

CHAPTER 35 – TRAINING

TUMBLEWEED

Everything on Shrubley's body hurt. Every dried and crackling yellowed leaf, every sap-crusted branch and twig. He had never trained so hard in his life, and yet it hardly seemed to matter.

He was growing so much, but it was never fast enough. Cal grew by leaps and bounds while Slyrox was becoming an expert with not only her essence, but also with her martial arts.

It was like the koblin was catching up for lost time.

Even Smudge was coming into his own, and he didn't even have any essences!

It was Shrubley that was the last to get a proficiency in the group, it was Shrubley who was last to hit level 10. And it was Shrubley who always seemed to get hurt and need a break before anybody else.

Nobody said anything.

Nobody ever remarked once on his weakness. Not even the Countess or her snarky oppa, Sose. At least not where he could hear.

More than anything, that worried him. They were always pushing. Faster, harder, better, but when it came to Shrubley, he simply couldn't keep up no matter how desperately he wanted to.

Shrubley wanted so badly to have some kind of latent talent or mystical power suddenly unveil itself and catapult him forward in power.

It was starting to settle in that Shrubley had no talent. He wasn't a genius, or a prodigy. The Druid had instilled in him the drive to work hard, but even that wasn't his own. He had been given it.

All he could do was work twice as hard as everyone else and gain less than the rest. He was slower to level up and took even longer to recover.

Shrubley downed another one of those potions to sate his hunger and pulled himself out of his bedroll. He didn't wish to look at his attributes, because he developed some kind of unwanted dread over it.

He didn't much feel like himself lately. He used to yearn to see any amount of growth and advancement. Now, it never felt like enough.

One day, things will get better. Things will be okay, he promised himself.

It did cheer him up a little, and he mustered up the strength of will to look over his attributes. He put down the burden of dread, and his beleaguered branches felt a little lighter for it.

[Shrubley]

Race: Soul Shrub

Class: Insufficient Essences

Rank: Mundane

Level: 10

[Attributes]

Strength: 15

Skill: 19

Hardiness: 22

Willpower: 31

Arcane: 22

Restoration: 24

[Essences]

[Curiosity (Black)] (Copper III Rank)

- [Lifelong Student]

[Nature (Green)] (Copper II Rank)

- [Bark Armor]

• [Budding Barrage]

[Empty]

[Proficiencies]

[Sword Proficiency] (G-Grade)

[Racial Abilities]

[Solar Synthesis]

[Verdant Inventory]

[Leyline Roots]

[Awakened Intellect]

[Garden Cultivation]

[Shardic Creature]

[Monsterfolk]

Shrubley studied his Shardscript, focusing his attention on the change in his attributes. His stats were growing higher than they ever had before.

The Countess had since confirmed and reinforced his group's knowledge of attributes. Strength influenced one's might and capacity to inflict physical damage. Skill governed one's speed, dexterity, and even agility.

For Shrubley's swordsmanship, he used both of those attributes to a considerable degree.

Hardiness was one's toughness and vitality. Raising that attribute greatly improved reserves of health, and even stamina to a lesser degree. Willpower increased resistance to magical effects and attacks, greatly improved one's reserves of mana, and moderately increased stamina.

Shrubley considered Willpower to be a particularly important attribute, so he was glad that was currently his highest attribute. Nothing else even came close. It allowed him to expand both his mana and stamina simultaneously, which was quite nice.

Then there was Arcane that was essentially the opposite of Strength. Arcane magnified magical prowess. Then, finally, there was the Restoration attribute, which enhanced the rate at which health, mana and stamina recovered. It also affected one's ability to heal from injuries and recuperate from exhaustion.

Though he hadn't been completing any quests lately, he was non-stop training. He knew how to wield a sword better than ever, but his shield use was lacking. There was no proficiency there, despite how much he wanted one.

Despite his troubles, Shrubley felt incredibly proud of himself. He worked hard and had the results to show for it. Even if he was slower than his friends, progress was progress.

With two essences bound, Shrubley needed just one more to begin to tap into a Class. What that would be, he didn't know. He was too tired to dream of what might be. Still, some part of him hoped that he would walk in the footsteps of the Druid, in whatever way that might be.

He could hear the sounds of training down the hall, but he didn't go there immediately.

Something felt off. More than usual, at any rate.

Shrubley wandered down the hall, taking turns at random until he arrived at a section he remembered. Hadn't it opened up into a large vault? It was now caved in with bare roots and soil spilling out on top of thick blocks of broken stone.

I don't remember feeling anything break, Shrubley thought to himself. Had he been that out of it lately that he didn't even feel when the earth itself quaked and trembled?

Shutting his lamplight eyes, Shrubley reached out a slightly withered hand and touched the root. He used [Leyline Roots] to connect to it and the Shard as a whole.

[Leyline Roots]: Extend your roots to connect with the Worldshard's energies and cast your senses far.

He didn't know how it would work in a mirror world like this. The Countess had explained that it wasn't like a *real* Shard, more a reflection of one, like a parasite.

Focusing his fragmented mind, Shrubley followed the root to a leyline. It was fuzzy and indistinct, like a watery reflection.

What he found waiting for him stole his breath and turned his sap to ice. Countless hissing voices and slithering filled his head until he thought it would burst like an overripe melon.

Shrubley was knocked onto his seat, but he didn't stay there long. Scrambling to his rooty feet, Shrubley ran back down the way he had come, but he was lost now. He had taken turns at random and didn't remember the way.

His thoughts spun around faster and faster as panic set in. He tried to calm down, but it wasn't working. *This is bad!* was all he could manage to think.

Running down the halls, he met one dead end after the other. More and more corridors ended with either a firmly shut stone door, or a bolted and barricaded wooden door that had the slightly askew look as if the room beyond had caved-in.

She knew. This entire time, the Countess must have known that they weren't actually safe. That the serpentii creatures were coming after them, worming their way through the maze of tunnels and corridors until they were practically on top of them.

And she never told us! Hot on the heels of that thought came another, *would it have mattered?*

That brought Shrubley up short.

Would he have tried harder if he knew their very lives depended on it? He already *knew* that! He knew that to go out was to risk not just this life, but the lives of his friends as well. They trusted him, and he was letting them down.

He couldn't work any harder than he did, and it wasn't enough. It was *never* enough!

The shrub turned down one of the labyrinthine halls and came face-to-face with a serpentii. This creature was the size of a man with arms and legs. It wore loose-fitted clothes that were more like draped colored bolts of cloth with metallic bits of armor to hold it in place.

His large, forked tongue flicked in the air, and he raised an axe with glee. Shrubley's mind went blank, but his body remembered the training even if he couldn't think straight.

Out came his sword and the much-mended shield. As the axe came down, Shrubley moved inside the creature's reach and bashed with his shield into the thing's wrist to push the axe out of the way.

With a clear opening, Shrubley used [Budding Barrage]. The blurring strikes caught both the serpentii and Shrubley by surprise.

Though it was just a wooden sword, it cut into the snake's hide with frightening ease. The creature's scales seemed to practically wilt as the sword touched it, as if it contained some sort of poison.

Where the blade opened the serpentii, its purple blood flowed freely. Shrubley prepared himself for another attack, but nothing came. The serpentii fell to the side and went still.

You defeat the [Serpentii Raider].

Shrubley stared, then turned and sprinted down another hall as he heard an answering hissing voice call out from behind the dead serpentii.

He finally found his way back to the training room. Cal and Slyrox were doing some sort of cooperative training where Cal had to use his newly formed Elemental essence at the same time as Slyrox attacked the conjured Fantasy essence monsters.

The Countess was watching with an idle look of curiosity. She turned when Shrubley sprinted into the room with his sword and shield.

He looks even worse than before, she thought, but there's no mistaking he has the fighting spirit of ten warriors. Look at him. He looks ready to... wait a sec—

"They're here!" he told her, and that look in his yellow eyes told her everything.

He knew what she had been doing the last few days. Hadn't she been subtle about it? There was no use in worrying everybody. But now they had been found out.

There was nowhere else to hide. They had to run.

"Sose!" the Countess barked.

The oppa immediately dropped the training regimen he was putting the others through. He understood that tone.

Without a look back at the Countess, he bolted through a tiny hole in the wall and disappeared.

“We’re leaving,” she announced suddenly.

Cal and Slyrox, looking battered and weary, started to argue but the Countess was on them in a second. She lifted them both up at once. “There is *no time!* If you need to grab something, get it *now*. We. Are. Leaving.”

Smudge hopped along after her, the Countess swept Shrubley up in her wake. “You’ve already fought one.”

“Yes.”

“You kill it?”

“I think so.”

The Countess’ grin was like seeing the sun for the first time. He still felt weak and withered, but the Countess doled out praise or a smile in the same way a miser spends gold.

“You’ve come a long way,” she said as they hurried down the hall at a fast walk. “With more training, you could come farther yet, but we’re out of time.”

There was so much she wanted to teach them. They barely touched on auras or ranks. There just hadn’t been time and with them not even being Copper Rank yet, it hadn’t seemed important at the time.

In a way, she was glad to cut out some of that curriculum. They focused on what they did have, and what they could use.

It had to be enough.

As they turned the corner, four serpentii filled the hallway ahead. The Countess brought herself into a low crouch and curled her hands as her fingernails turned into long talons. “Now we see just how well of a student you were, Shrubley. I do hope you were paying attention.”

The Countess charged.