

CHAPTER 50 – FLOWERING UP

While Shrubleby and his friends rested beneath the partial shelter of a set of reddish boulders, Sose awoke and squeezed out what Fantasy mana he could to form an illusionary barrier around them.

The effect wasn't entirely complete, but it provided enough cover for their chances of detection drop to near zero. As long as nobody stuck around to inspect it.

With that, the disreputable oppa returned to slumber. Shrubleby gave him a comforting pat, as he had learned from watching the Countess interact with her familiar.

"I can't take it," Cal said, handing the [Hunger Essence] to Smudge. "This isn't something that I can, in good conscience, use. Besides the fact that I don't really feel it aligns with what I want, it fits *you* perfectly. So, you should have it."

"Pyuu?"

"No, Smudge, I'm not sure. It does feel right, though. You are the only one of us who doesn't have a single essence. I would rather be missing an essence than stunt your growth. Take it, I don't want it."

"Slyrox might want," the koblin said slyly.

"Do you?"

"...no, Slyrox does not want beady-eye big-gut essence."

"It's not..." Cal shook his head. "Well, Smudge, you heard the lady. You're the only one who can use the [Hunger Essence]."

"Pyuu!"

Smudge's pink tongue unfurled, snagged the essence and pulled it into his body, where it slowly dissolved into a sphere of light that expanded to consume his whole body.

When the glow ceased, Smudge was unchanged as far as anybody could see.

“Did it... work?” Cal asked.

“Pyuu, pyuu!” Smudge confirmed with enthusiasm.

What was left after that was a halfhearted argument about the [Mirror Essence] that Cal was absolutely going to use. Smudge didn't show any interest in it, Shrubley couldn't use it.

That left Cal and Slyrox. The koblin was adamant that she wanted something bigger and scarier than Mirror essence and Cal was left to argue against his own desires or reluctantly accept her choice.

With that sorted, Shrubley pulled out his [Curiosity Essence Gem]. He looked between the item and the newly acquired [Light Essence Gem], trying to discern the difference.

Each one offered “greater experience” for the associated essences. To Shrubley, neither appeared to grant a higher potential of growth. Each was roughly equal, though only from using the gems would he truly be able to see the impact.

He remembered what Sel had told him, to wait until he was Copper Rank in order to use that gem. Presumably that meant it was safe to use both now.

He could feel the invigorating power of his Copper Rank flowing beneath his bark. He had felt so powerful when he had learned to tap into his Copper aura. It was like being a proper adventurer, if only for a few short minutes.

It was as addictive as sunshine and sweet spring rain. He craved more.

Despite that, even if Shrubley had not advanced in power, he would have still considered using the gems. They needed all they could get to survive the hazards and villains of the mirror realm's manor, along with everything between them and their destination.

Reunited with his friends, he wanted nothing more than to protect them. If he had not managed to get here in time, one of them might not have made it. And Shrubley couldn't stand for that.

As it was, the Countess and Sose were in bad shape. Even after using [Counteract] on them. He didn't know how long it would be until they were up and able to walk, let alone fight.

He didn't feel hurt that they didn't go back for him. Because none of them were able to. His friends had been in just as much danger as him. Perhaps more.

At least Shrubley had gotten to rest a few times, even if it was because he destroyed everything in that tomb. His friends looked worn and beaten, as if they hadn't gotten a good night's sleep since their training.

That chasm had been his personal trial and challenge. He felt proud of himself for overcoming the ordeal and putting a spirit to rest.

Seeing no reason to delay any longer, Shrubley held out both essence gems and squeezed. They shattered into glittering dust that immediately clung to his limbs, which looked more defined than he remembered them upon arriving in Taamra.

That felt like a lifetime ago, Shrubley thought to himself as the essence gems absorbed through his bark and he felt a brief pulse of power echo throughout his body. It felt comfortable, like the way Shrubley felt when the Druid would smile kindly upon him after answering a question correctly.

Your Curiosity Essence has improved to Tier IV.

Rank bonus match!

You gain:

+3 Arcane | +2 Willpower | +2 Hardiness

Immediately on the heels of that came another pulse of power, slightly weaker and different. This felt like the first rays of dawn warming up your bark after a cold mountain night. Everything felt... renewed and strengthened.

Your Light Essence has improved to Tier III.

Rank bonus match!

You gain:

+4 Restoration | +4 Willpower

At the fanfare of glittering gem dust, Smudge bounced and rolled around in excitement. "Pyuu!"

"Pssh-koh," Slyrox whispered, putting a steadying mitt on the slime. "Keep tongue-flaps low. Carpet-shark's barrier only so effective. Snakes might still hear us."

Smudge's eyes slowly drifted apart. Deciphering that took some time for Smudge to process.

“Carpet shark... as in, the oppa?” Cal ventured.

Slyrox nodded animatedly, her fuzzy ears flopping.

The black shattered gem dust still floating in the air suddenly went still, then rushed towards Shrubley on an unseen wind, as if time was reversing.

Shrubley stared, his little lamplight eyes going wide with wonder and curiosity. Which was fitting, considering.

Everybody stopped to stare at his hand. They had all been talking, but nobody had missed the glittering display of Shrubley using both essence gems.

And yet... here he was, with a [Curiosity Essence Gem] reconstituted in the palm of his hand as if time itself had rewound. Just to be sure, Shrubley looked at his status and found that, yes, his Curiosity essence was still Copper IV.

[Recycle (Curiosity)]

Cost: None

Cooldown: None

Reduce, reuse, recycle.

Imprint: Occasionally an item will gain another use when it should have been exhausted. Single-use items will be restored to their unused form.

“Ah, how did you do that?” Cal asked, leaning in.

Slyrox shuffled forward, peering closely at the recycled essence gem. “Can use many times?” she asked, puzzled.

“Usually, only the one,” Shrubley explained. “My essence ability, [Recycle], can sometimes restore a single use item. There’s no controlling it, though! Pure chance, it seems.”

“Amazing,” Slyrox whispered. “Essences are strange magic!”

“I agree,” Cal said. “Shrubley, which type of essence does that come from?”

“Curiosity,” he said, smiling beneath his leaves.

Smudge stared at the gem hungrily. “Pyuu?”

“Not sure you should, or even *can*, eat that buddy,” Cal said, patting his head. Which was really just the slime’s whole body. It sent ripples through his pink jelly.

“Pyuu...” Smudge whispered forlornly.

There was no use in waiting around again. Shrubley squeezed the gem once more until it shattered into onyx fragments and infused within his arm.

Double use! He watched with careful eyes to see if the gem would be reconstituted again. [Recycle] had no cooldown, but it was just a *chance*, and it didn't mention how much of one.

Math was not Shrubley's forte, so he wasn't even going to try to figure out the rough percentage. He was just happy it worked when it did and called it a day.

Your Curiosity Essence has improved to Tier V.

Rank bonus match!

You gain:

+3 Arcane | +3 Willpower | +2 Hardiness

Neat!

Though he wasn't at home with numbers, even Shrubley could tell that the higher the tier, the more bonus attributes he gained. Already, that was comparable to a level up.

That meant, given the choice, he was best off using an essence gem on his strongest essence. Which made him wonder if there was such a thing as an omni essence gem, something that would work for any essence he applied it to.

Maybe I'm onto something! Then again, I have Curiosity essence, not Intuition essence.

Seeing as his palms both remained empty, Shrubley assumed that he wasn't about to get lucky a second time and pulled up his status to check on his progress.

[Shrubley]

Race: Soul Shrub

Class: No Guidance Stone or Class Affinity Attuned

Rank: Copper

Level: 15

[Attributes]

Strength: 25

Skill: 29

Hardiness: 36

Willpower: 50

Arcane: 38

Restoration: 38

[Essences]

[Curiosity (Black)] (Copper V Rank)

- [Lifelong Student]
- [Recycle]

[Nature (Green)] (Copper III Rank)

- [Bark Armor]
- [Budding Barrage]
- [Graft]

[Light (White)] (Copper III Rank)

- [Recovery]
- [Counteract]

The gems said greater experience, but both times I gained another tier. Is that what they meant, or are my essences so low that any gem will grant them another tier?

He didn't bother wondering about how many tiers there were or how far he was from the next one. They would come when they came and there was no need to rush them along.

With each tier of essence gained, Shrubley felt stronger and more confident in their use. The Curiosity, Nature and Light essences forming a confluence within him was more potent than ever. Even his wellspring of mana was a little deeper.

“Has anyone else risen to Copper?” Shrubley asked with genuine interest.

And then he realized the dismal circumstances he had found them in. Unlikely any of them had, or else they could have stood up to that [Serpentii Assassin].

It had taken him using his newfound Copper Aura to take the creature down, and even then, it was a harder victory than he would have thought possible.

Slyrox shook her head, and so did Cal.

Smudge rolled upside down. His frown ended up resembling a smile, but Shrubley picked up the slime’s meaning well enough.

Shrubley nodded.

“Need three essences to reach Copper?” the koblin asked, then lifted a mitt up. “Slyrox only has one.”

“Well, you need three for a Class,” Cal put forth, picking up his severed bone hand with the one still attached to his body and putting the extremity to his chin in thought. “But... perhaps you need three for the next rank, too?”

Smudge blinked out of sync at the skeleton.

The group’s attention turned to Shrubley, hoping he had the answer. He was the only Copper among them, and anyone else that was far beyond that was down for the count.