

Chapter 102 – Herb Your Enthusiasm

All eyes turned to Shrubley as he screamed. Once Miranda was able to tell it had nothing to do with her, she turned back to the shopkeeper, Hershil's, inventory. "You have a lot of manuals here."

"Lord Hammar is good to the town, my Lady," Hershil said smoothly. "Many adventurers find things that they can neither identify nor unlock. You know how it is with cursed tomes, they require a great deal of effort to decontaminate. Time that most adventurers don't have. I'm old, so I have time to spare. My adventuring days are long over."

Miranda leaned down, putting her palms on the tabletop. The effect was immediate, and she was afraid a bit too much. The old man swallowed hard and tore his gaze away from the glorious view, forcing himself to look into her ruby eyes. "Oh, I don't know about that. You look like you've got a little fire in you still."

Hershil took out a kerchief and mopped his suddenly soggy brow. "That is fine of you to say, my Lady, very kind."

"What could I do to relieve you of these treasures you have worked so hard for, my young friend?"

"Young!" He barked a laugh. "I'm over 120 years old."

"As I said, you are young," Miranda purred.

Slyrox watched this exchange with less than accurate comprehension. The koblin registered that Miranda was putting on the charm, but couldn't piece together exactly why it was working so well. Despite that, Slyrox gave Miranda a thumbs up and scurried deeper into the bookshop to find something of her own.

“I... yes, you would like to barter or perhaps pay in gold?”

“I am... amenable to many arrangements,” Miranda told him suggestively.

Hershil wheezed, his face turning red as a beet. “I should warn you, if you stop my heart, I have an amulet that will automatically restart it.”

“Oh, my dear Hershil, I wouldn’t want to stop your heart.”

The old man wheezed again. “You could’ve fooled me!” He wrung out his kerchief to the side and mopped his entire face. “Please, my Lady! I cannot take much more.”

Hiding, Sose could barely contain his laughter behind his paws.

“Oh, you’re no fun,” she said, lightly tapping his shoulder. “Very well. How about... this one, that one, and oh why not? This one as well.”

Hershil, nearly vibrating with youthful energy that he didn’t know he had, looked over the items. “That w-will run you about 3 g-gold.”

Miranda gently draped her pale hand atop his. “What was that, dear? I didn’t quite catch the number.”

This is not the way I thought I would die, Hershil thought to himself. *But boy would it be a way to go!* “I... could possibly go as low as 2 gold, no less!”

Miranda laughed throatily. “Oh, my, you *do* drive a hard bargain.” She reached into a pouch at her hip. “And there is no Mrs. Hershil? What a shame.”

“Adventuring always got in the way,” the shopkeeper said.

“Well, just because your adventuring days are over,” Miranda said, counting out two gold pieces and gently putting them into his hand, “does not mean that you can’t have a few more *adventures*.”

This is it, the old man thought to himself, this is how I die, with a beautiful Lady suggesting glorious dark designs. Oh, if only I were 70 years younger!

“Th-thank you, my Lady,” Hershil managed through the constriction in his throat. “Here you are... always a pleasure.”

“Oh, no,” Miranda said, sliding the books away into her pocket. “The pleasure was all mine.”

Shrublely dropped a stack of books onto the counter. “I would like to purchase these books, please!”

Slyrox returned with a stack as well. “Fixed your shelf, mister.”

Miranda looked over at Hershil, raising one perfect eyebrow.

“On the h-h-house,” he wheezed.

Back at the Rooster’s Rest, Miranda returned to the private dining room. The attendants of the inn had already cleared away the food, which gave them a nice large area in which to display their goods.

“Now, I have acquired several manuals here. Does anybody know what a manual does?” Miranda asked.

Konko nervously wrung her hands. “I don’t mean to intrude or anything, but... back there with the shopkeeper, is that how a vampyr *feeds*?”

Miranda gave her a dark look. “Would you like me to show you?” She bared her fangs at her.

“Uhh... No thank you! Nope, I’m good!” The girl squeaked.

“That is what I thought. Now, as I was saying?”

Cal raised a bony hand. “Manuals are rare onetime use magical tomes that teach a proficiency at a varying level, opening up new avenues of skill and power. They are very rare, and usually quite expensive.”

Smudge eyed the stacks of books nearby. Shrubley could tell the little guy was feeling nervous and left out about the whole affair, on the account of not being able to read a thing.

Shrubley put a twiggy hand on his head to comfort him.

“No, Smudge, you don’t need to read them,” the Countess added.

“Manuals are deposits of Shard-based knowledge that when used, distill into a person’s mind. If you were to use one of these manuals, you would simply know their contents without having to study or learn to read. Even if you could read, many of them would be in ancient languages you would have no hope of deciphering.”

That brightened the slime’s spirits considerably, so much so his pink shade turned momentarily bright green.

“Ah! I didn’t know he could do that!” Konko said in surprise.

“As I was saying!” The Countess flipped her long hair over one shoulder. “What I have here are crafting proficiencies. You each may take *one*. Any more than that, and I fear your brain might melt through your various orifices.”

Cal looked down at all his many bones. He didn’t have many orifices in ready supply.

Shrubley was the first to approach the pile. “I do not like working with metal,” he proclaimed as he set a [Blacksmithing Manual] aside. He

shifted through the pile. Nobody thought to look through it until he was done.

Shrubley was their leader. Despite the Countess' rank, she was still subordinate to Shrubley's E-Grade 2-Star status within the Adventurers Guild.

It was all rather eye opening to Konko, who quickly picked up on the group dynamics. Clearly the skeleton thought highly of Shrubley, and the slime adored him with something approaching hero worship. The small creature called a koblin was the least enamored by Shrubley, but she followed in line with everybody else.

Even the Countess, a *Steel Ranker*, deferred to Shrubley. While Konko couldn't tell what Shrubley was, she imagined he had to be at least Bronze Rank. He felt powerful to her, even when he wasn't doing anything.

Of course, it was nothing compared to the deep wellspring of frightening strength that the Countess possessed. Which made her deferral to the much weaker Shrubley all the more alarming.

While this group seemed to be nothing like Konko's last one, she thought it would be best to join in deferring to Shrubley's whims for now as well. No matter that she saw an [Alchemy Manual] within the pile.

"I can take this one?" Shrubley asked, raising an [Enchanting Manual] in his twiggy hand.

"Is that what you wish to be?" the Countess asked.

Shrubley thought about that for a good long while. He stepped aside, but nobody else wanted to choose until Shrubley was done.

Konko watched as the patient and slow shrub thought long and hard about the Countess' rather simple question.

After a while, Shrublely nodded. "Yes, I think I should like to be an Enchanter. That way I can make things better than they once were! I can improve the mundane and simple into something extraordinary, yes?"

"That is the gist of the profession," Miranda told him warmly. "It does suit you."

"Then I shall be an Enchanter!"

Shrublely scuttled over to the crackling fireplace, sat down near the warm fire-soaked bricks and cracked open the manual while the others chose based on some sort of pecking order that Konko didn't understand.

All she knew was that she was at the bottom.

Each person went to their own separate area of the room to read their manual. It would take hours to absorb the pages. It wasn't reading, as Konko understood it. She saw how Shrublely would look at one page and it would vanish in a haze of light, before the next one would follow suit.

"And you, my dear?" Miranda asked, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You mentioned you wanted to be an Alchemist, I believe. Is that still the case?"

"More than anything," she said, though Konko did not hold out much hope. Not after the revelation of what she had done, and the surprising twist that *Smudge* of all people wanted to be an Alchemist, too.

There was no way the Countess had doubles of the same book, so Konko dejectedly went searching for something that could be a consolation prize.

She tried to tell herself that this was *fair*. It was *just*. She had hurt Smudge, and in doing so, removed any claim on something she might actually want.

People didn't get redemption simply for wanting to be better, they had to pay for it, and even then, it did not come easily or cheaply.

I meant it when I said I would pay for my mistake for the rest of my life, but I wish I could do so while being an Alchemist. At least that way I could be useful, Konko thought.

Miranda handed her a scroll. It looked tattered and beat up, but she could read the Shardscript identifying it.

Konko stared at the [Alchemy Scroll] in her hand. "How, why?"

"There is no need for unnecessary suffering," Miranda told her. "I am not happy about what you did. Do not mistake this for a gift. This is a tool in which I expect you to repay your debt. No matter what they say, you owe them for their forgiveness. What you did could have been many orders of magnitude worse, so I will not punish you, but you are not off the hook."

That was a harsh but fair reminder that if Shrubley did not intervene that day, Smudge would have died by Konko's hands.

Konko swallowed hard and nodded. She would do anything if it meant she could realize her life's ambition of being an Alchemist. She didn't want just the proficiency, she wanted the *class*. And that alone was impossibly rare. Not only would she need essences, but far more work would need to be done so that she could unlock Alchemist as a class.

"Thank you, Countess," she whispered with tears in her eyes as she unfurled the scroll. The mystical symbols on the page floated and filled her mind's eye with distilled knowledge.

Unlike the manuals that the others were going through, scrolls worked faster and went deeper, but had a rather nasty downside. While manuals could be stopped at any point, halting the process, a scroll was done in one sitting.

Owing to the much greater information density of a scroll, it took days to fully integrate the knowledge, leaving the willing student with a massive headache but a far greater understanding.

Konko collapsed to the floor.

For the less prepared student, learning via scroll often meant days lying unconscious in bed.

Shrubleby ran over to her, but Miranda held up a hand. “She is fine,” she told him. “The effects of using a scroll are harsher, but more complete. In time she will be up on her feet, but for now I think I best take her to bed.” Miranda scooped her up into her arms and looked at the rest of her party. “Stay here and read. I expect you to finish by the time we head out to the Dungeon. You’ll be surprised to see what advantages you gain with a new proficiency.”

The little shrub could still tell something was wrong with Konko, but he trusted the Countess and sat back down. He was too intrigued with the possibilities of enchanting to think about anything else.