

# CHAPTER 41 – A LIGHT IN THE DARK II

For the glowing shrub and his familiar, lost in a world of prevailing darkness, it was difficult to stay out of sight of all the undead roaming the vast chamber stacked with endless coffins and gravestones.

However, Shrubley did not let go of his Light essence orb. As it turned out, the Light kept him and his familiar safe. Or at least safer than they used to be without it.

He was glowing like a beacon in the infinite darkness around him, yet the undead did not appear to notice him. Perhaps they were not able to perceive light like most creatures.

“Maybe they are also weak to Light,” Shrubley whispered.

His glowbug familiar did that loop-the-loop again that seemed to mean, “yes”.

Shrubley nodded. “That’s encouraging.”

Before he ventured into the undead chamber, Shrubley took the time to build his [Bark Armor] up. The layers of protection fortified the adventurer greater than ever before.

Using [Bark Armor] wasn’t a fast process, but nothing was immediately attacking him yet. Unlike when he was ambushed, he could prepare, though not for long if he wanted to catch up to his friends.

Meanwhile, Shrubley took stock. His shield was busted to pieces, sitting in his inventory. There was no helping that for now.

His [Practice Sword] was still usable, but it had clearly seen better days.

While he was wishing he had a stronger sword, his familiar landed on the sword. A wispy green outline of ethereal vines enveloped the blade.

Nature essence saturated the weapon from pommel to tip, enhancing its magic damage.

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

Hidden within the leaves and branches obscuring Shrubley's face, a smile cracked through his bark exterior. "Thank you for this gift of strength, my familiar," he told the bug with utmost sincerity.

That loop-the-loop was more energetic than ever before.

Getting up, Shrubley took his first step towards the undead chamber. Just as his branch foot touched the ground, Shardscript appeared, offering him a new quest.

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Rykal paced up and down the parlor, rubbing at his temples. Then he stepped smartly into the dead center of the room.

"Igor!" he called with Count Haalften's voice.

He had previously placed every mirror in the manor in such a way that if you stood in the exact middle of the room, you could see every angle and corner of the room without any blind spots.

The curtains rustled, drawing Rykal's serpentine eyes. It was an instinctual thing, a mere flicker of the eye. It was hardly enough time for a creature to slip past him. Despite all of his preparation, the voice that issued a spray of saliva at his back was most definitely Igor's.

He spun around, raging, "How many times have I told you to stop doing that?"

"Three hundred and fifty theven times, *thir*." Igor stood at attention.

The false Count glared at him suspiciously. He was *sure* that the hump was on the other shoulder just last night....

He shook his head. *Fool! He'll be the first to go when all is settled.* For now, it wouldn't make any sense to waste time and energy on him.

The disguise was good enough to fool the Count's own Igor. Because of that, it made capturing Igor's soul in a painting utterly worthless until there was enough of his family to assume the fool's place.

"Tell me, Igor, how are our guests sleeping?"

“Thoundly, maarthter.”

Rykal pinched the bridge of his nose and dearly wanted to pull the face off and reveal who and what he was so he could bite that idiot Igor’s jugular out and be done with it.

But no. People expected the Igor. The Haalftens were rich and influential enough in their own way to have one, and that meant he was *expected*. Besides, who among his kin would sink so low as to imitate him?

None that he knew of.

“Very good. Would you be so kind as to offer them breakfast and slip a little something extra into their drinks?”

Igor twisted his mouth up at that suggestion. “Thir, I don’t mean to overstep myself, but this ith–”

“And quit with that accent!”

It took Igor a moment to steady himself. A vein pulsed just near a row of stitches above his eye. “Very well, *sir*. As I was saying, it is rather unsportsmanlike, don’t you think? Drugging your prey? Where does it end? Why even offer them respite and a nice safe bed if you’re just going to kill them when they can’t fight back?”

Igor had been with a number of masters throughout his long life, or rather it would be more accurate to say the *pieces* of Igor had been with countless masters throughout their original owners’ long lives and the lives of their inheritors.

That meant that Igor was no stranger to... well, evil and villainy, it was part and parcel of the job usually. The weird, the cooky, the mad, and everything in between. Before the Countess ran off, the Count was a jolly good chap, always willing to give his prey a sporting chance.

Besides, what was death to a vampyr? A little rest and relaxation until Igor managed to sweep up all the ashes and drop a little blood onto the mix. Hardly bothersome at all!

It was clear that the Countess’ absence was weighing heavily on the Count’s mind. Igor could see that plain as day. Why she had run off, he never could figure out. Any staff that had been around from before her departure were... different now.

Igor shook his head. The Count had *cured his vampyrism!* That was not the action of a sane mind.

He mostly kept to himself these days, but with one thing and another, he was thinking the unthinkable. And that was to leave his master behind and go find another one, perhaps one with a laboratory in the mountains with lots of lightning strikes and a penchant for digging up corpses and stitching them together.

A boy could dream.

“Are you listening to me?” the false Count said.

Igor realized he had committed a grave sin by not paying attention while he daydreamed about castles in the mountains and mobs of angry villagers at the gates. He scrolled through his memories to find the bits that his ears had caught, but his mind hadn't.

“Yes, master,” he said, enunciating for all his life was worth. “I understand. It is not my place to question your wishes. I shall give them the number two knock-out powder?”

“That'll do,” Rykal told him. “Now bego—” before the second syllable was out of his lips, there was an Igor shaped hole in front of him and the door was just shutting.

“Foolish creature,” he muttered to himself, looking at all the mirrors. “I'll just have to do something about the... distractions next time.”

Despite his failure to catch Igor, Rykal was sure he was close. It was a well-guarded secret that Igors could show up wherever you weren't looking after you called them.

They particularly preferred to be behind you. It was a great fright to a serpentii to have some *thing* always showing up behind you. It was unsettling, but it also presented an opportunity for discovery.

And a serpentii liked nothing more than copying somebody else's strength and making it their own. They were *good* at that. The serpentii had lived long enough in their mirror world. It was time *they* took center stage.

Rykal went to his study, where several paintings were hung in a seemingly random order. The old Count Haalften glared down at him, immortalized in the expensive wooden frame.

“Oh, don’t look so glum,” he told the Count. “You’ll never grow old in there, after all. And you’re about to have much more company.”

After all, that idiotic monster adventuring group had allowed four more members of his family through the portal. And now they had two Steel Ranked adventurers sleeping soundly in the western wing, begging to be taken. With the authority of two Steel Ranked adventurers, Rykal’s plans would be handily accelerated.

From the spying Igor had done, their friends were still back in Taamra, at the tavern. Once the Paladin and Wizard were out of the way, he could slip some family members into their skin, pull on their memories like an old jacket, and walk back into town to take care of the rest of their group.

With the Steel Rankers taken care of, nobody in Taamra had the power to stop him. And any adventurers or nosy interlopers from beyond the mountains would have to come by the manor. With Igor’s weather machine cranked up to eleven, they would be forced to take shelter at the manor where they could be appropriately dealt with.

Now that they had the original painting on hand, Rykal could make as many copies as he needed.

*Yes, Rykal thought to himself, hands laced behind his back, soon we won’t need to hide. We can shed our skin and take our rightful place as rulers of this realm.*

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Shrubley twisted on the balls of his feet and sliced through the reaching, clawing arm of a [Skeletal Beast]. As Shrubley’s sword cracked through the bone, the Light orb he fastened to the air above his head burned and charred the wound, preventing it from healing and speeding up its destruction.

The glowbug spun in the air, warning Shrubley of another attack. He danced out of the way, bringing his sword up just in time to block a hammer blow from a large [Skeletal Bruiser] that would have made even Countess Haalfden look small by comparison.

Shrubley’s strength, however, was back to full and with the Light essence weakening the skeletal creatures, he cleaved through their bones and left piles of powdery ash in his wake.

There was one more important lesson that Shrubley had learned. If he touched one of the skeletons and used [Recovery], it turned the creature's bones black as night as if they were left in a fire.

The bones became so brittle that a simple block turned them to ash. It ate through his mana like nobody's business, but Shrubley was able to turn the most stacked odds into a win with that little trick.

He didn't know why it worked, [Recovery] should have healed the skeletons, right? He didn't know much about skeletons or the undead, but this seemed like something Cal would have mentioned to him.

After all, the sunlight didn't bother skeletons, why would a Light essence ability?

Not that he minded. Shrubley wouldn't have survived the ambushes he had without using [Recovery] to cripple the skeletons that he couldn't immediately face.

The [Skeletal Beast] lunged at him. Shrubley tucked and rolled beneath it, reaching out a twiggy hand and tapping its ribcage while he used [Recovery]. The bones immediately turned to char.

The beast spun around after him, but the inertial force behind its movement was too much on its joints already crumbling from Shrubley's Light essence and [Recovery], that the entire thing was torn apart.

### **Quest Progress: Bone Daddy**

***Destroy every evil skeleton to awaken the Bone Knight.***

**Objectives remaining:**

**Slain Skeletons: 18/21**

**Reward:**

**Awaken the Bone Knight.**

Shrubley ducked to the side, taking a glancing blow across the leaves as a [Skeletal Bruiser] swung its axe at him while he was distracted by the [Skeletal Beast].

Shrubley shattered the creature's wrist bone with a heavy two-handed strike. He stepped into the skeleton's guard and worked his sword in a green blur. [Budding Barrage] filled the tomb with the sound of the skeleton's ribs cracking.

### **Slain Skeletons: 19/21**

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Shrubley looked up to the scouting, acorn-sized figure of his glowbug familiar. "Just two more to go," he said wearily.