

Chapter 126 – Vindictive Vampyr

They slept that night in the [Autotent], crowded around the Countess.

After Slyrox started slinging around punches while dreaming, knocking Smudge clear out of the tent and over 100 yards away down the mountain, Cal had to sleep outside.

“I’ll get him,” Shrubley told the rest.

“This isn’t so bad,” Cal said, looking up at the stars. Back when he was trapped with the Rattle Rousers, he was barely let outside to see the open world, let alone the beautiful sky in all its forms from night to day.

The skeleton fell asleep again, this time peacefully watching the stardust and purplish-blue nebulae smeared across the dark sky.

Shrubley ambled out of the tent and cupped his hands around his leafy mouth. “Smudge!”

“Pyuuuu!” came a distant cry.

The little shrub took off in the direction of his friend, calling out his name every so often to adjust his descent.

Smudge, for his part, rolled and bounced, used [Inflate], and generally tried his best to meet Shrubley halfway.

That was, until something grabbed him and stuffed him into a sack.

“Pyuu?” Smudge asked curiously when the stars winked out.

“Ve got him,” Corbin said.

“That is a *slime*, brother,” Styx said.

“...I knew that.”

Smudge giggled when a hand poked him repeatedly through the sack. The slime did not understand what was going on. He was used to being slower than the rest, so this wasn't an unusual occurrence for him.

“What are you two doing?” Doug asked, stepping out from an overhang.

“Smudge!” Shrubley's voice called.

“That is the target!” Styx said hungrily. “Here, I'll just tie him up on his branch here.”

“Genius, brother, simply genius!” Corbin said.

Doug was surprised. That was an actually smart idea for once. It had seemed when the triplets were risen as vampyrs, his brothers had been harshly afflicted with something that dampened their intelligence.

They, like the Count, insisted on doing the most ridiculous and inefficient things possible.

For once, however, it seemed that they had a genuinely good idea. Using the little slime as bait would allow them to...

Never mind, Doug thought, seeing what the brothers were doing.

“Pyuu!” Smudge called out from the hastily built tower balcony they had constructed on one of the tree branches. Unable to let the slime exist in a sack, they had used their vampyr super speed to fashion a rather frilly-looking dress for the slime.

It looked, as you would expect of a vampyr, like a maiden in a filmy dress on the edge of a grand vampyric balcony in some distant and faraway land.

Smudge blinked out of sync, thoroughly confused.

Me too, Doug thought at the Slime, *me too*.

“The monster speaks?” Corbin said.

“I did not know slimes could!” Styx remarked. “Should ve–”

“Kindred help me,” Doug muttered to himself, calling to mind the merciful Ardor. “That’s fine the way she–he–they, whatever it identifies as, is! Just leave the slime, brothers!”

The vampyrs looked at each other. “He’s a bit touchy today.”

“I vonder vhy?” Styx asked, scratching his head.

“They really don’t see it,” Doug mumbled to himself. “They think it’s totally normal to build a miniature castle turret and balcony, then dress a random slime up like a damsel in distress, all to lure one little shrub monster out.”

Not for the first time, Doug wondered if he was the one that was insane. It sure felt like it at times.

Finally, his brothers managed to hide with him under the same overhang he had been resting within.

Shrublely ran in, sword clattering in its sheath at his side. He was trying to wear it more like the stories told of traditional knights. Using his rooty legs, he found it easier to get up to speed with his more refined Bronze Ranker body without resorting to bouncing off all the trees using his [Morph Shield] in the form of a plated ball of destruction.

The sight before him confused him greatly, but he didn’t think too much about it before he commanded the tree to bend down to the ground. Smudge rolled over the hastily built balcony and sat there in front of Shrublely, blinking out of sync in his little sack dress.

“Smudge... are you wearing a dress?”

“Pretty.” Smudge turned back and forth, posing.

“It is rather pretty,” Shrubley agreed. “Whoever made it should be quite proud. They did a wonderful job with such difficult material!”

Styx put a hand on his silk vest. “Finally, some recognition!”

Corbin elbowed him in the side. “I did the stitching!”

“Oh, my gods,” Doug mumbled. “Just get him!”

The brothers looked at each other, red light gathering in their eyes. They dashed out with great speed, hissing and spitting like angry cats.

Unfortunately for them, Shrubley was still holding the tree down toward the west and was distracted by Smudge’s new dress when the vampyrs charged out from the east.

Startled by the vampyrs’ sounds, Shrubley let go. The tree whipped into the vampyrs. The hastily constructed balcony of rough wood shattered on impact, spearing the poor things just as they were about to make their dramatic entrance.

They had inadvertently created the weapon of their own demise.

A cloud of dust appeared where the tree rebounded off the ground. Shrubley stared curiously at the Shardscript, declaring he defeated two vampyrs.

“What?” he asked with great surprise. “Hello, is somebody there? Have I defeated you by accident?”

“Pyuu?”

Shrubley looked down at him. “Yes, of course you can keep the dress. I think our teacher might want one too, though.”

“Pyuu.”

“I know you look good in it, but that is no reason to upstage our teacher. You can try many more clothes too, if you like. I know you are not used to garments, much like me.”

“Pyuu!”

“Yes, I agree!” he said enthusiastically. “Trying new things is always fun, Smudge. Let us return to camp.”

Watching his brothers die without the slightest fight frightened the blood right out of Doug. He wasn't a particularly strong vampyr. For all their idiocy, his brothers were stronger than him. He was the brains, they were the brawn.

That was just the way of things.

And, once again, it was up to Doug to revive his fallen brothers. All it would take was for the wind to kick up again.

Then, even if he managed to drop some blood onto their ashes, they'd be spending the rest of the week picking limbs and pieces up off the side of the mountain until they were reassembled.

Once the horrible shrub and its silly slime were gone, Doug crept out and dribbled some blood onto the piles of ash. The process wasn't immediate, even for Bronze Rankers like his brothers, so he hunkered down to wait for their revival.

A mouth appeared in the dust. “Did ve get him?” Doug thought that was Styx.

“No, Styx,” Doug answered, though he was sorely tempted to say otherwise. Perhaps that duo of monsters was too much trouble to deal with.

“I’m Corbin!”

“No, Corbin,” Doug replied.

“Ve vill try again!”

Doug seriously wondered if it was worth it. He could instead cower at the feet of the Countess. She was more powerful, and beautiful, too. That was often the way of things, wasn’t it? You appeal to a higher power if the one directly in front of you is failing.

But then that would mean leaving his brothers behind.

For all their lunacy, Doug loved Corbin and Styx. They were family. And you never give up on your family, even if they make you want to create a self-propelled stake launcher aimed at their coffins, so the moment they wake up every day they are turned to ash.

Once again, Doug fantasized about that stake launcher.

“Why is Smudge wearing a dress?” Cal asked the next morning over breakfast.

“He is trying something new,” Shrubley explained simply.

Smudge twirled his dress around, letting it flutter around like flower petals.

“Oh.” Cal looked at the Countess, wondering what she thought.

Shrubley nodded approvingly at Smudge. “Oh, right. I defeated some vampyrs last night. Not... sure how though.”

Whatever it was she was going to say was squashed under Shrubley’s casual admittance.

“*What?*” she asked, unsure if she heard him correctly.

“I do not know where they were,” Shrubley admitted. “Only... when I went to get Smudge, he was... dressed in that pretty dress and standing atop a small model castle made out of wood. I did not know what to think of it, so I got him down and when the tree snapped back to its original shape, I received a notification that I defeated two vampyrs.”

“Two... vampyrs?” Sose asked slowly.

“What were their names?” Miranda demanded, ruby eyes widening with astonishment.

“The Shard did not tell me.”

“Typical,” Miranda grumbled, petting Sose to soothe and forestall her rage. “So it’s begun.”

“Oh? Oh! How fun. I should send them a thank you note.”

Miranda opened her mouth to say something more, but then thought better of it. It was in all their best interests that Shrubley saw the vampyrs hunting him as a game to be played.

That way, he would be far more interested in playing along instead of worrying about killing the vampyrs. Which, as Miranda knew firsthand, he could not do.

At least not permanently.

Her oppa looked up at her and shrugged. “What’s the harm?” he whispered.

“You do that, Shrublely,” Miranda told him. “Did you happen to find any strange dust?”

Shrublely looked a little shifty. “How did you know?”

A cruel smile appeared on her red lips. “Why don’t you give it to me?”

The little shrub took out the small pile of ashen dust he had found near the tree. It was different from normal ash and looked surprisingly silken. He had thought it would make a good present for Konko or Miranda, seeing as it was probably an alchemical ingredient.

Of course, Shrublely did not know what it truly was.

Miranda’s smile grew wide as a shark’s. She pulled out an envelope and spilled the contents inside. They smoldered ever-so-slightly in the direct sunlight, telling her that whoever this vampyr was, he was already regenerating.

The sunlight would stall that for a time.

At Miranda’s instruction, Shrublely took out a pen and a piece of parchment, writing a heartfelt and sincere thank you note to the Count. Telling him how much fun he was having and that he dearly hoped the Count would “come out and play” for once.

Miranda grinned as she glanced over his shoulder. When he was done, the soul shrub folded it carefully and put the letter inside.

Sose snickered the entire time, rubbing his paws together mischievously. His beady eyes gleamed wickedly.

Once it was sealed up, Miranda took out a rubber stamp and pressed it into a glittering dish of sparkling ink.

No sooner had the ink dried than the letter winked out of existence.

Miranda looked over at Shrubley, who looked so proud and happy. He practically beamed up at the Countess.

Sometimes looking into his bright eyes, I see why people have kids, she thought to herself.

“The letter is sent,” she told him. “I am sure the Count will be very... interested in the message you have sent him, Shrubley. Now, I think we should get going, yes?”

Konko lifted the swirling potion. It was pointing due west, into the Outer Ring and over the Oulstand Mountains.

They cleaned and packed up a few moments later, heading back up into the mountains.