

112: Hidden laboratory? Check

“Is everyone ready?” Scarlett asked, her gaze moving over the others in the study with her. She stopped at Allyssa. The girl blinked as she looked up from the journal she had been reading. She looked between Scarlett and the secret entrance that had opened up before.

“Oh, eh, kinda?” she said.

“Find anything interesting in there?” Rosa asked, pointing at her hands.

Allyssa looked down at the journal she was holding, running a finger over the yellowed pages. “I’m still looking. It’s mostly just this Lord Abelard’s daily musing. Though some of his thoughts are...strange.”

“Strange as in scaring-servants-by-walking-around-in-undies-strange, or as in live-in-a-mansion-filled-with-homicidal-dolls-strange?”

“Both?” Allyssa sounded uncertain. “I don’t quite understand all of it yet. I’m hoping it’ll start making sense soon.”

Rosa glanced at Scarlett. “You know anything?”

“Not much more than Miss Astrey will learn from that journal, I would venture,” Scarlett answered. “However, Abelard was a deranged man. That much I can tell you.”

“Really?” The bard held up a hand to her mouth. “Who would have thought?”

Scarlett eyed the woman for a moment, then turned back to the others. “If that is all, then I propose we continue.”

“Is it fine if we bring some of the books here?” Shin asked, gesturing to the bookshelves around the study. “There’s no telling what could be in them.”

She considered it for a few seconds. Books *could* be worth a pretty penny sometimes. And all of these were at minimum 150 years old. That either meant they were totally worthless, or worth more than your average book. It might indeed be worth gathering some of them up.

“Very well,” she said. “Bring as many as you wish.”

She waited as Shin started moving around the study, picking out piles of books with Fynn’s help and putting them into the [Bag of Juham]. Leon was looking on with an odd expression, but Scarlett didn’t pay him too much mind. Instead, she walked along the bookshelves to see if there weren’t a few titles that might interest her, placing a few inside her [Pouch of Holding] for later perusal.

Eventually, they all made ready to enter the secret entrance. Scarlett started walking down the dark stone stairway, conjuring a small fireball above her head to light the way. It was longer than one might expect, so it took her at least a minute or two, but finally, she reached the bottom. There, a worn wooden door blocked her way.

Leon, who'd been moving just behind her, reached out an arm past her. "It's best if I go first," he said, grabbing the handle.

She glanced back at him. "...Feel free." She stepped closer to the wall, allowing him to pass. The man gripped the handle of his sword with one hand as he pushed the door open with the other. She waited a couple of seconds before following.

Waiting on the other side was a wide stone chamber, though it was so dark that one could barely make out much of it. Scarlett gestured for Fynn and Shin to bring lamps, then conjured another set of fireballs that she dispersed around the chamber. Their light revealed a low, vaulted ceiling, with various chests, shelves, and tables with different tools on them spread around the place. Lining the walls were several variants of the dolls they'd seen throughout the mansion, hanging off of wooden racks of sorts. Most looked to be unfinished in some way, missing arms, legs, or other parts of their bodies, leaving metal frames visible beneath.

While the half-finished dolls certainly gave the place an eerie feeling, it wasn't quite the horrible sight one might have feared from what was ostensibly a madman's hidden laboratory.

Leon was eyeing the dolls closely, clearly expecting them to start moving any second now. Scarlett didn't bother telling him they weren't even alive. She doubted he would let his guard down, anyway.

As the others entered behind them, Allyssa looked around the chamber. "Actually," she said in a quiet voice. "We won't run into the ghost of Lord Abelard down here or something, will we?"

"I do not think that is especially likely, no," Scarlett answered. "There is a much higher likelihood that he is in the mansion's conservatory, from what I have gathered."

The girl paused, head turning to look at her. "Wait, so he *is* actually still around?"

Scarlett met her gaze. "Why would he not be? Have we not already encountered the ghosts of this mansion's other residents?"

Allyssa frowned. "Yes, well, but... I don't know. I just thought he'd be long dead."

"Technically, he is," Shin said. "He's a ghost."

She shot him a look. "You know what I meant."

"Yes. That's why I corrected you."

The girl shook her head, looking back at Scarlett. "Are we looking for anything special here?" she asked.

"I am, yes. You may do whatsoever you wish, for the time being."

"Oh... Okay." Allyssa returned her attention to the journal she had carried down with her.

Scarlett turned to take in the rest of the chamber. Leon had made his way to the center, having already checked those of the dolls that were closest.

Near her, Rosa walked past a particular doll whose face was half marble, without any of the eyes or mouth painted on yet, while the other half was replaced by what looked like leathery skin that might have once belonged to an animal of some sort.

“Okay, *that’s* a little disturbing,” the woman said. Despite that, she stopped to poke at the face.

Scarlett scowled at the sight. “In that, we are in agreement.” The leather was, presumably, in decent shape considering its age, but it still wasn’t a pretty view.

The bard turned back to her. “So, you’re looking for something down here, am I right? What then? What are we doing after that?”

Scarlett looked around for a moment, then pointed to a pair of doors at the other end of the chamber. “There should be paths connecting from here to the other parts of the mansion. We will have to locate the correct one, but from there we can proceed to wherever we may wish to go. Before that, however...” She looked around. “This was the workplace of an archmage, after all. It would be prudent to give it a thorough search first.”

She moved over to a nearby shelf, glancing over some of the old documents and books in it. The material here had aged much worse than up in the study, but she still managed to pull out a couple of papers where the words and illustrations were somewhat legible. She walked back over to where Allyssa was leaning against the wall near the entrance, holding them out to her.

The girl looked up at her, then down at the papers. “What are these?”

“Alchemical notes and recipes, it would appear.”

Her eyes widened. She reached out to take them before pausing, shooting an uncertain look around them and down at the journal she was reading. “Actually... I’m not sure I want them.”

Scarlett studied her for a few seconds. Then she put the papers into the pouch on her waist. “I will keep them for you to look at later, were you to change your mind. The origin of the knowledge does not diminish the value it holds or the good it might do. Keep that in mind.”

Allyssa blinked at that, but soon gave a short nod as Scarlett left her to her own and walked over to the other end of the chamber. By now, Shin and Fynn had placed out a couple of lanterns to light the place up, so she dispelled her fireballs to save mana.

As she passed Leon near the chamber’s center, she gestured to him. “Sir Leon. Would you care to lend me a hand?”

He gave her a wary look. “...Sure.”

He followed her as she walked over to a corner in the far end, where there was a set of worktables spread out in a square. The knight’s attention seemed to mostly be focused on the three almost-completed doll frames that hung from their racks in the middle of the tables.

Scarlett's eyes passed over the instruments that were strewn across the worktables. She had no idea what most of them were. There was a mix between what looked like receptacles of some kind, with odd gauges and tubes running along the sides, and different tools like chisels and files if you turned the sharpness up three times and carved scores into their handles.

She moved over to one table in particular. It was circular and made of a deep black stone, with grooves etched into its face in odd shapes. At its head was a human skull with a strange, violet gem set into its forehead. The gem had more facets cut into it than Scarlett could count, and it looked slightly different from each angle she viewed it from.

She turned back to Leon. "Help me remove this gem."

He looked between her and the table, narrowing his eyes at the skull. Despite that, he didn't speak up as he stepped over to the table and reached to grab the skull. He seemed to exert a bit of effort, then the skull came off with a small crack. He tried to remove the gem as well, but that proved to be a bit trickier. After a few attempts, he pulled out a small dagger from somewhere on his body—Scarlett wasn't sure where—and after sending her a querying gaze, he used the dagger's tip to carefully pry the gem off.

She held out a palm with a small smile. It looked like it might have taken a bit of strength, yes, but she mostly just hadn't wanted to touch the dirty old skull herself.

"Do you actually know what this is?" Leon asked as he placed the gem in her hand.

She held it up in front of her.

[Gem of Athanasia (Unique)]

{The impermanence of death lies in the connection that binds us. This gem embodies that impermanence}

"I do, yes." She gave a slow nod.

"...And?"

She looked at him. "You would not have an interest in genealogy?"

"In what?"

"I suppose not. To put it in a way that you might understand, this is an artifact that remembers that which runs within our blood."

The connections the description was speaking of were probably a reference to the blood relations between different people. It probably had more properties than just that, but from the game, she knew that this gem theoretically held the power to 'remember' the identities of those connected to a person by blood. Although 'remember' probably wasn't the best word to describe it, considering the item somehow knew about people both it and oneself might never have met.

Abelard had clearly been able to make use of the gem for his own purposes as well, though she didn't know exactly how. She wasn't an archmage, after all. But what use he had for it

didn't really matter to her, anyway. As long as it worked as she thought it would, she was satisfied. Though she wouldn't be able to test it out until she got her hands on the [Memory of the Covenant] that she had sent Gaven to find.

"That explanation does not make things much clearer," Leon said.

Scarlett placed the gem into her pouch. "That is regrettable. Unfortunately, that is about as far as my understanding of it goes."

She wasn't lying. She didn't know *how* it worked. To be honest, she thought the entire concept was complete bull. But that was just magic in general, wasn't it? She wasn't going to complain too much. If it worked, it worked.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Only about as dangerous as that sword you are holding." She pointed down at the blade in question, then looked up at Leon. "Any further questions?"

He met her eyes for a brief moment before shaking his head.

"Good." She turned away and walked over to the other tables. The [Gem of Athanasia] was her main purpose for finding this lab, so she would have been satisfied with this much. Still, there were a lot of old potions and magical instruments that did god-knows-what here, so it would be a waste not to bring those along as well. Who knows what all of this might be worth? And sure, this wasn't a game, so drinking a 150-year-old potion might not be the best idea, but that didn't mean they were worthless.

She brought Fynn over and spent a while just going around the lab, pocketing anything that wasn't nailed down or too large to fit in the [Bag of Juham]. They might actually be starting to near the limit of what the spatial bag could handle, but until they reached that point, she wouldn't hesitate. They could always toss things out when it came to that point. It was the classic way of inventory management, passed down through generations of games.

As they were finishing things up, Allyssa appeared to have finally stopped reading through that journal of hers and had walked over to the center of the chamber. A somber expression rested across the Shielder's face.

Scarlett halted her looking over what appeared to be more alchemical documents, as she watched the girl walk over to one of the doll frames. For a moment, she seemed to inspect the doll closely, looking into its currently empty eyes. "Rosa," she said out loud. "Before, you said that even monsters deserved pity. You said that the dolls looked...bored, or something, right? How *could* you tell that?"

The bard was standing not too far away and turned to look at Allyssa. "...I just knew."

The young Shielder reached out to touch the doll in front of her. "...I found how he created these. Abelard, I mean. He described it in the journal."

Shin and the others also seemed to stop in what they were doing, looking over at her.

“Apparently, they’re made from the souls of captured fey. Like those spirits we met outside of Temisbrook. He captured them, killed them, and then somehow brought them back again. But when he brought them back, he warped their souls somehow, so that he could place them into these dolls, with a single purpose that ruled their being. It would be like an obsession to them, and their whole existence revolved around it.” Allyssa’s voice held a bleak tone to it. “How sad is that? To have a purpose forced on you, and there’s nothing you can do about it. And then, after his death, they would have been forced to just sit still for over a hundred years, some not even being able to fulfill the only thing they wanted.”

She turned to look at Rosa. “How could you tell something like that from just seeing them one time?”

The bard met the girl’s eyes, then shrugged. “I didn’t. I only knew what I knew.”

Allyssa turned back to the doll. “...Despite what he did to them, Abelard wasn’t satisfied with the dolls that he had. He wanted more. That’s when he found his ‘muse’.” There was a distaste for the word hiding in the girl’s voice. “I’m not sure what happened, but his writings from this point on turned even...freakier, than before. He already seemed to have this weird creation on creating some new living thing, but after this, it almost seemed like *he* became as obsessed as the dolls he described creating.”

She paused, looking down at the journal. “ ‘Hair like the fabled golden shores of Zovivios. Eyes like the jewels of the sea. Perfection in the shape of living flesh.’ “ Allyssa grimaced at the description. “ ‘A character that charms all those around. The entire staff is already enamored with her. Only an act of divine will could have brought her to me. The sheer serendipity behind these facts proves as much.’ That’s how he described the girl from that painting earlier. Like she was a doll created for him.”

Scarlett studied Allyssa for a moment. That was a bit more information than she knew from the game. She was aware that the dolls were fey in origin since they shared some resistances, but the specific details hadn’t been described in the game to her knowledge. She was also uncertain whether this ‘muse’—she presumed it was the Orelia girl Allyssa mentioned earlier—was present in the game as well. It seemed likely that she might have been, but if so, it wasn’t as a major presence.

Allyssa turned to look at Scarlett. “You said the ghost of Lord Abelard might be in the conservatory?”

“That is correct.”

A serious expression had grown on the Shielder’s face. “Then I think I know what it is that I’m supposed to do now.”