

CHAPTER 22 – THE PLOT THICKENS

One of the burly men flung open the cell, and then the other slithered in and dragged the vampyric Count out.

There was a brief struggle and a strange scattering sound as one of the men threw a handful of rice into the air. As soon as it landed, the vampyric Count struggled visibly, then dropped to the ground, trying to pick them all up.

A pair of silver cuffs were slapped onto his wrists with surprising speed and the Count hissed.

The Imposter Count turned away from the man in chains. “Take him to my study.” He looked over at the monsters. “You are all monsters–” he raised a hand to forestall Shrubley’s predictable outburst, “–yes, yes, you claim to be adventurers, but I only see one badge among you. Monster adventurers... very *progressive*. Well, the world moves and we must move with it, eh?”

Behind him, his henchmen struggled with the proper Count and he turned his attention to his prisoner, quietly exchanging a few words.

“Something is not right,” Cal whispered. “If that was truly the Count, then who is it that has tossed us into the dungeons? An imposter of some kind? But why, and how?”

Smudge plopped down in front of Shrubley and oozed over to the cell door. His face swiveled around to peer at Cal and Shrubley both, waiting for something.

“We must save the true Count,” Shrubley said in realization. “This quest, it doesn’t cover what’s going on.”

“He is a vampyr,” Cal pointed out. “I do not think either of these people are *good*.”

“One is a prisoner, the other is the captor,” Shrubley pointed out. “And we did nothing wrong. We were doing what all adventurers do.”

“Some light breaking and entering?” Cal suggested.

“Investigating,” Shrubleby corrected.

The Imposter Count turned back around and grinned, with fangs too long and needle-like to be a vampyr. Tiny droplets of green venom gathered and dripped to the floor where they hissed and pitted the stones.

“There is no such thing as good and evil, only those with the strength and drive to take what they want, and those too weak to seize their heart’s desire.” He pointed at them. “You four are monsters, no matter what you say. You will be hated. Ostracized. Hunted. Why help the core races? What have they ever done for you?”

“Because that is what Heroes do!” Shrubleby shouted, taking out his wooden sword and pointing it at the Snake Count. “You are just a snake living in another’s skin, hiding who you are and taking something that does not belong to you.”

The Snake leaned back and laughed raucously. There was an unsettling, sibilant quality to it.

Now that the truth was out, Shrubleby could see the way the henchmen were moving. They weren’t drunk, they were snakes too, but clearly not as used to two legs as the Snake Count.

They led the true Count Haalften away as he moaned about the rice and struggled to go back and count it.

“Such easy things, vampyrs,” the Snake Count hissed. “And one that prefers to call himself a ‘sportsman’ is even easier than the others!” He shook his head. “Stupidity has no place in the new world. I will gather my... family, and we will take this sleepy countryside for our own.”

Shrubleby tilted his head to the side. This was the time the young daring Hero would get the big-bad-guy to reveal his plans, then sneak away somehow and come back to foil them!

“You’ll never get away with it!” Cal said, jumping the gun a little.

Shrubleby gave him a *look*

“Sorry, too soon?”

“Yes, Cal.”

The Snake Count shook his head as Shrubley stepped all the way up to the grating and pointed the sword as near as he could at the creature. “The Adventurers Guild will not stand by and let this happen.”

“And why should they care?” asked the Snake Count. “There will be no visible crimes or deaths. The monsters will be whipped into shape and obedient to me or they will suffer and die. What concern is that of the humans and their ilk?”

Rykal, the Imposter Count, shook his head. “Your naivety is almost painful. By the time they realize that this corner of the world hasn’t actually been conquered but was simply biding its time, it’ll be too late. First, we’ll take the Haalften lands. They’ll let us keep an eye on the Ranmount Pass. We’ll be the first to know if there’s any new adventurers poking around.”

Pressing a fingertip to the tip of Shrubley’s sword, the Snake Count pushed it back with great ease despite Shrubley’s trembling arms. “You are almost as simple as the people here. We’ll take the weaker adventurers first, the merchants and travelers, who wouldn’t be missed for some time. Everybody knows that adventurers have wanderlust, they’ll just be thought of as wandering off.”

Shrubley stared at his sword and was painfully aware just how weak he was compared to this person. If he wanted to, he could break Shrubley in half without breaking a sweat.

That was why they were in here together. It wasn’t that they were not a threat. They weren’t *important* enough to even be considered a threat.

Shrubley had never felt so helpless, except for one painfully agonizing memory that was buried into the deepest layer of his very roots.

His Druid, and his father, dying. No matter how much Shrubley had tried to heal him, it had never been enough.

Because Shrubley was too weak to restore his ailing spirit and crumbling body. And here he was, still too small, too feeble, to be able to achieve what he wanted so badly to.

To be the hero.

He shook his leafy head to dispel the haunting image of the big, kind man with his arms folded across his chest.

He had been so *still*.

“We’ll build up an army, and any influential members we happen to procure, we’ll give them the same treatment as the good Count.” The Snake Count leaned in and smiled viciously.

“In fact, I have you four to thank for this momentous occasion. You see, that painting you brought for me? It’s a very special one I had ordered just for such an occasion. With one look, the Count will be trapped within the canvas.”

“But how did you get the shopkeeper to go—oh.” Cal sagged a little.

Straightening his cravat, the Snake Count gave Cal a smug grin. “So you’re the brains of the operation, then. Ironic.”

“Har har,” Cal said despondently.

“Yes, the shopkeeper is one of mine. With that very special canvas, I can trap him with my Mirror essence within and siphon off his likeness and even his powers and knowledge to pass as him. I cannot go far from the source of my glamor, and so I had to rely on you idiotic adventurers. With the good Count in the cells, I was chained to this place as much as he was. It took *months*, but I am patient. A snake is nothing but patience.”

Shrublely shivered. He didn’t want to believe that they had caused this. *This is... my fault?*

“You see, once the Count is trapped in the canvas, I can bring it wherever I like. It’ll look like nothing more than a simple, if very lifelike, painting. Then our plan can truly go into effect.”

Smudge quivered in fear, slowly backing away. He bumped into Slyrox’s prone form. Her mitt twitched, betraying that she was awake and listening this whole time, possibly waiting for her time to strike.

Shrublely wasn’t sure what good it would do. He remembered the large, exceptionally lifelike painting of the shopkeeper and his family in his shop.

The man had *kids*.

“The kids...” Shrublely started to ask, but couldn’t get the words out.

“They are useless to me,” the Snake Count told him. “For now, they live. In time? Who knows? Perhaps my family will be peckish when they arrive. With your sacrifices, we’ll be four steps closer to taking over Taamra. For your role in all of this, I will offer you a chance at salvation, but I will only offer this once.”

He lowered himself into an easy crouch so he was more on Shrubley's level. "You may not be the brains, but it is clear that you are the leader of this merry band of misfit monsters. So to you, I will offer this bargain."

Shrubley shivered with fear and rage. The wooden sword creaked under the strain of his clenched fist.

"No matter what you do, we will take over this countryside. For every soul we sacrifice, another of my family members will take their rightful place in this world. Soon, every adventurer, every family member, every smiling child you see working the fields? They will be *my* family. What will your precious Adventurers Guild do when they, themselves, are made up entirely of my kin?"

Silence settled on the dungeon like a thick velvet cloak.

"Ah," the Snake Count said with a smirk. "No clever comeback? No witty repartee? Shame. Perhaps you do have more brains than I gave you credit. You can see that this will work. All we have to do is bide our time. One person at a time, this world will be ours. But you have served me, even if you did not do it willingly. You are misguided, young shrub. Join me, vow to serve beneath me, and our plan will go much smoother. You will no longer be ostracized. You will be... *family*."

It was Shrubley's turn to laugh. His ringing voice filled the cells with mirth. The Snake Count rose to his feet and hissed with anger, kicking at the grating so hard that it bent inward a few inches. "Insolent speck! How dare you spurn my gracious offer!"

Shrubley had dropped his sword when he laughed and had to hold his sides. He picked it up and stowed it away, looking up at the villain with a sober expression. "I *will* stop you," he promised the Snake Count.

The Snake Count seemed to have gained control of himself in the meantime. He stood up and straightened his borrowed clothing. "I await your violent retribution with bated breath." The sound of trudging feet echoed down the corridor. "Ah, it seems our time is at an end. Do give my regards to the Countess."

As the Snake Count left, he exchanged a brief, hissed word with the burly men. They came up to the cell and grinned like snakes that had just found a nest full of unwatched eggs.

They rammed the key into the lock. Cal winced as there was a faint crushing sound of something brittle, and then the lock fell to the floor.

The brutes threw open the cell, but there was one brief moment when they paused in their strange new bodies, uncertain of how to navigate the opened door when they both wouldn't fit through the doorway at the same time.

“Now!” Shrubley cried, whipping out his sword and shield.