

# CHAPTER 60 – MISTRESS CEASEWANE II

“But you’ll... die,” Shrubley said.

The Witch gave him one of those secret little smiles. “Think so, do ye?”

Shrubley paused. “I am... not sure.”

“Good.” She rubbed her hands together briskly. “Now,” she turned to the oppa, “I think you mentioned something about a little after-dinner story. After such a large meal I expect you all will be needing some rest. Girl, go up and fetch the spare beds for our guests.”

The Countess stood up before she even realized what she was doing. She glared at the Witch, her teacher, and strode up the stairs that groaned under her prodigious size.

Upstairs, she stomped around a little harder than necessary while she looked for the folding beds that Mistress Ceasewane always seemed to have on hand. It didn’t matter if she was camping by herself in the Darkglades with monsters all about. She always had a tea set and beds ready for guests.

*She knew we were coming,* she thought to herself as she took in the small storage room at the end of the uneven hall. *She could have stopped us. She’s stronger than me, even though she doesn’t want to flaunt it.*

But she couldn’t leave the swamp. It was the heart of her power. If she left, the Witch would be vulnerable. More than that, she’d be weaker the farther away she was from the Guidance Stone.

There was something to all of this that bothered the Countess beyond the impending death of her mentor. Mistress Ceasewane was legendary for her ability to defy death and do things that nobody else could do.

It was *impossible* to anchor a Guidance Stone. Whole kingdoms had fallen to ruin trying, and one little old lady managed it on her own.

Did she ever boast about it? No. And that was the most infuriating thing of all! She could have been richer beyond comprehension. Even if she didn't impart the secret, people would ply her with every comfort imaginable in the *slight* hope that she might drop a grain of advice.

And that, more than anything, was the reason that the Countess knew her teacher would never tell anybody what she did. Oh, it'll get out. The Countess would make sure of that.

Mistress Ceasewane always counted on somebody leaking her exploits, even if she never said it directly. She was clearly pleased that her legendary status continued to grow.

But she would never accept the accolades, riches, or comforts that were offered to her. She didn't want a comfortable life.

*She was right about one thing*, the Countess thought as she silently entered her teacher's bedroom, opposite the room she was clearly meant to go into. *Breaking into the Noble stage is almost impossible for most people. I haven't managed it in decades upon decades of trying.*

People called it the "Limit of Steel" and it was as true for a vampyr who had an infinite number of chances as it was for a human who had a pathetically short lifespan of a hundred years or so if they managed to hit Steel.

*Mistress Ceasewane doesn't like comfort*, she thought as her elongated claw of a fingernail fiddled around in the lock and it clicked open. *She always said comfort was the enemy of progress.* She was fond of saying, *"The moment ye get comfortable, that's when yer progress dies!"* and the Countess had to admit there was a ring of truth to it.

The monumental surge of power that Shrubley gained wasn't from training in a relatively safe place. It was from nearly dying and striving to survive without any thought of actually getting stronger.

He likely needed every bit of his strength just to make it through the ordeal. The problem was, the stronger you got, the more you had to lose. The more difficult every fight with a monster or enemy at your level was.

She opened the door slowly and slipped inside.

There wasn't much to see, and even less room to see it in, considering Miranda's seven-foot stature. Hunching slightly to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling, the Countess disarmed a magical alarm with a flick of her hand.

Her Hush essence smothered the alarm bells that would ring throughout the cottage at her next step.

She quickly searched the room with a calculating eye, but came up empty. There were five items in the room and nothing else.

*Mistress Ceasewane always did like everything in a multiple of five.*

The narrow bed was set beneath a small window. Next to that was a simple nightstand, a chest that you would expect to practically glow with magical wards but instead was just a slightly ratty chest for linens and things. A small notebook, and a framed picture on the nightstand completed the room.

No candles. No light sources of any kind. Then again, the old Witch didn't have any need for them. She could see better in the dark than just about any creature alive or dead.

There was enough light for Miranda's vampyric sight to see by, which was why it took her a moment to inspect the picture. It was, to her sensibilities, the absolute least interesting of all the things in her old teacher's room.

You would expect heaps of trophies and countless broadsheet clippings of her various exploits, but there was nothing.

Without even touching it, Miranda knew that there was no way she could read the journal. Whatever it contained was for the Witch alone.

But the picture.... She picked it up and examined it by the light from the hall coming in over her shoulder.

Her heart skipped a beat. Maybe it would beat again tomorrow.

*I remember this...* the Countess thought as she looked at the five people smiling and making silly faces in the picture. Like all proper photographs, they moved and shuffled about, a true capture of the moment and the emotions at that time.

A time Miranda desperately wished she could relive.

Something she hadn't thought about in decades came rushing back to her.

The day had been raining on and off, their training interrupted by the inclement weather.

Looming over them all was the famous Mistress Ceasewane, who seemed to be fighting a smirk. There was young Halbert with his bulky muscles and wide

shoulders. Next to him was Miranda, slightly smaller but altogether no different than she was now. To her left was Thundraut, the fiery-haired dwarf that you would expect to be the first one to rush out at the enemy, but instead, he was their cool-headed tactician.

It was Halbert that was the hothead of the group, and the dwarf, though he looked like your typical axe-wielder and beer quaffer, was often the one to cool his blood.

Now that she knew at least one of the missing pieces as to where he ended up, she wondered what made him pick the path of a Druid. In the dimness of the room, she allowed herself a moment to grieve his loss.

She had fully expected to meet him again one day.

*If things had been a little different back then... if the Guild had been a bit more trusting...* She gently touched the young, grinning man with her fingertips. He was just a memory now.

Blinking back tears, she looked at the most handsome and gloriously beautiful of the group. Alaster Mynt.

A small fire of rage and anger boiled in her chest at the sight of that smug idiot. He should have been the best of them. The Guild and most of the Inner Ring certainly believed him to be.

Oh, yes, she had kept tabs on *him* all right. He was the reason she hadn't stopped striving for Silver. If a loathsome creature like Alaster could do it, so could she.

A brittle tinkling sound brought her back to the present.

She had gripped the picture frame so tightly that the glass cracked. The Countess frowned, pressed two fingers to the crack and used [Mend] to restore the glass to new.

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The oppa puffed out his furry chest, then rubbed his paws together mischievously. "Alright, you're in for a treat!"

Colorful Fantasy mana spilled from his paws like running paint, sloshing across the floor in vibrant waves. In moments, a diorama-like stage was formed, people, creatures, and castles captured within.

The land rolled by, starting from a bustling castle town that then changed into hilly plains with hippogryphs soaring through the air. A motley group of wanderers called a few down with magical whistles, and then they were off across a cerulean sea swirling with countless whirlpools.

With his soft voice as the backdrop to the center stage, Sose regaled them with the story of these wanderers and their hippogryphs on a journey to fight a dragon.

Shrubley was enraptured, seeing an adventure unfold before his eyes. The rest were nearly just as transfixed.

The sea gave way to storm weathered cliffs, where lightning lashed at the stones, threatening to cleave the wanderers from the sky. One of the wanderers, dressed in the unmistakable garb of Witches everywhere, cast a barrier spell upon the group, warding them from harm.

The lightning struck a bubble, and the living paint that it was comprised of splattered out of the diorama, flicking dots of multicolor across Shrubley and his gathered group.

The cliffs shifted into jagged mountains, with one grander than the rest.

The wanderers, with their Witch in the lead, dove into the great mountain and ventured into its cavernous depths. Here, the hippogryphs were out of their element, so they stayed by the entrance.

An empty underground dwarven city of blocky buildings and waterfalls of lava formed before Shrubley's eyes. A dragon, roosting upon the biggest tower there, breathed frozen fire upon the wanderers.

The wanderers fought valiantly. The chromatic shades of magic and essences captured in Fantasy mana flashed, assailing not the dragon, but its collar. There were so many spells, Shrubley couldn't identify them all. One might have been Darkness essence, and another Light essence, but most of them bled into one another in a brilliant display of magical fireworks.

"For the dragon was enslaved by a Paladin driven mad by a fell god!" Sose proclaimed.

As he watched, Shrubley could begin to recognize the wanderers. One was the Countess, and another was the Witch herself. While their details weren't that defined, Shrubley began to study one closer than the rest. The hero he began to suspect was his father.

If there was one thing Sose was good at, it was bringing a tale to life. Writing them, not so much. But performing? Definitely. He'd make a mint whenever he showed up at a tavern.

In fact, that was part of how the Countess created her wealth. Most everybody liked the talking ferret and his magic paint. Provided that it was hidden behind a box and curtain, adding to the effect of the show.

Toward the middle of the storytelling, the Countess had come down from upstairs carrying the spare beds. They practically set themselves up as she laid them out.

Without another word, she went out onto the porch while the story wound itself down. The dragon was freed from the cursed collar, and the evil Paladin was defeated.

Crowds of dwarves began to return to their city. Building after building glowed with renewed life. The wanderers, atop that tower, gathered around a metallic dragon egg and the sleeping dragon.

The scene folded to a close.

“No, not a cliffhanger!” Cal cried. “Anything but that!”

“What happened to the dragon egg?” Slyrox begged the oppa.

He gave a toothy grin for an answer. “You’ll have to find out next time! It’s sleepy-time for me.”