

CHAPTER 42 – BONE BASHIN’

Jerric looked suspiciously at the tray of food on his bedside table. He frowned and did his usual sweep of the room. Various wires and detection traps remained, unsurprisingly, inert.

Nothing was triggered despite the whole room looking like some sort of acrobatics course back at the Academy. Wires crisscrossed the room and where there weren’t wires, Jerric had placed little clay discs with spells from Fio that would detect anybody’s presence.

The detection spells alone should have been enough. They overlapped three or four times and detected anything with even a drop of mana, alive or undead! Even animated creatures like suits of armor and the like would have set them off.

And yet, the tray of warm food on his bedside table told him, unequivocally, that somebody had been in the room without setting off a damn thing.

“I don’t know what I expected,” he said to himself. “I tip my hat to you, Igor, wherever you are.”

Behind a painting set into the wall over the fireplace, a pair of mismatched eyes watched Jerric. *It doeth my hearts proud when the good adventurerth of the world underthtand and recognize all the hard work and effort we Igorth put into our work. That’s professional pride, that ith!* Igor lisped proudly and heavily in his own thoughts, because as he figured, the Count couldn’t take away his thoughts no matter how hard he might try.

Jerric glanced up at the painting, stared for a moment in confusion, then shrugged and went back to the food. He had to admit, it was good food. Better than the inn they were staying at, as a matter of fact.

Which was a shame, because it was very clearly drugged. Jerric sighed and took out a small glass vial, downing the contents to counteract the drugs.

There was no use in wasting a perfectly good meal, especially after the night he and Fio had. Dead end after dead end. The Haalfden farms hadn’t been much use and with the storm as bad as it was, there was no way they could find the little shrub anywhere.

Sel couldn't tell him where he had gone. It was against the Code. The only way he could get around it would be to enter into a binding contract that would have him serving as Shrubley's mentor, and as much as he might like the little guy, he wasn't about to do that.

Whoever heard of a *Steel* mentoring a Mundane? It was ridiculous. He'd be laughed out of the Inner Ring. If he was ever able to go back.

Jerric grinned to himself and shoveled the fluffy omelet into his mouth. He nodded appreciatively. There were [Duskshrooms] in it, very hard to come by and obscenely expensive, but they tasted amazing and elevated any dish at least a whole rarity level.

The juice was fresh-squeezed, though he didn't know precisely what it was. It tasted good and paired well with the eggs and sausage. They were simple fare, but they were done to such perfection that you'd never guess they were something any idiot could whip together with a skillet and some common ingredients.

Jerric put the cleaned plate and empty cups to the side and stood up.

Only... he was still sitting on the bed.

Jerric stood up again –

–and completely failed to move a muscle.

The painting above the fireplace swung out to reveal Igor smiling proudly and wiping a tear from his one green eye. “Oh thir, you do an old Igor proud, you do. I thought you nearly had me for a moment there!” He hopped down onto the mantle, smiling as jovially and as crookedly as only an Igor could.

I can't move my body! Jerric shouted into his head. He tried to get up, to summon his essence powers, to fight, *anything*, but his body remained rigid and upright.

“I'm very sorry thir,” Igor said apologetically. “I was told to give you the ol' Number Two, but I know how crafty you adventurers are, and I thought to myself, I thaid, ‘Igor, what would a *professional* expect of you?’ and do you know what? I thaid, ‘They would expect the best, so you best give them the Number *Four* with a little dath of paprika.”

Jerric couldn't speak, but the expression in his eyes was clear enough for Igor as the man waltzed through his traps and tripwires as if they weren't even there.

“Ah, I see the question in your eyes! Why paprika? I like the color. And it disables antidotes, and essence powerth of course.”

Jerric struggled as best he could, but it was no use. The Igor picked him up like he was no more than a mere babe and carried him out of the room through the secret entrance behind the painting.

I hope you're doing better than I am, Fio, Jerric thought madly to himself.

Shrubley couldn't spare much thought about why his quest was called bone daddy, and why the reward wasn't any kind of additional experience, loot or the like. Instead, the reward was a bone knight.

That sounded like an enemy to fight.

Maybe the bone knight will be a friend instead, Shrubley thought without much hope. Things that originated from this mirror realm never seemed to be quite right and were instead twisted in all sorts of odd ways.

Just like those essence cubes in Lady Haalfen's inner sanctum. They appeared to be false items, reflections of what they were in the real Worldshard.

Shrubley sliced into a [Skeletal Beast], landing a clean strike on an oversized femur, but the [Emerald Weapon's] Green magic had begun to fade on Shrubley's [Practice Sword].

The attack didn't chop the bone fully in two like Shrubley planned, and instead got wedged in there. These undead were particularly vulnerable to magic damage and now one of Shrubley's sources was gone.

His familiar darted by, the vibrant glow of Green magic shimmering off its acorn-sized form, preparing to cast the spell for the third time.

He wasn't sure how many more uses of [Emerald Weapon] his familiar had left. That might be the last one.

Shrubley couldn't let that spell go off just yet. If one of these undead landed a hit on his familiar, the little bug might not make it. But it wasn't smart enough to stay out of range for an entire fight. If it thought Shrubley needed a hand, it rushed in without any sense of self-preservation.

There had been too many close calls.

Unfortunately, his familiar wasn't a mind reader. No mental commands worked so far, and Shrubley had tried a lot of mental screaming. It was a bug, after all, perhaps an even simpler creature than Smudge.

Shrubley wasn't sure exactly where familiars fell on the sliding scale of Awakened monsters, if it was Awakened at all.

Regardless, the bug had heart. The pair quickly formed a kinship despite the short amount of time in which they'd known one another.

"Hold off!" Shrubley told the glowbug, using succinct language to get the command across as fast as possible.

The familiar swooped away, promptly obeying the command. It was a good thing the bug could understand him. Even that feat was a lot for a mere insect to handle.

Concentrating his attention wholly on the [Skeletal Beast] again, Shrubley was forced to drop the mana upkeep for his [Bark Armor]. Since it consumed a moderate amount of mana per second, it wasn't a cheap essence ability to maintain.

Not when he had a lot more at his disposal now. And if he took a severe blow, he had [Recovery] to fall back on.

Fortunately, what defenses Shrubley built up from [Bark Armor] did not fade away when he stopped feeding mana into it. It just wouldn't build up higher anymore, nor would it restore anything lost.

The [Skeletal Beast] spun with its talon claws out, turning its whole osseous body into a raking blender, forcing Shrubley to roll away.

He was getting quite good at dodging with the renewed bounciness of his body. So long as it involved some kind of roll, he could dodge just about anything. His many branches worked in tandem to push him off the ground and spring him into the air in a way that no four limbed human or elf could ever achieve.

There were notable individuals across the Worldshards that could perform a similar effect with extra magical limbs, while still clinging to a humanoid frame. The Beastbornes from Aldim, or a certain monster hunter from Rottarn could manage it, if in slightly different ways.

Not that Shrubley knew any of that. Even just learning how to do it was uncharted territory.

And if he ever learned anything of Beastbornes, it would be to fear them, not envy them. They were the scourge of the Shardrunes, considered a failed experiment by many. Then again, with Shrubley's eternally optimistic attitude, he would no doubt attempt to befriend one.

There was another essence ability Shrubley could use for offensive purposes. Even though his Nature essence was Green, [Budding Barrage] was still an effective attack.

[Budding Barrage (Nature)]

Cost: Low Stamina.

Cooldown: 5 seconds.

Mother Nature is the great equalizer.

Imprint: While using a weapon you possess proficiency with, initiate a multi-strike attack that reduces the defensive attributes of your target. The greater the difference between yourself and the target, the greater the reduction.

It wasn't outright damage, but supportive as all Green powers were. It enhanced his natural proficiency with his sword and brought it to new heights, allowing him to break through defenses and open up deeper wounds. In some ways it acted akin to a Yellow essence, but the main difference was in the execution.

As he bounced a sufficient distance away, Shrubley called out for his familiar's spell. A mote of glittering emerald magic shot across the undead chamber and crashed into his raised blade.

Your [Elder Glowbug Familiar] casts [Emerald Weapon] (Green Magic).

Channeling [Budding Barrage] with the renewed Green magic, Shrubley tumbled forward as the undead's spinning ceased.

It loped forward on four gangly limbs and raised one bony paw that was larger than his entire shrubby body, ready to crush him flat.

The Light floating above his bushy body, that was illuminating the tomb, made the creature's defenses buckle. Its limbs splintered and shattered, bones falling to fragments on the ground like broken pottery.

Shrubley breathed hard, struggling to keep up the flurry of blows. Now that he had dealt a sufficient wound, he needed to press his advantage.

Roaring with fury and pain, the [Skeletal Beast] lashed out at Shrubley with talons the size of Shrubley's sword. With no time to bounce out of the way, Shrubley raised his blade and braced it with both hands.

This one is so much stronger than the rest!

He dug his roots into the dry rocky soil and held his ground against the creature. The Light essence that surrounded Shrubley weakened the creature so close to its source and it was forced to disengage before it could overpower the small bushy creature.

Shrubley unbound his roots from the soil and sprang after it, his green glowing sword leading the way. The [Skeletal Beast] was off-balance now that it was trying to pull away.

Shrubley leapt through the air, his battered sword striking true at the vertebrae normally protected by the beast's thick skull.

The bone shattered, freeing the large bestial skull. Shrubley reversed direction, kicked off a fractured clavicle, and reversed his grip on the wooden sword.

Shrubley didn't have much weight to him, which normally allowed him to bounce around the battlefield with ease. Unfortunately, at a time like this, when he needed every ounce of momentum he could get, his lightweight body worked against him, slowing his fall and giving the creature time to search for its missing head.

Two large taloned hands reached down to pick up its lost skull just as Shrubley landed on it and sent everything he had into the downward strike.

The skull blasted apart into chunks, and the animated bones of the [Skeletal Beast] clattered to the ground.

Slain Skeletons: 21/21

A hush fell upon the tomb. It wasn't silence, exactly. This was something different, like the whole world had ceased all its little sounds to make room for a very *big* sound.

The ground shook as a heavy, leaden coffin lid fell to the ground and filled the room with sound and enough force to blow Shrubley off his feet. Torches

sprang to life in a circle down below where Shrubley had been certain just a few moments ago was a yawning pit of nothingness.

Now he could see a series of coffins lined up in threes with a single one at their head. A gauntleted hand was gripping the side of the stone coffin and pulling itself free.

Shrubley got to his feet and bounced down to face this newest threat.