

CHAPTER 61 – THE SECRET OF SILVER

Shrublely was poked and prodded awake. He squinted his lamplight eyes and found the Witch's face so close to his that her wide-brimmed witch's hat sheltered him.

"Mistress Ceasewane?" he asked muzzily, noticing that everybody else was fast asleep.

"I think it's time we get a-moseying along, don't you?" The Witch said. "I can't be having with all this cleaning up if the world's going to be ending soon." She looked around the cottage and at the stacked dirty dishes. "Least I won't have to do the dishes."

"I certainly ain't doing it," Sose said.

The Witch looked at him sternly. Something about her posture told Shrublely that the Witch hadn't expected the oppa to be awake. "Ye sure would if I told ye to!" Then her gaze softened. "But you're a good oppa. You ain't gotta worry about all that." She patted his rump affectionately.

A faint sparkle of magic seemed to come from her palm and cling to the oppa's fur.

He lit up at that, so much so his tail fluffed up like a dandelion. A confused moment later, his eyes drooped a little, and he collapsed atop the slumbering Countess.

"Come along now," the Witch said, standing up. "Fantasy essence makes even the most simple humans difficult to ensorcell and soul aeder, like oppas and pobuls, are hard enough without such essences helping 'em out. Now up you get mister shrub."

"Shrublely."

"I know what your name is!" the Witch hissed, pulling him to his feet. "We got business to attend, ye understand? Just a'tween you and me."

Shrubley followed her tentatively out of the cottage and along the wraparound porch to the rear. “This feels slightly wrong, Mistress Ceasewane.”

“Anything worth doing feels slightly wrong. It’s part of the fun. You’ll see.”

Shrubley very much doubted that, but Mistress Ceasewane had taught the Druid, so she clearly knew what she was talking about.

“Did you really know my father?” Shrubley asked as they took the stairs at the rear of the cottage down into the swamp. There was no path to take at the foot of the steps and Shrubley was worried that they would have to swim.

As soon as Mistress Ceasewane reached the bottom step, boards floated to the surface of the murky waters to create a path for them deeper into the swamp. Rippling v’s followed them, but Shrubley did not think they were doing so out of predatory interest.

It felt like an honor guard.

“I did,” she finally answered.

There were so many questions he wanted to ask her! She knew the Druid before he was... well, the Druid! Shrubley had always known him as the Druid, a kind and soft-spoken man that was anything but the person the Witch suggested he had been.

Shrubley was still trying to work out which questions were best to ask when they arrived at a small foggy island amidst the murk and mugginess of the swamp.

With a wave of her hand, the mist parted to reveal a verdant island that rose majestically out of the brown-green waters. She stepped onto the greenery and turned to Shrubley, holding up three fingers.

“You get to ask me three questions,” she told him. “I see it burning you up from the inside, and so I’ll give you that much and no more. Be quick about it, because we need to be done by the time that girl wakes up. She won’t like me doing this no matter what she says. She’ll try to stop me. She was always the good one of the group.”

Shrubley tried to fit this into the mental model he had of the Countess.

Surely she wasn’t *evil*, not necessarily, but she was still... well, not *good*.

Being short-tempered doesn't mean a person is not good, Shrublely reminded himself. She was stuck in this world for a lot longer than you were and weakened by the lack of blood.

And yet, there was something slightly sinister about her. Then again, he felt the same from Mistress Ceasewane.

The bright glow of Shrublely's familiar fluttered by the Witch, then swerved around to perch atop one of his leaves.

"What can I do to help you?" Shrublely asked.

The Witch stared at him and then laughed. Her voice was swallowed up by the mist and fog that rose off the swamp. "You get three questions, and the first one you ask is about *helpin' me*. Kindred help you, lad. You're too pure for this world, and surely too pure for Almora."

Shrublely noticed for the first time that the Witch wasn't using her walking sticks. She didn't even struggle to get down to his height and pat him affectionately on the head. "No, Shrublely. I dare say that all you can do for me is to accept this gift and let me go my own way. You'll find that the very young and the very old often don't get the option to choose what they want in life. Let me choose."

Dew gathered in his lamplight eyes. Even the glowbug made a mournful sound. Shrublely looked up sadly at her, but he said, "Done."

She straightened up and led him up a path of dew-laden stones that wrapped around the spire-like hill to a tall stone shaped like a pyramid that'd been stretched until it resembles a needle several stories tall. "Don't think that just because you asked a kind question I'll let you off the hook. You still got two more. Best be on with them."

"Was my father a good person?"

"He was, in his own way," Ceasewane told him without the slightest hesitation. "He was foolish and hot-blooded. He was in love, too. Oh, the two didn't think I saw, but not much escapes my eyes. Still, he was a good soul. He wanted to help people, to truly help them. He did it better than most. Druid would be an unlikely, but solid fit for him once he settled down a bit. I imagine after all that nasty business, he wanted to live a life of peace and quiet. I'm sorry to hear he's gone, truly. Almora lost a stalwart soul the day he passed, but he's returned to the Shard to rest, and that's all any of us can ask for."

"I am sorry he's gone too. I miss him every day."

It was one thing to believe his father was a good person, and another to truly know. He did not think that Mistress Ceasewane would lie to him about that. Shrubley held himself back from asking who his father was in love with, though just barely.

His next question was more important.

The Witch clearly saw the hunger in his eyes and smiled at him knowingly.

Another test, Shrubley thought to himself.

He could be greedy, fall into the trap of asking a relatively simple question to satiate his hunger to learn more about his father now that he was gone, but it would be selfish.

Amidst the inner turmoil was the understanding that Classes could be changed. He doubted that his father could have been an A-Grade adventurer at sixteen if he didn't have a Class. Whatever his father used to be, it didn't seem to be Druid. And if Classes couldn't be changed, then perhaps it was evolution instead.

If only I could ask that as well, but I cannot. Not now, with only one question left, Shrubley thought, gathering up the flimsy remnants of calm within himself. His glowbug radiated some semblance of peace, helping him.

They arrived at the top of the hill, which had been flattened. Several magical wards were disassembled by the Witch as they walked toward the Guidance Stone of Vitality.

It was a massive thing written with strange engravings that crawled across its surface and crackled with power. All around it bushes and grass and flowers bloomed a riot of color and scents.

To Shrubley, it felt like home.

“Go on then,” the Witch said. “All you need to do is touch it and offer it your essences. It's a pact, see? You offer a bit of yourself, and it offers a bit of itself to you. Doesn't always work, mind. But I'll eat my own hat if the Stone rejects you. There ain't a soul alive that is more fitting for this Guidance Stone, and not a person I know of in the last century that has had its blessing.”

“Because you have hidden it away here.”

The Witch tilted her head to the side. “Not a question, smart boy. Yes, you're right. The Prime essences that come from this Guidance Stone are strong and rare. Anywhere you might find this would be surrounded by fierce and nearly

indestructible creatures that would guard it with their lives. As you can guess, a Guidance Stone of Vitality would make that very difficult.”

“You did it,” Shrublely said slowly, trying particularly hard to not raise the tail-end of his voice in question.

“Aye, but I’m not like most people. Witches use levers, my boy.”

Shrublely nodded. He had heard the Druid talk about that as well. Strength was good, but *properly applied strength* was better. Find the weak point and with a proper lever you could accomplish just about anything, from impossible magic to conquering a monster lair.

He looked towards the Guidance Stone, wondering what Prime essence he was going to discover. That was something he also couldn’t ask, even though the Witch likely knew.

His three essences were Curiosity, Nature, and Light. What would those three together combine into and create? He could feel as if he was almost upon the cusp of the truth, but the revelation stayed out of reach.

This was something that only the Shard itself could reveal to him, even in this distant place.

Shrublely walked up to the Guidance Stone and then stopped halfway there. The Witch did not get any closer. “I still have one more question.”

“Out with it then. We ain’t got time for lollygagging.”

“What is the secret of Silver?” Shrublely asked. This was the answer worth knowing. A truth that would one day change his life, and those of all his friends. Even the Countess.

“I told you—”

“But you know,” Shrublely said confidently. “You have done it. And you know what it is. I could see that. You just didn’t want to make it easy for anybody to ask you. You wanted to see who would go out of their way.”

“Such as a little Awakened soul shrub that only has three questions to ask?”

Shrublely turned and stood up as straight as he could. “Yes.”

Grinning like a grandmother, she strode up to Shrublely and knelt down beside him. She shooed away his familiar, so even the glowbug didn’t get to find out.

With one hand cupped to her mouth, she whispered the secret of Silver to him so quietly that Shrubley had a hard time hearing her.

His eyes widened. “But that’s *easy!*”

Mistress Ceasewane stood and folded her arms at her waist, stepping back once more. “So you say. But it ain’t easy for most folk. Just remember what I said.”

With her words bouncing around in his head, Shrubley turned to the Guidance Stone and placed his hand upon its surface.