

Chapter 125 – Loot!

Once outside of the Dungeon, they rested by a new campfire and went through their treasure chests. Even Konko had one, much to her surprise. Then she covered her mouth, stifling a scream.

“What is wrong?” Shrubley asked her. “Are you all right?”

She nodded quickly, tears forming in her eyes. Her hands flapped awkwardly, as if she’d just touched something hot. After taking a moment to compose herself, she said, “I leveled up. *A lot.*”

“Ah, that is good! I am happy for you,” he said sincerely.

“Pyuu!” Smudge agreed wholeheartedly.

Konko smiled. For a wonder, she was starting to feel like she belonged a little bit more.

“That’ll help you with alchemy, girl,” Miranda told her, holding up a crimson piece of chainmail and inspecting it with a critical eye.

“So many gemstones,” Cal said, sifting through his treasure chest. “I’ll be able to get in a solid crafting session with these.”

“Aren’t you going to take your cut?” Cal asked, looking suspiciously at the Countess.

Miranda shook her head. “You all performed well on your own. I don’t think I need to take more. Unless you’re offering...?”

“No!” Cal squealed. He calmed down a little. “I mean... no, ma’am. I think you are correct in your assessment. Very wise.”

Miranda was tempted to take from Konko's chest, but the poor thing didn't seem to have much going for her in her life as it was, and taking the paltry loot she received felt needlessly cruel.

"I will, however, be taking a large cut of this," the Countess said, picking up Slyrox's chest. "Seeing as I carried her for most of the Dungeon, it is only right that some of it belongs to me."

Cal started to open his mouth, but Miranda rode right over him. "And you, Cal, should get another portion. Leave some for Slyrox. It is hers after all. But together, we kept her safe. She can think of it as a tax if she wants."

Cal was not normally a greedy person, but the thought of having not only one full chest of loot filled with raw gems and various items he could put to good use, like mana potions and a brand-new [Hammerspace Satchel] that worked just like Shrubley's [Verdant Inventory] and whatever the Countess had.

No more tying things to my bones! Cal thought with great excitement. This was a turning point. He could stuff handfuls of jewels and copper coins into the pouch and it never ran out of room. Of course, managing it would be a bit of a nightmare, but he could always deal with that later.

For now, he dumped the contents of his treasure chest into his magical satchel without reservation.

When that was done, he emptied the various bags, purses, and pouches he had tied to his ribs, clavicle, and various other convenient bones, stuffing those items inside the satchel as well.

Then he held up the satchel and muttered the incantation that would simultaneously bind it to him and allow him to summon it with a word of his choosing.

Similar to Shrubley, Cal opted for an obvious and simple call word, “Bag!” Cal said aloud as the satchel disappeared from his grasp.

With another, “Bag!” the [Hammerspace Satchel] reappeared in his bony grasp. He giggled with glee and dismissed it once more. It felt good not to worry about people stealing his stuff. Now they would have to wait until he had the item in his possession, which was a lot harder to do when he could vanish it at will.

Curious about something, Cal experimentally moved around. “Oh, I make much less noise now!” That was another added benefit to owning a magical form of inventory.

“Quite the prize,” the Countess told him. “Most adventurers don’t acquire something that useful until they’re Iron at least. The Dungeon must have liked you.”

If Cal could have blushed, his bones would turn pink. “Thank you, Countess.”

“Are you going to...?”

Cal looked down at his ribs where Slyrox slumbered on. “She seems okay here,” he said slowly. Having gained more Strength and Hardiness from leveling up, the skeleton found it a little easier to carry the koblin’s added weight. “And besides, if she wakes up, we know where she will be. If anybody messes with us...” Cal poked Slyrox’s side and a fist snapped out with a fiery blue spark of Comet essence.

A tiny ghostly blue corona of Comet essence rolled through the air for a full foot before it vanished. Miranda’s eyes widened with interest.

“I see,” she said.

“I think, in the future, it’ll be best for one’s health to refrain from tickling Slyrox while she’s asleep,” Cal added, feeling wary of that Comet essence. Even with his relatively basic Mundane senses, he could sense the raw destructive potential in that prime essence that surpassed even his most powerful Elemental facet, lightning.

Shrubley knelt by his treasure chest. The first thing he did was sort out the coinage from the rest. As with the previous chests, he had a few satchels of coins. These seemed mixed between silver and copper, but as it took 100 copper to make a single silver, and 100 silver to make a gold, it wasn’t nearly as much money as Shrubley once thought.

If it takes 100 coppers to equal a silver... and 100 silvers to make a gold... how many coppers does it take to make a gold? If Shrubley had a tongue, he would have been sticking it out in thought at the moment.

Intense moral quandaries and ethical considerations were child’s play compared to simple math for the shrub. He just couldn’t wrap his leafy head around it.

“That would be 10,000 coppers,” Miranda said, when she finally couldn’t stand Shrubley’s muttering and his attempts to solve the problem by counting his many leaves, then forgetting halfway through and restarting. “A single gold coin is worth 10,000 copper coins, or 100 silver coins. There, that’s the answer.”

Shrubley ducked his head thankfully, glad to finally be out of that dancing hell of numbers that seemed to mock him so viciously.

I will defeat you one day, he promised to math as a whole.

“What are we going to do now?” Konko asked, putting on a new vest lined with pockets. The Copper Ranked vest’s imprint protected against lethal blows. It even added some magical defense, too.

Miranda held up a [Scarlet Card]. She handed it to Konko. "Take this. Tell me what you see."

Konko gingerly took the bendy card that seemed at once made of a thin rubber and yet also glass. It was translucent and beautiful like stained-glass, but it bent as easily as any rubber toy.

The young girl's eyes widened as she received the second quest of her life. "I just got a quest!"

Miranda nodded and took the card back. "So, as you can read, there is another card we need."

"What does it mean?" Konko asked.

"Something bad," Miranda told her. "What that exactly is, we don't know. For now, all that matters is that we put a stop to the rogue Dungeons. I don't think we'll be quite as lucky as we have been with this last one."

"Why is that? You seemed to handle it pretty easily."

Shrubley shook his head and turned around. He could tell the Countess had felt the same things as him.

"Shrubley?" the Countess called. "Mind telling our young friend why that is?"

Bashfulness was not an emotion Shrubley understood, despite seeing it often in his best friend, Cal. He turned to Konko. "The first Dungeon did not know what was going on. It was only recently sick, I think. Whoever or whatever is doing this, did not bother much with Dungeonley. This next Dungeon, however, was very different."

Konko furrowed her brow. "How so?"

“The Dungeon fought back and was defeated,” Shrubley told her. “It tried to stop whatever was going on. It had learned what happened before and didn’t want it to happen again. But the force causing these events infected its child and used that child against it. Unable to reject its own offspring, Dungeonley was unable to stop whatever is causing these infections.”

Konko blinked. “Wait. I thought you said that you just rescued Dungeonley back in Talvar?”

“We did.”

“But that was less than a few days ago! How could it get caught again?”

Shrubley looked at the Countess.

Miranda drummed her fingers on her thigh. “You may tell them,” she said at last.

“Dungeons do not operate on normal time,” Shrubley explained. “The Dungeon Dimensions are... divorced from the flow of time as we perceive them. Think of time as a moving stream and we are simply leaves that flow down with its passage. A Dungeon is a turtle that can step in and out of the river as it desires.”

“They can time travel?” Konko asked.

Shrubley nodded. “They, along with several other classes of monsters I do not fully comprehend, can find shortcuts. Bends in the river that they can take if they so choose to appear roughly where and when they want. I... do not think they can go back up the river?”

Miranda shook her head.

“But they can step outside of it, and time moves differently for them once they do. For Dungeonley, once he returned to the Dungeon

Dimension, he could have spent a lifetime there before emerging back into the flow of time as we understand it.”

“So... whoever or whatever is doing this, is able to manipulate the Dungeon Dimension then?” Konko asked.

“We do not know,” Miranda told her. “If that is the case, then they’re already in the Dungeon Dimension and... that could be very bad. There is a reason it is so dangerous. You could enter the Dungeon Dimension and spend years inside, only to come out a few weeks or months later, vastly stronger compared to your power before.”

“Pyuu...”

Shrublely looked confused. “What?”

“Pyuu?”

“What’s he saying?” Cal asked.

“I don’t know,” Shrublely admitted. “They are words I do not understand.”

“Well, translate for us!”

“Pyuu!”

“He’s saying, ‘Hyperbolic Time Chamber’.”

The monsters looked at one another in confusion while Smudge looked... decidedly smug, staring off into the middle distance.

“Moving on,” Miranda said. “You can see the potential problem we’re dealing with,” she told Konko. “If somebody was able to get into the Dungeon Dimension, their capacity to grow in strength would be unrivaled by the Godkings themselves. The Shard would try to seal away such powers, and for good reason.”

“But the quest wants us to go there,” Konko told her. A tiny bit of greed wormed its way into her heart. “Does that mean—?”

“That means we are supposed to go there to stop it,” Miranda told her. “Don’t get thoughts above your station, girl. Nothing good comes from messing around with the Shard.”

“But we could—”

“We *could*,” she told her sharply, “but we *won’t*, not unless there’s no other choice. Got it? If we happen to stay there a long time while finishing the quest, that is one thing. But to purposefully ignore the quest? That’s asking for trouble.”

The governing rules and laws of the Shard went above Konko’s head. However, she understood well enough that going against the will of the world would end badly. Konko had already committed one grave sin, and she dearly wished to avoid being plagued by guilt from another.

“That means that whoever is causing these problems might be much stronger than us,” Konko said, “and with each... oh. I get it now.”

Shrublely nodded quickly.

Cal raised a hand. “I don’t think Smudge does.” He looked shiftily at the slime staring off into the night sky. “Could you explain it to him?”

Shrublely patted his best friend on the bony shoulder. “It means that every hour we spend, our adversary could be spending weeks or months training and improving their technique. Already they have shown a great deal more skill and power in just a few days our time. The longer we take, the more likely it is that they will come up with an even worse affliction to spread. They may be too powerful already.”

Cal swallowed hard despite not having a throat anymore. “Yeah. I thought you’d say something like that.”