

# CHAPTER 56 – THE SHRUB, THE WITCH, AND THE TEACUP II

Despite the startling words, Shrubley felt no reason to put up his guard. He didn't feel *relaxed*, exactly, but he felt like he had misunderstood her somehow.

The Witch was looking around, judging all of their reactions, weighing them to within an inch of their worth.

“W-what?” Slyrox asked tremulously, crestfallen.

“Pyuu!” Smudge said, steam trailing out of his mouth. He grew in size, his adorable face turning mean and intimidating.

He was like a cat raising its hackles, trying to seem bigger to put on a scary front.

*She does this, Shrubley thought carefully, she says weird things and sees how we react. It's a sort of... test. To see if we're good enough? Or maybe to see if she can trust us?*

There was something, slight though it was, that reminded Shrubley of the Druid. He was a big man, as different in shape and temperament from the Witch as you could get, and yet there was something of a teacher in the both of them.

Not a kind teacher who held your hand and taught you everything, but the kind that looked and judged and tried to get you to teach *yourself*.

The Druid had done that on rare occasions when Shrubley was having a particularly hard time with something.

Sometimes the lessons you teach yourself are the best ones of all.

The Witch flapped a hand at them. “Never mind all that,” she said. “Just something that those slithery folks wanted me to do. Can't say I like havin' em for neighbors. Ruined the whole damn place, if you ask me. Then they have the gall to tell me to do something? Pfft.”

“We have met many of the serpentii,” Shrubley said.

“Yes, you said.”

“You don’t want to hurt us?” Cal asked skeptically. He was always a little skeptical when it came to people *not* wanting to break his bones or steal them.

“Would it make you feel better if’n I did?”

Cal truly had to think about that, and he didn’t like that.

“What will you do?” Shrubley asked.

The Witch rocked back and forth in her chair and handed Shrubley’s cup back, then refilled her cup with a flick of her wrist and swirl of her fingers. A moment later, the kettle settled back on the trivet with a faint *clink*.

“You’ve got an artifact of sealing on you,” she said at last. The old woman had green eyes as vibrant and deep as his leaves. “Right there,” she said, pointing at Slyrox’s [Kobbie Bag].

“Eek!” the koblin cried, then crawled behind Smudge for protection.

“I see you left that out in the telling.”

Smudge remained in his enlarged state. He looked like he was holding his breath, stuck between a reality where they were all enjoying some tea and then the next where they fought in a magic blasting battle.

Shrubley gently patted him. “It’s all right, Smudge. She’s not going to hurt us.”

“I never said nothing about not hurting you,” the Witch pointed out.

“Yes,” Shrubley agreed. “But you won’t, anyway.”

“Awfully uppity for a shrub that ain’t knowin’ my name. You remind me of a young boy I once knew, keen mind but too ambitious by half.”

“Was he... a Druid?” Shrubley couldn’t dare to hope.

She snorted. “Never on your life. He had a coal in his trousers since the day I met him. Couldn’t ever sit still. Always moving from one place to the next. Picking up magic like normal people pick up interestin’ looking pebbles.”

“He took a dump in his pants?” Cal asked, flabbergasted. “And... carried it around with him?”

“Don’t think that’s what she means,” Slyrox suggested.

“Anyways,” the Witch said, not bothering to engage, “there’s no way he would pick Druid. The boy was a spitfire and no mistake. Probably got one of them legendary Classes like Phoenixknight or Cometrider.”

“Comet?” Slyrox asked thoughtfully.

“Very, very rare essence,” the Witch said. “Only get it with the right combination.”

“Comet sounds like muchly big fist, yes?” Slyrox’s lenses seemed to sparkle in the frozen firelight.

The Witch tilted her head to the side for a moment. “I suppose it is like a big ol’ fist ready to slug anythin’ in the Shardrunes it comes across. Very interesting way of thinking. But it’s a Prime essence. You can’t just *find* it out in the wild.”

“Prime essence?” Shrubley asked, scooting closer.

The Witch tapped her fingertips on the side of her mug in thought. “I see your education was lackin’. No surprise, considering your teacher.”

“I’m new,” Slyrox said once again.

“Yes, I expect you are, child. How to put this.... You understand the three essences I take it?”

There was a chorus of nods.

“Once you get three essences, you can unlock a Class. Think of it like a calling. It’s what you do in a way of speaking. You’ll see Knights and Wizards and Archers galore. They’re archetypes and they have a million-and-one subtypes, but they’re all basically one of ‘em. But a Class isn’t an essence. It has levels and all that.”

“But what is a Prime essence?” Shrubley asked.

“I’m gettin’ to it!” Almost as if to punish the question, the Witch took a sip of her tea. “You can unlock a Class now that you’ve got your three essences, right? But there are things out in the world called Guidance Stones. They channel magical energy across the leylines of the Shard. Each one has a specific purpose. Depending on where that Guidance Stone is, it has different powers.”

She paused, almost waiting for another question. When it was clear that all of them were patiently awaiting her explanation, she continued.

“Them’s as got three essences can bind themselves to a Guidance Stone. By doing so, they are able to take a little power of the ley lines and the power of the Shard itself. This is usually too much magic for any person to handle. You can only have three essences after all, right?”

There was another chorus of nods.

“Wrong!” She snorted another laugh and slapped her knee. “When you bind yourself to a Guidance Stone, you’re making part of yourself open up to the Shard. Ye do that, and a piece of you becomes part of the Shard even more than it already was. A little bitty part of your essences get skimmed off, mixed with the power o’ the Shard, and you get a Prime essence.”

“So it’s a combination of the essences that you’ve already got?” Cal asked, immensely intrigued.

“Not quite.” The Witch set down the cup onto its mismatched saucer. “This Prime essence is influenced by your current essences, that’s right enough. But it is also the power of the Guidance Stone as well. It gets all mixed up. You could spend a lifetime working out every permutation and still not be able to make precisely what you want because y’see, it’s also up to the person themselves.”

Shrubley’s eyes lit up. “We can decide what our Prime essence is?” He liked the sound of that.

“Yes,” the Witch said, watching him keenly as she continued with, “and no. I said it was complicated, and I meant it! But if you were to take two people and give them the same essences, you understand that both people would have different essence abilities, yes? This is much the same way.”

“What if they have the exact same abilities?” Shrubley couldn’t help but ask.

“Then they might have the same Prime essence. Might. Like I said, ain’t no knowing for sure. Maybe one of them people dislikes the other and that changes things. Magic is finicky and fickle at the best o’ times and you’re taking a larger dose of it into yourself than normal.”

“So we just need to find a Guidance Stone once we have three essences and we’ll get a Prime essence?” Cal asked. “Then I’m just one essence away!”

The Witch shook her head and took a sip from her mug. “Easier said than done. How many people you know who have a Prime essence?”

Cal counted his fingers, then looked up. “None.”

“That’s because it’s hard to nail down a leyline. It ain’t like a hill where there’s a special stone sticking out for all to find.” She set her cup down again with a faint *clink*. “Use your heads! What would happen if there were stationary magical stones that gave people powerful new essences and a Class to boot?”

“You didn’t say it gave a Class too!” Cal exclaimed.

“Well, now I am!”

“They would build around it,” a cultured voice said quietly. “They would put up walls and stop just *anybody* from coming through. Only those people who adhered to *their* values would be able to get that special power. And so it would go throughout the world until every Guidance Stone was captured and its power shackled to fickle mortal rulers.”

“Countess!” Cal cried excitedly.

Shrublely looked over. He was relieved to see the Countess awake again. Though, the self-proclaimed disreputable oppa was not yet.

“I am well enough to stand on my own,” the Countess said, motioning for Cal and Shrublely to stay seated. She pulled herself up to her full height. “I did not expect to see you here, or truthfully, ever again, Mistress Ceasewane.”

The Witch waved a hand irritably at her. “Do sit, Miranda. You always did like to *loom*. It is unbecoming.”

The Countess smiled and sat down in an empty armchair. It squeaked and sagged under her as she got settled in. The vampyr’s familiar, still asleep, hung limply like a scarf from around her neck.

“However,” the Witch said, “Miranda is correct. If the Guidance Stones stood still, they would be abused. Whether the Shard knows this or not is anybody’s guess, but they are not so easily contained. People have tried. Oh my, yes. The harder they try, the more they fail.”

“The Kingdom of Alur was wiped off the face of the continent,” the Countess agreed. “They tried all sorts of anchoring spells and enchantments.”

“The harder you try to hold on to some things, the faster they slip away,” the Witch said just a touch wistfully to Shrubley’s senses.

“In the fullness of time, all things change,” the Countess said with a faint smile.

The Witch snorted. “Using your old teacher’s sayings against her now, are ya? Have you no shame, girl?”

“None,” the Countess said proudly. The oppa snorted in his sleep.

Shrubley watched the verbal sparring with keen interest. His lamplight eyes bounced from one proud and powerful woman to the next. “Then how do we ever find one?”

“The same way you find a storm,” the Countess and the Witch said at the same time.