

CHAPTER 75 – A FABLE

GLIMPSED

With the last of the serpentii dealt with, Cal stepped up to the lip of the well. The stone and wood platform that surrounded it was quite a bit cleaner than the one he remembered from the manor.

They had fought so hard to get here, and no one knew for sure that the well would truly work.

It all hinged on the amulet, and then what awaited them on the other side.

“Somebody will have to go first,” Cal said quietly to himself.

Shrubley stepped up onto the platform and turned to the rest of them. He seemed to loom larger than life up there with the darkness all around and the green reflected light of the well behind him. “You all know what needs to be done. We hold the entrance to the well against any and all comers until the last of us are through.”

He pointed out three people. Esmerelda, who still held the goblin’s cooling body, Smudge who he could always rely on, and the goblin Zyrxax with his cow artillery.

“I’m leaving the three of you in charge,” Shrubley told them. “Do not let *anyone* through this portal. No matter who they are. There is no telling what’s on the other side, and when we go through, we need to do it as a group.” His eyes fell on Exrin. “*Nobody* gets left behind, all right?”

The others nodded.

Everything was going to plan so far. There were more casualties than he hoped for. In stories, the Hero always managed to get everybody out safely with minimal harm. A few cool new scars were all anybody got.

People didn’t *die* in stories. And when they did, it was a long drawn-out affair, something that if you had a health potion, you could easily remedy.

But Exrin had died so fast there hadn't been time to do anything. *I failed you. I am sorry.*

He looked up. "The rest of you are with me."

The strike team had made it all the way to the well. Now it was up to Shrubley and the rest with him to make sure that path stayed clear.

Swaying side to side from heavy sustained damage, Cluckley launched a chicken foot square in the eye of the [Gigant Serpentii], blinding it with a gushing spray of purple blood. The witch hut didn't aim for the jaw, as that was risking an extra dose of that poison from those fangs.

Poison that was already coursing through its body. The passengers it held within could see the black veins rotting the wood. The floorboards buckled and twisted even as farmhands struck them with nail and hammer to keep things from falling apart.

Cluckley, the loyal familiar of one of the greatest witches ever to grace Almora, was now more patchwork than house.

She understood that her mistress wanted to watch over the little shrub whom she had placed so much faith in. It was a good thing, in Cluckley's opinion, that Shrubley did not have shoulders, because the burden that Mistress Ceaswane had placed upon him would have surely buckled them.

As it was, Cluckley was nearing the end of her strength. Her power and Mistress Ceaswane's were connected. It was never Cluckley's role to continue protecting the little shrub. Her duty ended here, but not even the gifted Mistress Ceaswane could have foreseen *this*.

The ensorcelled witch hut could feel what was left of its master out there somewhere. All it wanted was to return to her side to meet the end together.

The massive serpentii struck out, but an equally large, black-feathered wing, courtesy of Sose's Fantasy essence, was raised to block the offending bite. The house rattled all the same and a few field hands rushed out onto the battered porch with axes to hack at the side of the overgrown snake's head.

Bleeding with dozens of little cuts, the snake reeled back and readied for another round.

Cluckley and the giant serpentii exchanged one ponderous attack after another. Even with the witch hut empowered and augmented by Fantasy

essence, and armed with the few injured that could fight when the snake got close enough, it still was a losing battle.

Furious, and just a little bit delirious, the Countess swept out onto the porch. When the snake bit into the side of the house, the Countess latched on with her Darkness essence claws.

“How. Dare. You. Disturb. My. Sleep!” The vampyr snarled, foggy with exhaustion. She wrenched on its leathery hide and gouged out its last good eye.

The giant snake reared back, fully blind now. But it hadn't come all this way just to be defeated.

Sose took a gamble, knowing how much it would cost him, but anything was better than the alternative.

He strummed his paws along the air, casting [Fableweave] upon the Countess. It was a unique form of a Fantasy essence buff, one that took a particular heritage to wield.

A shadowy stardusted outer shell of ethereal armor materialized around the Countess, flickering in and out of existence as the spell struggled to stay tethered. Grand leathery bat wings unfurled from her back, fuming with misty shadows, and a dark greatsword of legendary power grew in her hands.

The fable of the god-like Lady of Cruor infused the Countess with strength, reinforced over generations by numerous retellings by Sose. It isn't often a vampyr is ever a shade of a hero, and yet Lady Ruencrad was just that to the darkdwellers of Worldshard Noctus.

Roaring, the Countess flew into the giant serpentii's opened mouth and unleashed a blurring bladed devastation from within.

The creature tried to snap its jaws shut, but Cluckley thrust a wing into its maw to wedge it open enough for the Countess to spear the roof of the creature's mouth with that black greatsword of hers.

Blood and mana alike poured out of the wound, drenching the Countess and pouring like a split waterfall onto the grounds of the manor below.

Screaming with incandescent rage, the Countess twisted and carved out half of the creature's upper jaw. It fell away and landed below, crushing a horticultural sculpture, ironically in the shape of the twisting serpent, Jörmungandr.

The Countess sagged but was caught by the black feathered wing and pulled into the safety of the porch. The [Gigant Serpentii] shook the ground as its long, coiled body fell, defeated.

“The beast, it is felled, by fables reforged,” Sose intoned, then collapsed.

Cluckley stomped a few stray serpentii into the dirt, but the exertion made the house stagger and nearly fall over. It lowered itself down with a sense of finality. There wasn't enough strength to stand again, not without risking its precious cargo.

Breathing hard, the Countess gripped the railing of the porch, trying to weather the power that leaked out from the Fantasy mana. She had been, for the briefest of times, the Lady of Cruor.

The greatest vampyr across the Shardrunes to ever live.

To embody so much power was taxing, all the more for her starvation. The strength of the hut had given out. She could feel it beneath her fingers and yet there were still enemies about.

You did well, she thought to Cluckley. Even Mistress Ceasewane would approve of your new name. Shrubley will be devastated, but you and I both knew how this would end.

Patting the railing affectionately in parting, the Countess stepped out to view the ring of gathering serpentii. She held out her hands, her claws extending into whip-thin blades. “Who's next?”

The doors to the Adventurers Guild shook with a resounding *BANG!* that rattled the rafters and startled every soul huddled together. Sel looked over the reports by candlelight and sighed. They were all correct.

No forgeries, nothing out of the ordinary. She had *checked* the reports. They had a full stock of armor, weapons, and supplies enough for *weeks*, even after accounting for their reduced stores from the previous years.

Now, the supplies were all but gone. The serpentii had gotten to them. How she never noticed, Sel had no idea.

Serpents should've never been able to pass off as adventurers, but they managed just that.

“What’re we going to do?” Joy, an older guild member who had long since retired, asked. She patted her steely gray bun like she always did when things were dire. “You want me to tell them?”

Sel shook her head. As much as she didn’t like lying, there wasn’t much use in telling everybody the food and water they expected to have was gone. There was just enough that if you happened to glance down into the cellar, you’d see shelves stacked full.

Only, when you actually went to *look*, the shelves were fronted with supplies and the rest were empty boxes stacked up behind.

The serpentii had planned the theft well. Now Sel would use their cruel trick to stave off the people’s panic.

This wasn’t a simple monster incursion, this was war. One that no mere monster could have ever pulled off. She pulled out a glass tracking tablet and though it hurt her to suspect him, she *had* to know.

With his adventurers badge, Shrubley was trackable by the guild. You weren’t supposed to use it except to find the body or unless an adventurer went rogue, but times were dire. And there was a growing muttering that all of this started with the guild admitting a *monster*.

Sel had done what she could to quell the rumors, but when there were monsters banging on your door and the only monsters admitted to the guild were nowhere to be seen, it didn’t look good.

Joy, leaning over Sel’s shoulder, clicked her tongue in annoyance. “That can’t be right. How can he be nowhere?”

Sel breathed a little sigh of relief. “I don’t know, but he’s not the only one.” She pulled up a host of other badges. Many of them showed the exact same thing. They weren’t on any map known to the guild, but they were still alive or at least not completely dead as far as the badge understood such things.

But Shrubley was far from the only adventurer missing.

It didn’t exonerate him, but it also didn’t implicate him either. That was good enough for Sel. And at this point, she’d take any solace she could find.

“Take a few adventurers, trusted ones, highest Grade possible, and put them to guard the storeroom.”

Joy raised a brow at that. “Even if you ration ‘em, they won’t go far.” She gestured to the crowded hall. “Not with so many mouths to feed.”

It had seemed ever since the branch leader Eldwin died, everything had gone downhill. When the only decisions to be made were bad ones, you had to do the best you could and hope it would turn out all right.

She couldn't spend too long on each problem because soon enough, another one would appear. If you spent forever deciding, you'd drown beneath the tide of problems.

"They'll go far enough," Sel told her, forcing a smile that just barely tipped over into convincing. "There's no use holding out forever. Help will come."

That was true whether they had supplies for a few months or a few days. Eventually, they'd run out.

And the guild was going to run out a lot sooner than that.

I really hope Royle made it out.