

Chapter 83 – Oregano Gangtsa III

“I’m sorry about that,” Jerric said.

Shrublely shrugged his leafy body. “He is young and in pain.”

Jerric studied the small shrub intently, wondering if he was going to say anything else. Then he realized who he was talking to.

It had been an... education, speaking with Shrublely.

Even as little as he had, the Paladin came away feeling somewhat tarnished compared to the little shrub’s radiant glow of morality and inherent goodness.

He caught himself feeling shame for the way he would have treated the child were the situations reversed. A cuff around the ear, a stern word, and then that’d be it.

Shrublely wanted to *help* the poor kid.

Even after he stole from him! Valuable rewards for something Shrublely had done that no other soul had been able to do. That went far beyond simple thieving to keep oneself fed.

And yet, for Shrublely, it was as simple as what he said. The young boy, whose name Jerric had already forgotten but was sure Shrublely hadn’t, was in pain and it was all Shrublely could think about.

“There were a fair number of orphans made this past week,” Fio said gently, resting a hand on Jerric’s armor. “Shrublely is right. We should endeavor to be kinder. Our station will allow the town to rebuild faster. We should focus on those efforts.”

Jerric looked over his shoulder at his party's Wizard. He gave her a grin and a nod of acceptance. Yes, she was right. Even with Remal on bedrest for the foreseeable future, there were still three members of his party, Steel Rankers, one and all, who were needed here. They could do the work of dozens of Coppers in a matter of hours instead of days.

"This is where we part ways for now, my friend," Jerric said, resisting the urge to kneel down and pat the monster's head. That, in Jerric's view, would be condescending. No matter that the little ambulatory shrub was oddly cute in a way he couldn't quite articulate.

Fio, despite her hatred of ruining her magical and opulent robes, had no such concerns. She dropped into a deep squat and patted Shrubley on the head. "Such a stout heart for one so young. Remember us when you're waving from the top of the Grancastle, yeah?"

Shrubley blinked yellow lamplight eyes at her. "The... what?"

The Wizard giggled. It sounded like tiny silver bells. She straightened and, with a shimmering wave of mana, brushed her skirts so that the muck and dirt of the ground turned into glitter and fell to the alleyway.

"The Grancastle is where the best of the best adventuring clans reside," Jerric explained as they began to head out into the town. "It's situated in Sormwynn, the capital of the Empire and at the heart of the Inner Ring. All politics, all policy, and more Diamond Rankers than any other city in the world, stem from that one place. The Grancastle is...."

He sighed wistfully. It was everybody's dream to view it, let alone be granted an invitation inside. For Fio to mention it, even jokingly, was high praise indeed. "It is a work of art," he said simply when all other words failed him. "A tremendous symbol of power and prestige. It's said you can see the Rimfall from there. But you needn't worry about it just yet. It's very far away from here."

“Not to mention, you’ll need to be at least Noble stage before you can enter it,” Fio said, raising a lecturing well-manicured finger. “Anything less and it’s said the unchecked power of Diamonds and so many Jewel stage people gathered in one location will kill you. The walls are specially formed to keep such power inside, so those within don’t need to stifle themselves for once.”

I should very much like to see this Grancastle, Shrublely thought excitedly. It was good to have goals, and that was getting added to The List immediately. He didn’t have much on The List, with the only item being “Become the greatest S-Grade Adventurer Hero”, which on the whole wasn’t easily achievable.

Adding “Visit the Grancastle in Sormwynn” however, was far more possible. All he had to do was gain several ranks and travel a very long—but unknown distance—to the Inner Ring.

Easy.

He had no idea where Sormwynn was, nor the Inner Ring, for that matter. Everybody spoke of it as if it was as obvious as the leaves on his body, but... well, he *was* just a shrub. Up until a few weeks ago he had lived peacefully in the mountains knowing little of anything apart from what his father, the Druid who gave him life, taught him.

“I will do it,” Shrublely said with conviction.

Jerric couldn’t help but root for the little guy. *He* hadn’t been able to do it despite having some of the best trainers and access to exceptional contacts considering his middling birth. Being from a well-off family with minor titles seemed like a great thing to the commoners and those born simply, but compared to the highborns he might as well be little different from a blacksmith’s son.

And yet... he felt sure that Shrubley would be there someday. There was something indefatigable about him. He had already done so much that if he wished to stay in Taamra for the rest of his days, he would no doubt be treated like a king.

Jerric thought back to the little kid. *Perhaps not by everybody, but certainly better than any monster living in a town full of people.*

And that was the thing. Shrubley didn't seem any different despite the fact that he had saved the lives of not one, but *four* Steel Rankers, an entire town full of hundreds of people, and the whole damn countryside.

Not to mention he thwarted the plans of a vile creature who, if he was completely honest with himself, would have had plenty of time to do some real damage to the surrounding lands.

Had he been able to crush Taamra's resistance and the Adventurers Guild, who could say how far the cancer would have spread? The little he was able to talk to Remal, who had experience with this sort of thing, the more he understood the potential for disaster was immeasurable.

And it had been stopped, ultimately, by Shrubley and his gang of little low-class monsters. Nobody thought a soul shrub, a skeleton, a slime, or a... whatever a "koblin" was, could take on such insurmountable odds and survive.

But they had.

Sure, the actual deathblow of the Snake Lord had been by Jerric's hand, but he would have been powerless if Shrubley hadn't freed him and all the rest of his Steel party members. He had figured out a trick that even the Snake Lord hadn't realized could be exploited.

Power could be gained, but cleverness? That was something you either had or did not. If Shrubley was ever able to get the sort of training he deserved, he would be a serious force to reckon with.

Besides, from all that Jerric had been able to suss out about hitting Noble and Jewel stages, cleverness was needed. Raw power capped out around High Steel. Jerric still had plenty of room to grow, but he was fast running out of road.

Eventually, like every other Steel in history, he would come up against the Limit of Steel, a wall of difficulty in achieving greater power and therefore a higher rank.

If he didn't have such a huge lead on Shrubley, he would honestly be quite worried that the shrub might beat him to Silver.

As the trio walked out into the warm morning light of a fine autumn day, he realized belatedly that Shrubley was already Mid Copper. And that was only just barely.

At such a low rank, the differences were subtle. However, if Shrubley kept on as he was, Jerric could easily see him hitting Bronze in a month or less.

It was hard to believe that just a few weeks ago he had joined the Adventurers Guild as a Mundane Ranker, and now he was cresting to the heights of Copper.

Though it was considered bad form to ask somebody what essences they had, Jerric found himself immensely curious. If only because he *swore* he detected four instead of the usual three. And that would be impossible.

Except, this is the Shrubley you're dealing with, he thought. He seems to live in the impossible.

They parted ways outside of the bustling guildhall, with Jerric's unasked question still nagging him. It was fine to ask friends, but while he liked Shrubley, they were not close enough for him to consider them friends.

And yet he knew that the soul shrub would think otherwise.

If only there were more of you in the world, Jerric thought. He turned to Fio. "Ready to get to work?"

Fio, in response, wriggled her fingers and summoned a magical hammer and saw from the aether. She nearly cackled at his expression. "You didn't think I'd do *manual labor*, now did you?"

Shrubley hurried into the Adventurers Guild, mulling over what to do next. He badly wanted to check his status to see what his Sage Knight level was at now, but the tantalizing smells of savory stews and steaks drew him in.

Just a few weeks ago he would have been pushed and bullied about with so many people coming and going through the guildhall. Now, whenever people saw him, they parted to allow him to walk without issue. Those that didn't were quickly pulled aside by another with a friendly wave for Shrubley.

"Hello, Nile!" Shrubley said. "Hello, Erlea!" Each person's name that he knew he greeted them as he saw them, much to their shock.

Despite being a plant monster, Shrubley wasn't much of a vegetarian. He preferred to eat meat, much to everyone else's surprise.

He still didn't understand why they acted like that.

Already seated at a premium spot, Slyrox eagerly waved him over. She had a plate heaped with a colorful salad crisscrossed with alternating

lines of purple and red dressing. Her tall glass of iced [Melondew Juice] was far more interesting to Shrubley.

I should like to order one as well!

How Slyrox could eat while wearing that mask, Shrubley didn't know, but she had already managed it in his presence multiple times without revealing her features.

Shrubley climbed into one of the seats at Slyrox's round table.

"Pyuu?" Smudge's disembodied voice asked.

Shrubley looked around, and spotted him leaning past the side of a square, jiggly pudding.

"Psshkoh, is good eye-peeking, Shrubley!" Slyrox said excitedly. "Great noms, yes?"

Shrubley looked at her food doubtfully but he said, "Yes, where—"

Before he could get more than two words out, a young man wearing the gray livery of the Adventurers Guild attendants came over with a platter of meats slathered in steaming red sauces. "Please accept this, with the compliments of the Guild Leader."

In the distance, Shrubley could see the mousey auburn-haired elf giving him a cheery wave. She was still filling out applications for new adventures, flanked by no less than three other attendants, all working feverishly to work through all the new adventurer applicants.

"Thank you very much!" Shrubley told the young man.

The attendant smiled and straightened up. The Hero of Taamra had thanked *him*. And to think, when he had first seen him walking past his

farm what felt like a lifetime ago, he had thought to call the Guild on him!

Shaking his head, Roger Aking hurried back to his post, his greenie badge proudly polished on his left breast.