

114: Friction

Scarlett downed her last mana potion and let the empty flask fall to the floor as she glanced to the side.

[**Mana:** 1668/4698]

That was all she had left to work with.

She looked at the ghost of Abelard Withersworth, whose form had turned more and more transparent as she'd continued her attacks. But he wasn't out of play yet, and hadn't stopped bringing more of his dolls alive, pushing her to expend more and more of her mana to force him to sacrifice the dolls in order to counterattack.

For the time being, they'd reached an odd balance of sorts. His dolls were currently being removed at roughly the same pace that they joined the fight, though Scarlett's own attacks had started becoming less aggressive in order to save mana. She had also become more reliant on Leon's barriers blocking Abelard's attacks, where possible. The knight was still in the middle of his own fight with the boss doll, having caused a bit of damage to one of its arms over the duration of their fight, but with him now also having to focus on protecting the others Scarlett feared it would hold him back too much.

It was better than the alternative, though. And removing Abelard from the fight would allow them to put things to an end relatively quickly.

She hurriedly conjured a set of three Aqua Mines in front of the path of one of the new dolls dashing towards Fynn. They burst just in time to strike two of its weak points, and despite only causing it to lose balance for the blink of an eye, it was enough for Fynn to step forward and dodge under its attack before sending a powerful right hook into its midriff. The blow sent the doll skidding across the floor, just as another doll came leaping at Fynn. The young man immediately ducked back, preparing himself to deal with it and another doll he had been fighting just before.

“Go, my dears! Teach these fools the consequences of their actions!” Abelard's voice echoed across the chamber once more. Following it, another set of dolls started moving. There were a little less than half of them left now, lining the walls.

Scarlett looked at Leon. The man hadn't had the time to erect another barrier yet after his last had been destroyed, and he seemed especially preoccupied dodging the boss doll's attacks at the moment, but she needed to cut down the dolls' number before the others were overrun.

At the same time as she used her magic to help Shin deal with an attack coming from the doll he was facing, she pulled up her [Wand of Fireball] from the pouch fastened to her waist. To catch his attention, she summoned another set of Aqua Mines around Abelard.

The ghost let out an angered scream as the barrage struck him, though the damage was noticeably less than some of her previous heavier attacks. That wasn't what mattered, though.

In response, Abelard soon waved his hand, and two of the dolls battling fell lifelessly to the floor, joining the dozen or so of their brethren already lying down.

Before he had the opportunity to send off his attack, however, Scarlett had already waved her wand and sent off four fireballs in quick succession. A moment later, four fiery explosions crashed out right in front of the ghost.

“You dare!” Abelard sent her a glare as the flames faded, barely any worse for wear.

It took him a moment to notice the new array of Aqua Mines that were hovering around him. Each was the size of his head, and even with [Superior Pyrokinesis] going at full effort, it took Scarlett a few seconds to prepare them, but that was what distractions were for. She detonated them all at once, the steaming blasts perforating Abelard’s form and the green magic that had been coalescing before him.

The ghost’s form grew slightly more see-through as the attack he’d been preparing dissipated away.

Scarlett smiled as she saw the anger on his gaunt face. She’d had a hard time successfully doing that in her previous attempts.

Suddenly, a loud crack spread out from ahead of her. In front of Leon, one of the boss doll’s arms was sent flying, landing on the floor next to the limp body of one of the other dolls.

“Finally,” the knight let out a tired sigh, sword held in front of him. “I’ve never encountered anything *this* tough other than a dragon.”

Abelard’s expression widened in horror. “No! No! No! What have you *done?!?*”

The ghost began floating down towards the doll, but Scarlett summoned several walls of fire between him and his goal. He didn’t even seem to notice, however, flying straight through the flames as they licked at his form, continuing towards his precious ‘masterpiece’. All of the other dolls’ attention also shifted from their opponents, turning straight to Leon.

“Fynn,” Scarlett called out, pointing towards the hysterical ghost. The young man seemed to understand her intent and immediately dashed off, while the others made to help Leon. The knight was pushing his advantage, now overwhelming the one-armed boss doll with his steadfast attacks, even as several of the dolls were converging on his position.

Scarlett closed her eyes for a moment, calling up the last of her focus, then looked straight at Abelard. She raised her hand as a blazing sun tore into existence to engulf the ghost, the flames drowning out the following screams. She didn’t stop, maintaining her magic for several more seconds as it devoured through her mana, sweat forming on her brow.

As the fire finally faded away, it revealed the weakened shape of Abelard, the hatred clear in his eyes as he stared at both Scarlett and Leon. Yet before he could do anything else, a hair-shivering howl sounded out from beneath him. The air in the chamber almost visibly shook, and a second later Fynn came leaping up at him with a speed that now dwarfed any that the other dolls—barring the boss doll—had displayed. Magical claws bared, the white-haired young man flew up, aided by unseen winds, and struck right at the ghost.

A bewildered expression appeared on Abelard's face for a brief moment as the claws slashed straight through him, then a tiny, muffled scream left him just as he burst into motes of light.

All at once, the dolls that had now surrounded Leon stopped in their tracks. A bright golden light covered the knight like a suit of armor. The man had seemingly been prepared to take them all on at the same time if necessary, even though that likely would have been too much even for him.

"Is... Is it over?" Allyssa asked after a few moments of silence. The girl's eyes seemed to turn to the blonde boss doll that was standing in front of Leon, an empty expression now on its face.

"It would appear so," Scarlett said. She took a few deep breaths as she wiped away the sweat from her face. She had little mana left, and using four mana potions in relatively close succession to each other didn't help much with the tiredness that was setting in on her. Still, this was nowhere near as bad as her training sessions in Freymeadow.

She turned to look at Allyssa as the girl began walking towards the boss doll.

That spirit—or whatever it was—that had appeared behind the young Shielder at the start of the fight... Scarlett assumed it was some remnant of the girl that had been living at this mansion. But what did it mean? Should she be worried about Allyssa's safety, or was whatever the spirit had done harmless? It shouldn't be a possession of any kind, at least not if the potions they'd imbued earlier worked as they were supposed to. But this might also not be the kind of thing where she should be too certain about things like that.

"Wait," she called as Allyssa stopped in front of the doll with an absorbed expression, reaching out a hand to touch it. The girl turned back to look at her with a questioning gaze. "What exactly is it that you are doing? If you can not give me an answer, perhaps it would be wise to defer any rash actions for which we do not know the true causes until a later time."

Allyssa blinked, looking between Scarlett and her own outstretched hand. "I... I don't think it's dangerous."

"You don't *think*," Shin said. The young man walked up to her and leaned his sword on the ground with an exhausted movement. "To me, that sounds like a recipe for disaster."

Scarlett studied the girl's expression closely.

"I say let her," Rosa chimed in from the side. The bard had gotten down on the floor, klerl lying next to her as she drank water from a flask she'd had attached to her waist. The woman had almost maintained her bardic magic for the entire fight, which probably took a lot more mana than Scarlett herself even had access to, so it was understandable that she was tired.

Sending a long look at Rosa, Scarlett then looked back at Allyssa and gave a short nod. "Do as you wish, then. I will not hinder you."

The Shielder returned the nod and looked at Shin. "I'll be fine. Promise."

The young man eyed her for a few seconds, then let out a sigh as he shook his head. “Sure. That’s what you always say before things go wrong, but I trust your word.”

A small smile formed on Allyssa’s face before she turned back to the blonde boss doll. She reached out to touch its cheek. A bright blue light shone from where she made contact with the doll, and the moment after the spirit from before appeared in front of Allyssa. Compared to before, the girl’s spirit looked more defined and substantial.

With wide eyes, Allyssa blinked a few times as she stared at it. She stayed silent for several seconds, then gave an uncertain nod. “Wow... Okay, yeah. I think I understand.”

Her head turned as she appeared to look around at all the unmoving and fallen dolls spread about the conservatory, then focused on the glass dome at the center of the chamber with the large emerald on top.

“What is that?” she asked, looking back at Scarlett and pointing at the emerald.

Scarlett glanced at the spirit floating next to the girl. “...Is that a question she is asking?”

Allyssa shook her head. “No, not exactly. She’s not really speaking with me. I’m not even sure if she *can* speak. She doesn’t seem to be entirely here, like a normal person. She’s moire like...a fragment of some kind, maybe? I can just...*feel* what she wants, and I can tell that the gem over there is somehow connected to it all.”

“I see...” Scarlett eyed the spirit for a moment longer, then started moving closer to the glass dome and shifting her attention to the gem atop it.

[Obedience’s Solitude Loci (Unique)]

{ Strange powers of an iterant realm dwell within this stone, creating something more than what was there before }

The [Gem of Athanasia] was the item she needed the most from this dungeon, but as for priorities, this artifact came in on a close second. it wasn’t that it was particularly strong or anything like that. In fact, it wasn’t even equippable, as far as she was aware. It was a bit of an odd item, compared to most of the other stuff she’d found until now. The only other item that was even remotely similar might be the [Statue of Longevity] that they found earlier in this mansion. But what interested her about [Obedience’s Solitude Loci] wasn’t necessarily the effects that she knew it had from the game, but rather the potential it might have in this world.

In ‘Chronicle Of Realms’, [Obedience’s Solitude Loci] was strictly an item you could place in your player house. It was mostly limited to recovery boosts and other minor effects that worked within the confines of what the game’s framework would allow, but the flavor-text and context around the item suggested a lot more could be possible. Like for example, using it to stop intruders from sneaking into your home unnoticed.

“I suppose that, if I were to explain it in simple terms, then this item—this loci—is the center of this mansion,” she said, turning back to the others. “Itis from this loci that all the magic suffusing this mansion originates, facilitating its further operation. Consequently, if it were to be removed, much of the phenomena plaguing thins mansion would cease as well.”

Allyssa stared at the artifact, as did the spirit floating beside her. “So, that means it’s also what’s keeping all of these souls from passing on?”

“...That is correct, yes,” Scarlett said.

“Then...” The girl looked between the spirit next to her and the loci. “If it was removed, wouldn’t all of their souls still remain here? They would just be unable to do anything, stuck here forever.” She turned to Scarlett. “But if we destroyed it, they would all be released, wouldn’t they? Both the people that used to work here and what remains of their ghosts, as well as the fey creatures inhabiting the dolls.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. “I am afraid I cannot allow that.”

Allyssa’s expression turned dazed. “What?”

“I said that I cannot allow that.” Scarlett shook her head. “I have need of that loci, so I cannot have it be destroyed at this juncture.”

Destroying it had been an option in the game as well, if you wanted to let all of the souls pass on. There was even a small quest related to it, if you chose to go down that path. But the reward was very lacklustre compared to keeping the gem, if you asked Scarlett. There was also the fact that releasing all of the wayward souls in this place made literally no practical difference to anyone still alive compared to just letting them linger about with the loci removed.

“But...” Allyssa looked back and forth between Scarlett and the spirit.

“Their fate is neither mine nor your responsibility, Miss Astrey,” Scarlett said. “And as you have observed yourself, they are not truly whole sapient beings. They are nothing but remnants of those that once lived. Leftover emotions and desires.”

“But they still feel *pain*. And sadness!” Allyssa exclaimed.

Scarlett gave her a long look.

“Scarlett—”

“Do not involve yourself with this,” she cut Leon off as he was about to join in on the conversation. “Miss Astrey, there will always be injustices in the world. This is a simple truth; one that cannot be changed by any but the gods, and I strongly suspect even they lack that power. It is commendable to try to right the wrongs in front of you, but it is also important to understand that the ability to even attempt this is in itself a privilege, one that often requires sacrifice, be it from those righting the wrong or those indirectly affected. Often, it becomes a question of prioritization. Who can you afford to help, and what must the others endure in turn?”

She met Allyssa’s eyes with a steely expression. “I have need for that loci, and I have neither the freedom nor the inclination to put the needs of these incomplete souls that haunt this place above that of myself and those working under me.”

Allyssa's face faltered, and she looked back at the spirit next to her.

"If you understand that, then..." Scarlett started moving closer towards the glass dome. In addition to the [Obedience's Solitude Loci], there should also be more boss loot in one of the smaller rooms that connected to the conservatory. If she wasn't misremembering things, there was even a legendary tier item among the loot.

"Wait," Allyssa suddenly called out.

Scarlett stopped, turning to look back at the Shielder.

"What if there's a way to free all of them *and* for you to keep the loci?"

She frowned. There wasn't as far as she was aware. "What is it that you are trying to say?"

Allyssa glanced at the spirit for a moment, then met Scarlett's gaze once again. "The loci. It's fey in nature, isn't it?"

"...It is, yes." Could she tell because of the spirit?

"Didn't you get that gift from the fairies that we met last, when they showed their gratitude? Might that be enough to make other fey listen to us if we wanted their help?"

Scarlett considered the girl. "Perhaps, although I cannot be certain. And finding fey who could lend their aid with something like this would prove difficult."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it? Besides, we don't have to go far. Abelard mentioned how he captured the fey in his notes, and it wasn't far from here."

She raised a brow. That was news to her. She turned to look between the loci and Allyssa, then gave a slow nod. "Very well... Tell me what it is you are planning."