

CHAPTER 40 – A LIGHT IN THE DARK

As sunlight spilled out of Shrubley's [Verdant Inventory], it no longer fell upon the [Essence Vessel] that had been stored in there this whole time.

Ever since Shrubley acquired the [Essence Vessel], the item had been absorbing energy. Though his verdant pocket dimension was saturated with Life mana, as if it were Shrubley's inner heart, there was an essence that manifested at the forefront of Life mana.

And that was Light essence, one of vital components of all living things everywhere that did not dwell in the dark.

Shrubley's eyes were drawn to the [Essence Vessel]. It had a faint glow all its own, as if there was light inside of it fighting to get out.

[Essence Vessel]

(Copper Rank) (★★★ Rare)

A small glass pot adorned with runes and diagrams designed to draw in ambient and natural mana types. Now fully saturated.

Imprint: Draws in mana, condensing it into an essence type based upon your actions and the ambient natural mana around you.

Shrubley drew in the light, channeling its reality weaving power into the [Essence Vessel]. His greatest wish was that it would take on a piece of his father's soul.

He imagined the Druid watching over him, made entirely of light. Shrubley wasn't sure whether the Druid had truly been there or if it had been some trick of his mind, but he liked to believe it was his father.

You have successfully bound [Light Essence (White)].

You gain the essence ability, [Recovery].

[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.

With fluttering pearlescent wings, the glowbug danced through the air, swirling around Shrubley's luminous form.

An avalanche of energy crashed over Shrubley, infusing and invigorating him with overpowering Light. His broken and twisted mana channels unknotted and reconnected, healing him from within.

There had been so much damage, but it was being undone.

His shattered branches reformed, bark grew back healthy and strong with sap flowing anew.

The bright power of [Recovery] radiated out of his spirit, banishing the chasm's vast darkness.

Huge centipede-like creatures screeched and hissed at the Light, their hairy carapaces melting. Corrupted things he hadn't even known were there, preparing to prey on the wayward monster adventurer.

On their many crooked legs, the things quickly skittered away from Shrubley, fleeing away into the depths of the chasm.

For as badly wounded as he was, Shrubley's awakened essence had undone much of the damage inflicted on him. He wasn't back to 100%, not by a long shot, but he could once again move his limbs and feet without pain or issue.

He thought about getting up and leaving, but where would he go?

Shrubley shook his head and hunkered down where he was. He now had the strength to reforge the opening to his [Verdant Inventory], making it a wide door that he could have easily rolled through.

He had never been able to make an opening that large before. It was sorely tempting to just waltz in through the opening and be bathed in sunlight, but he resisted the urge.

There was no telling what would happen if he walked into his own inventory, much less if he did it while on a strange mirror world like this. He felt apprehensive about it, as if some instinct was warning him.

Sitting cross-legged as the Druid often did, Shrubley soaked up the sunlight that perpetually came from his [Verdant Inventory]. When he had recovered enough, he used [Recovery] willingly for the first time.

When it had come over him after acquiring the Light essence, it felt like another force trying to restore what was broken so it had room to live. Now it was Shrubley undoing the rest of the damage his body had suffered.

It is a good thing I am not too heavy, he thought to himself, recounting the painful fall from above.

Had he been any larger or heavier, he might not have been able to survive the fall. As it was, what little [Bark Armor] he managed to conjure was stripped away faster than his mana could bring it back.

And even then, he survived with scarcely a sliver of health. It had been sheer luck.

Shrubley raised his hand and conjured a globe of Light. “Into the darkness, I bring my own light.”

The Light, unfortunately, did not heal him like the [Recovery] ability or the sunlight from his [Verdant Inventory]. He idly wondered if he opened his inventory around the Countess, if she might get burned from it.

It had been a good thing that it never seemed to be an issue when they were spending every hour of every day training. He did not want to hurt the vampyr.

Only now did Shrubley see how much he had needed the sun to be able to take advantage of all that training. And the irony was, he had the power to restore himself the entire time.

If he had only known what to do, he could likely have kept ahead of everybody else, if only because his [Solar Synthesis] seemed to work better than many of the Countess' potions.

It was likely Shrubley was too ill and enervated at the time to even think of the possibility of leveraging his inventory's unique facet. It was easier to come up with ideas and solutions when Shrubley was of sound body and mind.

I will know better in the future, Shrubley told himself. The first thing the Druid ever imparted to him was the importance of being kind to oneself. If you could not be kind to yourself, how could you ever be expected to be kind to another person or know when somebody was kind to you?

It was not a lesson that Shrubley understood at the time. But like with many of the Druid's more... opaque teachings, Shrubley had engraved the words upon his heart so that he might learn their meaning later.

There was no sense of time down at the bottom of the gorge. Shrubley did not know how long he stayed there, healing and recovering.

Every so often, he would hear a faint, echoing hiss, but it was never anywhere that he could see. It seemed to come from all around, as if the sounds bounced back and forth forever until they faded away.

It was fortunate that those centipede-like things had been scared off from his Light essence.

The glowbug still hovered in front of Shrubley. It seemed to want something.

Once Shrubley was back to his full strength, he dismissed his [Verdant Inventory] and got up. He nearly tripped over the [Essence Vessel], surprised to find it still there.

From everything he understood, it should have been a onetime use.

Shrubley picked up the vessel and peered at it. Incredibly faint lines of light were being drawn into it as it sucked up the ambient mana and turned it into essence, a process that would take days or weeks depending on the ambient mana.

You gain the essence ability, [Recycle].

[Recycle (Curiosity)]

Cost: None

Cooldown: None

Reduce, reuse, recycle.

Imprint: Occasionally an item will gain another use when it should have been exhausted. Single-use items will be restored to their unused form.

“Amazing,” Shrubley whispered. “Have I found the way to offer essences to my friends?”

Time would tell if he could ever find them again.

He looked up at the chasm that seemed to extend and disappear into infinity. His luminosity reached far, but not to the distant cavern walls. And most certainly not to the ledge high above.

There were nasty things crawling around at the edges of the Light, but they were burned by the essence, so Shrubley kept the orb of Light floating above the palm of his hand.

He felt like he was a little taller than he was before, a bit larger and stronger after finally healing.

It was time to find a way out.

Shrubley quickly found the river running at the bottom of the gorge. It was running at a sedate pace, so he chose to follow it. The Druid told him that if he was ever lost, all he had to do was follow a river and sooner or later he'd find a village or town.

He doubted that would happen here, but the odds that the river knew the way out of these lightless depths was as good an idea as any he'd had so far.

With the orb of Light keeping the chattering creatures at bay, Shrubley had an almost pleasant stroll along the river. It tinkled and burbled occasionally, but never picked up speed. It was wide and deep. It would get to where it was going in its own time.

“I wonder if you carved this place out over the ages,” Shrubley said to the river. He knew it wouldn't talk back to him, but after being in a group of friends for so long, he felt the need to hear a voice.

Even if it was his own.

The glowbug bumped into his leaves, trying to get his attention.

He looked over at it. “How did you get free, little friend?” He reached into his [Verdant Inventory]. “Would you like to join your fellows?”

It buzzed, sounding almost like a no. Then flew off across the river to the other side where the edge of Shrubley’s Light reached.

“Hey!” he called after it, jumping from stone to stone in the river to cross it. Something large and furry but with far too many legs for comfort skittered away from the light.

Several eyes reflected in the light, like distant twinkling stars. Thankfully, they remained at a distance.

Shrubley shivered.

He didn’t mind most insects. They were useful, after all. He especially didn’t mind spiders, but there was a limit to how large they could be before they went from being stalwart little protectors to monstrous predators.

No matter what, bugs were worlds better than mushrooms and fungus.

Still following the glowbug, Shrubley wandered away from the river. The glowbug pulsed with a faint greenish glow and flew in figure 8’s in front of an opening in the gorge’s wall.

When Shrubley approached, he was startled by the Shardscript that popped up in front of him.

Do you wish to bond the [Elder Glowbug] as your familiar?

Y / N

The bug hovered there, waiting for his answer. Perhaps it had been asking all along.

He didn’t ask “are you sure?” or any such nonsense. If the glowbug wanted to bond with him, he was hardly going to deny such a request. Besides, he had felt a kinship with the little bugs when he had first caught them.

“Perhaps I should ask if they would like to be let go,” he thought aloud as he accepted the request.

The glowbug grew several sizes and its green glow brightened considerably until it encompassed the acorn-sized creature.

Together, Shrubley and his new familiar stepped into the cavern entrance. Shrubley was going to ask what the familiar's name was when the words died on his wooden tongue at the sight before him.

The room beyond was even larger than the gorge had been. Coffins and graves of stone were everywhere. Skeletal creatures, the sort that would make even Cal quiver with fear (perhaps *especially* Cal, given his past), were strewn about the plateaus that made up the huge space beyond.

Shrubley looked at the glowbug. "Are you sure?"

It did a loop-the-loop which Shrubley took for "yes".

He didn't like the look of the place. It had a darkness to it that pressed in on the Light in his palm, but this was the first time since following the river that he could go in a direction that wasn't parallel to the gorge itself.

While following a river was all well and good, it could just as easily empty into a pit deeper within. There was no guarantee that following it would do anything. Besides, it would always be there if this path didn't work out.

Shrubley took out his battered sword from his inventory and held his orb of Light aloft.

It was time for another adventure.