

Chapter 82 - Oregano Gangtsa II

Shrublely squealed with delight. “Jerric!”

Before the Paladin could say anything more, or bring Shrublely’s attention back to the thief, the little plant leapt at him and wrapped his tiny limbs around him in as big a hug as the little guy could manage.

Jerric tolerated the display of affection despite Fio snickering behind him.

“All right, all right,” Jerric told him, patting him with one hand because the other was holding a small individual in a burgundy cloak. “Now tell me, is this the one who stole from you?”

Shrublely looked at the small figure and wagged his finger at the young man. “I asked you to hold on to them for me, not to run.”

The young boy, dirt streaking his face, was still clutching all the items he had stolen. He kicked hard at Jerric, but it did about as much good as kicking a castle.

The man, even if he wasn’t decked out in his full plate armor, was a Steel Ranker. That put him several ranks of power above Shrublely and probably dozens of levels as well.

Even the beautiful Wizard, Fio, was just as strong as Jerric, though you could not tell at a glance. Not unless you had Shrublely’s newfound Copper senses.

“You’re a monster!” the boy screamed. “You shouldn’t have any of these things. Monsters killed my ma and pa. I saw ‘em with my own eyes.

You're no different. One day you'll come and try to kill us in our sleep!
Big Jon says so!"

Shrublely shrank back from the vitriol in the boy's words, feeling suddenly small and helpless.

He had expected any number of responses... but not this. Not from somebody so young.

Jerric shook the kid. "Manners, lad."

"I could give him a little shock," Fio offered, poking her head around Jerric's bulky form. "Just so he remembers not to do it again."

Shrublely looked up at the boy. "No. Please set him down."

"If you run, it'll go badly," Jerric hissed into the boy's ear as he set his bare feet onto the dirt track of the alley.

The kid snarled at Jerric but didn't bother to do anything except hunch over the stolen items.

"He has had enough loss, I think," Shrublely said, not daring to get closer to the boy. He could see the fear at the core of that hatred. It wounded him to his very soul, but he knew well enough not to try to push the boy any further.

"If you will give everything back," Shrublely said, "then I think we can all agree this has been an unfortunate misunderstanding. And if you would be kind enough to apologize, I would be happy to give you a silver for your trouble."

The boy's lips twisted in disgust at the offer, but Jerric's strong hand was still on his shoulder, and he could tell that the Paladin wasn't an idiot.

The monster was a stone-cold fool, but the Paladin knew the score. He wasn't about to let the boy go, not unless he paid lip service to the foul monster.

Trying to look contrite, he set the items to the side out of the rivulet of water running through the middle of the alley. Then, looking at Shrubley, he opened his mouth to apologize.

For a silver, I'd even give the bleedin' thing a hug! That silver would buy me more than enough goods so I could burn my clothes! Even after Big Jon takes his cut, he thought, watching the strangely small monster carefully.

Just before he spoke, Shrubley held out a hand, a digit pointed. It looked like a crudely crafted facsimile of the boy's own arm, only made out of wood. He had expected the monster to be bigger and meaner, and now that it was time for him to apologize, the monster was clearly going to make it even harder for him.

"Not to me," Shrubley said. He shifted the aim of his arm and pointed at Jerric and Fio. "To them. They were the ones you inconvenienced."

The little boy opened and closed his mouth in disbelief.

The monster wanted him to apologize to *proper adventurers*? What madness was this? What game was he playing?

Dynk, the orphan-turned-thief, looked up at Jerric and thought of dropping to his knees to grovel, but figured that might be a little over the top. He looked like one of those nobs who always enjoyed people giving their egos a bit of a polish, but those eyes were too keen by half.

No, the Paladin would not be taken in by any groveling or flattery. He was mad at Dynk, and the little boy could not fathom why. He was defending a *monster*. Had everybody gone insane? Did they all suddenly

forget the past week? Was Big Jon the only one who understood what was going on?

Still, a silver was a silver. Dynk tilted his head and with sincere feeling said, “I am sorry to have bothered you, good knight, it was not my intention to trouble you.”

“Shrubley,” Jerric said warningly, seeing the shrub begin to bow.

“This is my request,” Shrubley told him. “You were the ones who grabbed him, and so I too must—”

“Not another word, Shrubley,” Jerric snapped. He could hardly believe that the little guy was going to apologize for inconveniencing *him*, when it was Shrubley who had lost everything to this little street brat.

Jerric had glimpsed the amazing items the kid had stolen. Sold to the right merchant, the kid would be set for life. Or at least until his Sword Day if he didn’t find the right merchant.

Shrubley seemed bothered by this. His little leaves rustled slightly, but he straightened and managed to give an approximation of a nod. “Very well. Then accept my thanks.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Jerric said, avoiding the kid’s curious and hurt expression as he treated Shrubley with respect.

It was not something often done.

A Steel didn’t have to give a Copper the time of day, much less any respect. But Shrubley had *earned it*. He earned it a thousand times over and if Jerric had to spend every last damned favor he was owed, he would see to it that Shrubley’s way to the Inner Ring was paved clear of troubles.

He couldn't do anything about monsters or bandits, but he could make sure that the "good people" of the Inner Ring were not going to stop him for being a common monster. The Great Houses wouldn't be clamoring for him to join their ranks, but at the very least they wouldn't hinder him either.

Jerric shook the kid, keeping his hand clamped on the little waif's shoulder. "Got relatives?" he asked gruffly.

The kid looked up at him. "No."

"Where are you staying?" Shrubley asked.

The boy made a low guttural growl in the back of his throat, which was interrupted when Jerric shook him again. It was clear that the Paladin wanted Dynk to speak to the monster.

Turning to half-face Shrubley, he said, "On the streets, like everybody else who lost it all when the monsters attacked."

Shrubley nodded sadly. "I am sorry to hear that. Here, as promised."

The boy couldn't believe his eyes, but he didn't waste any time questioning it. Who knew the fickleness of a monster? He might snatch back that coin if he balked at it, so Dynk took it as fast as he dared while taking great pains to make sure he didn't touch any of the monster's leaves or its strange hand.

Shrubley watched as the child took the coin, bit it for good measure, then secreted it away on his person.

I will need to speak with Sel, he thought to himself. She will know what to do. If I give him anything, he will spurn it. I can see it in his eyes. I frighten him... I wish I did not.

“Thank you,” Shrubley said to the boy. “I am very sorry to hear about your family. But Taamra will be rebuilt, of that, I am sure. The good people of this village are strong and brave. They will rise again stronger for it.”

The boy, not trusting himself to speak, merely glared at the monster.

As soon as the Paladin lets me go, I'm going to make a run for it, the boy thought to himself.

He didn't fully comprehend just how much stronger Jerric was than himself, but he had seen him around town before his parents were slaughtered by filthy monsters.

Dynk knew Jerric was a Steel Ranker, and since even before the battle his parents had been poor, there was no way he could ever be anything more than a filthy Mundane.

That didn't stop him from struggling against the implacable hold of the Paladin. The man had a grip like a golem!

“I won't make you apologize to Shrubley,” Jerric said to the kid. “But you better make sure to leave him alone. If not for this ‘monster’ as you call him, you would be dead. *I* would be dead. We *all* owe Shrubley and his friends a great debt that none of us could ever hope to pay off.”

The boy looked at Jerric as if he was insane.

“Who do you think drove off all the snakes? You think *we* came in and killed them all, don't you?” Jerric shook his head. “You see the bodies of any snakes? No? Why do you think that is?”

“That monster must have used some—” was all the boy managed to get out before the ringing slap stunned him to silence.

“His name is *Shruble!*” Jerric roared. “He has a *name*, boy! You will address him as Shruble, or you won’t at all. He saved *all our lives*. Saved the very edge of civilization from a fate worse than death. Your parents died fighting and protecting you—somebody they loved—but Shruble and his allies fought and died protecting people who *hated them*. Who would have attacked them at a moment’s notice if they had dared show their face during the serpentii attack. Don’t you *dare* belittle their sacrifices!”

Stunned, his mouth working like a fish on the muddy riverbanks, Dynk’s eyes teared up in confusion and fear and hatred. The boy ripped himself free of Jerric and sprinted for all he was worth deeper into the alley.

He couldn’t stand the forge heat of rage coming off the Paladin. It wasn’t just that Jerric was mad, he was *ashamed*. Dynk had seen that expression on his father’s face when they sat down to dinner, and Dynk was the only one with a full plate.

He would say things like, “I ate at work boy, you eat up,” and such lies, but there was a tightness to his eyes. Shame that ran deep.

It shook Dynk to his core to see a Steel Ranker admit openly—and in front of another Steel who didn’t correct him!—that not only did a Copper save him, but a *monster* as well.

There was no explanation that would make any sense to the boy, so he did the only thing he knew to do when he was afraid. He ran and hid from a world that no longer made sense.