

Chapter 130 – Dawn of the First Day

II

With full bellies, Shrubley and Smudge headed off to the western end of town, their backs strapped with a dizzying tower of packages.

The errand wasn't as simple as it first appeared to be.

They were to fill in for Eiran's courier today. In return, not only were they able to have some of that delicious chicken, but they would be able to get more later as well.

Smudge and Shrubley were both strong enough that the packages hardly bothered them, and Smudge was so cushiony that his towering pile of boxes barely swayed or shifted as he bounced after Shrubley.

"This is an excellent opportunity to practice our mana control, Smudge," Shrubley said, concentrating on steadily breathing mana in and out while carrying the packages. He always tried to incorporate training whenever possible. Whether it was fetching water and kindling or delivering packages. "Perhaps your efforts will bring you a bit closer to Copper Rank."

"Pyuu!" Smudge agreed.

Having recently advanced in rank, Shrubley had a greater difficulty controlling his mana while moving than he was used to. There was considerably more of it flowing around his body. It had more weight to it, too.

It still came relatively naturally to Smudge, even while carrying and balancing the packages.

There was a benefit to being a courier that Shrubley hadn't realized until that very moment he handed off the first package to a smiling attendant at the back door to the Milk Bar.

People were *happy* to receive packages.

So much so that they often gave Shrubley and Smudge gifts.

The first man at the Milk Bar gave them something called a "tip" in the form of two jugs of ice-cold blue milk.

A woman who answered the delivery door at another inn, the Boneyard ("Where you'll sleep like the dead!"), offered them a free night's stay in the form of a golden voucher.

Not every person gave them something, but it was enough for Shrubley to have a friendly smile and a little chat to better familiarize himself with the town.

Shrubley learned a great deal about Clocktown. It had not been here long, and while they eschewed the Guild's advances, they were not defenseless themselves and always had a need for young heroes looking to prove themselves.

Instead of paying the Guild, they paid the heroes handsomely. Or so some of the residents told him. They seemed quite keen on finding heroes.

Shrubley received many "hot leads" for quests that he could take. If he was interested, of course.

The people were very understanding that a young shrub such as himself might prefer to spend the time relaxing until the great festival in roughly 66 hours.

Shrubley thought that he should be slightly unnerved by that.

For some reason, it seemed as if the whole of Clocktown was counting down to something. And it seemed more important than a typical festival to Shrubleby, though whenever he asked, nobody could give him a satisfactory reason as to why that was.

Shrubleby and Smudge dutifully delivered their packages throughout the morning. Clocktown was not massive. It was, however, compact and organized, with countless alleys and side streets going off at set angles.

Every street led back to the market square and the clock tower that anchored the whole town at its center.

Shrubleby felt confident that if he were to climb the clock tower and look around, the entire town would be one large circle like the face of a clock.

“Pyuu?” Smudge asked once they were down to just two packages apiece.

“No, Smudge,” Shrubleby said. “I don’t think it would be right to peek into the packages. These were entrusted to us in good faith. Would you break that trust so easily?”

“Pyuu...”

“Oh, I know you didn’t mean anything by it!” Shrubleby patted his gelatinous head softly. “You are curious, much like me. I confess, I would like to know what has been making these people so happy, but it could be a very simple answer: everybody loves getting presents!”

Smudge nodded.

“And Clocktown seems like such a nice and comfortable place. No danger to worry about. No monsters. Everywhere you look, people are screaming and running down the streets—wait!”

Shrubleby turned as a stream of people rushed by, shouting and running toward the center of town. He immediately shrugged out of the backpack

that held the boxes and handed it to Smudge. “Hold on to these for one second.”

“Pyuu!” His slime body flattened into a more oval-like shape, growing wide enough to support the two bundles.

“I know you want to come with me, but we were *entrusted*, Smudge! We can’t let the packages get ruined! It is our sacred duty.” Shrubley ran off down the street, against the flow of people that were desperately trying to get away.

Smudge watched Shrubley disappear. Patience was not one of Smudge’s strong points, however, and it only took him a minute before he got bored and couldn’t wait any longer.

Tapping a random passerby on the ankle, Smudge motioned to the packages and then to the man. Before the older man could get a word in, Smudge shoved the packages at him.

Without a care in the world, Smudge bounced forward, following after his best friend, Shrubley.

Smudge saw Shrubley confronting a hulking monster, its large stony fists poised to crush Shrubley flat.

Shrubley flared his Bronze aura and dodged out of the way just in time. The paved street cracked and broke beneath the monster’s fist. Chips of stone and dirt sprayed into the air.

The fists continued to pummel the ground, shattering the cobblestones to dusty pieces. The creature had not yet noticed it missed the shrub entirely.

But Shrubley was already climbing the creature's back, taking out one of the Count's weapons and stabbing it into the back of the creature with as much force as he could muster.

Surprising even Shrubley, [Shadesbreath], the dark black sword with a wicked red tinged blade, sunk into the creature with hardly any effort.

It is a good thing I won this weapon from the Count! I did not expect there to be any fighting within Clocktown, Shrubley thought.

The monster let out a rumbling, ground-quaking groan of pain. It reversed the joints on its shoulders and clapped its large hands together, crushing Shrubley flat.

Twigs and branches bent and snapped. Shrubley tumbled from the creature's back. He landed roughly on the paved street, rolling and bouncing away out of instinct and training.

The golem's large stomping feet cracked the ground where Shrubley had just been. More dust and dirt were thrown into the air, obfuscating the ground.

Smudge squealed with rage and [Inflated]. With his Air essence ability, he lifted higher and higher into the sky than ever before. When he judged the distance to be right, he shouted, "*HARD!*" and tapping [Harden], turned to stone.

The golem looked around for the dazed Shrubley, but the little shrub was cloaked beneath the cover of dust. Just as he was getting to his feet, the golem heard a strange whistling sound from all around it.

Glancing around, the dim-witted creature couldn't discover the source of the sound bouncing off the buildings to either side until Smudge landed on its head, caving in the stony carved facsimile of a face.

As the dust settled around the golem's shoulders, his scowling, angry face had vanished and was replaced with the placid, slightly dopey face of Smudge.

You defeat the [Wayward Brick Golem].

“Pyuu...?” Smudge asked tentatively.

He meant to bounce off the head, but instead the entire golem's body jumped at his command, shaking the street and rattling Shrubley's branches.

Two more golems rushed down the street toward the dazed Shrubley. Smudge snarled and leapt at them. The hijacked form of the golem body raised its arms and clotheslined both golems who had thought Smudge was an ally.

They crashed to the street, flat on their backs. The paving stones shattered from the impact, but it wasn't enough to keep them down.

Confused, the golems were slowly getting to their feet. Smudge wasn't about to let them get an inch closer to his best friend.

“Pyuu!” Smudge cried triumphantly.

Smudge threw a tantrum, smashing and stomping with all his tiny pink soul until the two reinforcements were nothing more than dust and rubble.

“Smudge?” Shrubley asked, shaking himself to clear his thoughts. “Is that you?”

“Smudge!” cried the stony slime happily. He ran to Shrubley, nearly crushing him under his large golem feet.

It took Smudge several more seconds to realize that he was still controlling the golem's body. Having a full-sized body was new to the slime who preferred his simple and round shape above all others.

Others might not like it, but that was what peak slime performance looked like.

"This is new body now?" Smudge asked. "Not sure... I like."

"It would seem you hijacked the monster's body," Shrubley said. "You want to come down?"

Smudge nodded and gently curled the golem up into a sitting position with its knees tucked into its chest. As the people began to realize that the threat was over, they slowly filtered back into the street. At first, they gawked at the destruction, then they cheered for their newest heroes.

The slime, shedding his Stone essence, jumped down to Shrubley's waiting arms.

"Good job, Smudge!" Shrubley said, setting him down. "He whacked me pretty good. I'm glad you were there."

"Pyuu."

The crowds parted and a portly older man with a waxed mustache that made him resemble a walrus ambled forward. He had a large brass chain on his neck upon which a clock dangled. "Young heroes! You defeated not one, but 3 monsters from the Vile Workshop! How can we ever thank you?"

Before Shrubley knew what was going on, hands were shoved into his face, shaking his hands, dusting him off, lifting him up onto shoulders alongside Smudge, and paraded through the town toward the market center.

It all seemed rather odd to Shrubley, but he couldn't pinpoint why. He wanted to know what the Vile Workshop was, and whether there would be more monsters constructed within its walls to threaten Clocktown, but the people were much too preoccupied with celebrating.

As they neared the golem, Shrubley called out that he wanted to get his sword back. Rather than put him down, a young girl ran up to the slumped over creature and wrenched on the dark blade.

She clearly couldn't get it out easily, but she was not deterred. Inch by precious inch, the blade began to slide out. A testament to its sharpness that could slide out so easily.

Huffing impatiently, the little girl took out a few slender brass coins like the one Smudge had and crushed them in her hand. She gave one final tug, and in a faint Orange haze, the girl pulled the blade free with great ease.

Giggling the whole way, the girl ran up to Shrubley and handed him the sword with a, "Thank you for saving us!"

Shrubley watched with amazement. As a magical creature himself, he could tell when great magic was being worked around him.

That little girl, who was clearly Mundane Rank, had just *accelerated time*.

It was one thing to know that Clocktown's currency represented units of time, and another entirely to witness somebody employing time manipulation magic by using *coins*.

His mind immediately jumped to questioning theories. Were they made with Time essence? Or were somehow distilled from the Shard itself? Did they borrow from the future, and shorten one's lifespan, or did they do

the exact opposite and only cost their monetary value to impart such enhancements?

As he put away the sword and turned to look back at the damage the golems left behind, he saw laborers with hammers and chisels.

They too had slim coins in their hands that looked like clock hands. Shrubley watched as they shrank into the distance, but he could see the same Orange haze surrounding them as they worked on the broken and damaged street.

“Orange... essence?” Smudge asked Shrubley.

“I’m not so sure,” he said. “Orange is the color of dimensional and spatial essences. Is that what Time essence would be?”

Every hammer blow seemed to double again and again and again, until blurring hammer strikes filled the air. What should have taken the work of days, even with people who were at Copper or above, was done in record time.

He doubted even Jerric and his Steel Ranked party could do something so fast.

Carried to the center of the market square, Shrubley and Smudge were set down gently and ushered to the base of the clock tower where the mayor stood proudly. He was a short man, but like many short humans Shrubley had met, he possessed a very large personality to make up for the lack of physical space.

“Young heroes, it is my great honor to welcome you to Clocktown!” the mayor boomed heartily. “It is not every day we get wandering heroes in our town! You saved us a great deal of time in dealing with that golem, and I would like to formally reward you for your deeds in defense of our humble town...”