

# CHAPTER 71 – A THORNY PROBLEM

“Do you hear that?” Cal asked, cocking his head to the side as they neared Taamra.

Nobody was pleased by the news that they would be traveling near the mirror realm’s version of Taamra. It had been crawling—or rather, slithering—with serpentii before and they had only just barely managed to survive escaping.

Even the catacombs, heavily warded and protected as they were, had been breached. They were chased out into the hills and forests surrounding the town. Nothing had gone right, but now they were at least together, and they had Cluckley.

The walking witch hut seemed more than formidable enough to take out the wandering bands of serpentii without requiring much assistance. Merely a few [Enlighten] enhanced heals from Shrubley, and a couple of spells from the Countess and Cal who were able to clean up any creatures that managed to survive the stomping, slashing feet of the ambulatory hut.

“I hear it too,” Shrubley said. “It sounds like....”

“Mooing,” Slyrox said. Her floppy green ears perked up a little, as if they were trying to home in on the sound. “Definitely mooing.”

Cal and Shrubley looked at each other. They recognized the sounds, but there was absolutely no way that there were actually *cows* here. And even if, somehow, there were, there was no way they were the *same ones*.

That was preposterous.

“We don’t have time to check on them,” the Countess told them. “This world is fading fast without...” She cleared her throat. “Without the Guidance Stone, the world will collapse. It’s amazing it has managed to stay together this long. We need to get to the manor with all haste.”

As they emerged from the hills, Shrubley walked around the wraparound porch to get a better look at Taamra. It certainly seemed lively, that was for sure.

And it wasn't just mooing he heard, but a whole range of voices.

Cluckley crested a rise closer to the road that wrapped around Taamra and Shrubley immediately called out, "There are people fighting. We have to help them!"

Shrubley didn't bother asking for permission. In fact, he didn't even ask Cluckley to do *anything*. The ambulatory hut understood his heart and reacted on its own, turning to face Taamra and stepping over its walls like a child over a stack of blocks.

It stomped a few serpentii, kicked a small pottery business over onto a larger group, and headed deeper into the town, where Shrubley and his group had first fallen into this mirror realm.

There were bodies all over the place and Cluckley had to step lightly to avoid crushing those that weren't snakes.

In a huddled mass at the center of the town square were countless monsters and people. A group of slimes huddled together, stacked like multi-colored cabbages and quivering out of fear.

It wasn't until they drew closer that Shrubley saw the slimes were stacked up *in front* of a group of crying children, like a bulwark.

"We're here to help!" Shrubley said, jumping down before Cluckley could lower herself. He summoned his Copper aura immediately but followed the Countess' advice and held himself back to just a fraction of its full power.

Rather than feeling like his branches would explode from the power, he felt the sap in his veins rushing. It was invigorating rather than terrifying.

The shrub hit the cobbles in a three-point landing, [Death's Razor] already out and to the side. He bolted forward, cutting down two serpentii and then had to hurriedly summon his [Morph Shield] and use it to block a heavy axe blow from a screaming young man.

The air filled with the hearty *clang* of the axe on the shield, but the man might as well have tried to cut down a mountain for all the good it did. His axe bounced off the shield and sent him reeling.

A pair of women caught him before he could fall.

Shrubley turned to block a whistling arrow with his shield and then covered the distance between himself and the archer so fast that the snake only had enough time to hiss once before it was dead.

One by one, the others of Shrubley's group disembarked from Cluckley, and the witch hut ventured deeper into the hordes of enemies, kicking and stomping with all its might.

"What's going on here?" Shrubley asked once there was a lull in the fighting. The serpentii didn't know how to deal with the massive Cluckley, and seeing the bedraggled fighters close ranks, they decided to attack the lone creature stomping around town.

A decision Shrubley knew from experience that they would soon come to regret.

A rusty sword was leveled at the shrub. "No monsters! We won't have you eating us when our back is turned."

Shrubley looked at the group, then realized that the whole town square was actually divided into two groups with the bisecting line facing *each other* instead of the snakes encircling them. Together, they would have been a formidable force, but half of them were facing the other half, angry and afraid.

Even the slimes protecting the children were met with a level of disdain that Shrubley couldn't grasp. He pushed his way through the crowds and climbed atop the fountain.

Surrounded by a billowing Copper aura, the little shrub commanded the attention of everybody there. Even the few people who were actually Copper didn't seem to have enough control of themselves to possess an aura.

Shrubley flared his aura further, something he picked up from Mistress Ceasewane. It was often seen as rude, but it dragged every eye to him. Among monsters, flaring an aura with power was a sign of superiority.

This wasn't the time for speeches, Shrubley realized. He motioned to a pair of goblins fighting back-to-back. One of them was fighting the snakes, and the other was squaring off against a young woman in tattered leather armor.

"You!" he pointed at the goblin. The creature looked down, cowed, giving Shrubley a sort of half-crouch of monster-respect. "Go there!"

Without even thinking, the goblin facing the young woman followed his order and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with another monster to face a small group of serpentii coming to attack.

While many serpentii were clustered around Cluckley, that only bought them a little time. Once the serpentii realized the mistake of fighting something that only had to stomp around to take out most of your forces, they'd quickly return to picking off the easier targets where the ambulatory hut was wary of treading.

Several people and monsters lay dead already. Shrubley mourned for them, knowing within his heart of hearts that they could have been saved if they had just worked together.

Shrubley didn't direct just the monsters. He shouted at the humans and elves as well, pointing where they should go and taking his aura up another notch when there was any dissent.

He knew it was somewhat wrong, but there wasn't *time* for debate or a plea to common decency. This was war. And in war, everybody needed to be in their place.

Cal watched in awe as Shrubley, without the slightest concern for what people thought, ordered both humans and monsters alike. *Is he mixing them up on purpose?*

Slowly but surely, through Shrubley's commanding voice and even more impressive presence, the monsters and the humans were so mingled up that even if they wanted to, they couldn't have formed two groups anymore. Not without a lot of exchanging sides.

The skeleton cast his magic in wide swaths of flame and freezing ice, using his Mirror essence to add to the casts that were freezing and searing snakes in turn.

Smudge and Slyrox worked together, battling back the slippery little serpentii that were able to get through or beneath people's widened stances. Smudge hopped and then turned into stone, squishing the snakes into a fine paste as he gleefully cried out, "Hard!"

Slyrox used her martial prowess and short wide stature to get into those places that were most often occupied by children or the injured. She put herself between them and the enemy time and time again until they could be dragged to safety in the fountain.

Nobody liked the black roots and vines that had taken up residence there, but they didn't seem to harm anybody, and it was the safest place for people who needed to be out of the fight completely.

As the battle dragged on, more and more people were pulled into the fountain, but the hordes of serpentii were thinned. Their purple blood ran through the cobbles and made them slippery, but at Shrubley's direction, the ragtag band of monsters, humans, and elves continued to reform around their gaps and fight on.

The Countess, severely weakened though she was, followed Shrubley's lead as much to set an example as anything. She had to admit that he seemed to know what he was doing. She was a rallying point herself, being just over seven feet tall, and several of the farmers knew her as Lady Haalften.

She greeted them by name, and whenever they grumbled about fighting beside a slime, goblin, gnoll, or otherwise, she reminded them that *she* was a vampyr as well. Using their names helped remind them that she knew who they were. That always unsettled people.

This led to a lot of hemming and hawing over the fact that, while yes, the Haalftens had their strange little ways, but a man had to draw the line somewhere, didn't he?

To which the Countess curled her blood-red lips and pointed with an elongated bladed claw at the serpentii and said, "Yes, you draw it in their blood."

This seemed to mollify the holdouts.

As much as people might hate monsters, those around the Haalften manor were used to the vampyrs. They were respected. And as long as they had *some* monster to vilify and fight, they understood the world and their place in it.

Even if they were currently in a mirror realm that was rapidly vanishing and if they couldn't get back through the portal that brought them here at the manor, they were all going to die anyway.

Shrubley's vision of monsters and humans holding hands and fighting back the darkness was all well and good, but sometimes change had to happen slowly. And when you couldn't do that, that hatred and fear needed a place to call home.

The serpentii looked different enough from even the monsters in the region that they served well in that regard.

Sooner than she would have thought possible, the fighting was over.

Cluckley was chasing down the few remaining stragglers alongside Shrubley who moved about like a coppery candle of hope and light. It was odd to think that such a small creature was capable of inspiring anything other than derision, but wherever he went, both monsters and people stood a little taller despite their wounds.

He wasn't gone for long, though. Cluckley continued to make sure every serpentii she came across was mashed into the cobbles, but Shrubley returned and spent all of his time tending to the wounded.

It wasn't until the little shrub fell over, unconscious, that the Countess realized he had been using a *life-transfer* ability instead of traditional healing.

*Oh, no.*