

# CHAPTER 73 – GREEN OF SKIN, HEART OF GOLD

As they approached the manor, Shrubley thought about how often he'd traveled this road recently.

His very first adventure had set him on this road to the farms near the Haalften manor, and his second sent him to the manor proper. Both times, he had been accosted by misguided adventurers.

This time was different.

Nobody was willing to stand up to Cluckley. Without breaking stride, she booted snakes and serpentii hundreds of feet into the air or crushed them into the hardened soil.

Surely the Countess would have preferred them making a circuitous route around the manor through the surrounding foothills, but Shrubley didn't think there was any way you could disguise a tall, mobile witch hut like Cluckley.

The snakes at the manor would know they were coming, but they wouldn't expect the army at Shrubley's back. They were going to reclaim what was theirs.

Shrubley had put away the [Spiritgem] Slyrox gave him earlier. He needed the mana dearly, but he had something else to rely on when he wasn't in the middle of a battle or tense situation.

People and monsters were crammed all around him. He didn't want to open up his [Verdant Inventory] for all to see, but Shrubley supposed it couldn't be helped.

He needed the mana, and that [Spiritgem] would go to great use in whatever battle awaited them next.

Shuffling forward, he opened up a window into his inventory, and breathed a sigh of relief as the sunlight warmed his leaves. His mana buoyed up slightly.

He idly popped another seed from the grab bag he had. *Maybe this one will make something useful*, he thought, eternally optimistic, despite the countless seeds that were duds.

As soon as the manor came into view, Shrubley started to use [Bark Armor]. He liked that there wasn't a hugely visible component to the essence ability. It was subtle, just the way he liked it.

[Bark Armor (Nature)]

Cost: Moderate mana per second

Cooldown: 30 seconds

*Sometimes, the best offense is a solid defense.*

**Imprint: When channeled, builds up a small amount of (Nature) armor over time that absorbs damage. The longer you channel this ability, the more armor you gain.**

Going in with a bunch of armor on would make him stand out more than he wanted. It wasn't a problem for Shrubley that most armor wouldn't fit him. He liked the way he looked, and despite being erroneously called a monster from time to time, he enjoyed looking different.

During the trip, Smudge ate. A lot. Monsters and people alike had all sorts of things to offer, not just to him but to other slimes as well once the idea got passed around.

Not too many slimes could produce excreted gems, but some could.

Together, they created a decent stockpile of vitality gems that could restore health, stamina, or mana, depending on the need.

"Pyuu," Smudge cried victoriously, to a chorus of many more "Pyuu's" from his fellow slimes.

A good portion of the stockpile went to helping those who were already injured, but almost every person and monster would go into the battle with *something* to help them out.

Most weren't even Copper. The vast majority of the creatures at Shrubley's disposal were Mundane Rankers, common farmers, field hands, even hunters.

The monsters weren't any better. These weren't fire-breathing demons or terrifying manticores, these were your run-of-the-mill variety of monsters.

The sort of things that could survive in a low ambient mana environment. They were often hunted for sport, often because they chose to raid farms for their food.

Shrubley thought this was all a massive misunderstanding and could be remedied with a little dialog and a bit of common sense.

He wasn't aware just how feral most monsters were. Most slimes weren't newly Awakened like Smudge had been around the time he almost got turned into an alchemy potion.

Still, the small army he was bringing to the mirror realm's Haalften manor suggested something was different this time around. Awakenings were hardly ever a common occurrence, monsters being what they were, but to have so many at once was unprecedented.

Even Shrubley, who was hardly an expert, could tell this was something special. He just didn't know why, even though he very much wanted to.

The few serpentii that manned the gates to the manor were bowled over by purple stained chicken feet. The gates smashed apart, and the hedge mazes trampled underfoot.

Shrubley had gone over the battle plan and appointed leaders of smaller squads so everybody knew who to turn to. Every five-man team had a mixture of monsters and people.

Cluckley would secure their landing point, with anybody capable of ranged attacks helping to clear out any serpentii that the witch hut couldn't get.

The house rocked side to side as the big thing squashed whole clusters of snakes while a fusillade of spells, rocks, and arrows rained down on the serpentii that rushed out to hack at the chicken feet.

"Does the house need a [Heartgem]?" one of the farmers asked, staring up at the rafters.

A goblin and his cow shrugged.

"Look!" A child pointed to the wall, where nails and lengths of wood peeled back as if from a great blow.

“Now, that’s something I can mend,” the farmer said gruffly, getting to work repairing the damage.

Field hands picked up hammers and nails, repairing what damage they could under the watchful eye of the farmers. They might be seen as stupid or weak, but they were hardworking people who understood the meaning of quality work.

They woke up every day and dealt with problems that most people never would understand, and they did it without complaint. Day in and day out, they dealt with monsters, wolves, wild animals, disease, everything that life could throw at them, they weathered it all.

When Cluckley started taking damage, they were the first to patch her back up. They hadn’t been beaten by brutal winters and famine. They wouldn’t be beaten by a bunch of *snakes*.

Slyrox pitched in as well, working fast and efficiently with her [Kludge] racial ability.

**[Kludge]: Tinkerers to the last, you are a member of the proud koblin race that can take a few bits of string and some lengths of wood and turn them into nearly anything.**

Lifted high by field hands and offered their well cared for tools, Slyrox mended the rents in the ceiling with alacrity.

Even with them working together, they couldn’t keep up with the damage being sustained to Cluckley.

Once the area was clear enough, Cluckley lowered herself to the ground long enough for everybody to disembark. Shrubley immediately sent them on their tasks. There was a lot that had to be done and Shrubley was afraid of spreading them too thin, especially considering that serpentii were still flooding out of the manor.

Cluckley got back up on her legs and stomped around to the side of the manor as Shrubley and the rest of his rabble followed behind.

For a moment, it looked like Cluckley was about to fall over. She hopped on one foot and tilted precariously to the side, nearly spilling the few people too weak or scared to fight still inside.

With one foot in the air, she kicked the side of the house clean in, killing dozens of waiting serpentii in the process.

Shrubley's forces boiled into the opening, stabbing and slashing with whatever meager weapons they had managed to claim from the dead serpentii. It was clear that among all places, the snake folk had thought they would need to defend the manor.

But their numbers were much less than Shrubley expected. That didn't bode well for Taamra.

Keeping his Copper aura in check, Shrubley headed the spear tip of the strike force. He cut and thrust, dove and rolled, used his [Morph Shield] to cover his entire body and bowled through walls and foes alike. Using [Enlightenment] was a greater MP drain, but it meant that his [Bark Armor] was significantly enhanced.

### [Enlightenment (Sage Knight)]

**Cost: Low mana**

**Cooldown: 30 seconds**

*Elevate your mind.*

**Imprint: Optimize the efficacy of any spell or ability to its maximum.**

*Less damage taken means less healing*, Shrubley thought to himself proudly. He had become quite familiar with the way [Enlightenment] worked since gaining the ability.

[Enlightenment] wasn't always required, largely because the combined MP loss quickly added up, but if there was ever a need for a stronger barrier from [Valor], or a stronger heal from [Recovery], it was perfect. But it was, at the end of the day, inefficient.

Shrubley wasn't sure why that was. If he had more mana, he would use it constantly, but seeing as there was little time to rest up, he had to be careful where he spent what mana he possessed.

[Recovery] and [Bark Armor] were two places where [Enlightenment] worked exceptionally well. The additional mana cost was largely mitigated by the fact that both abilities functioned over a period of time.

### [Recovery (Light)]

**Cost: Moderate Mana**

**Cooldown: 10 seconds**

**Duration: 60 seconds**

*All things strive.*

**Imprint: Once you touch a wounded creature, you are able to tell the severity of their wounds and apply a non-stacking instance of healing magic that will gradually restore all damage equally.**

**[Bark Armor (Nature)]**

**Cost: Moderate mana per second**

**Cooldown: 30 seconds**

*Sometimes, the best offense is a solid defense.*

**Imprint: When channeled, builds up a small amount of (Nature) armor over time that absorbs damage. The longer you channel this ability, the more armor you gain.**

That “over time” bit was important. Though the improvement [Enlightenment] provided wasn’t massive to either ability, the effect quickly snowballed.

If it wasn’t for the present circumstances, Shrubley would be having quite a lot of fun rolling around at high speeds in that armored ball. His familiar certainly was enjoying the ride.

It was his job to reach the well and hold it against the serpentii. That was the most important role of all. Without the portal secured, they had no hope of getting back.

And aside from the Countess, only Shrubley and his group had any idea where the well was located. They had been unconscious when they were sent to the dungeon, but the Countess had explained where the dungeons were located.

From there it was a simple matter of breaking through the serpentii defenses until they reached the glowing green well that they had fallen into. The Countess was absolutely certain that there would be a mirror version of it

here. This was where the serpentii were coming from, and their fiercest defenders would be around the well.

It didn't bear thinking about the possibility that there might not be a recognizable well at all. Everything hinged on that well being their way out.

Floor by floor, room by room, Shrubley's group held fast against the serpentii that assaulted them. Their initial supply of [Heartgems] were used up by the time they reached the dankness of the dungeons, forcing Shrubley to drop back and use [Recovery] to mend what he could.

Once again, he was thankful to have a White essence specialized in healing.

The humans and monsters that came with Shrubley, Cal, Smudge, and Slyrox were in awe of Shrubley's focus on healing over fighting. Whenever possible, he would make sure that everybody was doing well. He didn't barge ahead as a traditional hero might. He cared, and they took notice.

"I'm a Sage Knight," he told them, as if that explained everything.

Not everyone understood exactly the deeper significance of what that meant. But a few of them realized that Shrubley, a monster, had unlocked a Class.

None of them had ever heard of a monster with a Class before.

And then it happened.

Something that would ripple across the face of Almora for generations.

They were passing through the cramped corridors of the dungeons when a serpentii assassin dropped from the ceiling into their midst.

A tiny goblin surged forward, pushing a fierce young woman aside just in time for her to avoid getting skewered by the serpentii's spear. The small goblin, however, wasn't quite so lucky. He grasped at the spear, trying in vain to stop from sliding along the shaft toward the waiting fanged maw of the serpentii.

The triumphant hiss of the snake was drowned out by the rage-filled roar from the young woman. She brought down her simple woodcutter's axe on the serpentii's flared head and split it clean open.

Goblin and spear rattled to the ground. Shrubley was there in a moment, but it was too late. He tried to heal the wound, but the goblin put his own tiny green hands on Shrubley's and shook his head.

Shrubley's heart broke. *My magic isn't strong enough for this...*

The woman knelt beside the goblin. “Why?”

Reaching a small, green-clawed hand to the woman, the goblin looked at her with a faint smile. “Friend,” he managed to wheeze.

The light faded from his childlike eyes, but the smile remained.