

111: Disbelief in the study

Scarlett and the others stood before a door at the end of a narrow stairway in the abandoned mansion's central wing. In the game, the primary way of continuing to the next section of this dungeon had been through the lobby here in the central wing, but that was the annoying way to go about things.

Scarlett pulled out the key she'd taken from the Custodian they had beaten, playing it into the door's keyhole. The mechanism inside clicked as the door slid open.

Taking the servants' entrance would save them a couple of unnecessary fights.

She stepped through the door into the dim hallway. It stretched forward a dozen or so meters with a thick wool carpet running along the floor until the hallway split in two directions. Unlike the other hallways they'd been moving through in the mansion, this one was noticeably lacking all the paintings on the walls.

Which was reasonable, at least from a game-design perspective. There were other threats to deal with here.

"Where are we going now, Scarlett?" Leon asked as they started walking down the hallway. He and Fynn took the front, with Shin taking up the rear. "You seem to have very intimate knowledge of the layout of this place, so I assume you have something in mind."

Scarlett studied the man's back. "I have learned enough through my research to have a general idea, yes. But there is still much that I am uncertain about. As for what our current objective is, that would be the study."

"The study?"

"Yes. The office of Lord Abelard, the master of this mansion," she said. "Do you not think that would be a suitable location to investigate?"

He glanced back at her for a moment. "...Sounds like a wise decision, yes. But what are we investigating? What's your goal after that?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "You will to be more specific. Are you asking what my overarching purpose in visiting this mansion is? Because I thought I made that abundantly clear in my discussions with Lord and Lady Withersworth."

For some reason, that earned her a surprised look from Leon. "If anything, that made it even *more* unclear." He shook his head. "But no, I'm talking about what we're doing after we find the study."

"I suppose you will have to wait and see for yourself."

He frowned. "Or you can tell us right now. This isn't the kind of situation where you keep secrets from your allies due to some distorted obsession with keeping secrets."

Next to Scarlett, Allyssa took a sudden breath at the man's words, while Fynn sent puzzled looks between Leon and Scarlett. Shin and Rosa were the only ones to pretend like they weren't listening.

Scarlett continued staring at Leon for several seconds. She supposed that was a...*reasonable* way to look at things. Though it annoyed her to no end that he went out and said it, just like that.

As for why she didn't just tell him what they'd be doing in the study... Was it *really* necessary? For him, it might make things more convenient, yes. But for her, it genuinely felt like it was easier to just let them see things for themselves rather than explaining every single detail every time they visited a place she had game knowledge of. She would admit that she was a bit too reticent at times, like earlier with the Custodians, but she didn't have to share *everything*. Besides, it was easier to pretend like she had just 'researched' things if she didn't go around describing all these places before they even got there.

Although she doubted her companions ever bought too much into her 'research' claims. But still.

She shook her head, turning her eyes away from Leon and focusing ahead. "I recommend you return your attention to the matters at hand. It will most likely soon become necessary."

"And why is that?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a breath. "...Because, while there do not appear to be any more of those haunted paintings in this part of the mansion, from what I have gathered, there will still be threats patrolling the hallways. More of the dolls we have run into up till now, although these are not ones you can afford to be as lax in dealing with."

"...How many of them are there?"

"You expect me to know an exact figure?" she asked. "While I understand it may appear as such, I am, in fact, *not* omniscient. It would do you well to remember that, and not allow your thoughts to stray towards useless misconceptions."

"That's not what I—" Leon looked back at her, then let out a tired sigh and turned his gaze forward again. "Fine. I'll keep my eyes open."

With that, the party descended into silence once more.

Eventually, after they'd been walking for a few minutes, Fynn suddenly stopped and sniffed the air. The rest of them came to a halt as well.

"What is it?" Allyssa whispered, stepping closer to him. "Did you notice something?"

Fynn just narrowed his eyes, staring down the hallway in front of them. Moments later, a figure stepped out from around the corner. It looked *almost* like a person, standing at the same height as a short adult, with long, flowing hair running down to cover its shoulders. Its face was in the image of a beautiful girl, with large, pale blue eyes that turned to stare at them.

One couldn't be blamed for mistaking it for a real girl at first glance. But if one looked closer, it was clear that something was off. Most of it was smaller things, like the rigid way it turned its head, the way the eyes didn't actually seem to move or blink, or the smooth marble-like skin. It was definitely in the uncanny-valley region, as far as looks went.

The large blades in place for hands were also a pretty major giveaway.

Fynn took off immediately. A gust of wind surged down the hallway along with him as he hurled towards the doll with a growl. A short protest had left Leon at the action, but by then, Fynn had already reached his target.

The young man's right hand shot out at the doll like a sledgehammer. A loud thud rang out through the hallway as the doll blocked the attack with its arm, barely budging.

Scarlett's eyes widened slightly at the sight. Fynn had been able to beat down the other foes they'd met in this mansion with nothing but pure force, so this was somewhat unexpected. She knew the dolls in this section were supposed to be a lot stronger, but this was a pretty major leap in strength.

Fynn's other hand slashed out towards the doll, a pair of glowing claws forming above his knuckles. One of the doll's blades moved to intercept the attack. The claws dug a finger's width into the blade, but the doll's other blade moved in response, forcing Fynn to bounce back to avoid getting cut.

"Keep your eyes open," Leon told Scarlett and the others. Then the man took off towards Fynn and the doll with surprising speed.

Scarlett's attention was caught by a clattering of noise that suddenly sounded out from the corridors behind them. Turning around, she and the others saw a small wave of tiny dolls come rushing around one of the corners and in their direction. The doll's stiff movements didn't help to make the sharp blades and scissors in their hands look any less threatening.

"Allyssa," Shin uttered, stepping forward to cover the rest of them.

In answer, one of Allyssa's hands went up to the bandolier across her chest and pulled out a thin flask. She threw it down the hallway, and the glass shattered in front of the incoming dolls, spreading a black, viscous fluid over the carpet and floor. For a moment, the fluid almost seemed to multiply, covering a lot more area than the size of the flask had suggested.

"Don't use fire," the young Shielder said, and Scarlet lowered her hand.

The tide of dolls pushed forward, rushing into the black solution. It quickly turned into a mess where they started clambering over each other as their tiny limbs got stuck in the goo, with the ones at the bottom getting crushed beneath the legs and blades of those at the top. Only a handful succeeded in getting past, and those were quickly dealt with by Shin's blade. Scarlett watched with interest as the young man then began removing the dolls that were stuck, along with Allyssa's help.

Those waves would have been pretty annoying to deal with in the game, unless you had powerful area-of-effect abilities. This was a surprisingly effective way of dealing with the

dolls, considering things. Scarlett also wasn't entirely sure her pyrokinesis could take out the dolls fast enough to stop them from reaching her and the others, and her hydrokinesis definitely couldn't, so this was definitely the easier way of dealing with things. Although, that also depended on how many of those flasks Allyssa had.

Scarlett glanced back towards Leon and Fynn. In comparison, however, these smaller dolls were relatively harmless. Credit where credit was due, though, Leon had managed to cut off one of the larger doll's arms already, and Fynn was trying to get past the blade on its other arm.

She cringed as one of the doll's—rather sharp—feet struck Fynn in the chest and sent him flying into a nearby wall. It was about to follow up on the attack when Leon's sword lit up a bright gold, the light moving to form a circle on the floor around him and the doll. It immediately shifted its attention to him, aiming a cut towards his head. The man managed to grab and bend its elbow in a move that forced the doll onto the ground, where he tried to use his knees to push it down further. Its legs, however, bent up into unnatural positions and slammed into the knight's sides with enough force that Scarlett almost felt the blast from where she was.

Leon grimaced at the blow, but he soon wrested its legs and remaining arms away and cleanly finished the fight off by cutting the grappled doll's head off.

At around the same time, Fynn got up, somewhat unsteadily, and walked over to him. As the circle around Leon dissipated, Fynn's head moved around as if he was sniffing the air, searching for more enemies. His gaze turned back to where Shin and Allyssa were dealing with what remained of the smaller dolls, before eventually falling back to Leon as the man stood up, dusting himself off.

Both threats were largely dealt with, so Scarlett walked up to Fynn and Leon, along with Rosa. "Are you okay?" she asked, studying Fynn.

The white-haired young man blinked for a moment, then looked down at his chest where part of his clothing had been ripped open and there were traces of blood.

"It was strong," he said, touching the injury with his fingers.

"I surmised as much," Scarlett said. She turned to Rosa. "Miss Hale. Would you care to lend him your aid?"

The bard smiled. "Sure. But if you ask me, it's Sir Leon over here that took the harder beating." She nodded towards the man.

He held up a hand. "I'm fine."

"Oh? So you looking as if you ate an unripe orange there earlier was just your normal fighting expression, then? Good to know." Rosa shot him a small grin as she readied her klert and played a short tune. Her magic quickly took effect, healing the wound on Fynn's chest.

“I’ve had worse,” Leon said and shook his head, though he seemed to relax a bit from the magic. “What Fynn said was correct, though. That doll was strong. A lot stronger than I thought something like that could be.”

“I believe this it to be expected from something created to protect the domain of an archmage,” Scarlett said.

“What?” His expression turned serious as he looked at her. “Abelard Withersworth was an archmage?”

She stared at him. “Of course he was. I would like to know what other caliber of mage could fashion a place such as this that remains in place generations after their death.”

The knight’s forehead creased. “...To be honest, I’m not sure even an archmage could create something like this mansion by themselves. But with the convergence of negative energies in this place, I was expecting part of the cause to have been a disaster of some sort. Or perhaps some kind of unknown artifact.”

“Perhaps that might have also been part of it, yes.” Scarlett turned around to look as Allyssa and Shin approached them after having cleaned up on their end. “But I can assure you that those dolls were the work of Abelard and no one else.”

“What did we miss?” Allyssa asked as she reached them.

“Nothing of note,” Scarlett replied. “We were about finished here, in truth. Come, let us not delay.”

She walked past the limp body of the now headless doll—there was nothing worth looting on it—and started moving down the hallways again. The others hurried to follow her as well.

Soon, they were moving in the same formation as before as they proceeded to make their way through the mansion. Within half an hour, they encountered another two sets of those larger dolls along with waves of the smaller ones. Both times, Leon took on the larger dolls by himself, while Scarlett and Fynn helped Shin and Allyssa in dealing with the other ones so that Allyssa could save some of her resources.

Eventually, after having meandered around for some time with little direction, they reached a wide vestibule of sorts that had an arched ceiling and a broad set of doors at its center. The doors were made of dark oak, with carved adornments running across them.

Scarlett and the others paused to look at the doors.

“Is this our destination, then?” Rosa asked.

Scarlett nodded. “It is.”

Shin stepped forward and tried opening one of the doors, but it didn’t budge. There also weren’t any keyholes on them.

“Unfortunately, that is unlikely to work,” she said.

“How are you planning for us to get inside?” Leon asked. “We’re not beating it down, are we?”

“You are welcome to try, if you so wish. But I have my doubts that even you would be successful in such an attempt.”

“So there’s another entrance.” Shin turned away from the doors and to Scarlett. “Like the servant’s entrance earlier.”

She gave him a satisfied nod. “Indeed, there is.”

She started towards one of the corridors connecting to the vestibule where they were, then continued down around a corner. There, she stopped before another oak door, much smaller than the previous ones. This door had two keyholes in it. She pulled out the key she got from the Custodian and put it into the first hole, then looked back at Allyssa. “If you would be so kind.”

The girl looked between her and the door for a moment, then a flash of realization passed over her eyes. She reached into her clothes and pulled out the other key. After she put it into the second keyhole, a click sounded out and the door slid open.

Scarlett stepped through first. She entered a sizeable study with a high ceiling, polished granite floor, and several bookshelves lining the walls. Large paintings hung between some of the shelves, most depicting various youthful women in different sceneries. There was also a small balcony alcove, situated above a fireplace in the corner, with a wooden railing hiding parts of a chair and a door.

“How old *is* this place? Like, actually?” Allyssa asked as all of them had entered the chamber. The girl ran her finger across the top of a telescope that stood near the wall, then held her fingertip up and eyed it closely.

Rosa looked around as well. “This whole mansion has been awfully clean for a place that’s supposed to have been abandoned, hasn’t it?”

“I do not know the exact age,” Scarlett said. “But approximately one hundred and fifty years should have passed since the mansion was ‘abandoned’, so to speak.”

“Wait, *that* long?” Allyssa turned to her with wide eyes. “That’s ages! Who’s going around cleaning this place? Other than that custodian, we haven’t run into the ghosts of staff or anything like that. I doubt the *dolls* have been cleaning things, right?”

Scarlett met her gaze. “We have run into many of them.”

Allyssa blinked, her expression dimming. “Oh.”

Scarlett shifted her attention back to the room itself. “Now, there is no rush, so feel free to explore as you wish, but inform me if you find anything of note,” she said. She walked over to one of the bookshelves and started looking over the books. “Abelard was supposed to have a secret entrance somewhere in his study, and although I do not know its exact location, I do know that there is a way to open it somewhere in here. That is what we are searching for.”

She paused, her attention shifting to a nearby chiffonier with a silver carafe on it. She grabbed it, putting the carafe into her pouch of holding. Didn't hurt to bag some extra loot while she was at it.

The others spread out around the study. Surprisingly, Shin didn't move for the bookshelves but rather made for the wide desk located at the end of the room, where there were only a few books and papers stacked on top of each other. There, he started leafing through some of the documents and thinner books.

"Find something interesting?" Allyssa asked him after they'd all been looking around for a few minutes. The girl had mostly been looking through a few drawers here and there.

"Possibly," he answered. "Looks like journals of some kind, written by this Lord Abelard. I'm trying to find some more detailed information about what happened here."

Allyssa's expression changed as she walked over to the desk, taking the book he was looking through from his hands.

He stared at her, then at the book. "...Are you ill? You didn't get possessed by one of those ghosts earlier, did you?"

"I'm allowed to be interested in books as well, you dunce." She sent him an annoyed look as she began flipping through the pages.

While they were doing that, Scarlett and the others continued searching through the room. At one point, Leon walked up to near where Scarlett was, pulling out the books from a nearby bookshelf and inspecting the space behind them. "What exactly is it that you're looking for, Scarlett?" he asked, his tone quiet.

"Have we not already discussed this?" she responded.

"I'm not asking about in this room, or whatever other answer you were planning to give. I'm asking what's your true end goal is here. At first, I thought it was about money, but things don't add up."

She eyed him for a moment. "I will be frank. I do not see a reason as to why I would be obligated to share that with you. Do not forget that you are merely here to aid me in return for my consideration in the betrothal matter. You being aware of the specifics of this excursion holds no importance to me."

"It *is* important if what you're doing here is something that can affect others in the future. We're dealing with necromancy and Ittar knows what other magic here. The fact that this place exists to begin with is bad enough, but if what's found here can bring further harm, I can't allow you to just leave with it."

She stared at him. Right. He was a knight of the empire. His duty to it and its citizens likely held priority over all else in his mind. She didn't doubt for a second that he would turn her in if he genuinely thought he had enough reason to.

"...What is it that you see when you look at me?" she asked.

He frowned. “What?”

Scarlett shook her head. “Never mind. It is nothing that you have to concern yourself with. As for your worries, what I want from this mansion is by all means harmless. I am not planning on doing anything that might threaten the empire, if that is your concern.”

That wasn't *entirely* true. Her main objective here was an item that was connected to her plans with Gaven and the Countess. Those weren't exactly 'legal' or 'virtuous'—and depending on who you asked, they could very well be considered a national issue—but she would at the very least try to ensure that no innocents were harmed. She also didn't have much choice in the matter.

Leon's eyes stayed on her for a few seconds, before he turned back to searching through the bookshelf. “...I wasn't implying that you were.”

Scarlett found herself scoffing at that. “Are you certain about that?”

The man remained silent at her reply.

She walked over to another part of the study to search through a bureau and its drawers.

After a while, Rosa passed by close to her. “Hey, mind sharing exactly what we're looking? I've been searching around like a miller in Silverborough but haven't found anything but a bunch of undusty dusty set of books. I've been thinking and, with secret entrances being, you know, secret, it'd be helpful if one knew what that secret looked like, really.”

“Unfortunately, I am uncertain on this part as well,” Scarlett said. It'd been a while since she had been here in the game, and this was such a minor puzzle that she couldn't remember exactly what it looked like in the game. “Most likely, we are searching for hidden levers or buttons of some kind. Two or three of them.”

“Hmm.” The woman let out a thoughtful hum, then shrugged her shoulders. “Well, I suppose that's better than nothing.”

They continued looking for a while longer, and eventually, Fynn found a small hidden lever inside the fireplace. Not long after, Leon found another one in one of the many bookshelves. Even after pulling both of those, however, nothing happened, so there was probably at least one more left. They searched for another ten minutes without finding any traces of it, though, and by that point, they had looked through most of the study.

Scarlett pressed her lips together in thought as she tried recalling where the last could be.

“What about up there?” Rosa asked.

Scarlett looked to where the woman was pointing, up at the alcove above the fireplace.

“I suppose that is the only place we have yet to look,” Leon said.

“How about it?” Rosa looked at Scarlett. “Feel like going for a climb?”

“I’ll do it,” Fynn said, stepping towards the fireplace.

“No, that is quite alright.” Scarlett met Rosa’s mirthful gaze. “I would not want to disappoint Miss Hale, after all.”

The woman gave her a surprised look. “Yeah, really? What are you planning to do?”

Scarlett walked over to stand in front of the fireplace, looking up at the alcove. After a moment’s focus, a thin mist sprung up around her. The moment after, she was standing on the alcove. The others were all staring up at her with surprise as she started searching for a lever. She quickly found it, as well: a thin metal rod that stuck out of the wall next to the door. She pulled it down.

A group of clicks and grinding sounded out as one of the bookshelves along the walls shifted, sliding inwards and dissipating away like an illusion, revealing a stairway that led down into darkness.

Mist formed around Scarlett once more as she teleported back down to the others, affording Rosa a small smile. “Does that satisfy you, Miss Hale?”

The woman chuckled. “I guess it does, yeah. That’ll teach me not to expect the unexpected.”

“What was that?” Leon asked, eyeing Scarlett.

“It was merely the effect of an artifact of mine,” she answered. Up till now, they hadn’t encountered any real situations where she had to use the short-range teleportation ability that came with the [Garments of Form], so this was the first time she was using it outside of practice. Considering it had three charges, and each charge only took five minutes to recharge, it wasn’t exactly a waste to use it on something like this.

“Now then,” she continued and looked towards the new entrance in the study. “Shall we proceed to the next step?”