

CHAPTER 74 – BOWLING FOR SNAKES

Outside the manor, another battle raged.

Those serpentii that hadn't gone after Shrubley's group were contending with the bulk of the forces that were left behind to defend Shrubley's back.

Many of the sick, the young, the old, and the wounded were still huddled inside Cluckley. Which, until now, was the safest place in the entire realm.

Sose watched the Countess, unable to tear his gaze away. She might have been faking it earlier, but his mistress was well and truly asleep now. A proper coffin would serve her much better, but at least she wasn't out in the thick of things anymore.

"Don't'cha worry, little guy. Our Countess will be alright, she will," a nearby farmer said. "Back when even my pa was a babe, the Countess has been there for us."

The oppa nodded slowly, much to the farmer's surprise. "Heckin' bleck, she better," Sose whispered.

The farmer figured the ferret looked familiar, but hardly understood whatever an oppa was. So maybe the Countess liked to keep ferrets around over the generations.

But even when you know that your Lord and Lady were vampyrs, it was another thing entirely to understand that it was the same ferret all along *and* that it could talk.

Sose wasn't used to this kind of dangerous life anymore. He was tired. He enjoyed a semblance of relaxation and normality, just like his mistress.

He didn't like seeing her hurt. He didn't like seeing anyone hurt. Which wasn't particularly odd for an oppa.

The house rocked side-to-side with the sort of horrifying turbulence only a ship lost at sea in the middle of a storm could ever undergo.

A menacing presence radiated through Cluckley's walls, powerful enough to rival even Cluckley's full might. And the poor girl was far from her full strength after everything they had been through.

There was no helping it. He had to fight.

"I must help. There's a hitch in the plan," Sose decided fiercely. "I'll be back, mistress."

He darted off, squeezing out between one of the broken boards in the wall.

Fantasy mana roiled and surged away from his dark fur. The paint seeped into Cluckley's walls, fortifying and changing them into a more formidable, more gothic state.

He joined his flagging power to Cluckley's, offering what little he could. The witch hut gained floor after floor, sprouting a great number of spooky eaves all along its outer edges.

Sose immediately saw the problem. "Those heckin' snakes," he cursed.

Three dozen serpentii were gathered up on what had once been the Sundown Gardens of the Haalfden manor. Surrounding them were several green-cloaked serpents chanting. Magic rolled off their bodies as complicated sigils and runes flashed through the air over the dozens of serpentii.

With another pulse of Purple summoning mana, the serpentii vanished in a cloud of smoke and in their place was something that even Sose hadn't expected of the enemy. And he had a very active imagination.

A giant serpentii, bigger than even the witch hut herself, bared its fangs and lunged for Cluckley.

The manor above shook. Something was happening up there, but Shrubley couldn't spare a thought for it. He shut the goblin's eyes, broke the spear in half, and then picked up the small goblin's body.

His friends gathered around him.

He looked at each of the people and monsters there. "Exrin died for us all," he told them solemnly. "He died saving a *friend*. Remember his sacrifice. Honor it. We can go home because of Exrin and those like him."

“I... will carry him,” the woman, Esmerelda, said softly. She scrubbed at her tears with a forearm. “He saved me.”

Shrublely nodded and handed the small goblin over.

Slyrox looked on quietly.

Shrublely wondered what it was like being related to goblins, but not quite being them. These goblins were wiry and thin, not nearly as wide and strong as the koblin was.

No other monster there was a koblin. Just like Shrublely, Slyrox was an oddity.

With nothing more to do than press on, Shrublely led the way once more. This time, he didn't bother to pull his sword out. He transformed the [Morph Shield] into a layered sphere to protect himself and rolled down the narrow passages.

Most of the mana-fed glowbugs from the [Bottle O' Glowbugs] stayed with the group.

As loud as he was, he attracted a great deal of attention. Assassins leapt out at him, hidden creatures snapped at his spinning ball of metal, but none could find purchase.

What they found instead, was over a dozen angry monsters and men alike who wanted nothing more than to see the serpentii pay for what they did.

Shrublely led the way, taking the brunt of the damage while his friends behind cleaned up the exposed and vulnerable attackers.

By the time they reached the massive underground room with the well, Shrublely's sphere was pockmarked and dented in a dozen places. Pieces of the ball were peeled back, but it had been well worth it.

Nobody seemed to know how to deal with a small metal ball rolling in their midst, so like the villains that they were, the serpentii attacked. Most of their attacks were repelled. It was hard to find purchase on a spinning metal ball after all.

But some attacks did get through, and Shrublely had exhausted all of his gems to keep himself going. His [Bark Armor] was gone, he even got a few lucky [Recycle] uses of one particular [Heartgem], but it still wasn't enough.

[Recycle (Curiosity)]

Cost: None

Cooldown: None

Reduce, reuse, recycle.

Imprint: Occasionally an item will gain another use when it should have been exhausted. Single-use items will be restored to their unused form.

Up until this point, Shrubley had kept his familiar the elder glowbug away from the worst of the fighting. Now that they had made it to the well, he needed all the help he could get.

Stumbling a bit drunkenly from all the rolling, especially that last winding bit down the stairs, Shrubley summoned his familiar. It fluttered up into the air around his head, pulsing with a deep green glow.

Pushing to the front of the group, the elder glowbug sent a streak of Nature infused mana into Shrubley's raised sword, empowering it further.

Your [Elder Glowbug Familiar] casts [Emerald Weapon] (Green Magic).

The robed serpentii were more than a little surprised, but that didn't put them off for long. From one of the columns slithered down a ripped serpentii that looked as if it lifted houses for fun.

It was the most humanoid out of all of them that Shrubley had ever seen so far, despite the fact that it lacked legs. It didn't have a frilled neck or elongated head. In fact, it almost resembled a human from the head down to the waist.

There was a faint tickling sensation on his branches. Shrubley's eyes widened and, unlike his usual self, he held up a finger to the slithering serpentii warrior. "Just a moment, please!"

Itszah was the pride of his clutch. He had trained long hours and Advanced to Copper Rank over everybody else. When the others finally managed to attain Low Copper, he was already at Mid Copper. His strength was legendary. He ruled the lower reaches of the mirror realm with an iron fist, being one of the few serpentii to have a fist at all.

He had been in many battles, both against invading adventurers, the old witch's pets, and of course, other serpentii. But despite that, Itszah had never seen such a pathetic excuse for a warrior like the one that stood before him now.

Even worse, he was *quite sure* that you did not hold up your finger and ask for your opponent to hold on a moment while you did... whatever it was that shrubs did.

It was such an odd mixture that Itszah found himself pulling up short, watching and, yes, waiting patiently for the little shrub to be ready.

Nobody had ever *asked* him to stop before. It was such a novel concept that the serpentii's brain short-circuited.

The ambulatory shrub plucked a shiny black spherical fruit from its leaves, and then another pair. Each was topped with a brown coiled stem.

What would mere fruits do against my incredible might? Itszah thought, throwing back his head to laugh.

And then he paused, seeing even at this distance what the fruit really was.

[Bomb Berries]

(Food)

(Copper Rank) (★ Common)

Pitch black berries rich with a mixture of Fire and Earth mana. Their coiled stems resemble a bomb's twisting wick, making their propensity to explode obvious. Only the hungriest, or the toughest, of creatures would dare to eat these.

Imprint: Deals area explosive damage after being triggered.

By the time the serpentii reached around to pull the shield off his back, a cluster of sizzling bomb berries was arcing through the air toward him.

But Itszah was a master of his craft, and even a sneaky little attack like that wasn't enough to stop him. He unslung his shield and raised it, coiling his serpentine tail to hold firm against the blast.

Unfortunately, with his shield raised, he couldn't see the Copper aura spring up around the tiny shrub as it bolted beneath the tossed bomb berries. Itszah

saw the little shrub beneath the bottom curve of his shield and realized he couldn't lower the shield in time to block the shrub's strike.

To Itszah's confusion, the shrub lowered himself even further and raised his small, layered shield. Confusion turned to horror as the serpentii warrior saw a dozen little sizzling bombs—the same ones he had tossed earlier—bounce off Shrubley's raised shield and up into Itszah's muscular body, well behind the safety of his own shield.

A bomb berry exploded with immense force. And then it exploded again, and again, turning into a cluster bomb. The clusters of bomb berries, trapped between the serpentii warrior's shield and body, blew its arms clean off as the trapped explosive force sought freedom by any means.

Shrubley's [Recycle] essence ability had fortuitously triggered not once, but multiple times, causing the [Bomb Berries] to repeatedly explode in a devastating conflagration.

Ah, I love my Curiosity essence! Shrubley thought, quite pleased at the result.

What was left of Itszah wasn't worth mentioning, especially not after a full meal. Shrubley put the snake out of its misery with a quick slice of his [Death's Razor].

While Shrubley had been dealing with their champion, the cowed serpentii weren't patiently sitting by. Thankfully, neither were Shrubley's allies. The fighting was fierce. The cowed serpentii were hardly the easy creatures that they had run into so far.

Mirrors shattered as the serpentii, keenly aware of Mirror essence's powers, moved to strike them down the moment they were conjured.

Cal was a quick study, however, and spent most of his time summoning more and more mirrors. Every time one was shattered, another was put up.

The serpentii feared the mirrors so much that they never saw the stolen weapons, simple pitchforks, boar spears, and hatchets that the farmers launched at them.

A bone missile, shot from one of the monstrous cows with Shrubley's team, ricocheted off one of the mirrors and struck one of the last serpentii right in the eye. Much to the amazement of all there.