

# CHAPTER 66 – WITHERED GRACE

Miranda, the Countess, already knew it was too late when she found Sose asleep. She could sense that it was magically induced and could even see the difference based on which back paw was kicking every once in a while.

An unholy concoction of dread, fear, and exhaustion clouded the vampyr's judgment. This mirror realm had been one nightmare after the other.

And now the unthinkable had occurred.

Her teacher, the legendary Witch Ceasewane, was gone.

*She never was big on goodbyes. Well, goodbye you old bat. I loved you, and I know you loved us too, in your own way. And now you're gone and....* She looked down at her oppa.

Now she truly was lost.

*One foot in front of the other,* she scolded herself. *You might not be anywhere near your full strength, but you still have a few tricks up your sleeve.* She had to get them all out of here, and it would be much easier if they could find a few essences along the way.

And she knew just where to get some. With Shrubley's uncomfortably large leap in power, they might just be able to get out of here before the whole place shrank to nothingness.

*First thing first, I need you, Sose.*

Other than food, there was one way to rouse Sose from slumber's grip. Scowling, she placed one large hand on his middle. It dwarfed his whole body.

Then Miranda scratched his fur vigorously.

Sose's eyes shot open. He thrashed his whole ferret-like body from end to end, biting and snapping playfully at her hand like he used to when he was a little oppa kit.

He froze up when he saw Miranda's grim expression. Then the previous events caught up in his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I tried to stop her but...”

“There’s no stopping Mistress Ceasewane when she has her mind set to something,” Miranda said, scooping up her beloved familiar.

His little heart beat so much faster than hers, and it always would.

The proverbial nail-in-the coffin struck when the [Teacher’s Questbook] materialized in the air in front of Miranda. It hovered there, waiting to be accepted.

There was no use denying such a sacred artifact, no matter the truth that it represented.

She snatched it from the air. Sose turned his head to regard it. He stared a long while at it, sniffing the book.

Then he raised his muzzle to the ceiling and howled mournfully.

The noise, thankfully, roused the others. She was dreading having to wake anybody up. It was one of the few things she thought was too much like a nanny.

Mistress Ceasewane didn’t mind. She’d come into your room with a cauldron full of freezing cold water, and if you didn’t wake up in time, you got drenched.

*Then she’d make you clean it all up.*

She was a hard woman, but she cared in her own special way.

*I can never be like you, she told the book as she stuffed it away. But I’ll try to live up to your memory.*

“Nooo, don’t take my bones! Please, not again! Not again!” Cal wailed, rolling to his feet and missing the landing. He kept rolling and rebounded off the couch, falling into the slime and getting no less than a third of his body lodged in that gooey mass.

“Pyuu...?” Smudge said, waking up slowly and looking around tiredly.

“... Ah, I see I’ve made a fool of myself,” Cal admitted sheepishly. “Sorry about that, Smudge.” Then he gave the slime a closer look, re-assessing his earlier moment of panic. Perhaps it wasn’t entirely unfounded. “You’re not going to take my bones, are you?”

The slime blinked out of sync at him.

This did not reassure the skeleton much.

Slyrox looked around. “Where shrub?”

The Countess looked around, growling under her breath as she realized that more than just Mistress Ceasewane was gone.

*I’m slipping.* But it made sense, now that she thought about it.

“Mistress Ceasewane took him,” Sose told them.

“To the Guidance Stone,” Miranda said. “Judging by the chill in the air, I’d say that he’s already attuned to it and received his Class by now.”

Slyrox hopped to her oversized feet and took off running. Not to the door, but to the kitchen. She raided the cupboards and pantry for foodstuffs.

“Eat and get ready,” the Countess told them. “Mistress Ceasewane... will not be joining us further. I don’t know how long this house will stay here, but it’s best to be far away when the magic finally collapses. So hurry up and meet me at the edge of the swamp when you’re done.”

Without waiting further, the Countess swept out of the cottage. Sose scrambled down from her arms and ran up the steps as fast as his noodly body would take him.

He slipped under Mistress Ceasewane’s door and did what oppas did best. He pilfered mementos and keepsakes to remember the old woman by. There wasn’t much, but he took the things that held the greatest spark of the woman.

That was why oppas often seemed to steal random junk, but they were things that had the strongest remnant of a person’s identity and who they were on them. Things a person touched daily and cared for regularly were of more value to an oppa than gold.

Besides, he knew the Countess couldn’t go up here. Not again. So, he did his duty as her familiar to take what was precious and bring it back to her. She might not like him doing it, but she would thank him one day.

Cal watched the oppa slip back outside just as fast as he went up the stairs. He thought about seeing what was up there and then realized that he never would know.

*And I’m okay with that.*

Whatever it was, it had clearly been a private affair. All he wanted was a good hearty calcium-filled breakfast and then to get out of here.

Hopefully Shrublely would show up before too long. If he had gotten the Guidance Stone, then he was no doubt even stronger than before. Cal had no idea what sort of Class he might want to get, and he realized he should probably start thinking about it because he was only a single essence away from being able to get one.

A Guidance Stone wasn't *necessary*, though it did come with the added benefit of an extra Prime essence. Judging by the Countess and Mistress Ceasewane's words, however, they were very hard to find, and he didn't think he had Shrublely's luck.

Smudge took the broomstick. At first, it seemed like the slime was going to eat it. And then the bristling thing, covered in cobwebs, shrank down to a fraction of its full size and floated around inside his jelly, shimmering every now and then with latent magic.

Cal eyed it. Perhaps it wasn't just a broomstick.

The cottage was a whirlwind of activity as each person tried to find something to eat, all while Slyrox was stuffing her [Kobbie Bag] full of all the food she could find.

"Is for snack'ems later," was her only explanation.

Only a few minutes later, with the cottage main floor looking like it was hit by a tornado, the group trooped out after the Countess.

"Where's Shrublely?" Cal asked once they climbed back up the steep hillside that cupped the swamp and the only area of true life that this mirror world possessed. Even that was rapidly shrinking.

The oppressive, humid heat was replaced by a weary chill that went deep. It made his bones ache.

Cal never thought he would have missed the damp air so much, but this was somehow worse. And yet it was still familiar.

As an undead skeleton, he knew better than most the emptiness that came from being surrounded by death. And in his undead estimation, the world was rapidly trending toward tomb-like.

A cold wind knifed through the trees that, shorn of their illusion magic, were filled to the brim with serpentine bodies of all sorts. There were even a few

other monsters that they hadn't seen, and more skeletons than Cal had ever seen before in his life.

Which is an impressive feat considering he grew up in an ossuary.

"Do not touch them," the Countess warned before Cal managed to take even a step forward.

"I wasn't," he lied.

"We don't know what sort of spell is still on the trees," she said, ignoring his blatant lie. "From here on out, we have to stick together and move fast. There's no telling what the trees will do."

"What about the house?" Slyrox asked from the rear.

"And what about Shrubley?" Cal asked again.

"The house was Mistress Ceasewane's," the Countess said without looking around. "We'll wait a few minutes for Shrubley, but if he isn't here by then, he'll just have to catch up. I have every faith in his ability."

Cal was about to protest when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He turned around, realizing that both Smudge and Slyrox were staring back at the swamp.

Was the Witch's cottage closer? He hadn't remembered it being that close before.

"You eye-peeking this too?" Slyrox asked. "Is moving when we no eye-peek. Is still now though."

"Maybe we should all turn around," Cal suggested.

As one, they turned all the way around, but they had done it so fast that if the house had moved nobody could tell.

Naturally, they did it again, slower.

"What are you three doing?" the Countess asked, turning around at the sound of their constantly shuffling feet.

Then she saw it too. "Oh, no."

"Hello, friends!" Shrubley said, waving from the porch of the hut. Its long chicken feet were propelling it through the swamp much faster than any of them could have gotten through it.

For a moment, Miranda's heart rose with hope, then she realized that Shrubley was alone. *Of course*, she thought to herself. *Mistress Ceasewane would stay behind, but I never thought she'd part with the cottage.*

The hill was just the right height to equal the porch, so all Shrubley had to do was step off. Once he was a few steps away from the cottage, he turned and bowed to the house.

"Thank you for the ride, Miss Chicken Hut," Shrubley said.

The Countess sniffed, more to hold back the unfamiliar sense of grief and loss than to seem disdainful. She turned around and marched deeper into the forest.

They had only gotten a few dozen feet into the forest when the ground began to shake. "It's just the spasming of the temporal—" the Countess began to say, turning around to address her new wards.

Like it or not, they were her responsibility now. The [Teacher's Questbook] was proof of that. Mistress Ceasewane had handed down that duty to her, and the proof was not only in her inventory, but staring her in the face.

Miranda couldn't believe her eyes. *You never were subtle when you wanted to prove a point, you old Witch.*