

# CHAPTER 57 – A LINK TO THE PAST

“Do you suppose there’s a Guidance Stone in this mirror realm?” Cal asked. “Or if... we could trust such a thing?”

The skeleton looked over at his friend, thinking.

If Shrubley could unlock his Class sooner than later and all the mysterious powers it would invoke, as well as acquiring a Prime essence in the process, then their chances of breaking free would be all the higher.

Maybe the four-foot-tall shrub would even grow as tall as a tree and be capable of defeating the serpentii’s leader.

A skeleton could dream.

Cal cleared his throat. “If you would be so kind, could I perhaps have some milk with my tea?”

The Witch eyed him knowingly.

If skeletons could sweat, Cal would.

With a smirk gracing her crimson painted lips, the Countess held up a cookie to the oppa sleeping around her neck.

Sose stirred, his nose twitching. His eyes shot open with an exuberant ferret dook, then he munched noisily upon the [Cinnabark Cookie].

The Witch glanced at Cal, but all of her attention was on the Countess. Her eyes saw a great deal because even Shrubley missed the tiny twitch of the Countess’ eye.

“You wouldn’t!” the Witch scolded her former pupil. “Even knowing it’s just a reflection, there’s no telling what sort of mischief you’d get up to tappin’ one of them Guidance Stones. Bold as brass, you are. Halbert wouldn’t have been half as bold!”

“He’s not here. I am. If there’s anyone that could withstand corruption, it is Shrubley,” the Countess said, full of confidence as always. “He has been through more than you might think.”

Shrubley’s whole world ground to a halt. “Halbert Wulfram?” It felt like his head was spinning.

The Witch looked over at him. “Where... how do you know that name?”

“My father... the Druid he... that was his name!” Shrubley looked up suddenly full of fire. “Halbert Wulfram was my father’s name!”

Both the Witch and the Countess were taken aback by that. “Did you?” the old woman asked.

Miranda shook her head. “I had no idea.”

“Pyyu?” Smudge put in, finally deflating.

“A *Druid*, you said?” the Witch asked, for the first time seeming like the old woman she was.

“Yes!” Shrubley nearly bounced in place.

“That doesn’t sound like young Halbert to me...”

“He did retreat from the world some twenty or thirty years ago,” the Countess said thoughtfully. “I always thought he had given up on his dreams of conquest.”

“Lady Haalften, you knew my father?” Shrubley asked in disbelief.

She gave Shrubley a sad little smile. “We... trained together, I suppose you could say. Ran in similar circles. That sort of thing. Mistress Ceasewane here was a famous teacher. Even the nobles in Pandaemonium know her and seek her out.” The Countess gave her a sly look. “Though I’m guessing not many have darkened your door in some years.”

“Is that why such an illustrious trainer is here?” Cal asked. “To be bothered by nobody?”

“The mage has some smarts about him,” Mistress Ceasewane said. “Only one who seemed to guess what was going on. Aside from yourself, of course.” She nodded at Miranda. “But then again, you were always a bright student. You know I rarely train heroes, much less an Awakened and a hero at the same time. I haven’t taken a student since.”

The Countess' face twisted briefly with pain, Shrubley thought, before she resumed that cool mask of confidence. "You must not blame yourself."

Sose hopped down from his mistress, looked about and then helped himself to the kitchen. The sounds and smells of cooking filtered out into the room.

Mistress Ceasewane waved away her concern, but she did seem a little lightened by her words. "Too much of a bother teaching people who can't teach themselves." Without turning around, she added. "You break anything you little weasel, and I'll wear you like a scarf!"

Sose snickered to himself, as if this was all one big game. Utensils and pots flew everywhere, stirring a bubbling pot and searing stringy root vegetables, compelled by some manner of magic.

"So... the Guidance Stone?" Cal prompted, trying to get them back on track.

The Countess tilted her chin toward her old teacher. "Now that she's here, I know it's here too. You know, I wasn't sure until I saw the vines. Very neat little trick."

Mistress Ceasewane inclined her head slightly. "I suppose it was too much to hope it might be overlooked. Even an old woman like me sometimes likes to make sure her students are taken care of."

"What do you mean?" Cal asked.

The Countess motioned to the Witch. "Do you remember when you were running away from the serpentii in the reflection of Taamra?" She smiled. "The vines were not my doing. They weren't there originally. *She* made them grow so that alley you nearly lost me at looked like an overgrown mess. She was *protecting me*."

"Pssh-koh, is very sweet!" Slyrox said enthusiastically.

The Witch grumbled, "Foolish girl," and folded her hands in her lap.

"But now that she's here, I'm certain the Guidance Stone is too," the Countess explained.

"How?" Shrubley asked. "You already said that you cannot pin them down and that they move all the time, didn't you?"

"I did say that, yes," Miranda agreed. "But that was for other people. Mistress Ceasewane here is... special. What others can only dream of doing, she does three times before breakfast." The Countess leaned in. "You brought the

Guidance Stone of Vitality here, didn't you? That's why your swamp is so full of creatures when the rest of the world is nothing but a pale reflection of Almora."

The Witch pointedly did not look at her. "Perhaps."

Cal nudged Shrubley. "Did you hear that? That sounds exactly like the sort of thing that would fit you perfectly!"

Shrubley, however, was more concerned with the downsides of locking a Guidance Stone in place. Both Countess Haalften and the Witch Ceasewane had been very clear on those points. Which meant there had to be a catch.

"Right you are, my lad," the Witch said, turning a critical green eye on him. "You're clever, like Halbert. He didn't speak much, but when he did, it was always something you didn't think he'd picked up on. The more you didn't want him to figure out, the more he did."

"I am surprised it took me so long to realize the connection," the Countess said. "You do act a great deal like him, Shrubley. Though by the time we parted ways, he was a very different man than the one you have told me about. He was very... driven when he was young."

Shrubley blushed. Or rather, pink berries grew around the leaves hiding his face.

The Witch barked a laugh. "Driven, she says! As if he was a mule. That boy could have held the world in the palm of his hand. A-Grade adventurer at sixteen years old!"

"He was that strong? I never knew," Shrubley admitted. "Little wonder he could create a precious artifact like the Questbook for me."

Both women turned to him. "He made you *what*?" the Witch asked right on the heels of the Countess asking, "He actually did it?"

"My [Vinebound Questbook]," he said sheepishly, taking out the small, intricately worked leather-bound book and holding it out for them to see.

"May I?" Ceasewane asked.

Slyrox scooted over, peering at it. "Is this how we gain quests on this Shard?"

That was a possibility Shrubley was unsure of. None of his racial abilities directly mentioned quests. He had wondered if this was a Shard given right to

all people, but the more quests he gained, the more he began to suspect they were from the questbook itself.

Shrubleby nodded to the Witch and gingerly handed it over. His twiggy hands lingered a little too long, but it could hardly be helped. Aside from his invitation card, this book was one of his most precious possessions.

The Witch took the book with extreme care, gently running her fingers over it. The Countess looked hungrily at it, her eyes dark pools of want. “The lad actually did it... well, I’ll be.”

“You said it was impossible!” the Countess snapped.

When the Witch spoke, it was slow and dreamy, as if she were a million miles away. “It should have been. The Gods know just how powerful that boy was, but to think that he did it... and he gave it to *you*.” She glanced sideways at Shrubleby, who swelled with pride. “You must know how important this thing is, boy.”

“It means everything to me,” Shrubleby said, taking the book back and putting it into his [Verdant Inventory]. There was no hiding the true nature of his inventory from the Witch. She watched and grinned slightly to herself. “It was his last gift to me.”

The Witch gave him an approving nod. “P’raps he’s ready.”

“You were just scolding me about the Guidance Stones less than a minute ago,” the Countess said. “Now you’re thinking about giving it to him?”

“At my age, I can do as I like, girl.”

The two stared at each other like two cats, but thankfully food arrived to break the tension.

Sose trotted back over, bearing a motley feast on floating plates and saucers. He squinted at them all, as if judging their different dietary needs and the challenge that presented.

There was a huge variety to enjoy. Some plates were heaped with ruby glistening foodstuffs, somehow suitable for his mistress, some were milky chowders for a skeleton like Cal, and others were a purely vegetable medley.

Much to Shrubleby’s surprise, Slyrox didn’t eat meat.

And much to everyone else's surprise, Shrubley loved to eat meat. He enjoyed trying new things. It didn't make much sense for a plant to be a vegetarian, after all. Sure, he'd eat seeds and the like but that wasn't the same thing.

When asked about it, he looked up from the slab of roasted meat and said, rather calmly, "When you can feel the emotions and awareness of both plants and animals, it hardly matters if you choose to only eat one over the other, does it?"

A great deal of silence followed this and much soul searching.

Even Sose was horrified. Though perhaps it was because there was one kind of food that the Witch had in surplus, and it was chicken. Lots and lots of chicken.

Having a chicken footed house had its perks, after all.

Sose bumped his head affectionately against the Witch. "Thank ya, Mistress Ceasewane. This is the least I could do."

"Yes, well," the Witch looked away, a forkful of spiceberry glazed chicken partway lifted to her mouth. "Perhaps ye could regale us with one of your stories sometime."

The oppa nodded. "Fantasy mana included, that's a dark oppa promise."