

## 123: New management

Scarlett ran her hand over the [Obedience's Solitude Loci]'s faceted surface. It always felt odd holding the emerald like this, if only for the fact of how *valuable* it looked. It was like holding a wad of thousand-dollar bills. The brain couldn't quite comprehend its value.

She eyed the artifact for a long while.

'Listening' to it still hadn't brought much result. She'd tried over a dozen times since her talk with Arlene, just to be sure. But if what the system's descriptions told her was enough, that didn't really matter.

It was time to put that to the test.

First of all, if part of the Loci's will was to find a worthy master—which was one of her suspicions—then she had to show that she could fulfill that role. And that meant somehow convincing a mute gemstone of her suitability.

She brought out the [Mark of the Fey] from her [Pouch of Holding]. Tiny, barely visible sparks ran through the blue crystal like lightning.

"This was given to me as a sign of trust," she said out loud. At the same time, she tried channeling the intent behind her words into the Loci, like she had done when she interacted with it back at Abelard's mansion. "When I give someone my word, I always uphold it. Others of your kin can attest to as much."

A few seconds of silence passed.

There was no reaction of any kind from the Loci, though she wasn't really expecting one. It was doubtful whether it actually had the intelligence to comprehend her words, or if it only worked on intent. Still, it was better to play things on the safe side. It was also easier to organize her will and thoughts when she spoke at the same time.

Holding the artifact up into the air, she gestured around them. "This is part of my domain, as well as my home. If you would allow it, it would also be yours."

She stood and walked around the center of the garden, continuing to channel her intent into the Loci as she spoke. "It is different from where you dwelled before, but I do not think it will be much inferior. What it is lacking it will soon gain."

As she finished showing it around, she proceeded to the rest of the hedge garden and then towards the training ground, where she 'explained' things to the Loci as they went. From there, she continued to show it everything else that was inside the stone walls enclosing the estate—the two guards at the gate gave her strange looks as she passed them by, but she ignored them—before eventually crossing the courtyard into the mansion itself.

There, she ran into a pair of servants that were cleaning the foyer. Both curtsied as they greeted her.

She gave them a nod in return. “These serve under me, and it is part of their duty to maintain and care for the estate’s needs and mine.”

The women blinked at her words, and Scarlett cringed just slightly inside as they glanced at each other and the Loci in her hand with bewildered expressions. She would have liked to just avoid the people here in the mansion, but part of the point of this was showing that she was a good master.

Leaving the two without further explanation, she continued her tour of the mansion. She passed by other members of staff a couple of times, where similar scenes repeated themselves.

At one point, as she was walking through the third-floor hallways in the west wing, she spotted Rosa turning around a corner ahead of her. The bard spotted her with a smile and walked over; the smile turned into a grin as she looked down at the Loci in Scarlett’s hand.

“I thought I heard the saccharine notes of your voice, but I figured you were guiding some important guest or other around with the way you talked. Who would have thought it was actually just you showing around your precious new jewel? I suppose it’s true what they say about gemstones being a noblewoman’s best friend, eh?”

“I would hope not,” Scarlett said. “I cannot think of much that would be more tragic.”

“Yeah, I much prefer gold myself.” Rosa nodded her head. “Has a lot more weight to it, so it can double as a bludgeon in times of need.”

“That is not what I meant, but I suspect you already know that.”

The woman just gave her the same smile in reply. “So, how come our local Baroness is walking around in her mansion talking to a stone? People have called *me* crazy, but the worst I’ve ever tried talking to was a crab.”

Scarlett opened her mouth to answer, but paused and narrowed her eyes at the bard. “...A crab?”

Rosa put one hand to her chin as if remembering a fond memory. “Ah, yes. Shirleen the Incogitable. Crassest crab I’ve ever met, but she sure knew how to dance.”

Scarlett stared at the woman. She was uncertain whether she was being serious or if this was just another of her pranks.

Considering the world they were in, it wasn’t *impossible* for there to be intelligent crabs.

She shook her head as her thoughts were about to deviate. Rosa was most likely joking. Probably.

“To answer your question, I am acquainting myself with the ego of this artifact, as well as familiarising it with the estate.”

“As one does.”

Scarlett gave the woman a sharp look, but Rosa just showed an amused expression.

“I’m not judging. I’m sure you know exactly what you’re doing. Who’s little old me to butt in?”

“...As usual, I find it hard discerning whether or not you say that in jest,” Scarlett said. “But that is of no concern. You can return to whatever it is that you were doing. We will see each other later.”

As she was about to leave, she paused and turned back to Rosa. The woman looked back at her with curiosity.

“Was there something you forgot?”

Scarlett considered her for a moment.

“Incidentally...” She held up the Loci in front of the woman. Maybe this should have been among the first things she tried. “You would not happen to hear anything from this artifact?”

Rosa raised her eyebrows, the smile on her lips growing larger. “You’re asking me if your pet rock is talking to me?”

“It is not a pet rock.”

“Sure it isn’t.” The woman chuckled, then examined the Loci. After a few seconds, she nodded her head as if in response to something. “Ah, yes, I agree. It *is* kind of a strange thing to ask, isn’t it?”

Scarlett frowned. “I am aware that you are still playing around.”

Rosa looked up at her. “Heh, sorry. Can’t stop myself. Occupational hazard.”

Scarlett lowered the Loci and prepared to leave again. “If you cannot sense anything in particular, then I will take my leave.”

“Never said I didn’t sense anything.”

She stopped, returning her eyes to the woman. “Do tell.”

“Well, it’s hard to put a finger on it, but I could feel a sense of...dutifulness, I guess? Or a want of it, at least. Like it craves something to do.” Rosa cocked her head to the side.

“There’s also an air of expectance around it. It’s paying attention.”

“Dutifulness and expectance, you say?” Scarlett knitted her brow. That didn’t sound too bad. “Thank you,” she told Rosa, this time turning around to leave for real.

She continued touring the rest of the mansion, introducing the Loci to the rooms and some of the people that were walking around. Eventually, after finishing off with the east wing and her office, she left through the back of the mansion and returned to the hedge garden she had started in.

There, she once more sat down underneath the alcove at the garden's center and held up the Loci in front of her.

“As you have seen, my domain houses several souls within, each serving and assisting me in my pursuits in some fashion. For the time being, this is a place of peace. But that peace is tenuous, and there are many who could threaten it. I have need for something that can watch over my domain and ensure its protection, and I wish for this duty to fall upon you.”

A few seconds passed as she let the intent behind her words sink in.

“Whatever demand you might have of me to accept this duty, I will endeavour to satisfy it. Recognizing me as a master is perhaps not a choice that to be done lightly, but it is one that I will guarantee to be the correct one. And as I said, my word is law.”

She examined the area around her. This garden was large enough that some restructuring could be done with little issue.

“This would be your new home,” she said. “It will be reformed and refined specifically to be fit for a being such as you. No expenses will be spared.”

To her mind's eye, she imagined what the place might look like. A pillar could be raised at the center for the Loci to rest on, and a pavilion built around it. Then she could add whatever else might be useful.

She tried channeling this image into the Loci, along with her intent in the form of a question. Then she looked down at it, observing it in wait for a response of some kind. There was nothing more she wanted to show. She just hoped this would be enough for at least a reaction. It would be embarrassing if she really had just been talking to herself this whole time.

The seconds passed, and her spirits sank.

Then, a faint green light emerged from the Loci, just like when the idol from the Wandering Realm had interacted with it. She felt something nudge at her consciousness. A sensation similar to when she formed a connection with her other artifacts. Although this was slightly different. This was a bit more than a simple connection. It was primal, in a way, but there was a will to it. A purpose.

She reached out to the sensation, accepting it. A link formed, and suddenly the Loci in her hand shone like a lighthouse to her mind's eye.

Invisible links spread out from the gemstone, like a thousand feelers, extending into the environment and towards the rest of the estate. Scarlett got the feeling that the Loci wished to be put down, so she rose and took a few steps forward, placing it on the ground before her.

Then she stood there and watched. To her normal sight, the Loci glowed a brighter and brighter green as it attached itself to its metaphysical—was that the word?—surroundings. Her new connection to the Loci fed her an impression of how it grew to envelop more and more of the estate.

It didn't *change* anything, more than it became *part* of everything. It literally merged into what was already there, in a way that Scarlett couldn't quite comprehend. The Loci was becoming both a permanent and non-permanent fixture of this space.

It was breathtaking to see, almost. There was a beauty to it that she couldn't quite put into words, and she couldn't say that she had ever been a person to care much about things like that.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she heard sounds approaching. Looking up, she spotted Fynn come running with a heavy scowl on his face.

He slowed down as she walked over to her, looking down at the glowing gemstone on the ground. "...What happened?"

She smiled at him. "It is nothing much. I have simply negotiated the services of a new custodian for the mansion."