

# CHAPTER 39 – ROCK BOTTOM

Time lost all meaning in this private universe of pain and agony.

Shrubley knew he wasn't dead only because of the pain that swept through his body whenever he moved a single twig, and often when he did nothing at all.

He struggled to consciousness more times than he could count, but always the darkness swept over him like a tide of lead and buried him.

Eventually, the moments of painful waking stretched out longer and longer. He was a fighter and never gave up, but even the greatest Heroes cannot fight pain.

It was something to be endured, not battled.

Shrubley remembered when the Druid had gotten sick. He did not understand the strength that the Druid had back then to keep going day after day as the cancer ravaged his body.

He grew frail and weak, but never gave up. The Druid continued to teach Shrubley everything he knew, and though the little sapling had tried his best to help, he was more of a hindrance than anything.

And still, the Druid never said a word. He must have been in unimaginable pain, but he always had a ready smile for Shrubley and a gentle pat on the leaves.

“If I can't meet him again,” Shrubley said, grunting with the effort of pulling himself upright, “then I will survive. For him. If the Druid can do it, *so can his son.*”

Shrubley's branches were shattered and broken. Most of them didn't work right or hung at nauseating angles, but he had managed to survive somehow. The gorge narrowed considerably down here and there was the faint trickling sound of running water, but it was just as lightless as ever.

He managed to stand up twice before the roots that wound together to form his legs and feet snapped completely and he was forced to admit that he wasn't about to walk out of here, even if there was an exit.

Despair washed over Shrubley. It was not a new sensation, but one he had hoped never to feel again.

He lay there, trying to puzzle his way out of this again and again. Any movement brought the risk of more pain. That, he might be able to endure for a time, but the more lasting damage he took, the less his chances of survival were.

The pain came in waves, never fully ceasing. He could hardly move, he had no mana, no stamina, and his health was a bare sliver.

It was looking like he had survived just to die a slow and agonizing death. He wasn't even sure if he could roll his broken body down to the water for a drink. Green sap leaked out of his countless wounds and he started to feel cold despite the humid air.

*Think, Shrubley, think! What else makes you special, but your ability to think?* He struggled to concentrate through the pain, trying to pull from the depths what he had at his disposal.

But it was hard. Like trying to catch mudlarks. The moment he managed to thrust his hand into the quagmire of his thoughts and grip something suitable, it slipped away again.

He did not hold hope for a moment that someone would come to save him.

Shrubley let himself go limp. Fighting just to try to sit up was too much. He might as well just let himself die. There was nobody coming to save him.

How could they? They were running for their lives, and though Shrubley had saved Slyrox... he wasn't important enough to go back for.

Besides, he had fallen so far that it would be all but impossible to climb down to him in the endless darkness.

Better to just let go. Then he could see the Druid again. The pain was too much.

He wasn't strong enough.

The Druid had been wrong about him.

Dew gathered at the edges of his lamplight eyes as they dimmed until they were bare pinpricks of light within the recesses of his broken and withered, bushy body.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered with a choked back sob. “I have failed you.”

A haze of light materialized next to him, shimmering and wavering, yet not illuminating the surrounding area in the slightest.

“...Master?”

The large man crouched low. What could be seen of his bearded face was lined with age, but his face crinkled with mirth as he smiled at Shrubley. “What did I say about calling me that?” he rumbled like an avalanche.

“I am sorry... Father.”

“Good lad,” the Druid said. He reached out and ruffled what was left of Shrubley’s leaves. “What’s all this then I hear about you giving up?” He leaned back and laughed. His rich mahogany voice boomed against the walls of stone. “Surely, I must have misheard you! That does not sound like my boy.”

“I am too weak,” Shrubley said, his eyes burning with shame and unshed tears. “I am not you! I never was good enough. You left me too soon. I wasn’t ready for the world, for life *without you*.”

The Druid sighed softly. It reminded Shrubley of the wind sowing through the trees near his home, and he could almost see the dappled sunlight of the glade he called home. “My boy, no parent wishes to go before their child is ready. They hope and wish, but none of us gets to choose when our time is called. The best we can do is make the most of the time given to us.”

Shrubley reached a broken limb out toward the Druid. It shook with desperate effort. “Why did you leave me?” His voice cracked with the weight of sorrow on his soul. “Was I not good enough?”

A warm light enveloped his hand. The Druid covered Shrubley’s tiny broken hand with both of his. They swallowed the twigs whole, and he felt like that small, scared sapling, unsure of himself and his place in the world without his father to anchor him.

“You were the best part of my life,” the Druid told him, his voice as soft as a butterfly’s kiss. “I have watched you blossom into a fine young man. And I have seen the way you touch the lives of others. Your heart is three sizes bigger than mine ever was, my boy.”

The Druid reached and pressed a hand onto Shrubley’s withered chest. “Such pain, so much for one so small. It is not fair, I know. But life is not fair. I wish

that it was. In times of great darkness, it is up to those who possess the spark of light to bring it into the deepest, darkest places. It is their responsibility, their duty to bring light to the darkness. Just as you have done here.”

“But I failed...”

“No, my child, you did not.” He patted Shrubley’s hand again. It soothed his wounds and calmed his soul. “We all live on through the lives we have touched. Though I am no longer in the land of the living, I live on through you. Every life you touch, I am there. And you too, live on through the lives you have touched. And already you have helped so many who never knew the kindness and tenderness that you showed them. You cannot call yourself a failure unless you are a liar. And I did not raise a liar.”

Shrubley sniffled back the hot dew that fell from his eyes. “I am so tired. My friends are gone, and I do not know how to get to them.”

“Those are simply problems,” the Druid told him, fading slightly. He sighed. “It would seem our reunion is coming to an end, my boy.”

“Please don’t go.”

“I am never far. I am always in your heart.” He reached forward and tapped Shrubley’s chest gently. “So long as you live, I will be here, though you may never see me, know that I am always watching over you. I like your name, by the way. It is very... you. And that is all I ever wanted for you, to choose your own path, your own way. Nothing makes a parent happier.”

Just before he faded away entirely, he added with a smile that crinkled around his eyes, “I am so very proud of you, Shrubley. Now get up, there’s work to be done. That’s a good lad.”

Shrubley reached both arms out. They shook like branches in a gale. “I love you, Father.”

The light faded, but Shrubley could just barely hear his voice as the vision vanished, “I love you too, my son.”

“Everything is so dark,” Shrubley whispered to the uncaring world. “I do not know what to do!”

There was no answer this time.

Shrubley curled up into a ball and sobbed, the pain of losing the Druid came back with a fury.

There was no way to tell how long he lay there crying, but eventually, even the tears dried up. He was racked with loss and guilt, and no small amount of pain.

An item tumbled free of his [Verdant Inventory], falling uselessly to the ground.

The [Essence Vessel]. He could see it. Not because it was glowing, but because a light was being cast upon it.

A lone glowbug, having escaped its magical bottle, perched on the vessel. Shrublely recognized it as the same one that had been with him in the darkness of the barrel during his battle against the Rattle Rousers.

Without any mana, the glowbug was covered in shadow too. It watched him, waiting.

He suddenly didn't feel utterly alone anymore.

He gently moved his arm and passed it through the stream of light coming out of his broken leaves and branches.

“Light inside of me...?” he muttered to himself.

With great effort, Shrublely sat up as the light from his [Verdant Inventory] faded. He hardly had the strength to call it again, but he wrung out every last drop of power he had left to open a small window into his inventory, outside of himself.

He stared into the hole in reality that shone golden sunlight on a verdant field of grass and flowers. Light spilled out and warmed his wounds and perked up his leaves.

“In the darkest times, it is the light that we give ourselves that keeps us going,” Shrublely said softly.

His [Verdant Inventory], hanging open in the air, was hardly the size of a dinner plate, but the sunlight from within felt like the most wondrous thing ever.

The leaves hit by the sunlight shimmered and sparkled, turning from sickly purple and yellow to a dark healthy and glossy green.

**[Solar Synthesis]: Accelerated health, stamina and mana recovery while absorbing Solar mana. Alters your affinity towards Nature, Wood and Life mana.**

“Thank you,” Shrubley said to his father. “For believing in me.”