

CHAPTER 36 – A THORNY SITUATION

[Rake] was a simple Blood essence ability, but as has already been established, simple doesn't mean weak. Normally, she could ramp up the damage by using some extra Blood she had on hand, but even that was out of the question.

With her claws extended, the Countess bore down on the serpentii group. They had clearly expected Shrubley, but not her.

Few people can keep their nerve when a woman over seven feet tall suddenly crouches like a wild animal and sprints toward them. The serpentii did well, but they were too slow, too stunned by the spectacle.

I hope you're paying attention, boy! she thought, hoping that Shrubley would be able to use his [Lifelong Student] ability to copy this essence ability and use it against the serpentii.

It was the only thing that seemed to work on them. They recovered from most wounds with frightening ease. They had some sort of strange recovery power that she couldn't fully wrap her head around.

[Rake], being a Blood essence ability, had one other attribute that made it stand out even without the extra Blood to ramp its damage up.

It inflicted both the wounding and bleeding debuffs on an enemy with as little as a grazing blow. With this essence ability, even Shrubley stood a chance at taking down one or two creatures so long as they weren't any stronger than Copper.

With just one more essence, the shrub would have been at Mid Copper by now. The others, even Slyrox who showed the most promise, would be Low Copper if she got her mitts on two more essences.

There was more to your rank than simple strength. If that was all a person was judged by, then there would never be a need for anything other than levels.

The Countess' claws blurred as they passed through raised weapons and gouged long wounds into the scaly hide of her enemies. Two of them fell to the ground, hissing and writhing in pain.

Shrubley, hot on her heels, was indeed watching and paying attention. He leapt forward, bounced and rolled, leaving behind a disturbing amount of dead leaves, before getting up and slashing with [Rake] leaving a red blur on the edge of his wooden sword.

The blade cut through the serpentii's cloth with ease and even cut into the scales beyond, spraying a copious amount of blood. Enough that Shrubley was practically drenched in the foul purple stuff.

But he was a shrub, not a mammal, and the blood did not affect him as it should have. The Countess, on the other hand, moved so fast that the spraying blood streamed into the air where she had once been, harming nobody.

In fact, Shrubley felt a little bit better after absorbing some of the blood. The serpentii dropped its crude spear and clutched a taloned hand at the wound, surprised at the blood pouring out in gallons.

Shrubley wriggled his roots into the blood and soaked it up. His leaves took on a faint purplish hue instead of yellow and a little life seemed to come back to him. "Thank you for this gift of water," he said solemnly, just before he put the serpentii out of its misery.

Together, with the Countess continually using [Rake], allowing Shrubley to gain greater and greater heights of the essence ability, the pair dispatched the remaining serpentii with only minimal wounds.

The Countess clicked her tongue in annoyance at the new rents to her dress, but otherwise kept silent. She quickly ransacked their corpses, but didn't find much of use. A few trinkets and items that their owners had found helpful, but clearly not enough to save them from their fate.

The fighting grew fiercer and fiercer. The serpentii had been one step ahead the entire time, forcing the Countess to show her hand and tell them where the decoy tunnels and trapped areas were.

They had instead focused on the surviving tunnels, not pressing too hard, so she didn't collapse them as well. She had committed the gravest sin. Underestimating your enemy.

I was played the entire time, she cursed to herself as she picked up a serpentii that the koblin knocked into the air and slammed it across the back of her knee. Its spine snapped like a bundle of kindling, and the creature went limp.

The would-be adventurers had learned a lot during their training. Seeing them under fire, she was proud of their progress.

They all were at least level 10 by now and had proficiency in the weapon of their choice as well as a tier or two extra for those with essences. Even Shrubley, who had progressed the slowest as the training went on, was showing his mettle.

He would go far one day, if he could survive until then. Cal was more capable, and Slyrox was a quick learner, but Shrubley had heart. It was easy to dismiss given his rather anemic progress, but that didn't stop him.

It was a shame he had to work twice as hard for less than half the gains, but that just meant when the others hit a wall and fell down, Shrubley would just scale it like he did every other obstacle in his path.

With a [Rake] imbued backhand, the Countess sheared the head off a serpentii. She whistled sharply, a quick double burst. The monster adventurers fell in line immediately, so that when the next serpentii came around the corner, they were met with five armed and furious adversaries who made quick work of them.

They rushed on with the Countess leading the way, cursing under her breath with every step. To have fallen so easily into their trap. They were surrounded. She broke through the ranks that she could with the help of the monster adventurers, but it was clear that the serpentii had been studying her refuge all this time.

If Shrubley hadn't run into them... It didn't bear thinking about. They would have surrounded them completely and wiped her out before she knew what was going on.

As it was, the Countess was forced to pull out every trick she knew to gain another foot toward freedom. She had to keep them away from her secret room, if only to stop them from getting ahead and cutting them off from reaching it.

The fighting in the stone corridors turned bloody and terrible as both the Countess and Shrubley relied deeply on [Rake] to deal devastating blows. Cal used his Elemental essence to great effect. The snakes were weak to fire and

lightning, filling the corridors with smoke and the stink of their charred corpses.

Slyrox's fists were wreathed in black smoke and sparkling motes of gold like her beloved Havior's aura. She was small and her tiny reach worked against her, but she had a very low center of gravity and could jump over the head of even the Countess by now, which made her job much easier for her.

The serpentii were used to using their elongated necks to snap and bite their victims, to inject their deadly toxins, and so when Slyrox flipped over their heads, they reached out to bite her.

With that one move, the koblin was able to turn her greatest weakness into her strength. She made the serpentii *come to her*, and then she walloped them with such strength that they fell into a coiled pile like an oversized garden hose.

Any wounds she took were easily remedied by her essence ability that granted her [Rally], allowing her to recover the recently lost health with relative ease so long as she had an enemy to fight.

The never-ending supply of serpentii guaranteed that long after the rest of them succumbed to their wounds, Slyrox would still be standing.

Even still, they were being herded. The serpentii were everywhere. Whenever they took too long to dispatch a group, another would appear from in front *and* behind.

The Countess bore numerous toxin-laden wounds that stained her dress with purple splotches. They were worthy sacrifices, made in the mad dash to break through the serpentii's many attempts to herd them into an ambush.

They were so close.

Up ahead at the T-junction, she saw the hall crowd with serpentii. They didn't seem to notice the secret room, but that didn't matter when they could body block the entire hall.

Even with her prodigious strength, there was no way to break through them without falling prey to the toxin that now coursed through her veins and burned like acid.

The longer the poison worked, the weaker she would get. She didn't have much more strength left.

There were so many ahead. She could hardly count them all. Then again, she was a vampyr and some of the OCD traits that they were attributed to were quite true.

Forty-three of the bloody buggers, she thought. But if they had some of those small triple-headed snakes that could wriggle through the larger serpentii, that number could easily double.

Despite all her efforts to lead them elsewhere, they still had the numbers to head them off and block any sort of escape. *Were they just toying with us all this time?*

She sagged and leaned against the wall, barely able to keep herself up with all the poison spreading through her body. *If I was any smaller, I don't think I'd be able to stand.*

Her prodigious size had always been a blessing and a curse, but now she wished she had more of her former stature. As she starved, she shrank inch by inch. Oh, she was still tall, but she had been larger when she was full of vitality.

“Countess?” Shrubley asked, stepping up to her with his sword in both hands. His shield had long-since been destroyed.

“I’m okay,” she lied.

The look of concern in Shrubley’s lamplight eyes nearly broke her heart. A tear trickled down her cheek. *And here I thought I was done being a sappy little girl.*

If she did anything, she would make sure that Shrubley survived. So all the dreams of a stupid little monster that wanted nothing more than to be an adventurer could live on.

She could go to her final rest peacefully if she knew his dream was safe.

Just what have you done to my cold dark heart, Shrubley? she found herself thinking.

As the serpentii at the end of the hall gathered up in greater numbers, more snakes hissed and slithered up behind them. She gave up counting once she hit a hundred.

They were well and truly trapped.