

Chapter 96 – Deciduously Devious

By the time they reached the gates of Talvar, the bandit seeking freedom was getting increasingly nervous. “Hey, what’s this then? You said you would let me go!”

“I am,” Shrubley said. “Once you are properly in the custody of the law, you will be let go.”

He said it so simply that even Miranda had to do a double take.

She ran the previous conversations through her mind. Had Shrubley *lied*? No. He had manipulated the truth a little, massaged it so that the man thought he was agreeing to terms that Shrubley never *actually agreed to*.

Huh, Miranda thought, *I didn’t think the kid had it in him. I’m impressed.*

“But that’s not letting me go!” The bandit stared in shock at Shrubley, slack-jawed.

Julius barked a bitter laugh, shaking his head at his lackey’s foolishness.

“Isn’t it?” Shrubley continued, sensing nothing amiss. This all made perfect sense to him. “Once you’ve served your time, you’ll change your ways, rather than resort to thievery. Just like you promised.”

The bandit struggled pointlessly in his bindings, stammering out excuses.

“You will, won’t you?” Miranda asked far too sweetly, unable to help herself. Her fangs gleamed in the dark. “Or else I might need to come after you. To make sure you’re truly a man of your word.”

The Countess leaned in close and inhaled deeply. “I’ve got your – admittedly rank – scent now, manling. If you dare step a toe out of line, I’ll know it. And then I’ll come for you. Oh, it might be a while. I’m a busy woman. But one day, you’ll be alone at night with no friends, no fire. Just the darkness... and *me*.”

That shut the bandit up entirely. He went ashen pale, nodding mutely.

“Good to hear it,” she said, motioning for the group to pick up the pace.

Slyrox scurried ahead, taking up the forward point. Even though they were hardly in any immediate danger approaching the town, the koblin still took the role seriously.

Unfortunately, the little monster’s stealth was lacking. Every few footfalls, she noisily crunched leaves and twigs underfoot that any novice to the wilds would know to avoid.

We all have to start somewhere, Miranda reminded herself.

In the night, Miranda’s strength began to return. She breathed in evenly, pulling ambient mana swirling through the trees towards their group. There were faint traces of Air, Nature, and Night mana interwoven through the neutral currents. Mere ethereal fragments that didn’t form into anything substantial.

The mana was simply too thin. They were still in the mountains. This tucked away valley would still be considered a border town, much like Taamra but larger, older.

Only Shrubley seemed to notice the disturbance. He looked up and around, unable to pick out what exactly caused it. A newly risen Copper's senses weren't likely to be that refined yet.

Then his attention fell on Miranda with a look of bright curiosity. Even in something that small, he managed to surprise her.

Miranda's vampyric extrasensory powers naturally sharpened, extending deeper into the surrounding woods and cliffs like crawling shadows.

Every creature in the world possesses a sense of self. It's what lets you know when somebody is staring at you across a room. That itching feeling you get between your shoulder blades is your sense of self telling you somebody is watching.

Even those with powerful auras and high ranks tend to have rather constrained senses of self. This sense of self was known as a Genesis Field, made up of two parts: an inner (Anima), and an outer (Animus).

Vampyrs naturally had an extremely powerful Animus, granting them a great deal of their powers. That also meant that a vampyr's Genesis Field often extended out to miles instead of feet.

That itching feeling was far more refined, letting Miranda know precisely where the most dangerous creatures were. As an apex predator herself, she was uniquely attuned to other predators. And now she felt the power of one far away, but still close enough to be felt.

So that's his game, huh? She was certain that the bandit's directions would lead them straight to it. *Let's see how our resident heroes deal with such a surprise.*

Some low level beasts squealed in the woods and took off in primal fear. As was characteristic of the emotion, fear could render a creature rather

senseless. A [Stone Boar] barreled through the trees, its tusks gouging deeply across a trunk. It appeared to be charging at their captives, though its eyes were rolling maddeningly.

The bandits, bound in lengths of tight rope, were utterly helpless.

Shrublely launched into action, but he needn't have worried. Smudge rolled and bounced in front of the charging boar and changed shape. His mouth stretched wide like a pink gelatinous cave and the boar, unable to turn aside in time, charged right in.

Smudge closed his mouth and the boar inside struggled for a moment before it vanished into a collection of shimmering purple-black motes that dissolved in the slime's translucent pink body.

“Pyuu!” Smudge said excitedly. “My Stone essence improved in tier.”

“Ah, good job, Smudge!” Shrublely told the slime. Stone and Hunger essence seemed like a fortuitous combination to the Sage Knight.

“That is... one way of dealing with a threat,” Cal said.

Whimpering, the bandits edged as far away from the cute boar-eating slime as was possible. They had thought he was a cute weak little thing, but after that display of casual savagery, they decided to take their chances with the skeleton or the overpowered shrub.

The gates were shut, as was typical of most towns outside of the Rings. Miranda approached and banged on the door next to a small hatch.

After a few moments, it slid open and a beady-eyed woman peered out. “What business do you have in Talvar?” she asked.

The Countess snorted. “I am Countess Miranda Haalften, and you just so happen to be speaking to the heroes who have rid your precious little

home of some rather nasty bandits. I take it you have been looking for just such a group out in the mountains? Yes, I thought so.”

Hidden in Miranda’s hood, Sose snickered quietly behind a paw at the guard’s reaction.

It did Miranda’s cold dead heart good to see the look of fear and recognition at her name, then to see the confusion when she suggested that the little figures behind her were heroes who apprehended some bandits.

Bandits were always a problem all across the Empire. It didn’t matter where you were. People fell through the cracks and decided to take matters into their own hands.

The Haalftens dealt with bandits in a very *final* manner that Shrubley would have surely protested against. There was no reason to make the innocent monster aware of this, not until they reached that crossroads.

Within moments, the hatch shut, though considerably slower than the guard would have liked, and the gates were swung open to admit their entry into the town.

Talvar was larger than Taamra, but it was also older, which meant much of its streets meandered with countless alleys as buildings grew up over time. Those nearest the walls were the most spacious, as they were newer than those near the central hill where the Baron’s residence and the Adventurers Guild resided.

As always, you could find the Adventurers Guild like a towering beacon in nearly any town with enough people to warrant their presence. Talvar’s was a 6-story beast of a building of gleaming white stone and exposed cedar timber.

The monster adventurers clustered around Shrubley and Miranda, looking all around in wonder at the new town. Cal excitedly pointed out an alchemy shop crossed with a bakery, then Slyrox nearly ran off towards a fried dough stand that promised to make your essences punch harder for a whole day.

If they're amazed by this, then they'll be floored by what's next, Miranda thought with fond amusement.

The gates swung shut behind them, and no sooner had the Captain of the Guard come out did the bandits begin professing that they had been waylaid by monsters. That this was a horrible ruse to get into the town.

Miranda let them speak. It amused her to see them try to turn things against Shrubley, and she was interested in how Shrubley would deal with things.

Technically, on Adventurer Guild matters, the Countess was subordinate to Shrubley. She would let him lead. However, when it came to political matters, she could interfere more easily. Nobles held significant sway.

Shrubley stepped up and puffed out his leafy chest. Somehow he managed to get his orange E-Grade adventurers guild badge to catch the light. In the lamplight that illuminated the gate yard, the copper edge could easily be mistaken for Iron or even Steel given the orange glow of the lamps that would make any neutral metal take on a coppery hue.

The Captain waved the bandits to silence and stared at the shrub. He had been the Captain of Talvar's Guards for over a decade and served two decades prior. He had never seen a monster wearing such a badge and knew that it was impossible.

Monsters could not wear the badge, they could be burned by simply picking it up. Yet, right in front of his broken and capillary ridden nose,

was a monster with not just an Adventurers Guild badge, but an *E-Grade* at that.

There was no mistaking that orange gleam. And did his old eyes deceive him? Where there really 2 stars beneath the Guild's hammer and anvil symbol?

“He is an adventurer? How could this be?” a wide-eyed guard whispered in incredulous tones. One of his fellows hushed him to silence.

Naturally, this began to draw a crowd. Townspeople of all walks of life grew curious about the unusual group of visitors bringing in fugitives.

The Captain began to ease his sword out of its scabbard. Miranda tensed, ready to intervene if she had to. This old man must not recognize her, but the young woman who had answered the gate definitely did. She was watching the whole thing unfold before her eyes.

Perhaps if the crowd had not drawn so many onlookers, the woman might have been able to reach the Captain to tell him who was with the monster adventurers.

Amusement wearing thin, the Countess would not allow the Captain to lay a hand on Shrubley's leafy head. She tensed, readying herself as the blade slid free, and the Captain raised it. The weapon caught the light in a violent orange glow.

“Until we can sort out fact from fantasy, we will be locking *all of you* up!” he proclaimed. “I will not begin to imagine what the bleeding Guild is up to, but I will not have it in my town! You.” He pointed the blade at Shrubley who, to his credit, did not flinch. “You will surrender yourself to our custody, barring a full investigation.”

There was a ruckus up the street, several people were shoved aside as a young man with a red envelope pushed through the gaggle of people and

presented his message to the Captain. Wheezing, the young man put both hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. “Direct. From. Guild,” he managed to get out.

The Captain rolled his eyes, but sheathed his sword and opened the letter all the same. His face turned a ruddy shade of puce once he got to the end. Several guards were forming up in a tight circle around the bandits and Shrubley’s party, readying to escort them to the town’s jail.

Snarling, the Captain balled up the letter and shoved it into his pocket. “The Guild vouches for these... *adventurers.*” He shook his head. “I need to have a lie down. Take the bandits into custody.” The older man put a hand to his head. “Never thought I’d see the day,” he slurred, staggering away.

“Are you alright, sir?” Shrubley asked with great concern. He stepped forward, raising a twiggy hand glowing with Life essence.

“M’fine,” the Captain mumbled. He took two shaky steps and then fell over.

He would have cracked his head on the cobblestones if not for Shrubley’s quick action. The shrub moved to intercept and placed his wooden hands on the man, catching him before he could do more harm to himself.

The Captain convulsed several times. Miranda shut her eyes in a silent curse.

All around Shrubley and the unconscious Captain, swords were being drawn.