

# CHAPTER 21 – POTTED PLANT

“Dreadfully thorry about thith,” said Igor, as he dragged all four monsters down the halls in a very large sack. “But the maaarthter is the maaarthter.”

Shrubley went in and out of consciousness. He remembered being rather gently tumbled out of a sack and set on a bed by Igor’s surprisingly soft six-fingered hands.

Still groggy and weak, Shrubley was only just able to get to his feet when *another* door opened. He had no idea where Igor went or how long ago he left. This one was set cunningly into the wall and had Shrubley been awake, would not have noticed it there until it opened and the two strange creatures slithered out.

Darkness closed in again and by the time Shrubley was shaken awake by a bony hand, he was somewhere else entirely.

This place was dark, dank, and reeked of disuse and mold. In fact, Shrubley quite liked the moldy earthy smell that permeated every soggy stone. His little root-like feet drank up the moisture gratefully and helped to revive him to full consciousness.

The slime was still atop his head and out cold, as was their new friend.

“We’re in a dungeon,” Cal said. “Not a capital D, dungeon, at least. But one all the same. I don’t think we’re alone either. I see something moving in the other cell across from us.”

Shrubley peered into the gloom of the cell across the cramped corridor but could not see much.

It was a popular misconception that most monsters could see in the dark. They were, however, more accustomed and familiar with it. That confidence often leads to mislabeling by adventurers who don’t have much other than observation to go by.

Not that Shrubley thought of himself as a monster. Anything but.

“Can you get us out?” Shrubley asked.

Cal turned to him, hands on his hips. “What, like taking off my bones one-by-one and feeding them through the grate?”

Shrublely blinked his lamplight eyes. “Yes?”

The skeletal mage turned to the grating thoughtfully. It wasn’t your typical dungeon with vertical bars. Whoever had made it wanted to be sure whoever was down here stayed down here.

Thick iron bands, riveted at every cross section, crisscrossed the only opening to the stone room. Cal could just barely get his boney arm through, but if he tried his head or pelvis, there’d be no way he could wedge them through.

“Don’t think so,” he said at last. “It was a good idea, though.” He paced back and forth in their decently sized cell. It wasn’t *spacious*, but even occupied as it was four times, there was room for some decent melodramatic pacing.

Sure, Cal could only pace a few steps to each side, but that was better than doing nothing. A small grating high up in the wall and barely large enough to be considered a drain hole let in some pale moonlight.

There was another drainage hole in the center of the room around stained stones. Cal didn’t like thinking about what those stains were.

“Why would Igor do this?” Shrublely asked, sitting on the pile of moldy straw that served as a bed. Again, he noticed the odd lack of rats or mice. They should have been in heaven with such a warm bed.

Cal shrugged. “He’s an Igor. They do weird things all the time. It’s practically normal for them. But he didn’t bring us here.”

“I did not dream that?” Shrublely asked.

“No, I was awake for most of it. Skeletons are rather hard to knock out, but lightning is a good mana disruptor, so it wasn’t like I could move. In fact, I had to reassemble myself when we were dumped in that first room.”

“Why were we taken to two separate rooms, then?”

Placing an ivory hand on the cold bands of the cell, Cal tried to peer into the gloom of the other cell. He was *sure* somebody was in there, but there was an unnatural stillness that suggested whoever it was, might have been in there for a very long time.

And would likely be in there for longer yet.

*I wonder if there's any bones I could use in there,* he thought to himself. He turned back to Shrubley. "If I was to guess, the Count doesn't trust Igor. Otherwise, why wouldn't *he* have brought us down here?"

"Igor did seem a little out of sorts," Shrubley agreed.

### **New Quest: The Manor's Mystery**

*Caught by the Count and his dutiful Igor, you and your group have been thrown into the manor's dungeons. Find a way to break out of your imprisonment before the Count's plans for you are unveiled and you are trapped somewhere far more dangerous.*

#### **Objectives:**

**Escape the manor 0/1**

**Escape with your full party (Cal, Smudge and Slyrox) 0/1**

#### **Optional Objectives:**

**Discover the secret behind the manor's dark change 0/1**

**Defeat the Count 0/1**

#### **Rewards:**

**Class Experience**

**[Nature Essence Gem]**

**Adventurer Accolades (Uncommon)**

Their eyes met. "You got it too?" Cal asked.

Shrubley nodded. "That makes it an adventure!"

Cal suppressed a groan. He didn't know where the little guy got all that spunk from. The shrub could see the silver lining in a *plague*. Then again, Cal could too.

Lots of skeletons from plagues.

“They did not separate us,” Shrubley pointed out.

“So? That just means they’re either strong enough to deal with us in a group, or they don’t care enough about what we do. I can’t break through this cell, can you?”

Shrubley looked at it, then back at him. “I am a plant.”

“Yes, well, maybe you can shapeshift?”

The plantoid monster continued to stare at him. Somehow, his lamplight eyes managed to squint. “I do not think you understand what a plant is.”

“Well, of course I don’t!” Cal snapped at him. “I’m an undead skeleton! I don’t know much that doesn’t have to do with death and necromancy, do I? You don’t get much living plants with the undead. That’s kind of the whole *thing*, you know?”

Despite what Shrubley had said, he did wonder what he could do with his newly acquired Nature essence and his [Garden Cultivation] ability. Was there some way he could squeeze through the bars?

*Perhaps I can make myself narrow enough to step through?*

Shrubley strained.

Nothing much happened, other than a berry popping out on his backside.

*Ah well, it was worth a try,* Shrubley thought.

There was a limit as to how much he could shape his own plantoid body with his present capabilities. Now growing, extending his leaves and branches, was far more accessible to Shrubley.

That did not help much in the current circumstances, not unless he grew extraordinarily big. And he would try, if he needed to, but it would be costly and exceedingly dangerous besides.

“Maybe there is something I can do.” Cal reached around to the heavy lock on the outside of the cell. It took him a while to rearrange his bones so he could fit his hand through the gap and then kink the wrist at a sharp angle that wasn’t normally possible.

With a single boney finger, he prodded at the keyhole. To an outside observer, it would look quite a lot like he was trying to tickle it open.

Slowly but surely, Cal's finger changed shape and began to fit inside the lock. It took a great deal of concentration and more mana and stamina than he would have liked, but he could feel the tumblers and pins inside the ancient metal thing.

**[Boneshaping]: You can create impressions and even change the shape of your bones to fit a variety of uses. Bones return to normal after a short period of time.**

"It is of no use," said a cultured voice from the other cell.

"You might be surprised," Cal said, grimacing as only a skull can and willing his finger bone to be soft enough to take the impression from inside the keyhole.

He struggled until finally he felt the tip of his finger touch the end of the lock. Now was the hard part. He had to re-harden his bone and pray that it kept its shape and was strong enough to turn the lock.

There wasn't much leverage to be had, and Cal was quite weak besides, but he could feel the lock creaking every-so-slightly.

"That is a Bronze lock," the voice told him, smooth as silk. "You will have a better time, my skeletal friend, if you tried to bash your bones against the grating until they were small enough to fit through."

Cal heard and, unfortunately, felt the snap of his finger bone at the same time. When he pulled back his finger, it was considerably shorter than it had been.

"Pyuu?" Smudge, the slime, muttered.

Shrublely reached up and gently patted it. "Good evening, Smudge! We are trapped in a dungeon, isn't this exciting?"

If Shrublely didn't know any better, he could hear Smudge's stomach grumbling. As to where exactly that stomach was, Shrublely wasn't sure.

Perhaps the whole slime was a stomach?

He didn't particularly like thinking about that, so he plucked free the berry that grew earlier and offered it to Smudge, who squeaked excitedly, then munched on it noisily.

"Your friend... he is well?" the voice called.

"You could say that," Cal hedged. "He is terminally optimistic."

“I am an adventurer,” Shrubley corrected.

Cal shook his head. “So, what’re you in for? I figured you were just a dead body.”

“If only I could be so lucky,” the voice said. He walked up to the grating and put his face up to it so that Cal could see him clearly. The man tilted his head to the side as if listening to something far off. “Ah. I do believe our chat has come to an end. I do apologize.”

Cal stared. That made no sense. He was a bit disheveled, but had clearly made an effort to clean up. There was no mistaking that widow’s peak, the way he stood. Even his pearly white fangs screamed “vampyr” and yet... his fangs were slightly different, weren’t they?

“You are the Count!” Shrubley shouted, pointing a trembling arm at him. “But... you threw us in here....”

“Pyuu!” the slime cried in confused agreement.

The echoing sound of footsteps and locks being thrown wide bounced down the stone corridor.

The spitting image of the Count stepped into the pool of light. He turned to the other cell. Two burly men stood on either side of him, swaying slightly as if drunk.

Both Counts stared at each other. “So, this is the way of it?” the imprisoned Count said.

“You will like your new home. It is a much better fate than the one your Lady endured or that which I have in store for our little monster friends.”

“Adventurers!” bellowed Shrubley.

The man in the hall turned to look at Shrubley over his shoulder. He blinked, only it wasn’t the right way. A second set of eyelids flickered horizontally across his eyes and, for just a moment, a vertical slit was visible. “I’ll deal with you ‘adventurers’ next.” He motioned to the Count’s cell. “Take him.”