

# Chapter 99 – Herb Your Enthusiasm

“I do not know what you think you can do,” Retima told him as she showed him the patients, “but Lord Hammar wishes you to accompany me, and I will do as my lord asks.”

“Thank you, Miss Retima,” Shrublely said politely. “I am concerned that so many in your fair town have fallen ill. It must be difficult.”

Retima eyed the little monster, unsure if he was making fun of her or calling her out for her lack of skills. The little beast had to know she didn't have a magical bone in her body, and yet she could detect no trace of sarcasm or cruelty.

*Odd.*

That did not deter her from treating Shrublely as the nuisance he was. She did not suffer fools gladly, but she would suffer a great deal for Lord Hammar.

“And their drinks?” Shrublely asked, taking care to step onto a stool and examine the sleeping patient without touching them. Miss Retima was *very* particular that he did not touch anybody and that they only visited sleeping patients.

Shrublely had to agree. It seemed excitement triggered the illness, whatever it might be, and seeing a monster in their hospital would surely cause alarm and stress.

“What do you mean?” she asked skeptically.

“You have ruled out environmental factors, friends, family, acquaintances, yes? Then all that is left is food and water. They must

drink, and most human towns I have seen have wells that service their people.”

Retima stiffened. “Are you suggesting the wells are poisoned?”

“I do not know.”

“That is quite a devious little mind you have there,” Retima said savagely. She saw the way Shrubley looked down, ashamed. Despite herself, she felt guilty.

“I am only trying to help, ma’am.”

Retima pressed her lips into a thin line. “Yes, yes, I know. And to answer your question, the answer is we have several wells. Each of them is distinct from the other, with no crossover that we are aware of. Many patients were from different areas of town, and if everybody was poisoned a great many more people would be here.”

Even as she said the words, she felt a kernel of doubt lodge in her heart. The shrub was onto something, but she wasn’t sure what. They had checked the wells, the food, everything that they could think of. Not everybody was sick, but far more people than she was comfortable with were.

There were over a thousand souls in Talvar, and almost a tenth of that number were sick. Some got better quickly, but others took longer. Roughly half of those who contracted the mysterious illness were stuck in the hospital, neither getting worse nor better.

The Guild had sent for healers and was, unfortunately, denied. They were needed elsewhere, and any adventurers with White mana were often given lucrative deals and contracts elsewhere.

Only Black essences were more rare than White, but from what Shrubley told Retima, he had *both*. She lacked any essence. The wounds she took as a young maiden had seen to it that she could never wield essence or mana ever again.

It was worth it.

She would have gladly given her life rather than just her essences in defense of her home, but it still stung to see a *monster* able to wield the magicks that should have been hers to command.

*With White mana, I could have healed all these people already*, she thought bitterly.

“Could I see what they are being given to eat and drink?” Shrubley asked politely.

Busy looking out the window, Retima bristled at the unsaid accusation. That somehow *she* was poisoning her own people. The nerve! She turned to tell the monster what she thought, when she noticed that the little monster had betrayed her trust.

He was *touching* a sickly child! His wooden hand over the little girl’s sweat-soaked forehead. The White mana she saw flowing out of his wooden fingers froze her blood. She could not believe what she was seeing.

The audacity of it stole her breath.

That was nothing compared to seeing the little girl’s eyes flutter open with a groan. The color returning to her pallid features, the fever blush receded as the White mana worked its magic to heal away the wounds of the body.

“Do not stop!” she nearly screamed at Shrubley. The White essence had faltered when he saw the fury that must have been plastered on her features.

She gripped the edge of the little girl’s bed, staring and willing her to get better. For the magic to work.

“It is *fighting* me,” Shrubley said, surprised. His voice was strained, like he was lifting something heavy.

“But it is working!”

Shrubley shook his head. He knew any healing would be temporary. Something deeper was wrong. He could wipe out the affliction’s damage, but not the source of the damage.

The little girl would get better. She would even be able to walk around and play, but sooner rather than later, she would fall ill again.

*This isn’t working,* Shrubley thought to himself. *What am I missing?*

When Shrubley pulled his hand away, the girl’s eyes widened with surprise at what she saw. Retima rushed over to hold her tiny hand, ready to assure her, but instead of screaming she giggled and reached a hand out to stroke one of Shrubley’s deep green leaves.

“Hello, little one. My name is Shrubley.”

“Shrub-ley,” the girl said slowly. She giggled and then yawned, falling asleep almost instantly.

“There are others,” Retima found herself saying, appalled by her willingness to use this monster’s magic to heal people.

Witnessing what he could do firsthand was hard to ignore. He could *save* them. To see just one more child brought back from the brink of death... Retima would sell her soul to see just one child grow up unharmed.

“It is temporary,” Shrubley insisted. “There is something wrong that I cannot see, but I am trying my best.”

“Then let it be temporary,” Retima pleaded. “Many of these people we have been making comfortable. Do you understand? We can do no more for them. But you... you can. You can give them *time*. Isn’t that worth it?”

Shrubley was already stretched to his limits, but he couldn’t deny Retima’s words. Even if it was temporary, he could build back their strength—such as it was—enough that they would be able to last a little longer.

With a determined nod, Shrubley said, “Show me to the others.”

Hours later, exhausted and wrung out, Shrubley dropped back into a chair that was much too narrow for his bushy body. While he was on the small side, his rounded shrubiness was wider than the average individual. As a result, his many leaves and branches squished into his shrouded face.

It wasn’t particularly comfortable, but it was amusing to some of the nearby children.

Even the recalcitrant Retima stifled a giggle behind her hand, then looked away in embarrassment. She had warmed considerably after seeing the first of the children up and walking again after being bedridden for weeks.

He had spent many long hours healing. Potions were initially unavailable, so Shrubley had to rely on his natural mana regeneration to recover his depleted stores.

Once Retima and the others could see the extent of Shrubley's healing abilities, [Mana Potions] began to arrive.

Shrubley drank himself sick, restoring his mana whenever he was able to without putting himself into one of those beds. As the only person in the entire town with White mana, Shrubley was alone in his ability to heal.

At one point, he swore he saw a familiar young blonde-haired woman with a cauldron strapped to her back. Shrubley was unsure of why her hair would have changed from what he remembered, but he did not presume to understand humans very well.

They were very strange.

Take Urtha Retima. She was initially crotchety and surly to Shrubley as if he had personally offended her. Every question he asked was answered begrudgingly and with unnecessary venom.

And then he started to heal the children, breaking a rule she had been adamant he must never break. She did not berate him, yell at him, or force him to stop.

Why give the rule in the first place if she was glad for him to break it?

Shrubley did not understand.

Now, Retima was rushing around, delivering missives and sending runners to all the shops in town. Shrubley was to be given anything in order to recover his mana so he could save as many people as possible.

The very young, very old, and the infirm were given priority, but by the end of that long night, nearly everybody in the hospital was significantly better off than they had been since arriving.

It wouldn't last.

Shrublely knew it, and Retima knew it too. But they had bought them time. And that, Shrublely knew, was priceless.

He didn't like being separated from his friends, but he reminded himself this was only temporary and the similarity to the events in the mirror world was just that. He wasn't in dire danger, and neither were they. Not in this place of civilization, he hoped.

**Your Light Essence has improved to Tier VI.**

**Rank bonus match!**

**You gain:**

**+4 Restoration | +4 Willpower**

It was getting steadily more difficult to increase his Light essence potency. He felt like he was on the cusp of something greater. Some kind of upper limit for his rank, perhaps.

*Light essence is among my strongest, Shrublely thought. And Life essence is the lowest in tier, but... feels almost just as strong. Is this the effect of a prime essence?*

Shrublely instilled calm within himself. Shutting his eyes and narrowing his focus, he could feel the mana spooling through his body like complicated twining rivers. The blue glow within his branches was noticeably dim, as his mana was greatly depleted.

Practicing his mana breathing, he could feel the slightest uptick in his natural recovery. He suspected that was from his efforts, though he had just gained some points in Restoration and Willpower that would affect things.

Restoration improved his mana recovery rate, whereas Willpower increased his maximum mana. In Shrubley's opinion, the two were great stats to be paired with improving his Light essence. It was largely a magical type after all, whereas his Nature essence tended to be a mix of both physical and magical.

It was too bad he had yet to acquire a proficiency for mana control. *I will just have to keep trying*, he thought.

Excited to see his progress, Shrubley checked his status.

**[Shrubley]**

**Race: Soul Shrub**

**Class: Sage Knight**

**Rank: Mid Copper**

**Adventurer: E-Grade (2-Star)**

**Level: 24**

**[Attributes]**

**Strength: 43**

**Skill: 40**

**Hardiness: 63**

**Willpower: 86**

**Arcane: 63**

**Restoration: 74**



## [Essences]

### [Life (Prime)] (Copper II Rank)

- [Transference]

### [Curiosity (Black)] (Copper VI Rank)

- [Lifelong Student]
- [Recycle]

### [Nature (Green)] (Copper V Rank)

- [Bark Armor]
- [Budding Barrage]
- [Graft]

### [Light (White)] (Copper VI Rank)

- [Recovery]
- [Counteract]

Shrublely took a deep breath, feeling the mana course through his limbs and leaves. Something was... off about the air. He couldn't put his twig on it, but he was certain there was something subtly different from anywhere else.

"Rest," Retima said, putting a hand gingerly on his leafy body. "I am sorry for pushing you so hard, Shrublely. You have done Talvar a great service this day that the people will not forget. But you should not martyr

yourself. I... am sorry I was not kinder to you when I had the opportunity.”

Shrublely reached a surprisingly gentle hand up to her arm and patted her. “It is all right. Humans take time to adjust. It is not your fault you fear that which you do not understand. I am not your enemy.”

The little shrub got up and went over to another bed to check on its occupant. He lifted his hand and White mana trickled out. “I will always be here to help. I am an adventurer... after all...”

“Yes, you are, Shrublely,” Retima said, stooping down and catching the swaying shrub that toppled over mid-sentence. She felt abjectly guilt ridden for pushing him so hard.

It was little wonder the children enjoyed his company so much. He was little more than a boy himself, and she had treated him so horribly. Only changing her treatment of him once she was able to get something in return.

*I would not blame him if he hated me,* she thought, carrying him to bed. The fact that Retima knew he would not only made her feel even worse.