "Magic isn't like that. Magic isn't linear, and it most certainly isn't 'solvable'. Magic cannot be taken apart and put together again. Magic means that the very act of *interacting* with it changes the rules. That twisted changeability makes magic hard to calculate, but it is also what makes magic so *rich*. It creates behaviours that would never appear in these otherwise crude representations that people often try to enforce upon the world around them. *Understanding* this chaos is part of what it means to be a true wizard. And of those, we are woefully lacking."

"Do you perhaps expect me to become a wizard?" Scarlett asked.

Arlene stared at her. "Gods no. That would both be a waste of your time and a risk for my sanity."

"Then what is it that you wish to say? What is it that you specifically wish for me to do?"

The woman tilted her head to the side, a thoughtful expression on her face. "That's a good question. Not sure if I bothered thinking that far."

Scarlett blinked. "...Pardon?"

"I wanted to cram some basics into that head of yours. I have never had the chance to teach someone before, so I will admit that this was a somewhat novel experience. What you do with it, however, is up to you."

She almost had to hold herself back from uttering an expletive at the woman, schooling her expression as much as she could. It felt like she had just been spun around in a circle over and over again, only to be left with a note of which direction to go in, but without a compass. "Then, is there at the very least something you can share regarding true pyrokinesis?" she asked.

A small smile wormed its way onto Arlene's face, and she turned away from Scarlett. "Perhaps next time."

Scarlett's eye twitched. Was this woman actually a sadist?