

# CHAPTER 23 - THE PLOT THICKENS II

His knees clacking together, Cal raised his staff and let loose a Red spell. The burning mote collided with the upper body of one of the henchmen and exploded in a burst of embers.

Shield raised, Shrubley charged forward, already channeling his [Bark Armor] essence ability. With that ability alone, he could take a hit better than the rest of his friends.

At least, from what he knew of their strengths and weaknesses. Smudge and Slyrox were new additions. And if he understood Slyrox correctly, she was actually a stranger to this land as well.

The koblin, of all people, got there first. She surged to her large floppy feet, bounced once, and then with a fist like an overdue tax bill, hit the first brute clean in the forehead, slamming his body across the corridor and into the opposite cell.

Slyrox Quickfingers peered down at her raised hands, astounded by what she had done.

Seeing that her mitts were actually weapons, it suddenly made a lot more sense.

[Kobbie Mitts]

(Melee Weapon)

(Copper Rank) (★★ Uncommon)

*A pair of stitched gloves specially crafted for the diminutive koblins, fitting seamlessly with their accompanying suits. Each brawling mitt is sown with heavy padded weights hidden into the fabric, demanding sufficient Skill and Hardiness to wield.*

**Imprint: Deals blunt physical damage, enhancing attack speed. Increases the Skill attribute's scaling upon critical hit rate when attacking with this weapon. Grants a minuscule boost to the Strength and Skill attributes when wearing this weapon.**

“Kobbie mitts are strong?” She tilted her head to the side. “Is Copper rank good?”

“Stronger than Mundane rank,” Cal told her, readying another Red spell. The smoldering brute was taken down by his fiery spell plus Shrubley's ramming charge.

Of course, Smudge, the slime, had adhered to the creature's foot and made Shrubley's job all the easier. One of the brutes was slumping down the cell that used to hold the Count and another was toppling over backwards.

“Where I come from, gear has item levels, not ranks,” Slyrox said. “Ranks are measures of power like... levels?”

“Do you truly hail from another world?” Shrubley asked, overtaken by wonder. The possibility of there being more worlds out there than just Almora amazed the little monster.

He raised his shield and sword, jumping on top of the snake brute's chest.

He wanted to know what those far-off places were like. Were monster adventurers commonplace there?

“Ranks cover a wider scale of power than individual levels,” Cal explained, sending a burning spell toward the slowly rising creature across the corridor. “But we have levels too, just not on items. However, we really should get going.”

“Yes,” Shrubley said as the brute beneath his feet began to deflate and resemble a rather empty sack.

It didn't become clear what precisely was happening until a thick black coil of muscle and scales wrapped around his branches.

From out of their “suits”, the snakes slithered and reared up. They were far stronger and faster in this form, and despite Shrubley's attempts to wriggle free, they did not relent.

Cal launched another mote of fire into one just as the snake's head came down hard enough atop him to crush him into powder. But when the dust cleared, Cal was nowhere to be seen.

*Go Cal!* Shrubley cheered. *He must have used the [Hide] ability on his cloak. Good thinking... wish I had thought of that.*

Slyrox, seeing that her first attack had worked out well, followed up with another. But the snake creature in its natural form was like hitting a rack of ribs on a meat hook. Her hand ached more than anything.

As she was pulling one short arm back for another strike, a whip-thin tail swept her feet out from under her and she joined Shrubley as the snake coiled its lower half around her.

Try as she might to get free, she could not bring any of her nascent strength to bear.

Smudge quivered and cried, but at a few wheezing words from Shrubley, it rolled and bounced across the floor until it landed in his twisted and bent branches.

The snakes clearly didn't see it as a threat.

"Uh... guys?" Cal said from somewhere in the corner. "I don't think I can beat these on my own."

Shrubley had to admit, the snakes were tougher than they looked. Now that they were free of having to pretend they were people, they were remarkably formidable.

The little shrub burned with shame at how easily they had been defeated, just as the tables seemed to be turning too!

One of the snakes flickered its tongue in and out, moving its head back and forth in the cell.

"Yeah, that's not going to work," Cal said from somewhere inside. "Undead, remember? No heat. No sweat. I'm pretty much at ambient temperature all the time." Then he gasped. "I'm basically invisible to snakes!"

"But we don't need our eyesss or tongues to know where you are!" hissed one of the snakes. It uncoiled and struck out with its head.

There was a faint blurring of speed, and then Cal's body reappeared, slumping down from the wall. The second snake coiled around him and turned to the first. "Let'sss go."

“That could have gone better,” Shrubley admitted once the snakes began slithering down the hall. Thankfully, they eased the pressure enough that he didn’t feel as if he was about to break in two.

Cal’s skeletal head slumped to the side. He was out cold.

*I wonder what it’s like when a skeleton gets knocked out? Do they dream? I dream. So he must too.*

Quivering, Smudge wasn’t ready to give up. His gelatinous mass began to grow, ballooning to double, then triple his normal size. In the dim light, Shrubley could see his color growing paler and more translucent the bigger the slime got.

But it wasn’t enough, not compared to how strong the snakes were. The snake simply coiled around both Smudge and Shrubley, despite the slime’s even larger size.

**[Mimic]: Your soft and squishy shape is easily moldable. The higher your Arcane and Willpower, the more advanced shapes you can turn yourself into, including mimicry of other creatures and races.**

There was no breaking free, even with Smudge’s [Mimic] racial ability. The snakes were entirely out of their league.

They must have been deep within the bowels of the earth because Shrubley could feel the presence of roots in the soil just beyond the oppressive stone walls.

“You losst,” one of the snakes gloated as it slithered down a spiral staircase and brought them to a massive underground chamber that pulsed with an eerie green light.

“What hope did you have?” the other snake hissed. “We are Copper Rank, and you are mere Mundanesss. Worsse, even our ‘Count’ is beyond Copper.”

“Bet they can’t even sssense auras!” The first snake laughed.

That certainly put things into perspective for Shrubley. Not one member of his group was Copper, even if some of their equipment and essences were.

*I need to get stronger, now more than ever,* Shrubley thought desperately.

There were large, twisted lamps carrying glowing crystals every so often at the edges of the room, but what truly dominated the space was a platform that encircled a well large enough to drop a house inside comfortably.

Inside the well, green bubbling water foamed and frothed as if fighting to get out of its containment.

There were already several hooded figures in green robes. They had a strange, stretched look to them, but they kept their hoods up and their heads fixed on the well below.

A sibilant chant picked up as soon as the two snake guards slithered into the chamber. They didn't waste time taunting their victims. Nobody had any further sinister plans to reveal.

*We lost,* Shrubleby thought sadly. *What would a Hero do in this situation?*

He didn't know. He wished he did.

The snakes made their way up the steps onto the platform, and the throng of green-cloaked figures backed away to give them room. Shrubleby tried to struggle, but it was useless.

The snakes weren't using any essence abilities. This was raw power. No tricks, nothing that Shrubleby could incorporate. Even his [Bark Armor] could only prevent him from taking further damage.

He hadn't let it go since he triggered it, and it was one of the few reasons his health wasn't a tiny sliver. Even still, whenever the snake slithered in the wrong way, Shrubleby was painfully squeezed. A bit more of his [Bark Armor] withered away, but he kept channeling it.

*I have a bad feeling I'm going to need it.*

"Oh, is that all?" Cal said, coming around. He was peering as much as was possible over his snake captor and into the green light of the well below. "I thought they said we were going to be sacrificed as in *killed*."

"Explain!" Slyrox wheezed.

Cal nodded to the well that the snakes had encircled. "We won't *die*, not as such. This is a transplanar tunnel." He looked at the empty expressions of his friends. "Like a portal."

"So they're sending us somewhere else?" Shrubleby said. That didn't make much sense. What good was that?

"Oh yesss," one of the hooded figures said. "You'll have a great big welcome where you're going."

Another chimed in, "Our family will greet you."

"They are alwayssss so hungry!"

"And our numbers will grow by four more. Hisss lordship isss truly a geniuss."

Slowly, without a care in the world, their snake guards uncoiled themselves. Slyrox, at the end of one, was the first to be dragged out over the edge of the boiling green pit and dropped.

"No fair, kobbiekind just got here!" She clung to the smooth scales for a few moments, scrabbling angrily. As she dropped into the well she yelled, "Slyrox best not eye-catch you outside! We will have many tongue-flaps about this. You have my word-bond!"

Shrublely watched as she dropped into the liquid surface of the well at the same time as another slender green figure was speeding toward its surface from beneath. At the very moment the water—for lack of a better word—was broken, the two figures blurred.

A person-sized snake leapt out of the well and landed among the robed figures. It was quickly brought into the fold and clothed in a ready-made green cloak.

Shrublely could still see the image of the koblin descending into the well. He did not shut his eyes as he was dragged over the well. Shrublely did not struggle or fight as the serpent uncoiled and dropped him into the green light of the well. "Heroes always return!" he promised.