

CHAPTER 58 – MISTRESS

CEASEWANE

Smudge looked at the plate of quivering gelatin dessert served up to him from Sose. The resemblance to the slime was uncanny.

He stared at it, then at the oppa. “Am I a joke to you?”

The oppa coughed nervously behind a paw. “Hey, ya like it or not?”

Smudge stared at it, then slurped up a little. After a notable pause, he finally decided with an emphatic, “Yes!”

“What’re the odds?” Slyrox muttered. She shook a rattling pair of dice within her mitt, then tossed them across the paneled flooring, using [Koblin Dice].

[Koblin Dice]: Roll a 12-sided die with different results based upon the roll and influenced by your current Rank. Can only be used once per day.

Shrublely turned to watch. He’d seen her do this rarely, but never quite understood the reasoning behind it.

Slyrox watched the pair of dice bounce and roll to a stop. Symbols flashed on the skyward facing sides. A faint swirling aura of fire rolled over Slyrox’s mitts and vanished a moment later.

Shrublely looked to see if anybody else had noticed, but everybody else was busy with their food or talking amongst themselves.

All except Mistress Ceasewane. Shrublely had caught her green gaze flicking over to the side and then focusing back on her hushed conversation with the Countess.

Shrublely would have loved to know what they were talking about but for some reason he couldn’t hear them despite only being a few feet away.

Whenever he tried to scoot closer, the Witch would give him such a glare that it was like a physical force. He felt himself scooting farther away than where he had started.

That didn't deter the little shrub, who had quickly eaten his meal and felt quite sated and full, giving him plenty of time (and energy) to test the limits of this new person's patience.

There was something about Mistress Ceasewane that made him want to act like a kid. Poking and prodding her patience in much the same way she set up test after little test to see how he and the others would react.

It felt... fair.

"That wasn't real blood, was it?" Cal asked, looking at the mostly cleaned plate of the Countess'.

Sose looked over. "Animal blood," he said. "Not very much of it." The oppa cast a disapproving look at the Witch as if everybody should keep their larders stocked with fresh blood at all times in case the Countess dropped by their alternate reality bubble. "But enough that it should restore a small portion of her strength."

"That is good," Shrubley said. "I am glad to see that you both are feeling better."

Sose ducked his head down a little lower than usual in an oppish bow. "Thank you for what you did for myself and the Lady Haalften." He sidled closer and spoke in a hushed voice. "I know she won't say much, but she is very grateful, and the gratitude of Lady Haalften is generous indeed."

Shrubley reached out a wooden hand and gently petted the long furry oppa like he'd seen the Countess do. The oppa tensed for a moment then relaxed. "Ohhh, that's the spot, right there behind the ear."

Cal watched enviously. Sose didn't like anybody but the Countess petting him, until now that was.

Still, as he sipped his milkshake, Cal couldn't help but feel happy and content for the first time in a very, very long while. His family was back, everybody was feeling better, the Countess wasn't being dragged across an inhospitable hellscape, and his best friend wasn't dead.

In fact, his best friend had taken his first steps along the path to the hero he always wanted to be. Cal didn't personally get the appeal, but he was more than happy to support his friend.

Once the meal was over, Shrubley turned expectantly to the Countess and the Witch.

“What?” the old woman asked snappishly. “Ye keep watchings us. Well, out with it, little man.”

“You are deciding something.”

“That much is obvious.”

Shrubley turned his lamplight eyes on the Countess. She looked uncomfortable for the first time that he’d known her. And the Witch looked... resolved.

He’d seen that look before and despite lacking the prerequisite organs, Shrubley felt a sinking feeling in his gut.

“The Guidance Stone is all that’s keeping you alive, isn’t it?”

The mood suddenly shifted. Everyone went silent, until the oppa darted over, his claws skittering across the wood flooring.

“No, say it isn’t so!” Sose cried, hopping up into the Witch’s lap and bending himself into an upside-down U.

Petting the disreputable oppa, the Witch smiled at the same time as the Countess frowned. “He’s Halbert’s boy, sure enough! Look at that concentration.” She leaned forward, her wrinkled and lined face broke into a grin. It didn’t look like it had much practice. “Worked that all out yourself, did you?”

Shrubley nodded his leafy body. “We don’t need it. I would not wish to take from you.”

“Pah! You’ll take what’s given to you, my lad, and you’ll like it. I’m an ol’ crone at this point, hiding away in a place that ain’t deserve to be. I didn’t mean to create this place, and now it’s my mess to clean up.”

Cal raised a hand timorously. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

The Witch held up a hand as the Countess opened her mouth to explain. She set her green gaze on Shrubley. “Let’s see how much Halbert’s son really understands. Go on, Shrubley.”

Shrubley turned to Cal and then looked back at the Witch. Her smile was anything but kind.

Another test? Shrubley wondered.

It didn't matter much. In the end, the truth would come out no matter what happened.

"I... think that the Witch, that is, Mistress Ceasewane, created this pocket dimension with the aid of a Guidance Stone. It gives this place a vitality all its own and, I imagine, her as well."

The Witch made a rolling gesture with her wrist, telling him to keep going.

Shrubleby steeled himself. "I don't know if she meant it. I hope she did not, but through some means that I do not understand, the world around this swamp sprang to life. The serpentii, the mirror world, all of it. In a way, it is her doing. And I *think*, if one of us uses the Guidance Stone, then it will be untethered to this reality."

"Which means what?" Cal asked.

"I think the world will be destroyed."

The Witch gave him a little nod. Shrubleby was realizing that she had many different types of nods. This one seemed to be the "well done" type.

"There must be another way," the Countess broke in.

Once again, she was silenced with an old wizened hand raised gently.

"I'll not be having with this," the Witch said with finality. "It's my doing. My choice, right? Right. The lad has the right of it, sure enough. Doing some mental gymnastics to make me seem a bit kinder than I am. He don't know if I created the serpentii to protect my little pocket realm, if they were some foul experiment gone wrong or somethin' else entirely. Perhaps I'm a wicked ol' witch after all!"

A few people shifted uneasily. The koblin crossed her arms stubbornly, clearly not believing any of that business about wickedness.

Sose whimpered, putting his inky paws over his muzzle miserably.

"Pah! It's a damn sight too difficult to convince you lot after little mister sunshine and optimism has already filled your head that I'm a good Witch. He's wrong about one thing. Even I don't know what will happen when the Guidance Stone of Vitality is attuned to him."

Cal looked down, his necromantic fire eyes dimmed. He preoccupied himself by struggling, and failing repeatedly, to adjust the small metacarpal bones in his hand. Since the Countess was no longer in need of the snakes to cart her

around, he figured it would be a good idea to reclaim his bones embedded in the snake skeletons before he lost them for good.

“Chin up, young man!” she told Cal. “I’m older even than the Countess, and she’s *old* even if she don’t look it.” She tilted her head to the side. “The problem with living a long life is that you get the same amount of youth as everybody else, but an extra heaping of aches and pains, going blind in one eye, and so on. It ain’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Immortality puts off reincarnation and all the other distant adventures you can take,” Sose whispered somberly, twisting himself into another looping shape. “Eventually, the next journey calls to us all.”

“But surely you are a high enough rank that—” Shrubley began.

“Aye, that I am,” the Witch said. “But some magic comes with a price. And what I’ve done, well, it comes with a mighty hefty bill o’ sale, if you get my drift. I might be strong enough that I could climb to another rank. Yer right enough about that and no mistake. Get my beauty back.” She eyed them all with her wrinkled face and hooked nose. “I used to be quite the looker in my day.”

“Must’ve been before my time,” the Countess said with a snort.

The Witch shook a finger at her. “Keep that sass to yourself, girl!” She cleared her throat and continued. “You see, as you climb the ranks, the ability to keep climbing becomes harder. Once you’re out of the alloys—”

Shrubley perked up. “Alloys?”

The Witch turned to the Countess. “Tell me you explained the ranks at least!”

“I didn’t have the time,” the Countess snapped. “They are *Mundane*! They were all single-digit levels when they found me. Do you have any idea how hard it is to train that?”

The Witch smiled to herself. “More than you know, my girl. More than you know.”

“Well, maybe if you’d been there to help out—”

“Pah!” The Witch waved her words away. “I’m willing to guess you know at least a few o’ the ranks?”

There was a chorus of nodding heads, a shaking shrubby bush, and the eyes and mouth bobbing up and down of Smudge the slime.

“There are a total of eleven ranks.” She looked askance at the Countess.

“Though some’d say only ten on account that they don’t feel Mundane is a proper rank on its own.”

“The Shardscript says it is,” Cal put in.

The Witch’s fingers snapping filled the cottage with more noise than it should have. She pointed at Cal. “Give the lad a glass of milk! So many people forget that the Shard itself is the one that dictates these things. Oh, ye can try to pin down its whims, but if the Almora makes a statement, ye better listen up.”

“Another? Oh, thank you. My bones are terribly brittle and...” he trailed off, seeing that his calcium deficiency wasn’t prudent to bring up presently.

Sose slipped off the Witch’s lap to go get another glass of milk for the skeleton. He grumbled along the way, but delivered it, nonetheless.

Cal reached out to pet the oppa. And it went as well as one could expect from the nervous, skeletal mage. First, his hand fell off, then Cal looked at the stump in surprise and tried again with the other. Sose ducked and weaved until finally the oppa took pity on him and stood still long enough to tolerate the awkward pat on the tail.