

CHAPTER 47 – KIND OF A BIG DILL

Cal sent the snakes carrying the Countess and her oppa one way, while he darted another. Slyrox, in true koblin fashion, bolted straight for the massive snake rearing up.

“Pssh-koh!” Launching into the air, Slyrox raised her fist to the sky and uppercut the snake square in the chin.

The serpentii’s head snapped back under the sheer force of Slyrox’s punch, carrying all the damage of her heavy [Kobbie Mitts] behind it.

Ever since the koblin had gained more levels, Slyrox had noticed that her melee strikes hit considerably harder. She had tested the difference between wearing the weaponized mitts and not. The result was a considerable divide, and one that kept broadening the more attributes she gained.

It was more than what those attributes should have given on their own, even combined with the Copper Rank potency of the weapon.

The [Kobbie Mitts] demanded sufficient Skill and Hardiness to wield properly. At first, Slyrox lacked an adequate amount of those attributes. And now, after training, her weapons’ effectiveness was that much higher.

Slyrox continued to soar upwards. Clenching her fists together, she flipped backwards and descended upon the reeling serpentii.

She crashed her fists into its skull, bringing the snake down, but she had forgotten to mind the tail—again—which came up with a vengeance and cracked her across her ribs.

The little koblin went flying into the distance.

Cal gathered up Elemental essence, using fire and lightning to strike and burn the snake to divert its attention from the downed koblin. The foe was much larger than any other snake they had faced so far.

Smudge, who had been resting on top of Slyrox's head, dropped out of the branches high above the snake where Slyrox had left it. The slime had changed, mimicking the tiny koblin.

[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.

The pink copied koblin slapped its elbow twice as it performed an elbow drop that collided with the snake's rising head.

Smudge, however, didn't have the power that the koblin did, and so, while it clearly hurt the snake, it didn't drop to the ground as Cal had hoped it would.

Instead, it bobbed with the hit, twisted around and snapped its massive jaws at Smudge.

The slime, in response, split into two smaller koblins that began to punch and kick the side of the snake's head.

Cal sent a bolt of lightning into the body of the snake, scorching its skin but doing little else. The skeleton was panicking now, unsure of what to do. The Countess was down, her oppa was out for the count as well, and now their strongest melee expert was likely unconscious, or worse.

It's just down to Smudge and me now, Cal thought. What would Shrubley do in this situation? Well... he'd certainly never ambush the creature, especially if it was big and strong. He'd step right out in front of it, challenge it to a fair and honorable duel, then likely get crushed flat.

Cal realized that thinking like Shrubley was probably not the way to win this battle. He took out his cobbled together cat o' nine tails made exclusively out of snake skeletons and assorted bones.

Leaves rustled in the branches above the snake's head, but the creature was focused solely on the Countess' still form. Cal was of no interest at all. It couldn't perceive him easily, and in any case, it didn't seem like his Elemental essence was doing much damage to it.

The split forms of Smudge continued to batter the sides of the snake, but with a simple flick of its head left and right, the slime disappeared into the woods in two different directions as nothing more than a screaming pink blur.

This snake was just that much stronger than the mere Mundane rank monsters arrayed against it.

Cal bolted to the Countess' prone form and stood in front of her. He would protect her to the last if he had to. In one hand, he held his staff aloft and in the other, the multi-headed whip made with a dozen snake skeletons.

The weapon was surprisingly strong, likely owing to the materials it was crafted from.

Cal hadn't intended to go for the intimidating factor when he cobbled together the weapon. Based on the grisly work he had done to make it, he figured it might have some sort of demoralizing effect.

Unfortunately, he couldn't have been more wrong.

Rearing up to strike, its massive, hooded frill expanding, the snake's hiss filled the woods with a sort of mocking laughter.

More leaves dropped from the canopy high above and one small cluster of them landed on the snake's head. The force of which was almost comical. To Cal's confusion, the snake sank to the forest floor, shaking the trees with a mighty tremor that nearly had Cal on his back.

What could have hit the snake so heavily that would cause that? Cal wondered as he edged closer to the colossal head.

To his amazement, the cluster of leaves jumped off and, in a stylish three-point landing, appeared in front of Cal. An age-darkened sword in one wooden hand was brandished until their eyes met.

"Shruble!" Cal cried, running to his friend.

"It's not dead!" Shruble said at the same time as the snake behind him began to raise its head.

As it did, the snake seemed to shrink and become something else. Rather than a large unwieldy form, it became one of those man-like serpentii with arms, but no legs or head.

Muscles glided and moved beneath its purplish scales as the creature became roughly the size of the Countess but with much more muscle.

From nowhere that Cal could see, it pulled free two heavily curved swords and hissed at Shruble.

"Stay back!" Shruble told Cal, pulling free a strange, layered shield from his inventory.

He looked so... *different*. Like the heart of Shrubley had become the tiny creature itself. This was what Shrubley must have always envisioned for himself.

This was who Shrubley was, deep inside.

The [Serpentii Assassin] slithered forward faster than a cannonball, but Shrubley was there to block its blow with his sword and shield. The two clashed mightily, going back and forth, but it was clear to Cal that Shrubley was losing.

I don't have good enough control over my essence to not risk hitting Shrubley!

There was a flash of orange sparks, and then the two separated. Shrubley turned and gave Cal a salute with his sword. "There's something I've been wanting to try. You don't mind, do you?"

Cal shook his head, but kept himself ready to defend the Countess just in case anything got past his friend.

He's alive! Cal could have cried. *It's like one of those heroic stories he told me about. He just appeared out of nowhere and is handling something that sent all of us into disarray. How has he gotten so strong?*

A Copper-tinged aura billowed from Shrubley, wreathing his form in a hazy corona of power, the likes of which Cal had never sensed before from his first friend.

Feeling the power of Copper within himself, he focused on the burgeoning strength it offered him. It was remarkably intuitive, a bit like using his essence powers. The knowledge of how to do it came to him. It was no different from using a leg or an arm.

The process felt a lot like opening a gate or a door within himself. The moment he committed to it, he could feel a surge of power that reminded him of the moment he had reached Copper.

A thin haze sprang up all around Shrubley, giving the air a faint coppery hue.

When the [Serpentii Assassin] came at Shrubley again, he met it with sword and shield. The force of their clash sent a ripple of power radiating outwards, flattening the grass and crushing the leaf mold into the ground.

Trees shook. The ground rumbled, and it became clear, even to the [Serpentii Assassin] that the tables had turned. It tried to disengage and run, but Shrubley cut it across the middle.

It lashed out with its tail and met his shield instead. A blow that should have sent Shrubley flying barely moved him. His roots were stuck fast into the ground. It was like trying to budge a house.

Panic set into the snake, and Shrubley took full advantage of its inexperienced blows and frantic attacks. Every sloppy attack was easily countered. The snake had only one thing on its mind: fleeing from the tiny shrub that seemed immune to its poisons.

But the not-so-little shrub kept up the pressure, walking the creature down until it finally fell from its numerous wounds. Shrubley felt an odd sense of calm as he methodically cut and thrust with his sword, using his gained proficiency to outmaneuver his opponent.

With his Copper aura, he could feel all of his attributes enhanced beyond what they had been just a moment ago.

So this is what real power feels like, Shrubley thought to himself as he came upon the prone enemy. It had seemed so strong just a few moments ago... and now it was hissing and spitting venomous defiance at him, but it was as good as dead.

He felt sorry for it. Shrubley pitied such a hate-filled existence, and he put it out of its misery with a stroke of his [Death's Razor].

More than any other foe he had fought thus far, this creature had excellent self-healing abilities. It was why he kept up the pressure without overextending himself. At any moment, it could have turned the tables on him if he had been careless.

Shrubley never wanted to risk his life or that of his friends again, all for the sake of honesty and open combat. He had learned that sometimes it was good and just to ambush an enemy that only wanted to harm your family and friends.

He didn't like it, but then again, he didn't have to. All he had to do was use the tools at his disposal.

You defeat the [Serpentii Assassin].

When it was all said and done, Shrubley released the Copper aura, feeling suddenly weak and tired. *So there's a cost*, he thought as he sagged a little.

Cal was there in a moment, supporting his friend. "Shrubley! Are you okay?"

Shrubley looked up at the first friend he ever made. His lamplight eyes were ablaze with happiness at finding him again. "I am now."

The two halves of Smudge slowly oozed his way back. After joining seamlessly back together with a gelatinous ripple, the pink slime looked up at Shrubley with adoration and joy. "Pyuu! Welcome back, Shrubley!"