

# CHAPTER 59 – ALLOYS, NOBLES, AND JEWELS

The Witch folded her hands in her lap and leaned back in her rocking chair, setting it to rocking back and forth again. The cool blue flames of the icy fireplace kept the sticky heat of the swamp at bay.

“I imagine, seeing as yon shrub over there is Copper, you understand at least the first major rank of power? Good. You see, after Copper is Bronze, then Iron, followed by Steel. A lot of people call this bracket the ‘Alloy’ stage.”

The Witch watched, seeing the vacant expressions of each of them. Somehow, Smudge had managed to achieve the most vacant of them all, which was a step above his normal mental fuzziness.

“Slyrox understands!” the koblin said, raising a mittened hand as if she were in school. Once the Witch nodded at her, she explained to the others. “Bronze is an alloy of Copper, and Steel an alloy of Iron. Both are typically stronger or better in some way than their base forms. You need Copper to make Bronze, and you need Iron to make Steel. That is why they call it the ‘Alloy’ stage, yes?”

“Quite so,” the Countess said. “It is the first major stage of Advancement. Most people stop at Steel. It’s considered the fourth Advancement and ends the so-called ‘easy’ Advancements.”

“Is that why you are Steel?” Shrubley asked.

There was a sucking silence that followed this question, as if Shrubley had just committed a massive faux pas.

Sose gave him an especially squinty, dirty look, although maybe the oppa was just disgruntled from Cal’s terrible petting.

However, the Countess merely smiled at him. “That is quite so. Up until the end of the Alloy stage, the only thing you need to do to Advance is get stronger. Improve your essences, gain greater experience, master your abilities, etcetera.”

“Even then, ain’t many that can achieve Steel in their lifetime,” Mistress Ceaswane said. “It’s hard work, and once you get to Bronze or Iron you’re already several times stronger than the rest of the folk around without essences, so what’s the matter? You could return home to your little podunk town and rule it until the Adventurers Guild gets called out to trounce you.”

“But why stop?” Shrublely asked, his eyes bright with interest. “If getting stronger keeps you healthier and lets you live longer... why stop ever?”

“Because it’s *hard*,” the Witch said. She noticed that this didn’t have the effect she expected. “You reckon that most folk don’t want to spend sunup to sundown working out, training, and improving themselves? Most folk want a pretty lad or lass to hang onto, some kids to run around their ankles, and nice relaxing days for years on end.”

The Countess chuckled. “It doesn’t help that in order to reach Copper you need three essences, something that would be too expensive for most people to buy and too dangerous to get naturally. The areas you would have to go to in order to acquire them by typical means would be areas where the monsters would already be at the mid to upper end of the alloy stage.”

Shrublely still didn’t understand. Improvement *was* relaxing and fun! For him at least.

“He’s Halbert’s all right,” the Witch said with a faint grin. “Look at him, trying to understand something that goes against his grain.”

The Countess tilted her chin up a little. “He doesn’t need to understand them to know that’s how they work. People are dreadfully simple and require simple things most of the time. It’s amazing that so many rulers get this wrong. A few special individuals want more, but most people just want a comfortable life with few problems so they can enjoy it while they are healthy enough to do so.”

“Is that why so many people join the Adventurers Guild?” Shrublely asked.

The Witch’s pointy black hat bobbed as she nodded. “Quite so, young man. They often give out essences as rewards for exemplary work and there is always work for a guild member. I notice your little badge. Must have been quite the story to get them to accept you. I should like to hear it one day.”

“Me too!” Sose said. “So I can add your fable to my repertoire. I can put on quite the performance with my Fantasy mana.”

Shrublely straightened up proudly.

“One day,” the Witch reiterated. “Not today. I am sure it is a good story, but for now I would like to finish my brief explanation before we get further sidetracked. That being said....”

“Alloy stage, Mistress Ceasewane,” the Countess supplied.

“Right. After that is the Noble stage, Silver, Electrum, Gold. Very difficult to break into, even harder to Advance within. Copper extends your life by roughly two years, and it doubles for every rank within the Alloy stage.”

Shrubleby, who was not very good at math and had no interest in dancing numbers, said, “Is that a lot?”

“I should say so!” the Witch told him. “Getting an extra sixteen years o’ life is nothing to be sneezed at, young man. And especially since the kind of life you’d get from that would be *youthful* life, it’s even better. But in the end, it’s just sixteen years, give or take a few based on yer race.”

All eyes turned to the Countess. She had claimed to be hundreds of years old, but she was only Steel.

“I’m a vampyr,” she told them with a curl of her blood-red lips. “Even if I was a Copper, I’m functionally immortal.”

“You’re lucky to be Awakened is what ye are!” the Witch said with a snort. “Once you reach the Noble stage, you stop needing to eat or drink food or water. You can sustain yourself solely on mana.” Ceasewane glanced at the Countess. “O’course, it’s based on race again. Some peoples can survive on mana alone at Iron or Steel.”

The old Witch straightened up. “As you can guess, eatin’ becomes a joy rather than an obligation.” She patted her robes. “It helps that food won’t make you fat no more, so you’ll see a lot of Noble rankers with a heck of a sweet tooth!”

“How do you become a Silver Ranker?” Shrubleby asked.

“That is a personal thing,” the Countess told him. “It is different for each person based on who they are and their path through life. Few people know the secret, and those that do—or claim to in any case—generally charge exorbitant sums for the knowledge and even then, it’s not guaranteed.”

The Witch was watching her with the world’s tiniest grin. Shrubleby didn’t think anybody else saw it. She glanced at him and gave him a wink.

“And this ‘Noble stage’, it extends your life further?” Cal asked.

“Usually,” the Witch said. “I hear tell it’s dang near an order of magnitude greater. Over two-hunnerd years is the general rule of thumb. Of course, that’s just Silver. Going from Silver to Gold grants even more, and quite a lot of folk say that the time granted by Silver isn’t enough to Advance.”

Shrubley contemplated about that vast amount of time needed. He was young, so that was the longest thing he had ever experienced. To comprehend the journey from Silver to Gold, training, fighting, and adventuring was a lot for him to process.

Surprisingly, he looked forward to it.

“What does that mean for monsters?” Slyrox asked, looking between them. “Can only short-think that I am one. Are we the same way?”

“Yer Awakened aren’t you?”

“We believe so.”

“If you can think and reason outside o’ yer baser instincts—which is a fair sight more than most o’ the *core races*—then you would be Awakened.” The Witch looked at them all. “Haven’t seen so many Awakened since I visited Pandaemonium.”

“What is that?” Shrubley asked.

“It is a city entirely for monsters. Awakened monsters like yourselves,” the Witch explained. “Difficult to get to. I dare say you lot will make your way there one day. It draws the powerful and those with the potential for greatness. There’s an Academy there—several, in fact—that are open exclusively to your kind. Good jobs come out of there, Dungeon minions, even Dungeon masters and bosses, not to mention Dark Lords aplenty.”

Before Shrubley could ask anything more, she waved him to silence. “Later, boy, later. I ain’t done yet. Once you get through the Noble stage, if you’re able to, which involves introspection and understandin’ yer own dang soul aplenty, you’ll arrive at the Jewel stage. The final three ranks are there: Ruby, Sapphire, and finally Diamond.”

“I have heard of Diamond,” Shrubley said proudly.

“Ain’t no surprise, my lad. Diamond is the mythical pinnacle of power. The few people who manage to attain it are shrouded in so much myth and mystery that even I can’t unravel the truth from fiction. Some say they are immortal, or that they are Gods themselves, who knows. And don’t even think

of asking me how to get there. I'm only a Silver. Couldn't ever get to Electrum. Spent the last few decades here tryin'."

Mistress Ceasewane folded her hands in her lap. "So, there you have it. Aye, I'm strong, but I'm also at the end o' my candle, if you get my meaning. The extra life that Silver afforded me wasn't enough to reach Electrum, so I tried to extend that a bit, but it hasn't worked. And now my hubris has come back to bite me."

"But you could have much longer to try if you kept the Guidance Stone," the Countess argued.

"Aye, girl, I could at that. I ain't for having it though! Not while my home is being invaded by those slitherin' bastards! I won't allow it."

Cal licked his teeth of any residual milk with a shadowy tongue. Satiated for once, Cal began to ask questions he had been wondering the whole time. "What exactly does this mean for our next step? Will we still need to brave the mirror realm's manor to find that portal home? For that matter, do we no longer need the amulet?"

Shrublely stared at Cal, unsure of what he had just seen. Was that a tongue, that wasn't bone?

His lamplight eyes turned to Slyrox, who appeared to be equally puzzled. Though the koblin was a hard read with that mask and those dark lenses.

Shrublely wasn't sure Smudge even noticed. The oppa didn't seem to find anything amiss either. The ferret-like creature was squinting suspiciously, but that could be about anything.

"What was that?" Shrublely asked him.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Cal replied.

Shrublely motioned with a twiggy hand at his own face.

The skeleton tilted his skull in confusion.

"Ah, never mind," Shrublely said in resignation.

"You'll still need to get out," the Witch said. "And fast. Once the Guidance Stone is gone, all that'll be keepin' this place alive is my magic. And let me tell you, that won't last long at all, but I'll do all that I can to keep it up so you can get out."

Shrubleby asked the question he knew the Witch didn't want him to ask. "What will happen when the magic runs out?"

"This world will pop like the big ol' soap bubble that it is, and anythin' still here will cease to be." She looked at them all in turn. "So ye better skedaddle!"