

CHAPTER 55 – THE SHRUB, THE WITCH, AND THE TEACUP

Now the figure rose from the chair.

She was bent like an old lady and used two walking sticks to move around. “If yer going to call on me, might as well offer ye all some refreshments. Go on, git.”

Slyrox scrambled to get between the Countess and this stranger, putting her weighted mitts up in a solid guard.

“I ain’t gonna hurt the wee lass,” she said with a dismissive flap of her blue-veined hand. “Though...” She looked keenly at the unconscious Countess and gave a very, *very* slight bow. “Yer welcome in me house too.” She gave a little snort, as if sharing a private joke.

Cal looked over. He did not share his suspicion aloud. Perhaps the myth that vampyrs needed to be invited inside domiciles was actually true.

Or the hermit was just making a joke.

Meanwhile, a number of things went through Shrubley’s head. All those trees slaying the serpentii, but not attacking him and his friends.

Could it have been an accident that they were trapped in the looping magic of that forest?

Shrubley ultimately didn’t know what to think. Generally, on principle, he didn’t like to assume. So perhaps there was a chance here that this witch wasn’t an enemy intent on harming them.

But that’s all it was in Shrubley’s eyes. A chance.

As much as Shrubley liked to be kind and polite, there was no use in letting people walk all over you. He had learned to grow a backbone—even if he technically didn’t have one—and learned how to stand up for himself.

He didn't think it was necessary here. For all the old woman seemed to be full of magical potential, she hadn't shown the slightest inclination to harm them. Shrubley thought of himself as having a good understanding of people, and this woman with her black as midnight clothes and pointed hat with the drooping tip looked straight out of one of the Druid's fairy tale books.

"You're a Witch," Shrubley said once they were inside her home.

Surprisingly, it was much cooler inside. The oppressive heat that seemed to permeate every moist inch of the world outside was completely banished. It felt like a weight had been lifted off Shrubley's shoulders.

There was a collective sigh of that same relief from his friends. Even the Countess appeared to rest a little easier.

"Think that, do you?" the Witch said. "That's typecasting, that is."

The koblin looked around, tension bleeding out of her. Slyrox cried out, then rushed the Witch. She wrapped her tiny arms around her skirts in a child-like hug.

The Witch pointed a finger down at Slyrox. "What's this one doing?"

"In our world, we call that a 'hug'," Cal told her slowly. "She is expressing—"

"Don't give me lip, sonny!"

"I can assure you, ma'am, I'm not able to give you any lip, because as you can see—"

"I didn't ask for your life's story!" She looked down at Slyrox. "Let go of me legs or don't you want some tea? Got to offer refreshments to guests, after all. Can't be having with breaking protocol. Not at my age."

"Yes, ma'am!" Slyrox let go, clutching her mitts together.

She motioned to a blackened kettle. "Be a lamb and fill that with water from the sink."

Slyrox scurried over obediently, eager to have some hospitality and show some measure of usefulness.

Even Shrubley was grateful for the reprieve.

As much as the Witch said she wanted to get refreshments for the group, she very quickly had each of them bustling about the place—which was surprisingly spacious—in no time flat.

She's having us make our own refreshments, Cal admired while he scrubbed out a few chipped cups for tea. *At least we'll know if it's poisoned. Maybe. Huh, can I be poisoned? Hm, not sure I want to find out, actually.*

The Countess was settled down on a couch near one of the windows. The interior of the two-story cottage was about as spartan as you could get and still have four walls.

It was clean, spotless even, and Shrubley noted that the rooms were far larger than the outside space would have allowed. He was pacing off the steps from the front door to the back when a little voice spoke right in his ear, “Noticed, have ya?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shrubley said, still counting the paces. “This place is a lot larger inside than outside.

“Simple Expansion Charm,” the Witch said dismissively. “Basic stuff.”

Cal’s head whipped around so fast it nearly spun off his spine. He snapped it back firmly in place with his one hand.

“It is an amazing feat of magic to me,” Shrubley replied with wholehearted sincerity.

“Go fetch that box of cookies in the pantry, young man. Hop do it! There’s a small step ladder just there. Yes, that’s the one.” The Witch, seeing that everything was moving like a well-oiled machine, went back to her rocking chair in front of the large fireplace.

With a snap of her fingers, flames sprang to life. Glittering blue-white things that added another layer of cool comfort to the cottage.

Cal stared at the frozen flames that beat out any lingering trace of the mirror realm’s oppressive heat. Tiny flakes of snow drifted out occasionally, like the inverse of embers. “Could you teach me that?” he asked sheepishly.

“Don’t know how,” the Witch told him matter-of-factly.

“But you just did it!”

“I know how *I* do it. How you’d do it would be different. Even if you was flesh and blood, magic don’t work that easy around here, not without your flashy little essences.”

Cal looked owlshly at her. “You don’t have essences?”

“Did I say that?”

Cal had to think for a moment about that. She certainly *suggested* it... but, no, she hadn't. “No.”

“So ye just *look* like a bonehead,” the Witch said with a faint grin.

“We can't help what we're made of,” Shrubley said, carrying a platter of cookies and setting them down on the coffee table in front of the fireplace.

“Pyuu?” Smudge audibly sniffed at the cookies, though nobody could see a nose.

“How are we going to boil the tea?” Slyrox asked, carrying the heavy kettle near the fireplace with a wide kicking gait.

The Witch motioned to Cal. “Ye've got some Elemental essence. Why don't you do it, lad?”

Shrubley hopped up onto a chintz couch. The fabric was worn thin throughout the years, but was still in good shape despite its long use.

Slyrox placed the kettle on a hook over the freezing fire and backed off, looking over at Cal expectantly.

Cal looked at her, then back at the fireplace. Frost was climbing up the black iron of the kettle. Struggling to piece it all together, he was starting to feel like he caught Smudge's [Dumb] ability.

“Hurry up now,” the Witch said sharply. “Else we'll be having to eat the tea with a fork and knife!”

Barked into action, Cal fumbled through what he was originally going to do. He hardly understood what he was doing. Cal could only be sure that he was deathly afraid of disappointing the Witch.

His Elemental essence went to work, converting and splitting a stream of flame, replacing it with heat instead of cold. The Witch looked on as the ice on the kettle melted, hissed, and became steam.

In no time at all, the kettle began to whistle a pleasant little tune that should never have been possible from something as simple as steam. It sounded like a small band was playing a jingle of some sort.

After some clapping praise, Slyrox scampered over to the couch and climbed up.

The Witch gave a short nod of acceptance.

Shrubley watched with great interest. Cal responded fairly poorly to pressure, but he responded to praise even worse. This never made any sense to Shrubley who had a loving upbringing, if a little lonely and isolated.

He couldn't fathom the way Cal was brought up, though he wanted to.

Little did Shrubley know, Cal had a thing for feminine authority figures, even old, wizened ladies.

That, and he was used to being bullied. If he was bullied in an almost friendly way, he seemed to find all of his magic working just the way he needed it to. It didn't matter much to him if the woman was an old lady or a powerful tall lady like the Countess.

They all had skeletons inside, waiting to get out. And if the Countess ever died, Cal knew what to do.

Slyrox was about to slide off the couch to get the kettle when the Witch crooked a finger and the kettle flew from the fireplace to a trivet on the table. From there, it poured out hot water into the teacups set in a circle.

"Blessings be upon this night and all that nonsense," the Witch said once they were all sipping their tea and crunching on some cookies. "Now tell me what the devil it is you're all doing here."

"Well, firstly, I must thank you for welcoming us into your chicken footed home," Shrubley said with seriousness. He then looked at his friends, wondering how much he should tell.

They nodded, even Cal, who was the most cautious of the lot.

When Shrubley thought about it, he didn't see the harm in explaining how they got here. And that they wanted to leave.

What he didn't understand was why the Witch was here. Was she trapped, too? Perhaps by that old magic? And that was only if she hadn't been the one to cast it.

Very likely, she had. So it was all the more puzzling to Shrubley.

He explained where they had come from, how they had been thrown through a portal in a well of green liquid and ended up here, training to survive and searching for a way out.

Shrubleby was keen not to mention the amulet.

The Witch was silent for the most part. She didn't interrupt or comment on anything until the tale was fully done. "You used that slime there to see through the illusion."

"Pyuu."

"His name is Smudge," Shrubleby explained.

"Smart going," she said after a moment's thought. "Slimes ain't the smartest of the bunch and mental magic slides right off'm like water off a duck's back. You're the first bunch o' adventurers I ever seen here in years."

"This world has existed for that long?" Shrubleby asked. Then he realized what the Witch called them.

Adventurers. His leaves rustled with pride.

"Aye, it's an old one," the Witch said. She stared into the dregs of her teacup and then snapped her fingers at Shrubleby. "Give us your cup."

Shrubleby obeyed, watching her curiously. Humans were odd to him, and he loved to watch them in all their weirdness.

The Witch stared from one mug to the other. She sniffed them with her long hooked nose. After a long silent moment, she appeared to reach a conclusion. "So, you're the ones I've got to kill then, eh?"