

# Chapter 124 - Dungeonley 2, the Dungeoning IV

Konko looked at each of them in turn. “You don’t know?”

Miranda put her hands on her wide hips. “Out with it, girl.”

“It’s the Fable of Farseil!” she said, eagerly pointing at the engravings. “This tells the story of Farseil and its fall from grace. How they once lived peacefully with nature. Then a charismatic madman swept through the nation and brought with him great change. That change poisoned the lands, swelled the streams with trash, cut down the trees and used them in machines that belched black smoke and choked the sky with ash...”

As Konko described the fable, Shrubley was horrified at such a terrible story. He felt sick just thinking about it. He did agree, however, that the story taught a good lesson. That change wasn’t always good, and that people should learn to live with their environment instead of destroying it. But he still shivered at the images she painted with her words.

He only hoped that Sose wouldn’t turn it into one of his ultra-realistic plays with Fantasy mana.

Konko held out both hands. Shrubley and Miranda put their orbs into them. She walked proudly up to the engravings and studied them intently. “This is the part where Melchior convinces the kingdom that they could become rich without ever doing any work themselves. The people praise his genius and insight.”

A yellow door kicked open with a startling *bang*, and out walked the strangest sight Shrubley had seen so far. Stranger than the evil Dungeon

was the sight of his two friends... fused? He wasn't sure, Cal waddled forward as the door slammed shut and faded behind him.

Cal held out a yellow orb. "We all made it!"

His friend looked especially smug, at least as smug as a skeleton could.

"I'll take— " Miranda began to say reluctantly.

"No!" Cal put out a hand to forestall her from taking Slyrox. "Er, I mean, no thank you. I can carry this burden."

"Orb please," Konko said, holding both orbs tucked into her forearm, her free hand out and making grabbing motions.

Cal looked to the Countess first before dropping his orb into the girl's hand. "What's this all about?"

"A puzzle and a trap," Shrubley told him. He pointed to the walls, now less than 5 feet away. "Each time we guess wrong, the walls close in."

"That's... not good," Cal said.

Konko reached out and placed the red orb. The walls rumbled and closed in, forcing them into a tight knot. Konko stifled a scream. She could no longer stand in the middle of the room and hold her arms out to each side. The walls stood in the way now.

The Countess looked especially unimpressed. "One more slip up like that, and I don't think I'll fit in here anymore."

Cal eyed the pressing walls. "I don't like the idea of being crushed. I'm not sure new and improved Slyrox can punch her way out of this."

"Sorry, sorry!" Konko said. "I don't know what the colors *mean*. I thought they were meant to represent the three major choices. Red for

bad, white for good, or something like that, but that didn't work. Melchior's arrival should have been bad!"

"Could the colors represent essences, perhaps? Or magic?" Shrubley asked, studying the puzzle. Just because Konko was certain that she could solve it did not stop him from trying.

Konko pressed her forehead into the door in frustration. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because I did," he said simply.

Konko pulled her head away and looked at him. As was typical, she wasn't sure if he was messing with her or not.

He smiled, kind as ever.

With a shake of her head, Konko lifted the yellow orb and placed it upon Melchior's arrival. She was awarded with a satisfying *click* as the orb locked into place and the engraving took on a sickly yellow sheen.

"Shrubley is right!" she said. "Melchior's arrival was an *affliction* upon the kingdom. That means... when they started to tear down the forests, that was an *offensive* action, so Red essence!"

The orb locked into place again, leaving only the white orb. "And White is healing, so that's easy. That's when the people threw off Melchior's ways and began to make peace with the land, fixing their wrongs and doing the work themselves!"

A final *click* echoed throughout the coffin-like narrow room and the doors opened to reveal a blinding light beyond.

When they blinked, they were in another room entirely. Their sight returned slowly, but they could still hear.

There was the scrape of a boot on stone and the sound of feet running very fast away. Shrubley called out, readying his sword and shield, but nothing attacked. He could feel the presence receding.

Even Miranda lashed out with some sort of attack, but all they heard was the crack of stone breaking.

By the time their vision returned, they were in the center of an octagonal room with no discernible exits. There was nobody in there with them. A multi-faceted diamond that glowed with a malicious inner red light spun gently on its axis, supported by nothing.

A chunk of stone and something dark were at the opposite end of the room from where they were facing.

Konko immediately went over and picked up the rubble. She lifted it up to the wall where the Countess' attack had cleaved off a chunk. But aside from the stone, there was a scrap of wine-dark velvet cloth. It looked like the edge of a cloak.

On the smooth satiny interior, a series of mind-bogglingly complex runes were stitched in glowing gold thread. She handed the cloth to Miranda wordlessly, the question obvious on her features.

Miranda took it, handed it to Sose, then felt at the wall with her free hand. She gave it a few experimental taps, then cocked back her fist and slammed it through the stone like it was a thin sheet of ice over a bucket of water.

Within moments, the Countess ripped open the wall to reveal a secret passage beyond. Footprints and a tiny splatter of blood led into the darkness.

“We managed to surprise whoever it was,” Miranda said. “I don’t think they were expecting us quite so soon.”

“Someone other than us in the bad Dungeon?” Smudge asked.

Sose sniffed intently at the scrap, learning the scent of who it belonged to. When Miranda looked at him, he shook his head. Sose did not seem to know whom it belonged to.

“I think so,” Miranda said thoughtfully. “Going after them is a mistake. Whatever they wanted to do here was thwarted. We should take the win and go.”

Shrublely looked at the jewel, feeling the immense rage and anger boiling off it. This was not Dungeonley, but something else. It was a parasite that lived only to cause pain. He did not know whether it was made to hate, or what its origins were.

“I am sorry,” Shrublely said, placing his wooden hand on the gem.

His heart told him he should crush it. Destroy it so it could never harm anything else ever again. But at the very core of the Dungeon, he felt something else... pain.

Any beast would lash out when they were in pain. Even family and friends were not safe.

Instead, Shrublely chose another path.

Concentrating all of his might, Shrublely used [Enlightenment] and [Transference].

“Shrublely! What have you done?” Miranda demanded, realizing too late what he was attempting to do. There was no stopping him now.

He collapsed to his knees, still gripping the red jewel. The vile red light flowed through his limbs into his leafy form.

*Such rage!* His mind screamed with static.

He wanted nothing more in that moment but to lash out and maim all those closest to him. Something had inflicted untold pain on him, and he would do the same to all those around him.

It was the only way! The pain would not stop unless he spread it around.

*No. I will not harm another,* Shrublely struggled to think through the haze of rage and pain that flooded his tiny body. He fought to remember who he was, and the honorable values he upheld every day of his life.

This was no poison that he could counter. This was a challenge of the mind. Of his very being. Shrublely did not relent. He expelled the pain and the hatred with every fiber of his being until no trace of it was left.

*I am a Good Shrub,* he thought fiercely, *I will not hurt my friends!*

The last of the vileness drained out of him, leaving him feeling feeble and weak, curled up on the floor with the brilliant diamond sparkling in the depths of his bushy body. Multi-colored light spilled out through the gaps in his branches.

A voice, half heard, spoke into his mind, *In the beginning, there was a crystal, singular and beautiful. Its many-colored light sheltered the lands and drove out the darkness...* and then the voice was gone, but the sense of hope and purpose it radiated stuck with him.

The change to the Dungeon was dramatic and immediate.

The stone faded away. The walls, the ceiling, even the floor vanished until they were alone in a chamber of ultimate darkness save for the shining jewel no larger than Miranda's fingertip.

"What did you just do?" Miranda asked, kneeling beside the shrub. "I thought you wanted to destroy it?"

Shrubley opened one eye wearily. “It was... in so much pain. Not right. It did not know any better. I... I wanted to take away its pain.”

Smudge bumped into Shrubley, tears in his eyes. Despite his worry, he smiled. “You did a good thing.”

“Is... is it okay now?” Cal asked, shivering slightly.

Shrubley, with the help of Smudge and Miranda, got to his feet slowly. He lifted the jewel and it hung in the air, spinning slowly and casting a gorgeous light across the darkness.

A greater presence filled the surrounding void. Stone and brick replaced the darkness until, in an eyeblink, they appeared in another room.

A room with two spinning jewels, one much larger than the other.

“Dungeonley!” Shrubley cried excitedly. “Don’t be too hard on her. She did not know what she was doing.”

The whole Dungeon rumbled ominously. Bits of stone dust drifted down from the ceiling.

“Oh... I did not know,” Shrubley said. “Why did you not say she was your daughter?”

A softer, gentler rumbling answered him. Many in the present company presumed this to be the younger Dungeon.

Shrubley gently scuffed the floor with his foot. “That is very kind of you to say, but I am not looking for a romantic partner at this time.”

Cal looked around. “Did... Dungeonley just offer his daughter’s hand in marriage to you, Shrubley?”

A light tinkling sound filled the Dungeon room, like crystals laughing.

“I am glad you think so,” Shrubley said. “I am sure you will meet a very powerful and kind Dungeon of your own one day too. I am sorry for being so... cross with you. I thought you were evil, but I see now that I was misled. Can you tell us who did this to you?”

“This world is stranger than I ever thought,” Konko said, staring at the two jewels.

There was a sound just outside of Konko’s human hearing that only the monsters could pick up. Of them, only Shrubley seemed to understand what was being said. He nodded along, not daring to interrupt until the very end.

“I see... I am sorry you went through this, Dungeonette,” Shrubley said solemnly. “We will gladly depart.”

“Dungeonette,” Miranda said slowly.

“It is her name,” Shrubley said simply.

A glowing portal appeared off to the side, along with several chests.

“Another Dungeon down,” Cal said. He gingerly lifted Slyrox’s limp arm and high-fived it. “Good job, team!”

In response, Slyrox knocked Cal out with a kick that came up and struck his chin.