

139: Sincerity

“That’s a curious statement,” Arlene said. “I am aware I have a few years on you, but I don’t look *that* old, do I?”

Scarlett examined the woman. While Arlene did have faint wrinkles and darker skin under her eyes, she didn’t appear much older than forty or so. Younger than Adalicia Mendenhall, probably.

Scarlett shook her head. “I do not believe you truly think that is what I meant.”

The woman showed a wry smile. “No, but one never knows. *You* certainly seem to know something that I don’t.”

Raising her hand, Scarlett gestured at the buildings near them. “Do you know what this place is?”

Arlene eyed her for a moment, then she wore an almost casual expression as she looked around. “I wonder.” She spoke with a drawling tone. “Most would have answered a simple village, but that’s not the response you are looking for, is it?”

Scarlett kept her gaze on the woman.

She had always been curious about exactly *how* self-aware the woman was regarding her situation. Their previous interactions showed that Arlene clearly had *some* idea that this place wasn’t entirely real. For one thing, she always made them leave before nightfall, as if aware that outsiders couldn’t stay here all the time. But it was hard to tell if she was *actually* aware, or if it was subconscious in some way.

Scarlett pointed at a house on the opposite side of the square. It was a single building, with a base made of timber and a thatched roof. Behind it was a tiny patch of land with a small ramshackle shed on it that looked like it might collapse any day now.

“That home belongs to a Gill and Leticia Adlam,” she said. “Gill Adlam is one of the men that tends to the livestock outside the village, while his wife Leticia spends her days performing chores and working the wool that they harvest. “

Whenever Scarlett had to spend a day resting here in Freymeadow due to built-up mental exhaustion, those two were the ones Rosa always convinced to lend out their home. They were a nice enough couple, though the accommodations themselves were somewhat lackluster.

She turned to look directly at Arlene. “Other than when I travel to and from the village, I have never left this square or spoken with any of the villagers. You can personally account for this, I suspect. Taking that into account, how do you think I know this?”

“Are you playing riddles now?” the woman asked.

“I am simply attempting to answer your previous question.”

“Is that so? Then I would say that bard friend of yours could have told you. She seems friendly enough with the villagers already.”

“And what if I tell you she did not?”

Arlene considered her for a brief second. “They could have been mentioned in the game you described.”

“It paid little attention to people whose impact on the overall narrative was that insignificant.”

A laugh escaped the woman’s mouth. “Then I suppose I should be flattered by, considering I was in it.”

Scarlett nodded. “If that is how you choose to view it, yes.”

“I do.” Arlene leaned back in her seat. “Anyhow, I give up. Tell me how you knew them.”

Scarlett observed the woman. It was difficult if she gave up so quickly because she didn’t know, or if there was another reason. “I know their names and what they do because this is not the first time I visit this village. Nor was our first meeting two days ago our first true encounter.”

She waited for Arlene to meet her eyes.

“It has not escaped my attention that you never asked what your role in the game was,” she said. “Is there a reason for that?”

A knowing smile appeared on the woman’s face. “There is. But it’s most likely not the reason you are thinking of.” She turned away, looking out at the square again in silence for a brief while. “I presume that I don’t live to see the end of this game. Am I right?”

Scarlett paused. “It depends on the actions of the person who plays the game. But there are only two endings that I know of.”

“From the tone of your voice, it seems that my death is the more preferable of those.”

“...Yes.”

In truth, there was only one real ending to Arlene’s questline. It could only be reached if you fulfilled her last wish. If you let her die.

The only other alternative was *not* completing the questline, consigning her to endlessly repeating the same five days and their end for all eternity.

“Then what role I had doesn’t matter much, does it? It’s the same no matter what. As for you...” The woman turned back to her with a composed expression. “You are here to ensure that I die, aren’t you?”

Scarlett stared at her. She said it in such a calm voice, but Scarlett could see so much unspoken emotion behind those eyes.

“...It is not my wish to see you dead.”

“But it is your ultimate aim, if you want to achieve your goal here.” There wasn’t a shred of judgement in Arlene’s gaze.

“You could simply give me the casket.”

Arlene glanced back at the wooden casket behind her. “You know I won’t.”

“...Why?” Scarlett asked.

“You already know why, or you wouldn’t be asking me to teach you.”

Both of them went silent.

Scarlett found some of her irritation and anger from earlier rising up again, and she wanted to say something, anything, to convince the woman. This had never been a matter of Arlene not being able to give Scarlett what she needed. It had always been that the woman *refused*. And just like in the game, there was only one way of getting through her stubbornness.

After a while, Arlene turned in her seat and peered up at the bright blue sky. Her right hand ran over the book in her lap. “Two days, you say? Then I would forget about this conversation?”

Scarlett kept quiet.

The woman smiled. “No, I guess I don’t need your confirmation. I know better than anyone what’s happening in two days. I was just uncertain about what happens after, but your words have made it clear enough.”

She raised a hand and several fires appeared above it, forming the vague image of a village in the air. “I *thought* some of your technique looked similar, you see,” she said, almost absentmindedly. “Although I also thought it might have been a coincidence. That’s unlikely now, however. How many times have we talked like this?”

“...This is the first time we have ever conversed in this manner,” Scarlett admitted. “But we’ve had dozens of conversations before this. More often than not, it does not prove fruitful for me.”

“I can imagine.” Arlene chuckled to herself. “Do I always give you a hard time?”

“...Sometimes, yes.”

“Good. Otherwise, I would have been disappointed in myself. Would have been a waste of an excellent opportunity.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. “I had my suspicions that you took joy in tormenting me.”

Arlene's hand ran through the fiery projection of a village, and it dissipated into the air as she looked back at Scarlett with a shrug of her shoulders. "I believe I mentioned having a terrible personality. There's a reason most of my family pretends I never existed. Several reasons, really, but that doesn't matter to you. You *should* have expected as much, though, if I taught you in that game as well."

"You did not teach anything in the game," Scarlett said.

The woman's eyes widened just slightly. "I didn't?"

"In the game, you were simply a...questgiver. The player could learn nothing from you."

"A questgiver...?" Arlene knitted her brows. "I gave people *tasks* to complete? Just so that they could grow stronger in a fraction of the time it took me to do it? That was my purpose?"

"Part of it, yes."

"Well, that is disappointing." The woman shook her head with a sigh. "I can *understand* it, but it's disappointing nonetheless."

"Does that mean you know what quests you might have given?" Scarlett asked.

This was something she had been curious about for a while. The woman had yet to even try to give her any of the quests from the game, even after Scarlett had grown so much stronger than before.

Arlene cocked her head to the side. "Several things come to mind, yes."

"Then would it be too much to ask you to give one to me now?"

The system might accept it as an actual quest if Arlene said it out loud, which meant extra skill points when completing it.

The woman let out a small scoff. "Oh, no. You are far too weak."

Scarlett frowned. "You have seen the proficiency that my skills provide me, and the rate at which I grow."

"Yes, and I'm not impressed. Your control is even worse now than it was before, and you're not even half as powerful as you could be. Your flames certainly hold a lot of heat behind them, but anyone above a certain level would find it child's play to counter them. I thought it was interesting what you were trying to do with the hydrokinesis, but unfortunately, that is still miles behind your pyrokinesis."

"That is why I wanted you to teach me."

"And it's also why I would never accept you." Arlene gave her a long, probing look. "You have tried to convince me several times, haven't you? And I assume I've told you no each time."

Scarlett drew her mouth together. "... Yes. Sometimes you provide me with some guidance, but you always refuse to teach me properly."

"And why do you think that is?" the woman asked.

"Because I am not strong enough."

It fit with what Scarlett knew from the game, where Arlene would only give quests to the player if they were above level fifty. Scarlett actually considered herself stronger than that, but her strength was a bit lopsided and difficult to quantify.

"It's not about strength," Arlene said. "It's about potential. I look at you and I see a conundrum. Power and skill mixed with inexperience and ignorance that suggests laziness. An unwillingness to grow. Someone blessed with talent that they don't have the will to use. That is what you *appeared to be* when I first saw you, and I had no interest in teaching someone like that. That was the main reason, at least. My opinion changed later on as I observed you more, but that doesn't matter much if I keep forgetting about it."

Scarlett stared at the woman. *That* was the reason? If that was true, then it didn't matter how much she upgraded her skills.

Would she have to search for another person to teach her, after all? Considering her goal, though, Arlene was without the best teacher she could find. Not to mention how other people would react to her growth rate whenever she upgraded another skill. She also didn't know if there were any other mages as experienced with pyrokinesis as Arlene was. When she had inquired into the matter with Adalicia, she had gotten the impression that *most* mages didn't actually spend much time using pyrokinesis and its equivalents from other schools in practice.

"All that said..." Arlene considered her for a few seconds. "Knowing what I do now, I don't see as much of a reason to say no."

Scarlett blinked. "You are saying that you *will* teach me?"

"I am saying that I would accept your request to be taught now, and for as long as my current memories go."

The momentary joy that had appeared inside Scarlett died out. That meant she would be back at square one the next time the loop restarted. Would she have to repeat this entire conversation every single time in order to convince the woman?

She wasn't sure she *wanted* to do that. She would, if she had to, but the thought didn't fill her with excitement. Despite how calmly Arlene seemed to be taking it, telling a woman the world she knew was a game, and that she was stuck in a loop of her own nightmare wasn't something Scarlett took pleasure in. Even if she might be able to skip the part about her own identity in the future, it was an uncomfortable experience. Presumably for them both.

As Arlene watched her, the woman soon let out a sigh. She moved her hand, and another fire appeared above it. It was shaped like a wheel, with strands of flame moving at the center like a tiny, intricate whirlpool.

“Shape your magic into something like this,” the woman said.

Scarlett examined the magic for a while, then raised her own hand. She took a breath, trying to focus her attention so that she didn’t lose control like earlier. Then she conjured a fire of her own. It was shaped like a wheel, with flames gathered at the center in a churning mass of movement.

“No, that’s not right. Try again.”

Frowning, she tried once more, and when that attempt failed as well, she tried again and again. Arlene guided her along the way, and eventually, she managed to create a fire that looked almost exactly like Arlene’s.

The woman nodded her head in satisfaction at seeing that. “In the future, when you introduce yourself to me, show me this exact configuration. That way, we won’t have to bother with the same old bells and whistles every time.”

Scarlett looked at her fire, eyeing the whirlpool at its center. “Is there something special about this configuration in particular?”

It looked interesting, yes, but she couldn’t tell if it did anything other than that. It also only took her about five minutes and a small amount of mana to learn, so it couldn’t be that *impressive*.

“There isn’t, no,” Arlene said.

“Why would this be likely to convince you in the future, then?”

The woman simply shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows? Call it a feeling. I don’t have the time or opportunity to teach you anything more complicated, so this will have to do.”

“We have more than one day left,” Scarlett pointed out. “Surely there is something you could teach me in that time. The water whips that I can do were taught by you, and that took less than one day.”

“Let me rephrase that. I’m *choosing* not to teach you anything more complicated.” The woman looked at her with an honest expression. “For now, I think you should take a break. You’ve been pushing yourself, haven’t you? Magic isn’t something you want to practice on a tired mind. Nothing is, really. Take this chance to relax.”

“Time moves differently here in Freymeadow than outside the village, and I am not as affected by exhaustion here,” Scarlett said. “I am not saying that I do not require rest, but it would be a waste to not use any of these remaining two days productively.”

“To me, that sounds like even more of a reason to take things slow.” One look from Arlene was enough for Scarlett’s fire to extinguish itself. “And while it may bother you, I am not giving you a choice.”

Scarlett fought back a scowl at having her magic dismissed so easily, and she could have *sworn* that the woman shot her a smile filled with mirth.

Was Scarlett only surrounded by people that enjoyed tormenting her?