

121: Damp progression

A brief shower of rain fell over part of Freymeadow's village square as the water spheres Scarlett had summoned burst, scattering in front of her. She watched the water sink into the soil for a moment before raising the towel on her lap to wipe away the sweat from her forehead.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Superior Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Superior Hydrokinesis]]

[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 1745/4747]

[Points: 10]

[Skills Menu:

Upgrades

[Superior Pyromancy] (25 points)

[Major Pyrokinesis] (50 points)

[Superior Hydromancy] (25 points)

[Major Hydrokinesis] (50 points)

[Superior Mana Control] (25 points)

New skills

[LOCKED]]

She had upgraded her hydrokinesis skill now, and as with [Superior Pyrokinesis], the leap from [Greater Hydrokinesis] to [Superior Hydrokinesis] was a lot larger than the leap from [Pyrokinesis] to [Greater Pyrokinesis]. It would take some time to get used to, considering the flexibility that hydrokinesis offered and the experiments she wanted to do, but Freymeadow was perfect for that kind of thing.

After clearing Abelard's Doll Mansion, as well as the other dungeons over in Autumnwell, Scarlett had been left with a total of 45 skill points to do with as she wished. Originally, she had been thinking of saving up to upgrade her pyrokinesis into [Major Pyrokinesis]. But, considering that she was currently getting a lot of new points and was currently in the process of learning how to properly use her magic even at the level it was, she didn't want to rush things for the time being.

She had also been feeling that her hydrokinesis had been falling behind. Barring her Aqua Mines, her hydrokinesis had started losing a lot of its applicability in combat against the stronger foes they'd faced lately. Spending 35 skill points to upgrade her hydrokinesis and hydromancy one step each would hopefully help with that, as well as afford her more options in the future.

She glanced at how mana she had left at the moment.

[Mana: 1745/4747]

She was usually pretty economical with her mana use during these sessions, but she was starting to get tired. One last push before taking another rest would be enough.

Raising a hand, she conjured several tendrils of water in the air before her, floating around like an array of thin whips. She turned her attention to a thick tree trunk that Rosa had gotten the help of some of the villagers to carry here the previous day. The bark on it was charred and beaten, with small gashes running across its side.

Obedying her mental urging, all the tendrils lashed out at the trunk. Several high-pitched cracks rang out across the village square. She didn't stop there, repeating the act again and again. Each tendril moved faster than she could see, the barrage of attacks assaulting the trunk from all directions like a kraken in the seas.

The sight itself was impressive. That much couldn't be denied.

Scarlett squinted her eyes.

The results, however, were somewhat lacklustre. Some of the strikes sent a small piece of bark flying, creating more of the gashes that covered the trunk's frame, but she doubted it would have left much more than a red mark or a bruise on most people.

Eventually, as her mana was running low, she dismissed the tendrils. To finish things off, she summoned two large Aqua Mines and detonated them. The trunk shook from the blast, and bark flew in all directions. A few even hit Scarlett, though [Sidhe's Flowing Garb] protected her from any damage.

She let out a small sigh, mostly out of tiredness.

Making the water created through her hydrokinesis solid enough to actually cause damage was still a difficult task, even after the upgrade. She needed more time to perfect it, if that was even possible with her current approach. But [Superior Hydrokinesis] had at the very least allowed her to put a lot more power into her Mines, as well as giving her a lot more options for using it for distractions.

With her mana almost exhausted, Scarlett rose from her chair and moved to sit on the porch where Arlene was. As usual, the cool air up here was a welcome reprieve from the warm summer climate of Freymeadow.

Arlene didn't pay her much attention as she sat down close to her.

The older woman had looked more tired than usual lately, the dark sections under her eyes clearly visible. Most of her focus was placed on the book on her lap, however, as was standard. That wasn't to say she didn't do *anything* else. Scarlett had noticed the woman eyeing her several times throughout the day.

After Arlene's impromptu lecture on magic and the correct approach to it a couple of days earlier, it felt like the woman had become a lot more open when it came to advising Scarlett.

Well, 'open' might be a strong word. Scarlett still suspected that Arlene took joy from confusing her and only *barely* telling her what she wanted to know, and it wasn't as if the woman had bothered to actually explain much more since then. Despite that, however, she *did* make more comments than usual during Scarlett's training sessions. Not especially informative ones, mind you.

Most of the time it had just been things like "that's wrong", "don't do that", or some other similarly unhelpful directions. But the timing had always been very good, like when Scarlett was using her mana in an inefficient way or close to losing control of her magic, and she had been able to make use of the warnings to make *some* progress.

For example, when Scarlett had first started trying to create those whip tendrils the day before, she'd had problems making the water stay both rigid and elastic at the same time. It hadn't been enough to just *imagine* it being both. So instead she had attempted to think of her magic in the way Arlene had told her before. Like a complete existence or system, instead of a collection of smaller parts.

Suffice to say, it went like hell at first. She didn't actually know how to *start* from there, even after what the woman had told her. And as such, she had simply created a mass of mana with her hydrokinesis, intending to feel her way forward, and that's when Arlene had surprised her by telling her every time she did something wrong. Literally every. Single. Time.

Scarlett had spent probably more than half a day trial-and-erroring her way forward until she finally succeeded in creating a tendril of water that acted in the way she wanted, but she had no idea *how* she did it because all she did was adjust her mana after Arlene's words. She could recreate the tendrils without too much issue, but she couldn't quite understand how they worked, and they were far too complex for her to analyze how the mana was structured and learn from that. Her Aqua Mines were like potato batteries compared to these.

That said, she felt like the act of creating them—even if she didn't know what she was doing—*had* helped her realize part of what Arlene had tried to tell her. Because the act of recreating the water tendrils was *ridiculously* easier compared to the first time, and it wasn't just because she had memorized it. If she were to describe the sensation, it was less like remembering how to ride a bike and more like remembering that if you turned the faucet exactly a certain amount, a certain amount of water poured out. Except you had hundreds of faucets and after touching one faucet, the others changed.

...It was strange, that's all she could say. Strange and annoying.

Still, she felt an appreciation towards Arlene for showing her this much, even if there was a lot more to share.

Letting those thoughts float to the back of her mind for now, however, Scarlett leaned back in her chair and let some of the tiredness wash away. Idly, she brought a hand to her waist and pulled out an item from her [Pouch of Holding].

[Obedience's Solitude Loci (Unique)]

{ Strange powers of an iterant realm dwell within this stone, creating something more than what was there before. The souls that were once tied to it have been severed }

A soft green light emanated from within the uncut emerald, but there wasn't much else to it at the moment. She certainly couldn't sense a presence or connection of any kind. She'd been trying to figure out how it worked for a while now, with little progress. It wasn't as if the damn thing came with a manual.

Like Abelard had done in his mansion, she wanted to place it inside her home so that she could make use of its effects there, but it wasn't quite as simple as she had originally hoped.

In the game, it had been enough to just put it on a pedestal in your house and things would take effect immediately, but she had already tried that. It was one of the first things she did after arriving in Freybrook and dealing with Leon and Evelyne. She'd even tried placing it in different rooms in the mansion and leaving it for a while, but that hadn't seemed to work either.

Which was why she was spending most of her breaks here in Freymeadow examining the Loci. She'd opened the portal to the Wandering realm back in Abelard's Doll Mansion simply by wishing for it to happen, so her hunch was that getting it to work was somehow related to intent and the forming of a connection of some sort.

"You've been staring at that for quite some time," Arlene said from the side.

Scarlett glanced up at the woman. Was that interest in her voice? Or at least a hint of curiosity? She had asked about the Loci once the previous day, but Arlene hadn't seemed to want to give a proper answer then.

"Do you know what it is?"

"No." Arlene looked up at her, then down at the Loci. "But I can tell that it is masterfully made."

"It was crafted by an archmage."

"That would explain it." The woman eyed the gem for one more second before returning her attention to her book.

Scarlett studied her. She didn't seem surprised hearing that an archmage was responsible, at least.

"His name was Baron Abelard Withersworth."

Arlene didn't look up from her book, bringing her fingers up to her mouth and wetting them as she turned a page. "Withersworth, you say?"

“Yes. Do you recognize the name?”

“I know *a* Withersworth,” the woman answered. “But he certainly wasn’t a baron. He was a decent enough mage, though, so it wouldn’t surprise me if the emperor decided to elevate him.”

“I see...” Scarlett kept her eyes on the woman for a few moments longer, then turned back to the Loci in her own hands.

She’d asked out of pure curiosity, but it wasn’t as if she expected Arlene to know of Abelard. Arlene’s casual response was surprising, though. It wasn’t the sort of answer one would expect from someone completely unaware of her situation would give.

How much did the woman actually know of the circumstances surrounding this place?

She wanted to ask, but she doubted Arlene would be particularly forthcoming. Their relationship was relatively good in this loop as well, so she didn’t see the point of risking it at the moment.

Her hand ran over the Loci’s smooth surface. For now, this was her priority.

“As you might have been able to tell, I have been trying to determine how this artifact works,” she said, looking back at Arlene. “You would not happen to have any advice to share related to that?”

The woman turned her head up, looking at Scarlett, then the Loci. For a moment, she stayed quiet. “It appears to originate from the Wandering Realm, but I suspect you already knew that much. That’s not exactly within my area of expertise, but I have a couple of ideas. What is your intention with it?”

“I intend to place it inside my home. There, it will work to secure the estate and ward off any trespassers. I also suspect that it might have some other aspects that could prove beneficial.”

Arlene eyed Scarlett for a few seconds. “If your main goal is to keep away intruders, there are much simpler methods than obtaining an enchanted artifact crafted by an archmage.”

“Perhaps.” Scarlett raised her shoulders in a light shrug. “But I already have this in my possession now, do I not? It would be a waste not to make proper use of it. And I would rather be safe than sorry when it comes to matters like these.”

That earned a short laugh from the woman. “If that’s all, then it probably won’t be that hard.” She gestured at the Loci. “You should try to listen to it and go from there. If you’re telling the truth, that much should be enough to get you started.”

Scarlett frowned. “What do you mean by ‘listen’?”

She’d tried connecting to the Loci as she had back in Abelard’s mansion several times already. Never had she ‘heard’ anything.

“That gem hails from the Wandering Realm,” Arlene said. “I’m not sure how much you know of that place, but everything has a will of sorts over there. If you want to get that gem to do what you want, the easiest way would be to fulfill whatever its will wants. Another option would be forcing your own will on it, but I doubt you have the experience or the knowledge to accomplish that.”

Scarlett looked down at the Loci. She supposed Abelard must have done the latter. But Arlene was correct in saying that would be hard for her, since she didn’t have an inkling of how it could be done. The first alternative sounded a lot more feasible. Although there was still a question mark surrounding that as well.

Perhaps she could bring the Loci back to the fairies in Temisbrook Glade and get their help somehow? They seemed to have been fond of her last time, and they would probably be able to ‘listen’ to the Loci better than she herself could.

But that would require her to go all the way to the capital and travel by carriage to Temisbrook. She couldn’t do that anytime soon, at least. Not with everything else that was coming up.

She sat there for several seconds, observing the item.

It was named [Obedience’s Solitude Loci].

The items here weren’t just randomly named, as far as she could tell. There was always *some* meaning behind it. So it was likely that ‘obedience’ and ‘solitude’ somehow tied into whatever the Loci’s will was, if its will was tied to its intrinsic qualities. Obedience suggested that it would follow a master of some kind, or that it could force obedience upon others in some way. Considering how the item was meant to be placed in the player’s house in the game, the former was more likely.

Solitude, however, could mean a lot of things. It could simply mean that the Loci needed to be placed somewhere where there were no others around. Or it could refer to how it ensured the solitude of its master or its surroundings. Or maybe it just had something to do with how the item was originally formed. She knew from the game that Abelard was the one who actually crafted and enchanted the item itself, but the core part of it was what originated from the Wandering Realm.

She looked back at Arlene. “Do you know of a way that I could determine what its ‘will’ might be?”

The woman shook her head. “Not other than what I just told you.”

“Hmm... Very well. I am grateful for your advice, nonetheless. Both this, and for what you have helped me with previously. I will endeavour not to forget any of it in the future.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Silence descended upon the porch as the two of them turned their attention back to their own matters.

Scarlett kept studying the Loci for a while, observing the way the light reflected off it.

Next she returned to Freymeadow, there were a few things she had to try out.