

Chapter 85 – Oregano Gangsta V

Slyrox held in her mitts an essence gem unlike any other. The red jewel shone with a resplendent blue inner light, yet somehow the two colors never mixed. White silhouettes scudded across the jewel's surface, resembling clouds.

“Ah, it is a Red essence!” Cal said.

“Blue?” Smudge asked, puzzled.

Shrublely considered that. From one angle, the light was blue, but the jewel itself was red. “Which is it?” he asked Slyrox.

The koblin looked up at him. “Is Red!”

Shrublely nodded. He considered that color of essence to be an excellent match for Slyrox, as Red essences were offense oriented. The koblin was a tough melee fighter who could make great use of high damage dealing powers.

Blue essences like Smudge's Stone essence were defensive. In Shrublely's opinion, starting with a Blue essence wouldn't be an ideal match for Slyrox. Perhaps after she gained more damaging powers, but not before.

However, the specific type of essence mattered greatly. It needed to be suitable for Slyrox.

Shrublely struggled to wait for his friend to explain what the essence was. The jewel's appearance was truly curious. He could ask to take a closer look at the item, but he did not wish to spoil what was effectively Slyrox's first essence upon this Worldshard.

Upon traveling from another world, Slyrox acquired the Braver essence, as if it was always a part of her. It was a Black essence too, which was a unique kind just like his Curiosity essence.

Shrubley had to admit, he was quite intrigued by Slyrox's origins. He wanted to know what that land was like, and who this Havior person was. Was he like the Druid to Shrubley? A father figure, if not a father in truth?

There had never been an opportunity to broach the subject before.

This wasn't the first time he wondered about Slyrox, and surely wouldn't be the last. Shrubley had manners, and that meant he understood now wasn't the best time to ask. Not when Slyrox was eagerly examining the beautiful red jewel that seemed to hold the blue sky within its many facets.

If traveling between worlds was a simple affair, he might like to try it some day and meet this fatherly Havior. However, from what Shrubley understood, Worldshard Aldim was not without its problems. Its land seemed to be sick, much like Slyrox had been before Almora cured her.

For the time being, he had a little too much of delving into an ailing land. He did not particularly like to recall his yellowing, dying leaves in the mirror realm.

"Is Sky essence!" Slyrox said excitedly. She held it cupped in her mittened hand, then realized what she was doing and forced her palm flat to keep the jewel on display for all. "Slyrox would very much like, if okay?"

If she expected there to be an argument, Slyrox was in for a surprise.

“It suits you,” Cal said. “I’m afraid of heights. Not going to catch me with a Sky essence!” His bones began to rattle and shake at the mere thought.

“Pyuu!” Smudge cried encouragingly.

Despite Shrubley’s full essences, the koblin still looked to him for approval. He nodded enthusiastically.

“Go for it,” Shrubley told her. “You earned it.”

Her tiny mittened hand closed on the gem and the room shifted for a brief moment. Clouds scudded across the ceiling, the walls vanished, and they were all alone in the big blue yonder.

Cal screamed and went invisible, drawing his bony legs up from the vanished floor. Thankfully, the furniture they were sitting on was still there. It was just suddenly suspended hundreds—perhaps thousands—of feet in the sky.

They could see the village of Taamra down below, and the distant Haalften manor, as well as the perilous mountain roads beyond that one day would take them into the fabled Inner Ring.

“Ah, that is a wondrous view!” Shrubley cried, overtaken by awe. He looked every which way. Truly, the powers of this Sky essence were incredible.

It was over far too soon. The walls reappeared, the floor solidified under their furniture, and the room returned to normal.

Cal took several more minutes to appear, but the nervous rattling of his bones told Shrubley he was sitting in the same spot.

“More?” Smudge bounced in a circuit around the coffee table, his big eyes and smiling mouth swiveling as he looked for any sign of that sky vision.

Slyrox shrugged, unsure how she had managed it.

“That leaves 3 essences,” Shrubley said proudly. “The next one to get an essence will be finished.”

He was looking forward to his friends catching up to him, to being able to share what he learned of Copper with them. He had expected that attaining a higher rank meant that he was simply more powerful.

That appeared to be true, but controlling his Copper aura allowed him to draw out more of that power. The more he worked at his aura control, the stronger it became, and the more he could empower himself without weakness afterward.

It was a valuable lesson he intended to impart to his friends as soon as they were able to learn it.

I owe the Countess for that, Shrubley thought. She had imparted the useful lesson after watching him nearly burn out from using all of his available Copper power at once.

He missed the statuesque vampyr, but he did not wish to impose. As the region’s ruling noble, she was busy looking after everyone. Not just Shrubley.

It was still tempting, however, to go check in on her. *Surely a visit wouldn’t be too much of a bother?* Shrubley dearly missed Cluckley, and he felt he should apologize to her about the magical witch hut’s demise.

But there had been so much pain and loss that Shrubley couldn’t bear to bring further bad news. That child, Dynk, appeared in his mind’s eye

again and he reminded himself to help not only the one orphan he saw, but all the others he knew must be out there, unseen.

I am rich now, he told himself, I could use this money for the good of the people.

It wasn't until Shrubley heard the squeal of wood furniture being moved across the wooden floor that he looked up.

Slyrox had scurried away, then hastily pushed aside some furniture. The koblin lowered into a deep, almost comical squat. Though masked and covered in that suit from head to toe, she visibly strained, her mitts clenching.

Cal scurried to Shrubley's side, far away from Slyrox's little area.

"I don't know what she's doing," he told Shrubley, "but I know well enough to give her some space."

Shrubley agreed. Essences, once gained, always gave at least one essence ability. Slyrox was not alone in being keen to test out her new power. Shrubley had fallen victim to that same desire many times.

Translucent mana streamed off of Slyrox's body. It deepened, whipping into clouds.

With less common sense than the rest of the group, Smudge bounded off the coffee table and rolled to a stop in front of Slyrox, just in time to get a spinning kick to the face.

Slyrox spun like a top into the air, clouds whipping around her like a mini tornado.

The look of shock and surprise was, unfortunately, too much for Cal. Despite his friend's pain, he couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Smudge absorbed most of the blow, rearranging his pink slime body and the components of his face that floated along the outside. One eye drifted around while his mouth twisted 90-degrees.

When Smudge hit the ground, he rolled to a stop just beneath the window. If he had still been as tiny and small as he was when Shrubley first found him he would have been sent out the window and into the town.

Shrubley hurried over to his friend, using [Recovery] on him, despite sensing that the damage was only superficial. A shimmering white haze settled onto Smudge. His eyes rearranged themselves and his 90-degree smile turned the right way around.

[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.

“Pyuu!” Smudge exclaimed happily.

Shrubley patted him gently on the head and helped him back to his seat. Slyrox was still in the air, spinning. Her vaporous mana seemed far more chaotic than Shrubley had first thought.

Then she started to scream. A high-pitched, oddly dopplering warble as she spun in place, going faster and faster, slowly drifting toward one of the many open windows.

Cal was the first to get up and try to grab onto one of her stubby legs with her too-large shoes, but got his head kicked off for the trouble. The skeleton's skull went flying across the room as his body began to crouch and feel along the floor for it.

"Over here!" Cal called to his body.

Shrubley stared at it, then at Cal. He gently set Smudge down and went to pick up Cal's head as Slyrox—still screaming—slowly worked her way toward the window like the world's slowest moving tornado.

"Thanks," Cal said to Shrubley, clicking his head onto his neck.

"MUCHLY HAND-LENDING THANKING YOU!" Slyrox cried. The mana from the new essence ability was too much for her to control.

Cal picked up his staff and began to cast an Elemental spell, ice by the looks of it, before Shrubley extended a hand to stop him.

"What're you doing?" Cal asked.

"She is burning through her mana at an incredible rate," Shrubley told him. "She will deplete herself in a matter of seconds. There is no need for further injury."

Cal looked at Shrubley, calmly stating something as if it was obvious for all to see. Perhaps, to the shrub, it was. Cal couldn't tell one bit whether the koblin would stop or would continue to the next town, forever twirling in the air like a dandelion seed caught in a spring breeze.

Once again, Smudge began to bounce towards the spinning koblin, but Shrubley merely put a rooty limb out to stop him.

With a surprised warbling cry, Slyrox landed a foot away from the window, staggered about in place, then fell onto her back.

When everyone went over to check on her, she lifted a mittened hand and gave them a thumbs up. “Slyrox will muchly master [Tornado Kick]!”

Shrublely and Cal helped her to her feet. She walked more drunkenly than her standard duck-foot waddle before she plopped down into an armchair.

“How did you know?” Cal asked once they were seated again.

The little soul shrub regarded him curiously. “How do you mean?”

“I couldn’t tell anything!” Cal said.

It had been obvious to Shrublely. He could feel the way she was weakening. The pressure coming off of the koblin was reducing dramatically every second.

The best way he could describe it was like feeling the wind on his leaves. The wind coming from Slyrox was a strong breeze at first, but then toward the end, he could barely feel it.

That was when he knew that she was nearing the end of her mana.

Shrublely tried to explain it to Cal, who didn’t fully understand, but nodded along anyway and asked questions to try to tease out the full answer.

The two talked while Slyrox sipped on some juice they had chilling in a bucket and Smudge ate the rest of the snacks provided despite so recently eating.

A gentle knock at the door interrupted their conversation, which had turned toward where to find the next essences that they needed.

Shrubleby, who had only the barest concept of ownership, security, or locks, called out, "Please come in, thank you."

A silver-gray liveried attendant of the Adventurers Guild slipped through the door, bowed to them each in turn, and presented a heavy parchment envelope. "This came just moments ago, addressed to each of you directly." He set it gingerly down on the table between them, bowed once more, and backed out of the room before anybody could get a word in.