

CHAPTER 52 – BLOOMING

ESSENCES II

Cal looked over at him. “How? Do you have *another* essence just rattling around in your inventory or something?”

Shrubley looked a little bashful. “Not as such... no.”

“Then what?”

He took out the [Essence Vessel]. Runes and sigils glowed softly on the outside. “Remember that [Recycle] essence ability that made the [Curiosity Gem] remake itself? It worked on this too.”

Cal’s necromantic fires flared in shock. “Those are incredibly rare!”

“You can have it,” Shrubley said, holding it out to his best friend.

“I can’t take that!”

“Why not?”

Cal thought about this for several minutes, but couldn’t come up with a good answer. He didn’t feel right being effectively *given* two essences. Not when Slyrox and Smudge only had one each.

He had an aversion to gifts. It was a struggle to remember that any gift Shrubley gave was one free of strings.

Cal’s former gang, the Rattle Rousers, had treated him very poorly, and before that, he was treated even worse by the Necromancer.

It was an adjustment to realize that not everybody hated him or wanted to see him cry and suffer.

Bit by bit, Cal’s perspective of the world was changing.

“Skeleton-man is closest to Copper,” Slyrox told him with an encouraging thumbs-up. “Just one essence away. Muchly important you have firstly.”

Smudge bounced in a steady tempo of agreement.

Cal eyed the slime. *Though, perhaps I'm just reading into it?*

Despite his inner struggle, Cal finally arrived at a decision.

"I... will keep it safe," Cal said, taking it gently and putting it into his ribcage with the rest of his ill-gotten gains. It was a rather good storage space with all the extra bones slung around to make a net of sorts.

"Good," Shrubley said happily. "Once it makes a new essence, you can be Copper Rank! And if you don't like the essence, maybe Slyrox or Smudge would."

Cal nodded. He hadn't thought of that earlier. The potential essence-to-be could be used by any of them if it didn't suit Cal's style and build.

He strained to believe that he had the luxury to actually shape what kind of mage he was going to be. He certainly didn't want Fist essence. What would he be then, some kind of Fist Mage?

Somewhere across the universe, there was an incorrigible, foul-mouthed Magi practicing just that. Not that Cal knew her and her sassy pobul.

They climbed over a heavily rotted tree smothered with purple ivy.

"Why didn't you keep it in your inventory?" Cal asked. "You told me nothing can decay or get damaged in there. It seems like a risk keeping it out in the open like this."

"I trust you."

Once again, Cal struggled to take Shrubley at face value. If he said something, he meant it. He didn't know if the little guy even understood the concept of lying.

Besides, Cal didn't know what to say to something like that. How did people normally handle compliments? There should be a guidebook!

"Err... thanks."

"Besides," Shrubley continued, completely unaware of the inner turmoil in Cal, "I'm willing to bet that the mana within my [Verdant Inventory] caused it to become Light essence. I don't think you'd want that, so having it out where it can absorb a variety of different types of ambient mana seems best. That way, you might get something you'd want to use."

Cal opened his mouth, then shut it again with a little *click*.

Sometimes it was hard dealing with somebody as kind and thoughtful as Shrubley. Cal liked him immensely. He was his best friend, after all, but that didn't mean he understood the little bundle of leaves and twigs.

It was quite hard to remember that Shrubley, for all his naivety and rampant kindness, spent a lot of his time thinking about things. He rarely seemed to do anything without giving it a great deal of thought, and that always made Cal uncomfortable.

He wasn't sure why, but it did.

"Well... thank you, Shrubley. I'm sure we'll get a good use out of this [Essence Vessel] once it fills up."

"If we go somewhere that has a very strong amount of ambient mana, it will likely speed up the process," Shrubley told him. "I had the vessel before we arrived here and I do not know when it was finally filled. I confess that I did not check upon it regularly, feeling as I was."

"Yes," Cal said, looking sidelong at his green and leafy friend. "You do look a lot better now. Why is that? I didn't think it was polite to ask. We were all worried for you, you know."

"I appreciate it," Shrubley told him. He looked up at the canopy of leaves. All of them were the same sickly purple and yellow. He felt for the trees, even if he couldn't hear their voices. Even if they, like the rest of this world, were just pale reflections of something real.

Shrubley looked around to make sure they weren't being followed. Satisfied to the best of his abilities, he pulled open his [Verdant Inventory] shrouded in his body. Light, golden and pure spilled out between the leaves as if the sun was just out of sight somewhere.

Cal stopped walking and stared at it. He had never been one for the moon and midnight nonsense that all the other skeletons adhered to. It was becoming clear to him that the difference between a run-of-the-mill monster and an Awakened was individuality.

A monster appeared to do little more than follow a script, but an Awakened... they had thoughts, they asked questions, they *doubted*. And perhaps that was why Cal was beat up so often.

Just like with people who would rather the easy road of non-thinking conformity, seeing somebody question deeply held beliefs made monsters feel uncomfortable. And when a monster is uncomfortable, they want to make sure *everybody else* feels uncomfortable as well.

Usually with violence.

He had always wanted to bask in the glow of the sun. The Rattle Rousers had told him it was “unnatural”, and he would “turn to dust” which would “serve him right” and yet they wouldn’t allow him to step out of their tomb into the morning light.

They *guarded* against skeletons leaving, not entering!

That first day with Shrubley, when the sun had come up over the eastern hills, was a sight to behold. And Cal wanted many more days like that.

Right now, staring at the golden light spilling out of his friend’s spherical shrubby body, he was reminded of what he had to fight for.

If they didn’t stop the Snake Lord, who would? Perhaps he had already taken over Taamra. With every person stolen, it would be harder and harder to undo the damage he caused.

That was if anything had happened already. Cal was nervous about that. He certainly wasn’t a hero, but he thought of Shrubley as one. Small though he may be, he had the heart of a hero.

Not like Big Rick, the previous leader of the Rattle Rousers who had the heart of a hero in a little jar on the nightstand beside his coffin.

Being a hero was part of who Shrubley was. He may be one of the weakest types of monsters in existence, but so was Cal, and for that matter, so was Smudge. He wasn’t so sure about kobblins, but if they were anything like goblins... well, they were all the lowest of the low.

All of them were misfits in one way or another.

There weren’t any types of monsters *weaker* than they were. Skeletons were a joke for adventurers. He’d heard their scornful laughter when the Rattle Rousers ran across them and were easily thinned out.

Slimes and magical shrubs like Shrubley were the sort of things *kids* practiced on! Goblins, while threatening in groups, were pushovers on their own.

“We are stronger together,” Shrublely had told him when he asked why he wanted to lead a band of reject monsters like them. Shrublely, for all his innate weakness, was not like the rest of them.

He had a vision, and a goal.

Cal wanted nothing more than for his best friend to become the very hero he aspired to be. But he didn't think he could join him. Sooner or later, Shrublely would realize how much dead (hah!) weight he was.

When he was inevitably tossed aside, he'd be okay with it. And he would still try to help Shrublely from the sidelines. Until that day came, however, he would do his best to live up to his friend's expectations.

Sometimes he thought it would be better to be beaten and his bones stolen to the sounds of raucous, hurtful laughter than to strive forever to reach the lofty expectations that Shrublely had for him.

One day, he'll see just how different I am from the person he thinks I am.

Little did Cal know, Shrublely had no intention of ever casting his first friend aside. The mere thought hadn't occurred to him, and probably never would.

Shrublely, meanwhile, was enjoying a stroll through the woods after being reunited with his friends. He closed the [Verdant Inventory] and kept up the pace.

Slyrox kept a keen eye on their surroundings, focusing on the group's sides and rear. Though distracted, Cal kept an eye out for any threats ahead.

That left Smudge and Shrublely's perception to keep an eye out for threats from above. After all, that was how Shrublely got the jump on the assassin.

The day grew oppressively muggy and hot as the sun rode high overhead. They kept to the shelter of the woods, fighting only when absolutely necessary and usually dominated by Shrublely's new use of his Copper aura.

He had to reign in his enthusiasm in order to let the others try out their new essence powers. Despite towing the unconscious Countess, the serpentii always seemed to go straight for Shrublely as if they could sense the threat he posed to them.

When that coppery aura sprang up around the tiny shrub, the look of shock and surprise on their faces was priceless. Cal wished he had one of those fancy cameras to immortalize the moment.

And every time that aura showed, it lifted the group's morale and spirits. The strength of a hero to rally behind did wonders in this dark and hostile territory.

Despite the fighting, they were making good time.

From time-to-time Shrubley would go up to the edge of the forest where he would blend in better than anybody else and peek out at the road.

As what weak and pale sunlight there was began to fade and the blanket of heat that announced midday was lifted, Shrubley returned and motioned them closer.

"There is something bothering me," Shrubley told them.

Cal craned to look toward the edge of the forest, but it was so far away he couldn't see it for all the trees. Shrubley had been taking them deeper and deeper into the forest lately, though he wouldn't say why.

"What is it?"

"Pyuu?"

Shrubley looked around frustratedly. His senses told him one thing, but his eyes did not lie. He was certain.

"I think we've been walking in circles," he told them. "This forest has trapped us."