

A wide bedchamber opened up before Allyssa. Several paintings and mirrors decorated the walls, with an ornate bed standing near the center with a chest placed at its foot and a white marble dressing table next to it. There were no windows in the room, yet an opening in the ceiling held a panel in it that lit up the entire room with a soft, white light. The panel looked like it could have been made of the same material some magical lamps were, but it was massive compared to them. She couldn't even imagine how expensive that would be.

Her eyes went to the bed, as well as a few bureaus placed around the room. There were dolls on them. Not as many as in the other places they'd seen up till now, but it looked to be the same—or at least a similar—kind as back in the Withersworth cellar.

“Stay here for now,” Sir Leon said as he stepped past her into the room with his sword at the ready.

Unlike the last room they'd entered like this, none of the dolls moved. He continued even further inside, but they didn't show any reaction.

He glanced back at Allyssa and Rosa. “You can enter. Stay close to me.”

They walked inside, looking around as they took the room in. Unlike the other parts of the mansion they'd been in, this room felt a lot *calmer*. It didn't have that same foreboding sensation to it that seemed to stick to the rest of this place like a veil of untreated Nettle Tar. There was a tranquility to this room, as well as something else that Allyssa couldn't quite place.

“I can't detect anything in particular here, discounting the relative peace,” Sir Leon said. He looked at her. “But you're still saying it feels special in some way?”

She shook her head. “No. Or, yes, I guess, but not really. It's obviously different from the rest of what we've seen, but there's something more to it.”

“It's lived in. That's what's different.” Rosa's somber tone reached her from the side. “Or it was, once. The feeling just never left.”

Allyssa turned to look at the bard, freezing when she saw the woman move to pick up one of the dolls that was sitting on a wooden dresser.

“Wait, don't—”

The doll was picked up without issue. Rosa turned to look at her and Sir Leon. “These are just ordinary dolls. Ordinary dolls for an ordinary bedroom. The only one in this place, it seems.”

Allyssa blinked, staring at the doll in the woman's “Oh... I-I see.”

How was she supposed to know that?! All the dolls looked the same, and it wasn't as if there was a sign saying what was so special about this room in simple words!

“How could you tell?” Sir Leon studied Rosa, his forehead creased.

The woman shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe I’ve got a knack for this kind of thing? People’ve got all kinds of talents up their sleeves that they just don’t know about yet.”

Allyssa eyed her. Rosa usually seemed like such a straightforward person, but sometimes she wondered whether Scarlett and the bard had a competition going for who could be the most mysterious and evasive. The woman’s answer just now didn’t answer much at all.

Rosa examined the doll for a moment longer before returning it to the dresser. She then turned to look at something behind Allyssa, letting out a low whistle. “That’s not something you see every day.”

Allyssa spun around to see what the woman was referring to.

There, hanging on the wall opposite the bed, was one of the largest paintings in the room. Like all paintings in this place, it was nothing but an empty canvas as she first laid eyes on it. But after a moment, it changed to show a portrait. It was of a girl, around Allyssa’s age, sitting in front of a picturesque garden with several rare flowers that Allyssa could name in it. If the girl were to be described in one word, it would be breathtaking.

She had long, flaxen blonde hair that was tied into a loose braid and reached past her shoulders, as well as smooth, yet graceful, features that might have been at home on a princess from a fairytale. Instead of exquisite and expensive clothing that might have fit her surroundings, however, the girl was dressed in a simple white dress that you might have found on any other girl walking the streets in Elystead.

Still, her clothing didn’t do anything to take away from the beauty of the girl. Even Allyssa could admit that, though it felt odd to do so. The girl’s beauty was to the point where it could almost be called unnatural. Like the dolls that made this mansion their home, fittingly enough. Although it was clear that this girl wasn’t a doll. Her face held a blank and neutral expression in the painting, but there was life behind those eyes. Whoever had painted this portrait had been incredibly talented, to be able to capture the likeness of this girl so well.

Allyssa’s gaze stayed on the painting for a long while. That sense of...well, it wasn’t familiarity, but perhaps *understanding*, was present in the picture. She didn’t know this girl, but she felt like she definitely understood her, despite knowing absolutely nothing about her.

A hand was placed on Allyssa’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Sir Leon asked as he stepped closer to her.

She met his eyes for a moment, then gave a slow nod. “I’m fine. Promise. It’s just that...” She glanced back at the painting. “This girl... I guess it would be hard to explain to you so that you understand, considering even I don’t, but she’s what’s special about this place.”

The man looked at the portrait. “Her appearance is striking, I will admit that. But that’s also what one might expect from a painting. They’re not always accurate representations of reality. I can’t tell if there’s anything more to it, however.”

Allyssa shook her head at his words. “This painting caught her exactly as she was. I can tell. And I’m not sure I would say that there’s necessarily more to it, other than it just...is.”

Sir Leon narrowed his eyes. After a while, he seemed to give up. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tell what it is you mean. If something that’s only affecting you, though, and we’re unsure about what it is... I think it’s best if we leave for now. We can return here when we have more information.”

“You’re looking at it the wrong way,” Rosa said, stepping up beside him. The woman looked at the painting. “You have to *look* at it. Get it? Allyssa knows exactly what she’s doing right now, so there’s no need to worry.”

Allyssa gaped at her. Rosa seemed a lot more sure about this than she herself did. But she didn’t exactly think the woman was wrong. Whatever this was, it didn’t *feel* dangerous.

“I don’t ‘get it’, no. But you’re claiming it’s safe.” Sir Leon eyed Rosa for a moment. “Are you prepared to take responsibility for your words?”

The tips of the woman’s mouth rose in a smile. “Responsibility and I don’t exactly have the closest of relationships. We ignore the other like the plague, really. Usually proves to be the best choice for all involved. But...sure. Just this once, me and ol’ Responsibility will call it a truce.”

The rattling of chains echoed from the room’s entrance.

Allyssa’s hand reached up to the vials strapped across her chest as she spun to look at the door. Moments later, a man in an old-looking black suit stepped through the door, long iron chains hanging off his arms and trailing on the floorboards behind him. He was floating slightly in the air, feet dangling above the floor, and there was this *gloom* surrounding his vaguely transparent body. Allyssa could almost *taste* the resignation coming off him. This was the ‘custodian’ Scarlett wanted them to find.

He stopped in front of the room’s entrance, his eyes locking onto Allyssa.

Next to her, Sir Leon moved forward and raised his sword. Almost without thinking, she put out her arm to stop him. The man gave her a long look.

She didn’t know why she did that, but she didn’t think attacking this ghost man immediately was a good decision. He wasn’t looking at her like some of the other ghosts had — like they wanted to eat her, tear her limbs apart, or some other equally horrifying thing. He was looking at her as if he was trying to figure out who she was.

Finally, after over a dozen seconds had passed, a look of recognition appeared on the ghost’s face, which soon turned into an expression of relief.

“Ah, so this is where you were.” The man’s voice came out as a strange echo across the room. The chains hanging off his arms rattled as he floated closer to them. Sir Leon took a step back but seemed ready to act at a moment’s notice. “We were all wondering where you had gone to, young lady,” the man continued.

Allyssa stared at him for a moment. “Young lady? You mean...me?”

That sounded so...*weird*.

“Who else? It heartens me to see you in good health, still.”

She looked between the ghost and the portrait on the wall. Was he mistaking her for the girl in that painting? The resemblance wasn't even close, if you asked her. The somewhat blonde hair was about the only thing they shared. It shouldn't be enough to confuse the two of them. But, maybe...

“Do you know my name?” she asked.

The man's speech softened. “The young lady's name, you say? Why, of course. Thinking of it hearkens me back to when young lady Orelia first graced us at this mansion with her appearance. It is not a day easily forgotten.”

“Then it's fine for you to just use my name,” Allyssa said. “You don't have to call me young lady.”

A horrified expression found its way onto the man's face. “I could never! To show such disrespect to your personage?” The chains clattered against the floor as he shook his head. “Unthinkable.”

“O-Oh, alright then.” Allyssa tried to hide her grimace. “Ehm, are the other...servants, also nearby right now?”

“I am sure they are all attending to their duties at present, young lady. Although I am certain they would all greatly appreciate your kindness, there is no need to worry about them.” The ghost man's countenance darkened. “Ah, but young lady... I must inform you that the Lord wishes to see you.”

“The Lord?” Allyssa glanced at the painting. “You mean...my father?”

He gave her a perplexed look. “No...? I apologize, young lady, but none of us have heard anything regarding anyone claiming to be your father having sent a message.” The man went quiet for a moment. “Ah, but the Lord wishes to see you. He will be mad if you disobey his orders.” He shook his head once again, the chains dragging over the floor. “Ah, young lady. That you would be forced into such an unfortunate position. All of us lament that something like this would be the fate of someone as compassionate as you. Yet, as the Lord's faithful servants, we are oath sworn to carry all of his burdens as they come, and to continue as such for as long as we can. We are undeserving of your kindness, young lady, but know that you will always have our loyalty and support. That is why I must ask you to not disobey the Lord's command and anger him unnecessarily. It would rack us all with undescrivable pain if something were to happen to you.”

Allyssa took a moment to process his words, but before she could say anything else, the expression on the ghost's face twisted into a frown.

“Young lady, what is that you have on your face? And what is with the way you speak? Did we not teach you how to speak while in this mansion, as not to anger the Lord excessively?”

Her hand shot up to her alchemist-treated leather goggles, quickly pulling them off. “Ah, these are just...nothing really,” she said, trying to remember how Scarlett usually talked. “Then, the Lord...where is he right no—I mean, where is he at the moment?”

“He should be in the conservatory.” The ghost’s expression calmed for a moment, before returning as he just now seemed to notice Sir Leon and Rosa. “Who are these people, young lady?”

Allyssa looked between the two of them and him. “Oh, ehm...these are acquaintances of mine. They are here to help me with some... Some matters.”

The man’s brow furrowed even further as he eyed the sword in Sir Leon’s hand. “You shouldn’t keep such dangerous company, young lady. Strange men cannot be trusted. And the Lord will not like hearing about you meeting with outsiders.”

“He’s not a strange man,” Allyssa said. “He’s a, uh... A knight. Indeed, he is an imperial knight, part of the...” She frowned. Did the Solar Knights exist whenever this ghost lived? How old were they, even? Shin would know, no doubt. Maybe she should have listened to him more...

“I am Leon Delmon,” Sir Leon said. “Vice-Captain of the Imperial Solar Knights. I am here on the authority of Captain Grimbald Crowder, serving under the order of the Empire’s gilded sun and light, His Majesty the Emperor. As a Solar Knight, it is within my jurisdiction to ensure that no undue proceedings are taking place on this land or any of the other lands governed by its lord.”

The ghost-man stared at the knight for several seconds. Then he turned back to Allyssa like he hadn’t registered the man’s words at all. “Should I lead you to the lord, young lady?”

“Ah, wait, before that.” Allyssa looked around the room. While she did *find* this room, she couldn’t tell if there was anything special she was supposed to do here. The feeling it all gave was far too vague. She doubted seeing this ‘Lord’ was the best choice, though. He probably wasn’t even alive anymore. Besides, the task Scarlett had given them related specifically to this ghost in front of them. Nothing else.

Not finding anything that stuck out particularly, other than the painting of the girl, she turned back to the ghost. “You...” she began, studying him for a moment. “What are your duties in this mansion?”

The man raised his hands to straighten the tie around his neck, paying no attention to the rattling of the chains as they moved. “I am one of this mansion’s custodians, young lady. It is my obligation to tend to the estate, as well as ensuring everything is kept in order and that nothing strays from its intended purpose.”

“Then... All of the dolls that are in this place, you are responsible for them?”

“They are, of course, the works of the Lord, but I am indeed the one that oversees them.”

“Could you perhaps not do that? For just a few hours?”

“Pardon me, young lady?” The man gave her a confused look.

“Ehm, I would appreciate it if you could...” She searched for the words in her mind. “If you could *refrain* from tending to the dolls for some time, while me and my acquaintances move through the mansion. With that, I will also be able to go to see the lord sooner.”

“I cannot, young lady. The Lord would be enraged if I were to be negligent in my duties, and it would pain me if that anger would affect you.”

“Please?” Allyssa gave him a pleading look, the one that always worked on her father.

“Young lady...” The ghost held an uncertain expression. “...Very well. But you must not speak of this to the Lord. When he learns of it, he must not know it was upon your request.”

“I won’t say a word. I promise. Thank you.”

He looked around for a moment as if he just remembered something. “I am afraid I must leave, young lady. It would be seen as odd if I remained here for too long.”

“Wait, one last thing.” Allyssa creased her brows. Scarlett had asked them to ‘take care of’ this ghost, which the woman probably figured was enough for whatever they were doing. Hopefully, what Allyssa had done just now was enough, because she didn’t actually want to kill this ghost. But it was possible there was more to it. “Uh, might there maybe some doors and other areas in this mansion that I won’t be able to reach by myself? Maybe I need a key of some kind?”

“A key?” The ghost seemed to think about it for a moment, then pulled out a thick key from a pocket on his suit. “Do you mean like this one, young lady?”

She nodded her head. “Yes, exactly like that. Can I borrow that for a while, please?”

“But, young lady...”

“I promise I will give it back when I’m done, okay?”

He looked at her for a few seconds, then slowly held out the key to her. “You must make sure to not anger the Lord, young lady.”

“I will not. You have my word,” Allyssa answered as she received the key, placing it inside one of the pockets in her cape.

“I must leave now. Be safe, young lady, and I will see you later.” With that, the ghost-man turned around and floated through one of the walls, disappearing out of the room along with the fading sound of his chains.

Allyssa stared at the wall for a while as silence eventually fell upon the room again.

“It would have been better if we dealt with him immediately,” Sir Leon eventually said.

She turned to stare at him. “What? Why?! This worked just as well.”

The knight gave her a serious look. "He's dangerous."

"But he didn't hurt us!"

"If he had not confused you for this young lady, he would have moved to kill us the moment he saw us. Don't mistake the confusion of a ghost with their harmlessness."

Allyssa looked back at the wall the ghost had disappeared through. Was that true? She felt that it probably was. Or rather, she could feel instinctually that it was. Still, it wasn't wrong to pity the man despite that, was it?

She glanced at Rosa. She had an unreadable expression on her face, but Allyssa felt that the woman probably understood her. Because now she could sort of understand what Rosa had meant earlier when she said even monsters could deserve pity.

"I still think this was the right choice," she said after some time.

"Even though it wasn't what Scarlett asked you to do?" Sir Leon asked.

"I don't think she'll mind."

"Why are you so certain of that?"

"Because she's a kind person."

The man stared at her. "...You truly believe that?"

Allyssa nodded. "She has her flaws, and I think she has trouble trusting people...which can be annoying, at times. But yes, despite that, I think she's a nice person."

He gave her a long look, then turned to look at Rosa. "And would you happen to think the same?"

The woman seemed to be pulled out of whatever she'd been thinking about, cocking her head to the side. "That's a difficult one to answer. But I suppose yes. Just don't forget the dozen or so caveats that come with that answer."

"And what, exactly, does that mean?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're her fiance. You tell me."

He seemed to consider the woman for a moment, then let out a short sigh as he turned around to scan the room. "If this is we're leaving things, then it seems we're done here for now. Next would be meeting up with Scarlett's group again, but that might take a while. What do we do until then?"

Allyssa also looked around the room. She was still lacking an answer to what all of this was, but she also didn't feel like there was much more to do in this room specifically. "I suppose we do what Scarlett usually asks us to do at this point?" she said.

Sir Leon looked at her. “And what’s that?”

Her eyes went to the chest at the foot of the large bed. “Find all of the ‘loot’.”