

# CHAPTER 78 – SHRUBLEY, THE MONSTER ADVENTURER

“What have you done?” Rykal snapped at the paintings in his study.

They were up to *something*. He knew it. There was entirely too much silence in the manor for his tastes. The few guards he had posted were sent to scour the grounds for the interlopers.

Clearly, some adventurers had gotten loose and come looking for him. Well, they’d find him all right. And then, if they were lucky, he’d add them to his collection.

No sword, spell, or trickery could free them save his own hand that put them there. He had been very sure of that. Meticulous, even.

And now, through absolutely no fault of his own, he could feel the solid foundation of his brilliant plan cracking.

When the door to his study burst open, he made sure to keep his back to it, hands laced and empty of weapons for the would-be Hero to see.

“I thought one of your kind might make it through my minions,” Rykal said, without turning. “But you’ll find I am no easy beast to slay, no simple mindless monster. I am Awakened!”

Dramatically, Rykal twirled around to face his adversary and saw... nothing. Just an empty and very much busted down door. His gaze fell a few feet and there he saw Shrubley.

“*You!*?”

Of all things, an armed shrub marched up to Rykal, leaves quivering as if caught in an unseen storm. “Me.” A lone glowbug darted over the shrub, buzzing with the pathetic excuse for a monster’s ire.

“I had a perfectly good monologue about my evil plan, and *you* of all people managed to make it through—” Rykal paused and stared because Shrubley was not giving him time to talk. He was not adhering to the archetype very well.

There was the unmistakable aura of rage about him, laced through the surprisingly potent Copper that sprang up around the shrub.

Shrublely lunged forward, [Death's Razor] leading. Rykal, who hadn't been empowered by an aura, barely dodged to the side, but suffered a nick along the ribs.

Rykal believed Shrublely to be so far beneath him, worth less than that luminous insect, that he hadn't even considered using his Bronze aura.

"I'll prune you with every slice. And then, once this little *farce* is over, I'll plant you with all the other topiaries in the garden." He grinned and used [Molting] to shed the damage and was appalled when the wound pulsed with cold agony and refused to flee.

Though Rykal was a Bronze Ranker, the [Death's Grasp] successfully took hold. The stacks did not relent, especially when he combined [Enlightenment] with [Budding Barrage].

Shrublely attacked again, emboldened. "This is for Mistress Ceasewane!" he cried, his little voice trembling. "And this is for Cluckley, and the Countess, and Exrin, and everybody you hurt!"

Caught on the back foot, Rykal's evening dress was cut to ribbons as purple blood stained the rich carpeting of his study. He tried to use [Molting] several more times, but nothing happened aside from wasting precious mana.

He had never been this wounded before! He was a perfect creature, a serpenti of the highest order. He could remove any wound with a thought, and this... this little *thing* thought it was his equal!

A Bronze aura sprang up around Rykal. The damage wasn't life-threatening, but if he let the little shrub get in too many hits, even a Copper could kill him. The green edge to the sword caused it to blur in the air as Shrublely swung at him with more expertise than he would have expected.

It defied all sense and reason. A little soul shrub, one of the weakest kinds of monsters, was able to not just stand up to Rykal but almost had a real chance at victory.

However, with Rykal wielding his Bronze aura, that chance was rapidly dwindling. Soon enough, Rykal would crush the thing.

From his own pocket dimension, a thin misericorde appeared in his hand as he fended off the savage blows that would have mounted his injuries even further.

As it was, Rykal had suffered a substantial amount of damage in such a short period, especially considering that this Shrub had been Mundane when he last saw him.

The gulf between their power was too much, however. Rykal had long since mastered his aura control and while Shrubley was surprisingly talented, he had many years on the little monster.

*If he had proper training, he might actually be somebody to watch out for,* he thought to himself as he twisted his arm in strange ways that suggested he was not just double-jointed, but very likely triple-jointed as well.

Shrubley's small stature worked in his favor, but Rykal could bend both his knees and elbows back at a moment's notice and deflect even the best of blows, and all with a needle-thin blade compared to Shrubley's sword.

"You were Mundane. How did you not only escape the mirror realm, but manage to get enough essences while inside? My minions should have made that impossible," Rykal spat.

Shrubley rolled and narrowly dodged a counterstroke. He popped up onto his wooden legs and held up his battered shield, circling the fake Count.

"Why does it matter? You will be defeated soon."

Rykal couldn't help but laugh. Yes, on the surface, he could see how the small creature thought he had an actual chance still. His surprise attack had fallen short of defeating Rykal. He had to know how outclassed he was, surely?

"I have the heart of a Hero!" he claimed loudly.

Rykal laughed and immediately stopped when he swore he saw a smirk from that Paladin adventurer.

Shrubley's lamplight eyes flickered to the various paintings, then back to Rykal as he lashed out, his arm moving in complicated motions that no human arm should be capable of. It was more like a whip with a blade on the end.

He raised his shield to defend against the blow, but Rykal's arm twisted *around* the shield as if it were made of jelly.

The blade stung Shrubley on the side of the body and where the blade pierced, leaves withered and turned sickly purple. He cried out in pain but did not falter an inch.

“Ah, ah!” Rykal said, wagging a finger at him. “You should be paying attention to me, little monster! You’ll find no help from *them*.”

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Cal and Slyrox bolted through the manor. They went the wrong way several times since neither of them were very good at tracking and, in any case, it was hard to track a bush.

A few serpentii were caught unawares by their presence and, with a few spells and some rather painful clobbering by the koblin, they went down for the count.

After training, gaining essences, and all those level ups over in the mirror realm, the pair were more than a match for all the serpentii they encountered. It was a drastic difference compared to when Cal and Slyrox first set foot in the manor.

When they finally located the source of the fighting, the pair burst into the room just as Shrubley dropped to his knees in pain.

Slyrox rushed forward, but Cal put a bony arm out to stop her. They would just get in the way. Even Shrubley, the strongest of them all, was struggling to stay upright. Patches of leaves were gone, and he looked to have received quite a pruning based on how he no longer looked round and bushy.

“The paintings!” Shrubley called out to Cal. “We have to rescue them!”

Cal, attuned to Mirror essence as he was, could feel the presence of a much more powerful Mirror essence at work. “It’s Mirror essence! I think I can undo it.”

Slyrox slipped forward and barreled into Rykal’s knees just as he was about to stab down on Shrubley’s quivering body. The pair went back with the force of the koblin’s tackle and crashed into the large stately desk, breaking it and sending flinders skittering across the floor in every direction.

Just as quickly as she had come, the Koblin was booted across the room until she slammed into the far wall and dislodged a painting there. It fell to the ground. The frame cracked, and the snap attracted the Snake Lord’s attention like a lodestone to iron filings.

Shrubley got to his feet unsteadily, using [Recovery] to heal himself and then [Counteract] to nullify the poison. Being that it was his body, he didn't need to eat the berries that would normally be generated.

Slyrox groaned, then threw a pair of small items at Rykal. They bounced off the man's tattered clothes and fell gently to the blood-splattered carpet.

**[Koblin Dice]: Roll a 12-sided die with different results based upon the roll and influenced by your current Rank. Can only be used once per day.**

"Snake eyes," the Snake Lord said with a grin.

From the dice, a wall of light made out of thousands of glowing filaments sprang up and ensnared Rykal. He stared, mouth open in rage as the bands of light were tightened and he was brought to his knees.

**[Koblin Dice (Snake Eyes)]: Generates a binding effect on the target that dampens their power and prevents them from moving for an hour. Significantly less effective on those of a higher Rank.**

"Slyrox muchly lucky," the koblin said with a firm nod, then made a rude gesture at the false Count. "Havior taught me this. Stings, yes?"

Cal stared up at one of the paintings depicting a Steel Ranker adventurer. Fio, the elf mage. She seemed to actually look back at the skeleton, tilting her floppy hat to the side.

"Hey, this is one of the adventurers!" Cal said, holding up the painting. "Let's see if I can use Mirror essence to bring her out." He looked over his bony shoulder at the Snake Lord. "Let's see how you handle a Steel Ranker, buddy!"

While Shrubley's wounds were healed, he backed away toward Slyrox to use [Recovery] on her as well. He watched the false Count as closely as he dared.

Shrubley wanted to attack him, but he was so drained he didn't know if he had the strength.

"Muchly thankings," Slyrox said, getting to her feet as Cal focused his Mirror essence to shatter the bonds that held the mage inside the frame.

Shrubley looked around. All the Steel Ranker adventurers were there, with the exclusion of that bard he didn't remember seeing too much of.

They were proper adventurers. They had strength. *Strength that I lack.*

Once more he summoned his Copper aura and used it to drag his body forward, putting himself between the Snake Lord and his friends. He had to buy them time.

Rykal began to laugh, a high-pitched hissing that sounded more like the air being let out of a balloon than anything human.

As he did, his body deflated. The webbing of light that restrained him pulled tighter, but something green and slithery wriggled out before the net fully collapsed onto an empty person suit.

Rykal reared up to his full height, a majestic cobra hood flaring behind him, forked tongue darting. Bright golden slitted eyes regarded Shrubley with malice.

“And now, little monster, you die.”