

## 115: Strange encounters

After successfully dealing with Abelard and his dolls in the conservatory, Scarlett and the others located the side room which held the loot. It was a storage room of sorts, housing trunks and shelves that mostly held magical tools and equipment, similar to some of what they had found in the laboratory. She hadn't wasted any time in gathering it all up and putting it into the [Bag of Juham] to go over later.

As for the artifacts they found, there were four of them.

### **[Tiara of Lost Benediction (Legendary)]**

{A tiara made for a forgotten muse, it holds the prayers that were lost to the world}

### **[Ring of the Soul harvest (Epic)]**

{Sustaining the life of one always sacrifices the life of another. Be it wheat from the field or animal for the slaughter, all eat from the reaper's platter}

### **[Death's Shadow (Epic)]**

{This black garnet amulet hungers for dark magic, devouring any that approaches it into depths unknown}

### **[Alchemist's Potion Belt (Epic)]**

{An enchanted for an experienced alchemist, with advanced magic woven into it}

### **[Charm of Expeditious Change (Unique)]**

{An artisan's work requires dexterous fingers and sharp eyes, yet even they like to save time on occasion}

Scarlett observed all of the items one by one before she placed them into the [Bag of Juham] along with the rest of the loot. She was going to have to tally everything together when she returned to Freybrook anyhow, so she would decide what to do with it all then. The legendary item interested her, of course, along with the [Charm of Expeditious Change], but she wasn't in a hurry at the moment, nor could she remember exactly what they did.

Having gathered all of that, they returned to the conservatory itself and dislodged the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] from where it was affixed at the top of the glass dome, then left the chamber behind to clear the rest of the mansion. Scarlett was somewhat surprised that she hadn't gotten any quest completion notices yet, but the trigger for those things wasn't particularly predictable to begin with, so she was expecting it to show up eventually.

The last section of the mansion, which was where the conservatory was and which ostensibly consisted of the higher floors, was large enough that it took them a good amount of time just to search through the area for what they could find, even though it was a lot easier now that they had defeated Abelard and taken the Loci.

They didn't run into opposition of any kind, with them passing by several dolls standing motionless in the hallways and rooms, and many of the maze-like qualities that had been present before were now gone, to a certain degree. There were no more events where they walked down a hallway, only to turn around and see that things had changed behind them or

that opening a door would lead to different rooms each time. Scarlett wasn't sure if this was because they had removed the Loci, or if it was because they'd defeated Abelard. Both were possibilities, although she hoped it was the first one. That would mean the Loci held more power than was visible at first glance.

They collected a few more items as they went through the place, but nothing that stood out too much compared to what Scarlett had already found. Most of it would be sold anyhow.

After they'd searched through as much of the last section of the mansion as they could, then they moved on to the middle where they had originally started. Much of this area had already been explored by them, but they still spent a bit of time there—with all dolls and ghosts now gone or docile—before proceeding to the first section, comprised of the lowest floors.

Unlike the two later sections, the first section actually still held some enemies that were moving around. They were simpler undead and skeletons—presumably people who had walked into and died in this place and the surrounding forest over the years—who weren't 'powered' by the magic suffusing and spread throughout the mansion by the Loci.

Leon had suggested that the nature of this place had gathered enough negative energy that natural ghosts and undead—which apparently differed from the kind they had mostly run into in the mansion—popping up was to be expected, and that Abelard's other magic had probably, in fact, kept their numbers relatively low and stopped anything too strong from appearing.

This also implied that more of them would start emerging now that the magic was removed, which wasn't exactly what Scarlett had expected. Leon had assured her that Lord Withersworth could employ priests and mages who could deal with this before things became too bad, however, and hopefully clear the entire area from its influence eventually.

Considering the relative weakness of the undead they ran into on the first floors, she didn't doubt that he was right about that. None in their group had too much issue taking care of the enemies they faced there, and searching through the section to find all the loot and valuables was effortless enough.

They *did* run into a slight issue when the [Bag of Juham] apparently reached full capacity. That annoyed Scarlett somewhat since there still were things she wanted to bring with, but what could she do? She ended up putting some of the more valuable-looking stuff in her [Pouch of Holding] and replaced some of the more useless items in the [Bag of Juham], but things were what they were. If she had the time in the future, she could probably return to loot what remained, though she doubted it would be worth it.

After they finished with the first floors of the mansion, they finally exited onto the grounds outside, which had more of the undead walking around among neglected gardens and hedge bushes. Dealing with them was easy enough, and from there, Allyssa started guiding them down an old pathway that led away from the central parts of the estate and to an old meadow nestled into a section of the grounds that was mostly surrounded by a dense thicket of looming trees.

At the center of the meadow, there was a dilapidated white gazebo, overgrown with vines and the surrounding underbrush. As they neared, Scarlett stopped in front of it and noted that the

roof of the gazebo was covered in an intricate framework of bronze and mirrors that had strange symbols etched into them. She wasn't certain, but she couldn't recall any of this being in the game. Though it was possible she just hadn't found it.

"This is where you claim that Abelard captured the fey whose souls he used to create his dolls?" she asked Allyssa, turning to look at the girl.

"I think so, yes," the young Shielder answered. "It stands out enough to be something special, at least."

"And what is it that you suggest we do now, then?"

The girl paused, blinking a few times as she looked between Scarlett and the gazebo. "I-I'm not sure? Aren't you more familiar with fey and the...interstitial spaces, or whatever they're called? Do you have any idea what we could do from here?"

Scarlett observed the complex workings that were attached to the gazebo's ceiling. "I am afraid that this is outside of my expertise. I myself do not understand what it is Abelard has created here. Especially not if it meant forcefully creating a connection to the Wandering Realm, which I suspect is the case."

The likelihood that the Withersworth's ancestral mansion would just so happen to be right next to a permanent portal to the Wandering Realm wasn't exactly the highest.

She knitted her forehead as she thought about how this thing might work. She supposed she could just try whatever might have stood a chance of working in the game if you were faced with a situation like this.

Stepping up on the gazebo's old wooden flooring, she walked to its center and pulled out the small blue crystal that she had been gifted by the [Eupherbia Wildshimmer] in Temisbrook Glade.

### **[Mark of the Fey (Rare)]**

{ A mark of gratitude from a being of the Wandering Realms }

Holding it up in the air, she looked up at a circular mirror that was placed directly above her. It reflected the light given off from the lanterns that Fynn and Shin were holding to give them some visibility, since Abelard's Doll Mansion was constantly engulfed in darkness.

She squinted her eyes as she thought there was a small mote of light escaping from the center of the crystal in her hand, but nothing happened.

After a while, she lowered it again.

Well, that wasn't exactly a huge surprise. Whatever mechanism Abelard had created with this gazebo probably wasn't designed to work with just any random item.

She pulled out the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] instead, which she had been keeping in her pouch. Palming the emerald in her hand, she examined it for a moment. It was large enough that holding it in just one hand was unwieldy. That fact alone probably meant it would have

been worth a fortune back in her old world. Add on the fact that it was magical and she wouldn't be surprised if she could buy a mansion in and of itself with the money she could get from selling it. But, while money *was* nice, it wasn't exactly where her priority lay. Not always, at least.

She turned the heavy gemstone around for a moment, gazing into its uncut surface, from which a pale green light was emanating. While she wasn't sure, she half-suspected that the Loci had some form of sentience. Not to the degree where it could think, but at least to a level where it could probably sense intent of some sort. The Loci had also likely been part of what powered this gazebo originally, so it had been her second choice for things to try.

She concentrated on it, focusing her thoughts and wishing for whatever this place was to work.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

"Going good for you over there?" Rosa's voice sounded out from behind her.

Suddenly, a spark of light appeared in the air in front of Scarlett. A moment later, the light widened into a portal slightly larger than her midriff, though pushing her way through might have proven difficult. On the other side, she could see a glade with bluish grass in it, surrounded by an ethereal forest whose treetops moved according to some hidden pattern.

She stepped back as she took the sight in, slightly surprised that it had actually worked exactly as she'd wanted.

"Wait, what did you do?" Allyssa asked, and Scarlett heard several of the others step onto the gazebo's floor.

"I opened the gateway, just as you wished."

The girl wordlessly walked up next to her, staring into the portal. "It's...empty."

"That it is."

"I was thinking, hoping...that there would be something there."

"We do not know how this contraption works," Scarlett said. "It could be that it simply creates a portal to a random location in the Wandering Realm, or perhaps an interstitial space like the one in Temisbrook. If so, the likelihood is higher that it *would* be empty, considering the vastness of realms such as these. If I were to make a conjecture, it is probable that Abelard himself used some method to lure beings here, rather than enter through the portal himself."

While Scarlett *might* be able to force her way through it, that certainly wasn't true for those with wider builds, like Leon and Shin. It's possible that Abelard could make it larger than this, considering he would have been more familiar with the workings of the device, but there was no way to know.

"What do we do now?" Allyssa turned to look at her.

She met the girl's eyes. How would she know? "This was your suggestion, so I suggest you think of the answer."

"Then..." Allyssa looked back to the portal with an uncertain expression. "We wait? Something might pass by eventually."

"...If that is what you think we should do." Scarlett sent one last look at the glade on the other side, then turned around and walked to the edge of the gazebo, where she placed the [Mark of the Fey] and [Obedience's Solitude Loci] aside for now and leaned to rest against the railing.

The others looked around at each other for a moment, then did the same.

And so they waited.

The portal stayed open even as half an hour had passed without anything happening. The expression on Allyssa's face that was growing more and more anxious as time went by made Scarlett not say anything. She was willing to give this a shot, and they weren't pressed for time.

At one point, as Rosa suppressed a yawn near her, Scarlett leaned over the railing and looked up at the night sky. Some of the stars peaked through the heavy canopies above, though she didn't know any of the specific constellations. She wondered what time it was. Since it was always dark around here, it was hard to know.

They had left the Withersworth estate in Autumnwell around noon, and since then, they'd been walking around Abelard's mansion for a pretty good chunk of time. She wasn't sure for exactly how long, but it wouldn't surprise her if it was morning in the world outside at the moment. She felt tired enough for that to be true, at the very least. The [Mark of the Staunch] was enough to stave off some of that weariness, and skipping sleep wasn't something she couldn't endure for a bit, even after having fought a few battles. Still, she wouldn't want to run any marathons right about now.

Even more time passed, enough that Rosa had even started dosing off and Scarlett was considering giving up on this approach, and that was when a gasp left Allyssa.

Everybody—excluding Rosa—turned to look towards the gazebo's center. Scarlett froze for a second at what she saw.

Where there previously had been the view of a magical glade with ethereal greenery, there was now just an eye. One *eye*. The deep blue iris—with small lights spread around it almost as if it was hiding the stars of the night sky in it—was great enough to more than fill the entire opening. The large, elongated pupil, which was as tall as the portal itself and had strands of light like lightning moving through the black viscera, moved around slowly as it peered through at them.

Several seconds passed before Scarlett even remembered to move.

Leon was the first to step forward, a golden light surging up around him like armor. Fynn growled as he stared at the eye, stepping closer to Scarlett. Meanwhile, she simply continued to stare at this being.

She had *no idea* what this was.

“E-Ehm, hello,” Allyssa’s weak voice sounded out from beside her.

The pupil shifted to the girl.

“Can you understand me?”

Silence followed as it continued to observe her, then it turned to look at Scarlett. Or rather, what was behind her. She turned around to look at the [Mark of the Fey] and the [Obedience’s Solitude Loci], both of which were placed on the railing.

Scarlett looked back at the giant eye, searching for any sign of hostility. Even though they were separated by a gateway between realms, there was a weight to its gaze that unnerved her. She didn’t know whether it could reach them through the small portal, if it was dangerous, or perhaps just curious. But it might be best if she didn’t risk finding out. She should be able to close the portal with the Loci, considering the artifact was what opened it to begin with.

Taking a small step backward, she watched as Allyssa instead moved closer to the portal.

“We wanted to talk with someone from your...realm,” the girl said, the hesitance clear in her voice. “There’s something we need help with, and we thought someone from where you are might know what to do about it.”

There was a momentary silence as the eye examined the young Shielder.

“I don’t know if you’re aware, but the magic that formed this portal was created by a very bad man who used it to capture a lot of fey beings a long time ago. He hurt those fey, as well as a lot of people, that’s—I mean—people are humans like us.” Allyssa pointed at herself. “We wanted to help all of them move on.”

The eye blinked. A slow, deliberate movement, with several thick, incandescent tendrils that might have been eyelashes of some kind showing briefly.

Allyssa seemed to swallow at the sight. “That’s, uh... That large emerald over there is what’s keeping those people and fey from moving on, and we don’t know how we can help them other than to destroy it, and that’s not something we can do because we really need it. I-Is this something you could help with? Or maybe you know someone who can do something about it and can help us contact them?”

There was no response from the eye.

The girl squirmed on the spot for a moment, then seemed to remember something and pointed back at Scarlett and the [Mark of the Fey]. “We’re not here to hurt anyone. We’ve met others like you before, or well, not exactly like you, but fairies who were in danger, and the woman over there helped them.”

The eye once again shifted to Scarlett, and she could feel the pressure bearing down on her.

She didn't know if the being understood Alyssa's words, but it appeared to be probing her in some manner. After a while, it blinked again and Scarlett felt the pressure fade.

Suddenly, the Loci and [Mark of the Fey] floated past her through the air towards the portal. Neither she nor any of the others even had time to react before the two gems stopped before the being, its large pupil focusing on the objects.

Scarlett's eyes widened as a light burst forth from them, followed by a symphony of glass shattering and gleeful chittering that echoed out around the gazebo. A moment later, both gems fell to the ground, and the being turned to look at Allyssa and Scarlett one last time. Then it blinked, and the portal closed without warning.

**[Quest completed: Cleared Abelard's Doll Mansion]**  
**{Skill points awarded: 8}**

**[Side-Quest completed: Help Lady Orelia and the other souls of Abelard's Doll Mansion move on]**  
**{Skill points awarded: 6}**

The messages appeared in the air in front of Scarlett at the same time as noises of surprise left the others around her.

She read over the words for a second before looking at both of the gems now lying on the floorboard. She walked over to pick them up.

The Loci was emitting a faint, serene green light, and the blue gem beside it had tiny, almost imperceptible sparks running through sections of it now.

**[Obedience's Solitude Loci (Unique)]**

{Strange powers of an iterant realm dwell within this stone, creating something more than what was there before. The souls that were once tied to it have been severed and freed from their torment}

**[Mark of the Fey (Epic)]**

{Originally a mark of gratitude from a being of the Wandering Realms, it has now been touched by the powers of an idol, remembering a debt owed and a debt due}

She stared at the description.

An idol? That had been an *idol*?

Her throat tightened at the implications. Idols were like the deities of the Wandering Realm. Not quite gods in the normal sense, and vastly more numerous, but some of them could be on par with beings like the Viles when it came to how powerful they were in their domains. The [Bag of Juham] was supposedly connected to one such idol, for example.

What frightened her wasn't that. It was whatever this 'a debt owed and a debt due' meant. Did the idol expect her to owe it a favor now, and vice versa?

She had no idea what a being like this could ask of her, and since she didn't actually know what idol it had been—if it even was one that had been present in the game, which she wasn't sure of considering she didn't recognize the eye—she also had no idea what she could even ask of *it*.

What was even the point of them owing each other debts? Couldn't it just have been satisfied with neither of them owing the other one anything at all, then?

She let out a tired sigh. This could either be a massive boon, a terrible curse, or anything in between. The problem was that she didn't know which. The six skill points she got from completing the side-quest didn't quite make up for that uncertainty.

“—arlett.”

She looked up as Leon called her name.

All of the others were giving her worried looks, and she realized that she had lost control of her expression. Schooling her face as much as she could, she turned to Allyssa, who held an uneasy look.

“Did it work?” she asked.

Some of the worry on the girl's face faded at the question, and she showed a small smile. “Yes, I think it did. She's gone now, and I have a feeling the same goes for the rest of the people and fey who were stuck here.”

Scarlett gave a slow nod. “That is good. If so, we are finished here. It is time that we make our way back.”

“To Autumnwell?” Rosa asked, the bard having woken up sometime during the previous proceedings.

“Yes.” Scarlett paused, turning to Leon as the man seemed to study her. “Is there something you wish to say, Sir Leon?”

He frowned. “Are you alright, Scarlett?”

She gave him a long look. “I am perfectly well, thank you.”

“...Do you know what that was?”

She arched a brow at him. “A being of the Wandering Realm,” she said in a dry tone. “Although I suppose you were expecting more of an answer than that. Unfortunately, there is not much more that I know, other than that it might have had enough power to erase the existence of all of us here without expending any real effort.”

His expression darkened at that. “It didn't appear to be hostile to us, at least. Despite that, you didn't look happy even after it seemed to help with what you asked.”



“Quite the opposite, actually. I am very pleased with the aid it provided. I am simply uncertain about the price it might ask,” she said.

“The price?” A worried look filled Allyssa’s eyes. “We were asking for it to help us save other fey. Would it really ask a price for that?”

Scarlett looked at the girl. Was there a point in placing the responsibility on her, when Scarlett had been the one to decide to go through with things?

“...No, I suppose it would not. It could very well only be me being overly apprehensive about things, since it did not provide a proper response.”

That didn’t seem to relax the girl any.

Scarlett turned away from the other, looking down the path leading away from the gazebo. “there is no point in continuing to waste time thinking about it at the moment. We can discuss things more on a later occasion. For now, I think we should return to Autumnwell and rest.”