

Laboratories, in your experience, have always been sterile, orderly places. Countertops clear except for what was absolutely necessary, cabinets neatly sorted and organized, and no signs of life or anything that could potentially mess up an experiment. It made sense; scientists are often adamant about keeping everything controlled and managed. So you can't help but be intrigued by the lab you currently find yourself in, what with its many anomalies.

Tables littered with glassware of all shapes and sizes. A sink filled with containers holding differing amounts of water. Plants sticking out of every few cracks in the walls, nurtured by both windows and artificial lamps hanging down from the ceiling. A white-furred rat running around a sizable cage on top of a cart. This place is obviously one of research, and it certainly isn't disorderly, but it gives you a very different idea of what a laboratory can be. And perhaps the strangest thing is the person mixing chemicals a few feet away from you.

Amelia Earls, as the other Butterflies had introduced them, is a dark-skinned human and the apparent owner – master? ruler? You aren't sure the proper term – of this lab. They are quite obviously the youngest of all the Butterflies, between their short stature and their often-cracking voice. Perhaps the cracking and stuttering was why they rarely used that voice. Instead, most of your visit to their floor thus far had been them giving you head and hand gestures, both somewhat muddled by their crow-like mask and black leather gloves. Their dark dress and square leather shoes completed an outfit that was drab but seemingly functional; with no bits of skin showing besides their neck, they wouldn't have to worry about spilling anything dangerous on themselves. They wore their curly hair in a tight bun, further exemplifying to you just how likely it was they spent most of their time in this room.

Amelia hadn't been *unwelcoming* to you, but whereas most of the other Butterflies seemed happy to show you their floors, this one was much more reserved. "As long as you don't touch an-y-thing," is what they'd told you. Well, you've been certain to keep all your digits to yourself. It actually hasn't been the easiest task either, what with the many colorful vials and machines littered around the place.

As if they could read your thoughts, Amelia turns away from their work for a moment to look at you. You give a nervous grin as they stare at you for a few seconds before glancing back at the chemicals in their hands. A viscous, dark blue liquid flows into a cloudy blue one. The mix is quickened as Amelia fetches a wooden rod from a nearby rack and begins to stir. Once the reaction is complete, they pick up the vial full of a now light-blue substance and place it onto some sort of metallic plate. With the press of a button, the smell of heating metal begins to waft up from the plate, combining with the lab's usual scent of dried flowers.

"You know, this is the potion that saved you."

Their sudden comment puts a look of confusion on your face. “Saved” you? Wasn’t it the group that rescued you, you ask?

Amelia nods without looking at you. “Yes, but this saved your life. Once we brought you back here.”

But hadn’t Wolfgang said he healed you?

“Wolf did his part. Kept you alive. I gave you me-di-cine to wake you up. Without alchemy, you might still be in a coma. Or worse.”

The grim message combined with their croaky, monotone voice makes you shiver a bit. Your shock is equally split between learning just how close you came to never waking up as to how nonchalant and bluntly the human had explained it. You eventually manage to gather yourself after some seconds of awkward silence, finally giving a meek thanks.

“Such is my work,” they respond, almost robotically.

You endure a few more moments of not quite knowing what to say before coming up with a conversation topic. That potion must be quite the brew to rouse you from a coma. Maybe the medicine where you come from isn’t as effective, or maybe this is the norm, but in any case it really is impressive now that you mention it. Especially for just one person in a relatively small lab.

“In the grand scheme of things, this is minor. Alchemy is ca-pa-ble of much,” they respond before turning off the hot plate. There was that term again – “alchemy”. You’d heard it before, but it was one of those words that felt like it had a different definition whenever someone said it. To some it was a form of magic. To others, medicine. To still more, smoke and mirrors. Yet this person seemed like an avid practitioner of it.

You watch as Amelia takes the vial off the hot plate – the liquid inside was now a hearty green – and places it in a refrigerator almost her height. Looking inside, there are a few other vials at various stages of the process. The more complete ones are the same color, but with a consistency like jelly instead of water. You wait until they close the door to ask the question really on your mind: what is this alchemy that they practice?

For the first time since entering the lab, Amelia stands completely still. They turn to look at you, making direct eye contact. You can’t make out their eyes exactly behind the thick glass of the lenses in their mask’s eye holes, but you get the feeling that they are indeed meeting your gaze. Intensely.

“I could explain. That would take hours. Or, I could show you. That would take seconds.”

The demonstration sounds more up your alley, and you tell them this.

“Retrieve a rose,” they command, pointing towards one of the windows. You notice a few sets of glass vases, one holding a bundle of red roses. You’re compelled to pick one without question, wandering over and taking a flower you think looks healthy. When you return to Amelia and hand it to them, they look it over.

After turning it over a few times, they hold it in between two fingers just below the flower. “Did you ask it for pre-mis-sion?”

Maybe you have no idea what they’re talking about. Or maybe you do, and you feel bad because you did forget to ask. In any case, you stay silent.

They take the lack of response for what it is and turn to look at the flower. “May we?” After a few seconds, they nod and grab the rose’s long stem in their other hand. Their gloves seem to protect them completely from the plant’s tiny thorns. “It says yes,” they finally relay to you.

You hesitantly nod and ask for the next step.

“Next: breakdown.” As Amelia says the word, you notice the atmosphere of the room shift. A small glow begins to come off their gloves, slowly snaking up and down the rose from both ends before covering the plant completely. So too do their mask’s lenses light up, casting a golden light over the lab nearby.

Before you, the alchemist gets to work. You notice as the very tissue of the rose seems to unravel, strands of plant fiber coming apart and flowing into the air in front of you both. The head of the rose decomposes gracefully, petals flaking off before themselves being undone. As the light grows more vibrant, even the individual plant fibers melt away into smaller and smaller pieces, until ultimately becoming nothing. The entire process of seeing something completely unbecome is mesmerizing, and you can’t take your eyes away from it.

“Alchemy is change. It is to start from one place and end up in a-noth-er. It is trans-for-ma-tion. It is the science of all things.”

That epiphany, mixed with the display, leaves you speechless. Once the rose is effectively no more, you notice the energy of the room shift from coming in towards Amelia to surging

away from them. Slowly, as a shape coalesces in their hands, and they bring them together. Above their palms, a simple braid is constructed. A braid made of strands all the same colors of the rose, but otherwise completely new.

“This rose is now a braid. Its com-po-nents could make a life-saving potion. Its pigments could dye clothing. And eventually...”

The strand comes apart once more, into nothingness.

“It will return to the world. And it will live on in what-ev-er comes next.”

Finally, Amelia reverses the magic completely. With a tangible ebb and flow of energy, the rose re-becomes, sitting in their palms. As the light fades from their body, Amelia looks up towards you.

Though the demonstration is over, there’s an electricity that still buzzes in the air and in your mind. An excitement at the possibilities and life in all things. Maybe this cognizance of change as an almost-divine force in the world is something you already had. Or maybe this alchemist has shown you something new, but always right in front of you at the same time. In either case, you’re extremely impressed by the work and awareness Amelia has, and you tell them this.

Their expression is hard to read behind their mask, but you sense they’re thankful for the compliment. They walk over and place the rose back into its vase before responding.

“It is nice for someone to see my work as I do,” they sigh. They take a moment to look out the window before turning back to the lab. “You...are not a bad a-sis-tant, it seems. Would you mind helping with my next brew?”

You smile, excited to continue watching the alchemist at work.