

CHAPTER 37 – A THORNY SITUATION II

Shrubley turned towards the hundreds of serpentii gathered at both ends of the hall. The flickering, dancing shadows of the faint torchlight served only to make the mirror realm monsters even more intimidating.

He held firm to his wooden sword, dearly wishing he had a weapon stronger than Mundane rank for a battle to the death. He stared into the serpentii's slitted eyes, beginning to see just how alien these creatures were.

Perhaps they weren't from his home world at all, but from somewhere far more sinister than even this mirror realm.

"Shut your eyes," the Countess told them. "And don't move, whatever you do."

Shrubley's leaves creased into a look of consternation as the Countess whispered something under her breath that sounded an awful lot like "I hope this works". She pulled on the iron bracket with the torch, triggering a section of the wall to open up ahead of them.

"Now!" she hissed in a whisper to the rest of them. "Shut your eyes and stay still."

What Shrubley, Slyrox, Smudge and even Cal couldn't see was the Fantasy essence rolling through the hallway, eddying around the hundreds of serpentii like a colorful tide of paint.

Dooking echoed and bounced around the hall of stone and dust, surrounding the serpentii with the overwhelming presence of one of their hated enemies.

Dozens of those snakemen scented the air with their forked tongues, searching for the mythological predator.

The Countess watched, as the paint swirled and became not just real, but *more* real than reality itself. The Countess shut her eyes and held her breath as the serpentii were wrapped up the Fantasy illusion.

Paint swirled over the group, the ceiling groaned overhead and Fantasy versions of the Countess, Shrubley, Cal, Slyrox, and Smudge sprinted away just in time to avoid the falling bits of cracked ceiling.

The real versions of the group were turned into a pile of rubble that choked off part of the hall, but the serpentii could only see the figures fleeing from them.

That triggered their instinct to give chase and together the two ends of the hall boiled with green-skinned bodies as they fought against one another to rush down the hall after their escaping prey.

Shrubley heard the hissing and snarling so close that he could have reached out a branch and touched a snake. But the Countess had told him to keep his eyes shut and to stay still. He did so, though he desperately wanted to know what was going on and why they weren't dead already.

His twiggy arms trembled as Shrubley struggled to keep his weapon steady. The utter darkness and the harsh susurrant sounds enveloping him were becoming too much to bear.

Soon, he would crack under the pressure like a tree's trunk in a storm.

Remaining still, except for his shaking sword, he desperately fought every passing moment to cling to sanity and resolve, to stay strong while weathering that storm.

As one unit, the serpentii rushed after their prey only to find a yawning pit of darkness a few feet into the lightless room that had been revealed. The creatures that suddenly found air where they had expected the floor screamed as they dropped, but their voices were cut off by a thick velvety layer of dust that soaked up the sound better than velvet drapes.

Hidden safely in the walls, the dark oppa snickered.

One after the other, the serpentii plunged to their deaths until only a handful of confused creatures remained.

"Now, run!" the Countess said, bowling over a confused serpentii that hadn't been entirely fooled by the Fantasy essence and was giving the odd leaf-like rubble a good look.

The creature was knocked over and trampled by feet that were less than caring of where they stepped. A root jabbed into the serpentii's eye and it screeched in pain as the group sprinted toward the T-junction at the end of the hall.

More serpentii were coming, but they had gained a small reprieve. At the empty stretch of wall, the Countess reached up and tugged on the iron bracket, opening up the wall and revealing her inner sanctum.

From a hole in the wall, a panting Sose limped out. He had several wounds on him, and where he bled, there was a faint glittering gold liquid instead of blood.

The Countess, with infinite tenderness, reached down and picked up the oppa, stuffing him into her dress once again. “You did well, Sose. We’d be dead if not for you.”

“I’ll always protect you, mistress,” the dark oppa said, shutting his eyes tiredly. “But I need a *nap*.”

Behind them, the wall spun shut again.

“That’s not going to hold them for long,” Cal said. “Now what?” He looked around and gasped. The Countess was taking a few items from the shelves but largely left them blank as she headed toward the opposite end of the room, toward a painting of a young couple with a small, white-wrapped bundle in their arms.

Shrubley thought they looked incredibly happy. There was no wondering who they were. Vampyr’s didn’t really age in the typical way and, though she was smaller in the painting, the Countess and Count had clearly been quite happy once.

Shrubley’s gaze fell upon the painted child, finding a brief moment of peace. He wondered who the child was and where it was now.

Was this painting hundreds of years old, and the child was somewhere far off in the world, ruling as a vampyr in his or her own right? Or was the Haalften heir trapped in the manor, just like the Count?

Shrubley turned his attention towards something else.

Beneath the painting was shelf after shelf of tiny gems that glittered strangely. Cal gasped and reached a hand out toward one but his bony fingers simply passed through it like an illusion.

“They’re not real,” the Countess said. “They are... you could say records of essences. It doesn’t matter though, come help me with this. We don’t have long before they break through.”

Each of the monster adventurers helped the Countess, to pull out the shelf attached to a thick block of stone. She should have been able to heave the shelf out of the way with ease, but not after battling through all those snakes.

Once it was removed, a small hidden passage sloped down into the cool darkness.

The Countess tilted her head to the side and listened for a moment. There were no sounds from within.

She breathed a sigh of relief, then dropped to her hands and knees to crawl through the small opening. Cal had to crouch after her, but the rest of the monster adventurers could walk easily behind the Countess.

Shrubley tugged on the block, pulling it back into the hole and shutting out all the light in the tunnel. He hurried up after the rest of them. The Countess led the way through a maze of branching tunnels.

She paused at one, muttered something to herself, then seemed to pick a tunnel at random and continue on. They had to double-back only once when the tunnel ahead had been caved-in.

Faint glowing runes in the ceiling provided a meager light, enough to see by if you got used to the darkness long enough but not enough to make anything out clearly.

Even the glowbugs were better than those luminous runes, but the bugs needed precious mana to bring light to their surroundings. Shrubley needed as much as he could in order to keep fighting.

I have so little mana left as it is, Shrubley thought.

A firm, oakclad resolve settled within him. That sort of wood was strong and would stand against even the toughest force without flinching. He would do all he could to protect his friends, including the Countess and the oppa.

They all deserved a better fate than being lost in a mirror realm.

The group made it to a large dark space that felt immensely vast to Shrubley's senses. He could feel the hot sticky wind of the surface from here, though he could sense no sun or light of any kind.

From the way they had come, was a faint distant hissing sound echoing down the tunnels.

The Countess put a hand to one of the engravings next to the tunnel's exit and a series of heavy thuds rattled the ground as blocks of stone fell to block the exit.

"That'll hold them for a while," she said. "But there are other exits. We have to hurry."

She stood up to her full height and then staggered, resting one hand against the rock wall. "We're over a large gorge," she told them. "Keep a hand on the wall and make sure you walk *carefully*. The ledge is very weak but if you walk single-file, it should be fine. Now... where the devil is that bridge?" The last bit she muttered to herself, but in the sucking silence of the gorge, her words sounded as loud as an avalanche.

"Pyuu," Smudge said, hopping along after the Countess. After all his training, he was no longer small enough to sit on Shrubley's head. Smudge was now the size of a beach ball.

They stumbled and clung to the side of the lightless gorge, trusting that they weren't about to tumble into the infinite darkness like the serpentii had when there came a deep grinding noise.

Shrubley's sensitive root-like feet understood immediately what was happening. He grabbed Slyrox's backpack and pulled as hard and as mightily as he could, lifting her off the crumbling stone.

Cal's arms shot out and took her as he staggered back. The koblin reached out for Shrubley, but he was so tired, so weak from days upon days without sunlight, that his footing slipped on the crumbling stone.

It was a simple mistake that he should never have made. But after all the fighting... he was running on fumes before the serpentii had found them.

He wanted to be strong, but there was only so much determination and grit could do in his ailing state.

Perhaps I'm not oakclad after all... Shrubley thought, his voice quiet and weak even in his own mind.

He fell into the darkness, unable to tell which way was up or down. Wind rushed against his leaves and fluttered his branches.

The others shouted in alarm, calling his name, but even their voices were swallowed up by the sound of the wind. It wrapped around him, became his entire world.

In a way, he was almost relieved. He had been so tired for so long. Would it hurt to die? He had wanted to ask the Druid... but you can't ask a dead person and those that come back don't remember their deaths. Cal didn't remember anything about his past life.

Will I finally see the Druid again? The thought filled him with a comforting warmth. He missed the Druid terribly, and though his dream of being an S-Grade Adventurer might be over... he could take solace in seeing the old Druid again.

I shall be glad to see him.

There was a faint whistling noise, a sense of claustrophobia, and then his world was filled with pain.