

# CHAPTER 76 – EXTENDED

## WARRANTY

Rykal frowned at the well, then turned his displeasure on a hooded figure in green. “Summon them again!”

Instead of offering excuses, which had gotten the last two recently promoted (then demoted by way of exsanguination) High Priests killed, the robed figure slithered over to the others and began whispering.

The last of the prisoners had been tossed inside hours ago, those odd but humorous cows along with them. And yet the portal wasn't giving them new family to summon up.

It should have been as simple as calling the next up from the other side of the well!

Rykal smoothed his expression to neutrality. It wouldn't do to get worked up. He had to remain cool and in control. That was the serpentii way. Taamra would soon be his. Whatever minor magical hiccup that was causing this would go away and they would be fine.

Everything was *fine*.

The sibilant chanting picked up again as the priests took their positions. The well properly bubbled as it should, there was a surge of green liquid... and then nothing.

In a fit of rage, Rykal tossed one of the cowled figures into the well. He pointed at the rest of them. “Get this working *within the hour!* For every hour that this is inoperable, another one of you will be sent back. Do not test me.”

Sweeping out of the room, still in the guise of Lord Haalften, Rykal went to check on the rest of the preparations. He had sent the vast majority of his forces ahead to secure Taamra and to ensure that nobody made it out alive.

That left the passage through the mountains and the manor itself lightly defended, but since the foothills surrounding the estate were devoid of any sentient (let alone sapient) life, there was little to worry.

Still, something bothered him. His scales itched as if he had to molt, but that was still a few years off.

He was missing *something*. Even if a few adventurers came to face him, he would be more than enough for them. What family he had with him was more than a match, but he still felt like he should have kept more guards on hand.

Unable to let go of the suspicion, he visited the paintings that had captured the spirits of those high ranked adventurers and the Count. Everything appeared to be in order. They were still well and truly trapped, not left to roam free in the mirror realm where they would wreak havoc upon the family.

The family members that had taken the copied paintings of Jerric and Fio were dead. He could tell from the renewed vibrancy of their canvases. Of course, when the last of his infiltrators from Taamra returned with the canvas-imprisoned Archer, they had also told him about the Bard's interference.

Not that it mattered. Taamra was done for, no matter the pesky influences of a lone Steel Ranker. There was nothing he could do against the horde set against the town.

That Countess had done a number on them, but it was necessary to send her over at the time. She wasn't as easily fooled as the true Count had been.

*No*, he told himself, once again on the balcony that looked toward Taamra. The night had come on in full, but he could just barely make out the thick oily smoke in the moonlight. *Everything will be fine. My plan was flawless. Even the Steel Rankers couldn't stop me, and that was a hitch in the plans that nobody saw coming.*

Rykal looked at each of the paintings and smiled triumphantly.

It felt *good* to win.

"You all looked down on me because I was a snake," he told the paintings, knowing full well that they could hear every word but never communicate their pain and suffering. "You all thought I was destined to wriggle around on the ground! I'll take this light-forsaken world and show you what a true serpent can do. We are the heirs of greatness, the family will—" He spun toward the door. "Yes, what is it, Igor?!"

The door inched open as a bashful face that even a mother would struggle to love poked in, his six-fingered hand poised in a half-knock. "Sorry, Master," he said, speaking properly for once in his forsaken life. "I just wanted to give you this." He shuffled into the room and held out an envelope.

Rykal stared at it, then took it. Not quite out of sight behind the half-open door were several abused and strained pieces of luggage. Something unsettling slithered into Rykal's stomach and nestled there like an iron egg.

He slit the envelope open with a thumbnail and unfolded the letter within. His eyes went wider with every word, his rage mounting until he could barely contain himself.

"Igor, what is the mea—" he started to shout, but when he looked up, the strange little freak was gone.

Snarling, Rykal ripped up the letter and stormed out into the hall. "Igor, you cannot leave! You are *mine!*"

But as fast as Rykal was, the little man was faster. He was gone. There was a distinct lack of *Igoriness* about the place.

"That's fine!" he yelled to the empty halls. "I'll get another Igor, a better one!"

*A loyal one.*

When he returned to the study, Rykal swore that the picture of Lord Haalften—the real one—was grinning more smugly than before. It took all of his restraint to stop from ripping that picture to shreds.

It would only release the Count, who would no doubt be too weak to do anything, but would still pose more of a problem than he needed at this moment.

Without Igor's brilliant concoctions, the family would struggle to maintain their glamors. It was a loss, for sure.

*Perhaps banning the lisp was a step too far.*

There was time to come up with a solution, he was sure of it. With no humans alive in the entire region, they could walk around in their proper bodies for a while.

For now, he was going to stay the course. Just a little longer and it would all be over.

\*\*\*

Halfway through the manor, a young farmer called out, “Shrubley, come quick, it’s the Countess!”

Shrubley and Cal exchanged a look.

“That would explain the lack of resistance,” the skeleton told him.

They expected to meet a lot more serpentii coming back, but the few that they encountered were badly wounded and seemed to be running *away* from something rather than seeking to retake the well.

Shrubley had gained a further 3 levels from all the fighting and he could feel his mastery over his Copper aura growing. In a strange way, he was almost looking forward to the uphill battle that had failed to materialize.

Strange, because Shrubley had never before sought a fight if he didn’t have to. It was not what Heroes did. At least not the Heroes from the Druid’s stories. Now that he knew he and the Countess knew each other, he wondered which of those stories featured her.

There were many candidates, though none that fit the current woman’s stature or coldness.

Cal nodded to Shrubley. “Go on,” he told him.

Hunkering down and using his [Morph Shield] to cover himself in a beat-up ball of layered metal, Shrubley flared his Copper aura and rocketed out of the hallway like he was just fired out of a cannon.

The young farmer looked at Cal, then at the faint trail of Copper aura that the shrub left behind.

“Lead on, man!” Cal said, snapping him out of it.

Shrubley hurtled down the halls, digging great big grooves in the walls as he used them to bank around one corner after the other until he flew out of the hole in the wall and straight into a cluster of fleeing serpentii.

“Where are you going?!” screamed the Countess as she sliced and skewered serpentii with her whip-thin claws that could stretch up to ten feet long.

She was covered in a pale gray aura that dwarfed Shrubley’s own.

*Is that the power of an Iron?* he wondered, truly humbled by the incredible strength.

Even as he was in awe, he could see how much using the aura was costing the Countess. You couldn't argue with the results, however, the grounds were carpeted with serpentii bodies.

Unrolling from his ball shape, Shrubley saw why as he lifted his gaze. The Countess was defending Cluckley. Every so often, one of the broken windows would open and shudder a bit, as if it was wheezing.

He hadn't been able to feel it before, but up close, he could tell that it was in bad shape.

*Please, no*, he thought as he rushed to the hut's porch. The Countess took one look at him, half-moved to stop him, then collapsed on the spot. *I can't lose another friend*, Shrubley thought fiercely as he used [Recover] on Cluckley.

It didn't work.

"Mistress Ceasewane didn't want you to die with her!" Shrubley scolded the hut. "You kept us safe. You kept all these people safe. You, Cluckley, you did that! Please be okay...."

Cluckley unfolded a black wing of Fantasy essence. Parts of it were vanishing as it moved, but it swept Shrubley up and gently pressed him to the broken and battered railing in a hug.

*There are other worlds than this*, Cluckley sent to Shrubley's mind. *Life is a wheel*.

And with that, the great ambulatory hut gave a great shudder and went very, very still.

Shrubley cried, holding onto the hut.

It shouldn't have been able to feel cold. It was just a magical house, and yet it did. There was something... vacant about it, despite the countless people inside.

He allowed himself time to grieve until the others arrived. His leaves were wet with tears when he turned around to greet them.

Cal looked up at him and knew. "Oh, Shrubley...."

Slyrox came over, leaving the others with the Countess. One of the farmers was respectfully and gently patting her hand, trying to bring her around. Somebody had clearly read far too many romance novels about fainting ladies.

Her oppa, disreputable as ever, lightly kicked the farmer in his sleep.

Joined with his friends, Shrubley had never felt more alone in his life. Even when the Druid died, it hadn't been because of a wound or injury. This was different.

They were supposed to have time.

Shrubley sniffled and straightened his branches. He still had a job to do. People, more lives than just one very good witch hut, counted on him keeping it together.

Cal watched his friend go into the still hut, noticing the difference immediately. *I pity whoever thinks to stand in his way now.*

Holding his modified staff, draped with countless snake bones, Cal didn't have the heart to go into the hut. He put a hand on the railing and said a prayer, for all it would do.

He didn't know where houses went in the afterlife. Perhaps the big real estate market in the sky. But he hoped it was a better place. One where the paint stayed immaculate and the floorboards were forever gleaming and polished.

Wrapped in layers of misery and grief, Cal turned to Slyrox, who was quietly sobbing and hugging the mailbox post.

*This was supposed to be an easy contract. Simple.*

A quick delivery that would earn him his adventurers badge. He put a hand on Slyrox's shoulder and gazed up at the hut, lost for words.

And that was when he noticed that the battered and rusted mailbox's little red flag was up.