

## 113: A conservatory melee

Along with the others, Scarlett made her way through the hidden paths of Abelard's Doll mansion that had connected to the secret laboratory. They'd climbed dark stone stairways, squeezed past tight passageways running behind the mansion walls, and now eventually found themselves exiting out from a large painting frame and into a lengthy lobby with painted walls and bright, magical lights hanging from the ceiling. At the end of the lobby was a large set of doors with a pair of dolls standing on either side, keeping watch. Both dolls' attention seemed to turn to them, but neither moved from where they were.

Scarlett looked around for a moment. They were now in front of the conservatory—or rather, the boss room—and had skipped the vast majority of this section of the dungeon. It wasn't exactly optimal, at least not when looking at it from a loot-gathering perspective, but that wasn't an actual issue. They could always backtrack through the mansion later, after having dealt with things here. It was a lot easier doing things in this order.

She turned her attention to the two dolls, eyeing them for a moment. She could see the telltale signs of where their weak points were; small whirlwinds of movement, where the dolls' magical defences met or turned more erratic. It seemed the [Tablet of Sovegrephor] had done its job. She'd used it on her [Charms of Apperception] before they left the laboratory, thinking it would be helpful in the upcoming boss fight. She didn't know where the new 'level limit' for the charms was, but considering the tablet had been of epic tier, she would guess that the [Charms of Apperception] would now work up against enemies somewhere in the 65-70 range, going by the game's power levels. That *should* be enough for this place, hopefully.

She gestured towards the guardian dolls. "Sir Leon. If you would take the lead. The rest of us will also offer our assistance."

The tall man gave her a short look, then readied his sword and started moving in the direction of the dolls. Neither of them showed any reaction whatsoever towards his approach until he was within a few meters of the doors they were guarding. Then, as if triggered by a switch, both raised their blade-like arms and lashed out at the knight.

A bright gold left Leon's sword as he blocked one set of arms with his blade. The other doll was pushed back by a quick burst of light, and a second later, Fynn came rushing in like a bullet, leaping at it with arms raised and claws formed above his knuckles. The doll shifted its attention to the young man just in time to block the attack, but its marble face was then knocked back as a small bolt struck it beneath the eye and created a crack.

Next to Scarlett, Allyssa quickly got to reloading her crossbow.

Fynn jumped on the opportunity and cut his claws through one of the doll's arms, almost tearing half of it off in the process. Before the doll could retaliate, Scarlett conjured a wall of fire to its left as Shin came striking with his sword from the right. The doll blocked the second attack without issue and didn't seem afraid of Scarlett's magic to its left, but barely a moment after its head was separated from its body by Leon's blade that came soaring through the wall of fire, an outline of flames trailing behind it.

Fynn quickly moved on to break apart what remained of the doll as the rest of them shifted their attention to the other doll in order to distract it for long enough that Leon could finish it off as well. A dozen or so seconds after the fight had started, both dolls lay unmoving on the floor.

Leon turned back to Scarlett with a surprised look on his face as she and the others approached. “Did you do that intentionally?”

“Are you referring to how I used the doll’s single-mindedness on the opponent in front of it to shift its attention away from you and the danger you posed?” she asked. “If so, then yes. It seemed a suitable way of handling things without wasting too much mana.”

The man stared at her for a few seconds, then turned back to the doors as he sheathed his sword. “I didn’t know you had any experience in things like this.”

“I have had my butler tutor me on the subject recently. While I am yet far from being an expert, the understanding his teachings have given me has proven indispensable.”

She glanced to the side.

**[Mana: 3386/4698]**

She had been frugal enough with her mana up till now, but this was where things would have to get serious. She placed a hand into her [Pouch of Holding] and pulled out the [Fireguard Knife], placing it into her belt. While she had yet to have had the rust removed from its blade, the effect the item had of enhancing her pyromancy—pyrokinesis included, it turned out—worked despite that. Her experiments had shown that the effect wasn’t *too* strong, maybe a bit under a 10% difference, but it was definitely better than nothing.

It went without saying that she had her other items equipped as well, [Sidhe’s Flowing Garbs] activated and enhanced by the [Prayer of Salvation] bracelet, as well as several health potions and mana potions ready.

She pulled out two mana potions, having the others wait for a couple of minutes as she forced them both down. The taste was far from pleasant, but it refilled enough of her stores.

**[Mana: 4434/4698]**

She only had two more of those potions, unfortunately. The materials were rarer for them than for the health potions. But there was also a limit to how many mana potions you could drink before getting some side effects that were similar to mana exhaustion, so it wasn’t as if it made much of a difference at the moment.

“Are you all prepared for what comes next?” she asked the others as she turned to look at them.

They all nodded their heads.

“Good. Then let us proceed.”

She nodded for Leon to go ahead. The man walked over to the two thick doors before them, leaning forward as he pushed them open. A loud squeaking filled the hall as they slid over the floor to reveal what lay beyond.

It was a large, circular chamber, with a vaulted glass ceiling that showed the dark night sky and the stars above. Lining the walls was a veritable army of the tougher dolls they'd been dealing with throughout this section of the mansion, standing as still as statues. At the center of the room, jutting up from the floor, was a small dome of glass with a light green liquid inside. Sitting at the top of the dome was a large emerald.

In front of this, seated on a chair that faced the entrance, was another doll. While the other dolls were very human-like in their appearances, you could still tell what they were. This doll, however, was almost indistinguishable from a person, lacking the blade-like arms the others shared. It had long, blonde hair and a fetching face that would make almost any man—and probably some women—turn their heads. If Scarlett didn't already know it was a doll, she would have thought it was a real girl.

The others in her party sent wary glances across the room and the dolls here, their gazes stopping on the one at the center for a while. After all of them had stepped into the room, the air above the glass dome shimmered, and a figure started taking shape. A black, billowing robe covered most of the figure's frame as bony hands and a willowy, gaunt face formed, half-translucent and with a faint green glow surrounding it. The ghost of Abelard Withersworth had appeared, and he was staring right at them. Or rather, right at Allyssa.

Behind them, the doors to the conservatory closed shut.

Allyssa seemed to notice the ghost's attention being focused on her and looked back at Scarlett and the others with a slight nod. Scarlett could guess the meaning behind it, returning a nod of her own. The girl had wanted a chance to approach things herself before they began.

Allyssa moved forward a few steps, and the ghost of Abelard started floating down towards her. Both Leon and Shin took a step forward as well, seemingly ready to move within a moment's notice if necessary, but Abelard didn't even seem to notice them.

"Hmm. Orelia, is that you?" he spoke as he studied Allyssa. His brows furrowed into a frown. "Why are you late? I sent word for you ages ago. Ages."

"I... I came as soon as I could, Lord Abelard," Allyssa replied.

The ghost's frown deepened at her words.

"...Fine, fine. It matters no more. You are here. Come. Sit." He turned and gestured towards the chair at the center of the room, where the blonde doll was. "We do not have much time. Those fools do not understand the majesty of my work here, but that will not stop their middling. They are coming. Quick. Move your feet."

"What are going to do?"

Abelard halted, turning back to stare at Allyssa. "What was that? Why are you dallying? This is no time for nonsense. Come, hurry."

“But there aren’t any people coming here. Can’t you tell me what this is first?”

The ghost went quiet, his gaze turning steelier. Then his eyes narrowed. “...You think to trick me?”

“What? No.” Allyssa raised her hands. “I’m not trying to—”

“Silence.” Abelard moved his hand. Suddenly, the girl jolted as something flew out from her, taking form behind her. A vague, barely visible shape of a girl in a flowing white dress.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. That looked familiar...

As Leon and Shin hurried up to support Allyssa, Abelard’s gaze suddenly shifted to Scarlett and the others. The atmosphere around him shifted completely. “Intruders? In my home?” he uttered a phrase Scarlett recognized. “You fools. You have come to seek your own doom. This is my domain!”

Allyssa seemed to recover from whatever happened and the presence behind her faded away as Abelard floated back to the center of the room, stopping to hover above the glass dome.

“Come, my dears,” he cried out, raising his arms into the air. “Shows these intruders their folly!”

The blonde doll came alive, rising from the chair with a fluidity that the other dolls had all lacked. Its eyes focused on Leon as the man hurried to step in front of the rest of them. At the same time, three of the dolls spread around the room also started moving.

Rosa’s soft voice enveloped Scarlett as the woman started performing her magic, quickly shifting between three different tunes. Fynn, Shin, and Leon all seemed to lean forward a bit, as if filled with energy and ready to move. Scarlett herself felt as if a wave of pure focus washed over her. Suddenly, not only Abelard, but all of the dolls spread around the room stood out like beacons to her, along with all of their weak points. It was as if their presences were calling for her to notice them, almost. Meanwhile, she discerned that the movements of the three normal dolls that had started moving towards them had gotten slightly slower.

Rosa let out a long breath next to her. “Wasn’t sure that one’d work. Never tried so many at once before, but suppose there’s a first for everything.”

Scarlett glanced at the bard for a second, then turned her attention back to the dolls. The boss doll, the blonde one, was staring at Leon as the others approached from the sides. Then, all at once, they all sprang forward.

“Back!” Leon shouted as his sword lit up and met the boss doll’s advance. A crack rang out as blade met limb, the shockwave blowing back Scarlett’s hair.

She left the boss doll to Leon, instead focusing on the other dolls that were rushing towards them.

In front of her, Fynn's clothes shuddered as the wind soared up around him and he ran ahead to face the two dolls that were coming from the right. Shin made to meet the last one coming from the left, which Allyssa had already started firing her crossbow at.

Scarlett took a few steps back, getting an overlook of the battlefield. She was in no rush to strike at the dolls with all she had. While her magic could probably injure them if she struck their weak points, in the end these dolls were too strong for most of what she could bring to bear without using too much mana to be effective. They weren't much weaker than the last boss had been in the [Howling Gale's Haunt]. As for the boss doll, it had been level 65 in the game. Leon should be stronger than that, theoretically, but it was still unlikely that he could focus on both it and the other dolls at the same time.

She raised a hand and conjured a high-intensity Aqua Mine next to one of the dolls that Fynn was fighting, blasting through part of its defense and distracting it just enough for Fynn to avoid the twin attacks that came from both his opponents. She then looked to the left, creating a film of water around the head of the doll that Shin was fighting, quickly heating it up to create a cloud of smoke around the doll. This afforded Shin a brief moment to step back from its assault, and for one of Allyssa's vials to come flying and land at its feet, spreading a black goo over the floor.

Scarlett lit the substance on fire. The doll's legs quickly became a burning pyre as it made to follow Shin.

Splitting her attention between both Fynn and Shin, Scarlett continued giving her support where needed. Shin was by far the one at the largest disadvantage, having neither the strength nor the speed to fully stop the doll's advance, but with Scarlett's help, Rosa's magic, as well as Allyssa's concoctions and crossbow attacks, they managed to keep him on his feet for the time being.

Fynn and Shin did suffer a couple of injuries a couple of times—especially Fynn, who wasn't wearing any real armor and whose own defense wasn't quite at the level where it could stop these dolls—but Rosa was quick at using her songs to heal them, though she had to briefly halt one of her other effects as she did.

Eventually, Fynn succeed in completely separating one of his opponents' arms from its body with Scarlett's help, but she pursed her lips at the time it had taken. At least a few minutes had passed, and this was as far as they had gotten. Leon was still keeping the boss doll busy, their fight literally causing her ears to hurt with its intensity, but it didn't look like it was ending soon. Things were moving a lot slower than she had wanted.

Things weren't paced quite the same as they had been in the game, but, from Abelard not joining in the fight himself, to the dolls spread around the room only joining a few at a time, everything else about this boss fight was about the same as she remembered. Which meant that...

“Go, my dears! Teach these fools the consequences of their actions!” Abelard announced suddenly.

Another two dolls standing by the walls started moving.

...It was only a matter of time before more enemies joined in.

Scarlett looked at Fynn and Shin. Neither could deal with any more enemies.

Leon seemed to have realized the new threat as well. He looked away from his fight for a moment and back at them. "Come over here!" he called out as a shimmer of light left him, trailing across the ground and forming a circular barrier between him and them.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at it. That might be able to keep them safe for a bit, but it wasn't a sustainable way of continuing this fight.

She looked up at Abelard, who still showed no signs of entering the fight himself. She wasn't even sure he *could*. Not for real. The real man might have been an archmage in life, but that didn't necessarily mean he had known how to fight. And this was just the ghost of him that remained.

"Go to the barrier, then close your eyes," she told Rosa and Allyssa. She waited for them to enter the barrier that Leon had created, glancing at the two new dolls that were approaching. Both had been standing on the left side of the room and were now moving to overwhelm Shin.

She raised a hand, narrowing her focus. A moment later, a conflagration of flames was summoned at the spot where Abelard was.

Despite her looking away, the heat and brightness almost blinded her as an echoing scream spread across the chamber. She only maintained the magic for a few seconds before dispelling it, revealing a slightly more translucent Abelard that was now staring at her.

"You dare!" He waved his hand in a wide movement. Suddenly, a dark, green light escaped from one of the dolls Fynn was fighting, as well as the one Shin had been dealing with, flying across the room and towards the man. Both dolls fell to the floor like puppets with their string cut as the lights formed into a sphere before Abelard. He thrust his arms forward, and the sphere shot out towards Scarlett, followed by the wails of a hundred souls.

A thin mist sprung up around her as she disappeared, reappearing several meters behind where she'd been.

She ignored the surprised expression on the ghost's face as she raised her hand, eyes locked on the spot where Abelard's attack had just hit. The green light roiled and clung to the ground like a thick miasma, and dozens of specter-like shapes were taking form. In response, she identified all of their weak points and created dozens of Aqua Mines. The shapes were embroiled in a barrage of steam and flames before they could even act, their incorporeal forms disappearing back into nothingness within seconds.

She felt like her magic was a particularly good counter against this. Rosa's magic also made it *a lot* easier to handle so many Aqua Mines at once. Her practice in Freymeadow might also have had something to do with it, though she couldn't tell for sure.

Not wasting any more time, she turned her attention to the two dolls that were moving towards Shin, creating a pair of firewalls just in time to distract them from bisecting the young

Shielder. A moment later, Fynn came running, leaping through the air and punching one of the dolls' heads straight into the ground as he and Shin switched sides.

Once more, Scarlett spent some time supporting the two of them against their opponents until a certain balance was achieved again. Then she returned her attention to Abelard's ghost. He had moved away from the center of the room, but her range was far from that limited. She wasn't sure if this would work more than one time, but...

Another sphere of fire formed to encapsulate the ghost, followed by another violent shriek. As the flames died down, the man glared at her with death in his eyes. He moved his hands again and two more dolls fell to the floor, this time the two that Fynn was fighting.

Scarlett readied herself to dodge the ghost's attack once more, but this time, Abelard wasn't looking at her. For a brief moment, her breath caught in her throat as he launched the blast towards Allyssa and Rosa and the dark green magic crashed against Leon's barrier, pushing against and forming cracks in it. After a moment, the barrier completely shattered to the sound of a thousand splitting windows, yet the attacking magic dissipated along with it.

A scowl formed on the ghost's face. "Go, my dears! Teach these fools the consequences of their actions!" he declared yet again, in the exact same tone as the previous time. Two more dolls started moving.

"Go, my dears! Teach these fools the consequences of their actions!" Another pair of dolls came to life.

A small smile formed on Scarlett's face. It seemed this ghost was stuck in his ways, to a certain degree. That meant that she could force things to come down between him and her, and that was exactly what she was planning. A battle of attrition it was...