

Chapter 86 – Oregano Gangsta VI

“Well, is somebody going to open it?” Cal asked.

The letter bulged suspiciously, as if it was filled with countless sheets of parchment. Shrubley leaned in and picked up the letter, weighing it in his hands, marveling at how much more dexterous he was than the last time he had visited the Adventurers Guild.

“What’s in it?” Slyrox asked warily, then noisily slurped on some [Thundermelon Juice]. Tiny bits of electricity sparked around her mask.

Cal tried his best to get a closer look. Despite his efforts, he couldn’t figure out how she was getting that straw in there. He shrugged his bony shoulders.

Shrubley flicked open the wax seal, noting that it was the Adventurers Guild’s seal, a shield emblazoned with an anvil and a hammer poised over it.

Letter after letter was stuffed inside. As Shrubley drank in the words inked on the parchment, he handed them out to each of his friends in turn.

“It is muchly bigger on the inside!” Slyrox exclaimed in surprise.

Cal started to sniffle. Even Slyrox made a blubbery sort of noise inside her mask, while Smudge simply blinked at the words and said, “Can’t read.”

No one dared shame him for it, even if it was somewhat amusing to everyone but Smudge.

Shrubley read his letter aloud and was soon joined by Slyrox and Cal. Each letter was from a different person in Taamra. Each professed gratitude in varying degrees, addressed to the “Heroes of Taamra” who had saved their home.

The monster adventurers, it seemed, were famous.

Countless promises of sponsorship, aid, lodgings, and all sorts of discounts on every sort of good imaginable was offered. There were many more who simply wanted to tell them that they were heroes.

Shrubley sat down on the floor slowly, feeling stunned.

He had never felt so accepted in all his life. His yellow lamplight eyes misted with dew.

Any moment now, Shrubley expected to wake up from the dream. To find himself alone, without friends, still struggling down from the mountains and being chased from small villages.

It didn't happen, though.

This was real.

While nobody else would likely hear of his deeds outside of this border town, Shrubley had gone above and beyond to save countless lives. The Steel Ranked adventurers had done their part to assure people that it was the monsters, not the adventurers, that had been the saviors.

All day letters poured in, visitors were turned away politely but firmly by the new acting Guild Leader, Sel Vevini.

Shrubley read every single letter aloud, so Smudge could partake in the joy of being a hero too. Not only did Shrubley read every letter, he wrote back as well.

To each person.

It took him days, but he worked tirelessly in between recovering from his ordeals in the mirror realm and repairing his equipment. The shops that had once turned him away welcomed him with open arms, showering the little shrub with all sorts of trinkets.

Taamra was still a border town, and relatively poor at that, so they couldn't afford to give everything away, but even Shrubley's poor economic senses told him that they were losing money on the items he purchased.

Steep discounts were not the only thing offered. There were letters of introduction to several families offered to Shrubley, should he and his clan of adventurers decide to head to the Inner Ring. Letters that would ease their passage and introduce them to distant relations, providing a point of contact in several cities that dwarfed Taamra's small stature.

The days flew by, and after a week and countless amounts of parchment, Shrubley was finally caught up. His equipment, while not new, was polished and free of dents or dings. His friends had new equipment of their own, and the town of Taamra was fast on the mend.

With Jerric and his party working feverishly with their Steel strength, they were able to rebuild the walls and repair much of the damage that devastated the small town.

"In a few more days, you won't even know that anything happened," Sel told Shrubley from the balcony of her office.

Shrubley thought she looked the part of a Guild Leader, regal and stately, beautiful and kind.

"There will be scars," Shrubley said somberly.

Sel turned away from the view of the town. It was amazing the progress a small group of Steels could achieve. No wonder the Inner Ring was filled with architectural wonders.

“You are oddly perceptive, little one,” she told Shrubley. He always said things that you would never expect to come from somebody with such a childlike sense of wonder.

Shrubley shifted on his roots. “Have you thought about my offer?”

Sel turned back to the golden view of Taamra. Tiles glittered in the afternoon sun. The black marks on the walls were just a bad memory, and the streets were clear of refuse and debris.

It was a beautiful town once more. The only difference was that the walls were bigger, grander, and fully encircled the expanded size of the town.

After so many farms and homesteads were burned, a great deal of survivors had elected to come into the town properly, ballooning its original size by nearly half again.

When the traveling merchants and adventurers came once more, the tales of Shrubley’s deeds would spread, the dangers of Taamra would grow with every retelling, and soon Taamra would be unrecognizable.

The borders of the world would be pushed back once more, and Taamra might one day be considered an Outer Ring town instead of a border town.

Sel sighed. *And all because of a little shrub who wanted to be an adventurer.*

Of course, the people were different now too. Many had taken up the adventuring life. The surrounding areas were safer than ever. Especially

since Shrubley and his friends weren't the only monster adventurers protecting the realm.

"You have garnered enough support that no matter what my answer is, you could go ahead and do it anyway," Sel told him, turning around and sitting back at her large oak desk. "You do realize that, don't you?"

Shrubley hopped up into a chair. He didn't have to struggle the way he used to. He was taller, stronger, and more confident than she would have ever thought possible.

"Asking for permission is respectful," Shrubley told her.

Coming from anybody else but Shrubley, that would have rung all of her alarm bells. A great many people believed that it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission, and far too many saw her as an easy mark to rise through the Guild's ranking structure.

In Sel's experience, Shrubley had always been sincere.

Letters had been pouring in from the very first day, telling, asking, begging, or demanding based on the writer for her to raise Shrubley and his party—or at the very least Shrubley—to D-Grade or higher.

Sel had resisted.

Not because she didn't want to heap even more laurels upon the little shrub, but because he was not ready. He was young and new to the world still, and she still worried that she had done him a disservice by granting him E-Grade with 2 Stars.

Even as an official Guild Leader, she could not grant Shrubley 3-Star status without at least 2 other Guild Leaders signing off on it.

To grant him D-Grade or higher would be to push him headlong into not only the rough politics of the Guild, but onto more dangerous contracts than he was ready for.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Sel asked for what felt like the 100th time. “You could live like a king here. The people would see to it that you wanted for nothing. You’ve *earned* your rest, Shrublely. You all have.”

She knew his answer before he spoke. Shrublely was an adventurer through and through. A week waiting around and getting doted on was boring to him. He wanted to be out there fighting, making the world safer, seeing everything that made Almora such a wondrous place.

Shrublely took the brass desk plaque that named Sel as the official Guild Leader of the Adventurers Guild chapter in Taamra. He lightly traced the etched letters, deep in thought.

“Do you know the saying, ‘whatever does not kill you, makes you stronger?’” he asked quietly.

Sel furrowed her brow and tucked a strand of auburn hair behind one pointed ear. “It is a common enough saying among adventurers, yes. What about it?”

Shrublely turned the plaque around in his hands, still staring at it as if it held all the world’s answers. “I have often thought about that saying. My father... he was not fond of it. He said whatever did not kill people left scars. Scars that wound and bind and tighten with age and experience. They limit. Narrow people’s focus. Prevent them from doing what caused that scar in the first place.”

“Well... that is natural, is it not? We all want to avoid pain,” Sel told him. Not that many adventurers seemed to think like that, but Sel kept that to herself. Shrublely seemed to be going somewhere with this.

As with all things to do with Shrubley, where he ended up was never where you thought.

Sel could not resist adding, “But there are many people who do. They throw off their shackles, their fear of pain, and do that very same thing day in and day out. Many adventurers do this.”

“But how many adventurers are there compared to the world’s population?” Shrubley asked.

“Less than a percent,” Sel told him. The adventurers, though plenty and largely charged with the overall safety of the realm, were a fraction of a fraction.

More accurately, they were somewhere around 0.55% of the current core race population based on the last census. As a Guild Leader, Sel had access to such data on demographics. And numbers were steadily declining.

Shrubley nodded as if he expected that. “Which leaves an alarmingly large number of people who do not share that sentiment. Most people only wish to live a good life, to be happy, to fall in love.”

“I suppose you are right,” Sel admitted. “You do not think common people are resilient enough?”

Shrubley shook his leafy, round body. His green leaves rustled. “That’s not it at all. But I have thought often about that saying. I used to believe that my father was correct, but now I see that he was viewing it through the lens of his own suffering. I do not believe either statement to be true any longer.”

Despite herself, Sel found herself leaning forward. “What do you believe, Shrubley?”

“I believe my father was wrong,” he told her, setting the plaque down gently and rearranging it so it was in the exact position it was in when he picked it up. “And I believe the old adage is also wrong.”

Shrubley leaned back and folded his branch-like limbs over his round and leafy middle. “It is not the wounds that we survive that make us stronger. If you are wounded, it stays with you. If that is all that happens, then I believe my father is right. That all wounds scar.”

“But I thought you just said—”

Shrubley shook his head, which was effectively his whole body, setting the leaves rustling again. “It is not the wound that makes us stronger, it is the *healing*. If you do not heal, you can never become stronger. And to heal you need rest, compassion, and above all, *time*. The world is not so simple as I once thought. There is no way to avoid all pain, and so there must be healing to prevent those wounds from festering, from scarring. When we heal, we become stronger than we were before, but when we are denied that ability to heal, we are lessened for the wounds we suffer. Everybody should be allowed to heal, Sel.”

Sel looked down at the bulging satchel on her desk. It was more money than she had seen in her entire life. She imagined it wouldn't have been hard for Shrubley, the Monster Hero of Taamra, to convince every person he met to make a donation.

“Very well, Shrubley,” she said, taking the purse of coins. “The Guild will see that your home for children and refugees is properly administered.”