

CHAPTER 53: LOOPER

“How is that possible?” Cal asked. “We’ve been walking all day and you keep checking the road, don’t you?”

“That’s why I think we’re in a trap,” Shrubley said. “I’ve seen that *same* camp twice now, and I’ve been marking trees as we’ve passed them.” He pointed to one tree, but it was completely unmarked. “I’ve marked that tree four times now. It doesn’t stay.”

Slyrox rubbed her chin thoughtfully, which because of her mask, made it look like she was rubbing a comically large and bulbous nose. “Is perhaps different group looking muchly alike?”

“No,” Shrubley said, full of certainty. “This is different. I can’t explain it, but I don’t think we’ve gone more than a few hundred feet at best. I don’t know how it’s happening.”

“What if one of us stays—” Cal began but was immediately shut down.

Shrubley shook himself. “No. We are not to split up. I think that’s what it wants. If you kept walking when I went to check the edge, I think you would be somewhere else than me. I have been using [Leyline Roots] to keep connected to where you are. I am afraid to go far without it.”

Cal could see Shrubley was deeply bothered by this. He was too, though he wasn’t as certain as Shrubley. He realized that he wanted Shrubley to be wrong and immediately felt guilty about it.

If he was right... that meant they had lost a full day. What events had been transpiring back in Taamra and the Haalften region while they were gone?

The days seemed to melt away in this frustrating mirror realm.

And yet Shrubley’s belief had the ring of truth to it. If they were on an adventure as Shrubley claimed, then that was just the sort of thing that would happen.

Some dark, evil forest trapping would-be adventurers seemed right out of a tavern tale.

“I think it wants us to leave the forest,” Shrubley said. “But if we do, we’ll walk right into those camps.”

Smudge revolved on the spot, his eyes moving from one tree to the next. He cleared his throat, though what throat he had at all was questionable, readying for the rare occurrence to speak. “Pyuu...?” When that didn’t get the reaction he expected, he added, almost as an afterthought, “I thought it was odd we were walking in circles.”

“Slime isn’t... tricked?” Slyrox asked, crouching beside him.

Shrubley turned to him. “You knew?”

Smudge bobbed, his jelly rippling up and down with the motion.

[Dumb]: Lacking a brain, you’re not the brightest bulb in the sock drawer, but because of your lack of brain you cannot be ensorcelled by mind-bending magic.

“I am [Dumb],” Smudge explained simply, as if that told them everything.

Everybody looked at him in that strangely stressed way that said they had heard him but didn’t know they had heard him *right* and were now slightly worried about the implications of what had been said.

Cal coughed delicately. Slyrox eyed him askance, wondering how he made that noise. Never mind that the skeleton talked all the time, and it really wasn’t that much of a stretch to include coughing in the mix.

Smudge was vaguely curious too, and when he couldn’t hold on to the thought for much longer than the few seconds it took to process it, he proceeded to forget it entirely.

“Have no brain to magic-bend,” the slime tried again.

This didn’t elicit a better result from the group.

Shrubley got down low next to Smudge and whispered, “Can you tell what’s making us go in circles?”

The slime nodded. He didn’t like using more words than was necessary, but for Shrubley, he would do *anything*. The shrub was Smudge’s whole world. If Shrubley said that the sun was safe to look at, then Smudge would believe him and stare at the sun until his eyes turned to raisins.

“Yes,” Smudge said gently. “You keep moving closer to the magic, and the magic keeps pushing you away.”

Shrubley thought about this for a moment. “Is somebody doing it to us?”

Smudge bounced in place uncertainly. It was the closest thing to a shrug you could get from the shoulderless slime.

With delicate hands, Shrubley picked him up and placed the slime back atop his head. “Tell me when the change is strongest and in what direction,” Shrubley said. “That way, we can get down to the root of this.”

Some of his leaves were immediately covered in ooze, but that was alright with Shrubley. He didn’t hear any stomach growling.

Cal watched with admiration as Shrubley headed off in the direction Smudge indicated.

That was the thing about Shrubley. You couldn’t ever keep him down. He was indefatigable. The little guy just did not know when to quit. When offered a way out of a terrible Dungeon, he’d likely be the one to go back into the center to take down the boss.

And by “take down” Shrubley probably meant he’d offer him some tea and cookies, ask the cranky Dungeon boss about his day, and try to *befriend* the devil instead of putting it down in the ground like most adventurers would.

They had the *perfect* opportunity to leave. With Smudge telling where the magic was strongest, all they had to do was *leave*.

It seemed so obvious to Cal that he wondered why nobody else realized it. In a scary way, he wondered if Shrubley had understood and instead chose to confront the problem head-on.

That would be just like him, Cal thought to himself as he sent a mental command to the snakes carrying the Countess’ stretcher.

The way the magic intensified as they moved closer to its source sounded like a clear indication to Cal that they should just leave. It’d be easier than going in if the magic was weakening.

But if you put a big sign that said “STAY OUT” in front of Shrubley, he’d be knocking politely—yet inquiringly—before you finished nailing the sign in place.

Cal dearly hoped none of them would ever get ensnared in a labyrinthine Dungeon's trap with minion-filled rooms.

"We gonna beat it up?" Slyrox asked them, then added after a moment of thought, "Or run away?"

"If we must fight, we will fight," Shrubley answered. "Whatever it is."

The koblin nodded.

Now that Cal was looking for it, he could see the slight warping in the air. This was *powerful* magic, but it wasn't active. He didn't know how he could tell, he just could.

Is this because Smudge revealed the magic bewitching us, or is it something else? Cal wondered.

There was a tinny taste to the air that told him this had been set up a long time ago and was left to run its course.

Perhaps they weren't being corralled by some evil entity, but that didn't make it any better. If this magic was old, then that meant whoever created it was immensely strong. Far stronger than any of them, for sure.

Magic weakened over time. It was a living thing after all, and it needed constant maintenance and upkeep. The Countess had spoken about Diamond Rankers being able to enact "Infinity" types of magic that lasted indefinitely, but if there was a Diamond Ranker around, they were doing an excellent job of hiding.

If they were up against a Diamond Ranker, then they would truly have no chance, even if the Countess was fully recovered and in fine fighting form.

At least, Cal did not suspect the Countess was as high as a Diamond Ranker.

As far as Cal understood, a Diamond would warp the very world around them. They were the closest things to Gods given flesh.

Even the Countess was afraid of them, and she was many orders of magnitude stronger than any of them.

Besides, if there was a strong person here, then they were very likely a villain. There was no other way you could live in a world like this and not be. You'd have to do something about all the snakes, for one, if you were anything but a villain.

Unless the serpentii are afraid of this too, Cal thought. He was glad he didn't have blood, because the very thought would have made it run cold. *We've been walking for a while now and haven't seen any serpentii. Nothing.*

They traveled in silence until Slyrox asked another question. "Is it snek magic?"

"I don't think so," Cal said. "This feels different."

"Not snake magic," Smudge said, growing a limb out of his gelatinous mass to point to a tree. "Unless snake magic eats snakes."

The koblin and Cal both did a double-take at that, then bumped into each other.

"What do you mean?" Shrubley asked, looking up at Smudge atop his head.

It was easy for Smudge to forget that the others couldn't see the forest as it truly was.

For everybody else, they were moving in a thick forest of beeches and cedars and other strange trees they didn't know the names of, all with oddly purple and yellow-colored leaves.

From their point of view, the forest was a never-changing rolling landscape.

To Smudge, who could see what was truly there, he saw a thin pale-blue mist that clung to everything, including the massive, gnarled trees. Many of them had large hollows that, had he understood what a coffin was, would have looked unsettlingly coffin shaped.

The slime wished he could show them what he saw. It would be a lot easier that way. Smudge just didn't have much of a way with words.

Poets, bards, and minstrels were legendary entities to him, capable of feats forever beyond Smudge's hazy comprehension.

In every hollow of every wicked-looking tree was a body, or several bodies of snakes and serpentii. Many were crammed in as tight as you could go so that if you squinted *just right* in the low light of dusk, you could trick yourself into thinking the tree was very bumpy.

Smudge wasn't smart enough to trick himself. He saw the world as it was, which was often very different from the world everybody else saw. Unlike the other races, who were constantly placing their own filters over their experiences, Smudge simply saw what was.

He had a singular lens of perspective, and it was Smudge tinted.

It was one of the reasons he began to quiver slightly atop of Shrubley's head.

While everybody else saw what the magic wanted them to see, Smudge saw the horrific trees and their grisly meals. The deeper they went, the more bones and fewer bodies there were, but the tighter the trees were as well.

And as Smudge pivoted his eyes to see behind, he saw another thing that made him quiver. The trees were moving to block their escape.