

67: Unexpected Company

Although Beatrice was sure that her little “demonstration” for Olivia did not take more than an hour, the night had fully set in by now. And the stars that were dim and barely noticeable when they approached the wall of the city last time, were now bright and many. Even through the dense trees Beatrice caught glimpses of just how many stars there were in the sky. Beatrice actually looked forward to exiting the forest just to marvel at the sky that hasn’t been polluted by her previous, modern world.

The trio swiftly navigated the forest thanks to the light provided by Ember. And as they approached Samuel’s house, and Beatrice saw a light coming from the familiar window, she suddenly stopped when she saw more lights approaching the two buildings. *Torches*. She concluded, judging by the uneven movement and flickering lights. Nearly identical as those many lights that moved far above them, atop the eighty feet wall that surrounded this city.

Olivia also noticed the lights and reached for her kunai.

“Were we expecting company that I wasn’t aware of?” the ninja girl asked.

The only one who did not seem to give a damn about the lights was Ember.

“I think I know who came to Samuel for a visit,” she said.

And just like last time, she lit up and quenched the fire in her hand. Again, and again—four times—she gave her signal and proceeded to move ahead, to the abrupt edge of the Shadow Woods.

As the trio moved closer, it became obvious Beatrice’s keen sight did not fail her—those were indeed torches she saw. Four men with torches to be exact, next to the stone and mortar fifteen-foot-high building that was connected to Samuel’s house.

Only two buildings stood here, beneath the wall. And with enough open space in three directions from the buildings to see any intruders long in advance, it was clear that whatever was going on here, it was under the watchful eye of those atop the walls. Beatrice also guessed that there had to be some hidden door or passage that led from the walls, to swiftly deal with unwelcome company, though she could not see one now.

“Who goes there?” A deep, animalistic growl formed human words, coming from the direction of the group of dark figures.

“It’s just me,” Ember replied as she exited the woods and confidently approached the unknown group. Beatrice remained just a step behind her bodyguard. Olivia—another step behind Beatrice and always opposite of Ember, as Beatrice was determined to keep the two at a distance for the time being.

It turned out, that instead of four people, there were in fact seven. One figure did not hold a torch, and instead seemed to be commanding the operation. Two more dark silhouettes exited the stone building, which Beatrice had assumed before was some kind of a cold storage. The two men left with empty hands from the building, went up to a large, but simple wooden wagon, and lifted off some kind of large bag.

Beatrice recognized one of the silhouettes—the well-fed Samuel. Whatever he and his partner were unloading and carrying into the stone building was heavy enough that it required two people. And while Samuel gave many impressions, weak was not among them.

Something shady was going on under the cover of the night, in this remote, secluded area. That much was painfully obvious to Beatrice. She made sure not to let the four figures out of her sight. And as the trio approached, it grew apparent that all five were men, beastkin to be exact (in Beatrice's old world they'd be simply referred to as 'furries'), and all were armed to the teeth. In fact, for most of them, their teeth were also their weapons.

The largest, most imposing figure among them was a bipedal beast with the head of a lion. Like a lion, he had a prominent, even royal, golden mane. And unlike Samuel, his large figure resembled a turned over triangle—a dream shape of any bodybuilder.

A steel breastplate on his chest and a giant claymore on his back. And among everyone present, this lionkin looked like the only one who could even lift such a weapon. A commanding presence.

Two other beastkin resembled hienas. And they acted like it too—jittery, with dumb smiles on their faces, garbed in poorly sown together leather armor. Beatrice wondered if it was even safe to trust with the torches, and half-expected that at any moment one of them would set the other on fire. However, they also had at least ten blades between them and seemed like the first that would cause trouble at the slightest provocation.

Two more men were wolfkin. The entire time they had stood like statues near the wagon. But when they saw the approaching girls, they walked forward and took position just behind the lionkin. Their swords looked like toothpicks compared to the giant claymore. And the wolfkin themselves looked like boys in presence of a man, but that was a misleading play on the eyes due to the lionkin's figure. Beatrice even wondered if that was on purpose—the wolfkin get underestimated to their advantage, while the lionkin looks like an unassailable mountain by comparison.

“Well, I'll be damned!” the lionkin growled and took a step toward Ember. “You manipulative, double-crossing, pyromaniac! You've got a lot of nerves showing your face here after what you've pulled!”