

CHAPTER 29 – BARK TO BASICS II

They found the Countess beside another arched doorway. When she opened it, they found something that managed to get through even Cal's willfully thick skull.

He looked around nervously when Countess Haalften shut the doors behind her and grinned at the four monsters. "This looks a lot like a training hall," he said softly.

"So you *do* have something akin to a brain in that head of yours," the Countess said. "Good. You'll need it."

Slyrox shuffled closer to Cal. The koblin made no attempt to hide the fact that she was trying to peek through his eyeholes, and then his jaw, to see what was in his skull.

Shrublely looked at the walls laden with racks of weapons. Hanging ropes suspended various dummies, all of which looked very... humanlike.

There were mock barricades and even dummies holding various farmer implements, all rooted to the same spot like a mushroom growing several stalks from one log.

"She even has *mob training dummies*," Cal whispered after Shrublely had pointed it out.

The Countess shrugged and lifted her palms toward the vaulted ceiling. "There are only so many books you can read in the immortal life of a vampyr," she explained. "Doing some... training and research is never a *bad* thing. It's not like I'm killing the good people of Taamra or *trying to take over the world like some people*."

Slyrox put a mitt to her muzzle in thought. "Can... kobbies become immortal vampyrs?"

The Countess, having worked herself up, breathed heavily as she turned toward the koblin. Her eyes were burning pits from the deepest layer of Hell for a moment before she conquered herself.

Rather than cower and shake, Slyrox looked up and squared her shoulders.

“You have the mettle of a vampyr, I’ll give you that,” she said, tossing her dark curls over one shoulder. “There is no telling what would happen if you were to be Turned. You would not be able to go out in the... er...” She trailed off, staring at her outfit. “Well, you’d have to hide your ears from the sun, in any case.”

Slyrox crossed her short arms. Apparently, that was a line too far to cross in exchange for immortality.

Though she did not admit it aloud, the possibility of being Turned did weigh on the koblin’s mind. She was so used to being sick that the promise of never feeling any kind of sickness again was tempting.

But the koblin had already been through a considerable amount of change lately, hopping between worlds and all that came after. And being a koblin vampyr might not actually pan out the way she had hoped.

Shrubley lifted a pike and tumbled back to the wooden floor. The weapon clattered out of his hands and spun away. His palms felt the planking and what he was going to say as all eyes turned his way, became something else on the way to his mouth. “Why is there wood here?”

The Countess looked at him curiously.

“In every other room, it is stone,” Shrubley explained. “But here, it is wood. Why?”

“Because wood is softer than stone and easier to repair,” she told him, gesturing at the gouge the pike had left in a plank. “When it gets damaged enough, we can just replace the plank, or find a carpenter with an essence that allows him to repair such things. It’s much harder to repair stone, and far costlier.”

“I understand,” Shrubley said, pushing himself to his feet. He went in front of the Countess and held out his palms to her. Piled atop his palms were dozens of [Copper Coins].

She stared at him, unsure of what he was doing.

Shrubley looked over at the gouge in the wood, then back at her.

Oh, that is just too much. He’s trying to pay for the repairs? She shook her head and curled his fingers back around his money. “That is yours, Shrubley. Besides, this place isn’t *mine*, really.”

The look in the little shrub's eyes was too much for even the Countess to bear. She sighed and plucked a single coin from the pile. "There, happy? Good. Now stop this foolishness. You want to repay me for damaging my floors? Then learn fast before those serpentii find us. When they do, you will need to be as strong as possible."

"Repair essence?" Slyrox asked. "Or wood essence? Are those kinds of this land's magic?"

The koblin certainly wasn't doing much to hide the fact that she was a foreigner. Not that any of Shrubley or anyone else from their group suggested Slyrox do so.

They had been running from one thing to another ever since Shrubley met the koblin. Even then, he did not see a reason she should hide it.

Considering their circumstances, there wasn't much purpose in being overly distrustful of the Countess.

Putting one hand on a large hip, the Countess looked at the assembled monsters. *I don't think I've ever seen such a sorry excuse for monsters in my life. They would be laughed out of Pandaemonium!*

"I'm not sure who—if anybody—taught you, so let's start from the top, shall we? This is how it'll work: I'll ask questions, point at one of you, and then you'll answer me, got it?"

Nobody answered.

A sly grin curled on her blood-red lips. "You're faster learners than I thought. Very well. You. What essences do you have?"

Slyrox shifted side to side on her oversized clown feet. "Kobbie no-know this 'essence' is like airy-self?"

"If I could translate, I would," Cal said helplessly.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, the Countess said, "No. It's not... what you just said. You don't know what an *essence* is? It's the very building blocks of our power."

Judging by the rapt expression her unusual pupils gave her, she realized something quite sad and yet brimming with potential. How many Awakened had she been able to help so soon after waking up? Of course, there was Pandaemonium, with its great schools and academies, but that was far away and they might never survive the journey.

Each of the monsters sat in front of the vampyr, looking up at her patiently. Quiet for once, too. Only the koblin fidgeted with her mitts.

They might as well have been sitting outside an academy's grounds, waiting for the professor's lesson to begin.

"We'll start with the basics, then." She lifted her hand up, palm facing the ceiling. A small orb of smoky darkness flowed out of her skin and swirled just above her palm. She made it into a flat disc, turned it into a hoop, and even created several impossible-looking non-Euclidean shapes before returning it to a sphere. "Can anybody tell me what this is?"

Silence.

A vein began to bulge just slightly over her eyebrow, which was impressive for a vampyr who generally only had a heartbeat once a day. "Anybody who wants can answer if I don't pick somebody," she elaborated.

"Essence?" Shrubley offered, leaves quivering with uncertainty. "It must be, but I don't know which."

"Pyyu," the slime put forth with much more confidence.

"Darkness," Cal said after a moment's thought.

"The skeleton is right," Countess Haalften said. "Technically, Shrubley was right too. It is essence, but it is more accurately Darkness essence. I don't know what you were taught about essences –"

"Not much," Cal said. "The only thing I picked up was from reading bits and pieces of things I wasn't supposed to."

"I'm new," Slyrox admitted, as if that explained everything.

"The Druid did not spend much time teaching me about essences," Shrubley explained. "I know they are needed for Classes, though that is because a very nice and pretty elf told me."

That drew Slyrox's attention. That was a term the koblin more readily understood.

The Countess put out her large hands. "Okay, okay. I see this is a *remedial* class then. We'll start with essences then." She made the sphere of Darkness split into four balls and then hover in front of each person sitting on the wooden floor in front of her.

Slyrox took a deep sniff through her mask. “Psshkoh! It smells like licorice!”

Smudge bubbled in agreement.

“Essences are the most basic expressions of power and magic. Whereas spells require mana and additional ingredients, often just words, essences typically only require mana or stamina. In rare cases, you will get those that need health as well to use them. But essences themselves are specific types of raw mana. The name really should be all you need to know to understand this. They are the *essence* of any type of mana.”

“Like Curiosity?” Shrubley asked.

The Countess was pulled up short. She’d never heard of that essence. “A Black essence, I take it?”

Shrubley nodded enthusiastically. He looked like a bush in a hurricane.

“Black essences are a little different from the others.”

“Like my [Braver Essence]?” Slyrox asked.

“So long as it’s Black essence, yes,” the Countess said. “It is one of the seven primary essences, from which all other essences spring forth. However, unlike the other 6 which tend to be a type of mana, Black essences tend to take on more esoteric types of mana.”

“What does –” Slyrox began to said.

She was cut off by Shrubley’s answer. “Something intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest. Often confused with ancient or powerful,” he added.

Slyrox nodded in thanks.

The Countess wore that slightly confused and hunted look that many people did when they spent too long around Shrubley. It felt like he was going to try correcting her with some memorized example, but he never did.

In fact, she was beginning to worry that he was a lot smarter than he put on. *Curiosity essence? I’ve never even heard a whisper of something like that.*

Cal hung his skull miserably. “Ah, I’m the odd one out with Red essence, aren’t I? What’s next, Smudge will come forth and proclaim he has Emperor essence?”

Everyone's attention shifted to the slime momentarily, but no answer was forthcoming other than an errant, almost flatulent-like *plop* sound from Smudge's approximate backside.

"I think you're safe," the Countess told him, then added in an ominous tone, "For now."