

## 49: In The Shadow Of The Wall

With the sun gone, the surroundings darkened by the minute. Though her eyes adjusted, soon Beatrice could barely see ten feet ahead of her in the dense forest. Ember did not light a way for them, to avoid new unwelcome encounters. Their every step seemed eerily loud in the dead-silent forest. Beatrice started to forget they were supposed to be inside a busy city.

“We’re close,” Ember said and pointed ahead at the tiny glimmering yellow dots that appeared and disappeared in the tiny gaps in the trees. Though they looked dimmer than the stars, Beatrice understood that those lights came from the patrolling guards, high on the pitch-black city walls.

As the group approached the walls, Beatrice saw another dim light up ahead, shining through a square opening. They approached a large house. *No, more like a barn or some storage*, Beatrice thought, looking at the dark silhouette.

Suddenly, Ember lit up a small fire in her hand. Just as quickly she quenched it. She then lit it up again. And quenched it. In rapid succession, she did this four times.

Morse code? Beatrice thought at first, but the signals made little sense in morse code. Which meant they were in fact just that—a signal.

“What are you doing?” Olivia spoke in a hushed voice and ran up next to Ember. “Somebody’s going to see that!”

“That’s the idea,” Ember answered and calmly walked forward. “Unless you’re itching for another fight?”

Olivia held one of her kunai tightly, anticipating an ambush. But no ambush came even as the group approached what turned out to be two buildings, built in the shadow of the eighty feet high solid stone walls of the city.

The first building that drew them with its solitary light, turned out to be an impressive (for medieval times) two-story stone and wood building with a gable, tiled roof. The light came from a single window in the wall facing the forest, next to a wooden door.

Next to the house, connected by a short but sturdy stone and mortar tunnel, stood a far more impressive building, built with the same stone and mortar as the tunnel. Over fifteen feet high, twice as wide, thrice as long. It seemed like the house was built as an addition to this windowless building rather than the other way around.

As Beatrice walked closer to the stone behemoth, she felt a cool breeze coming from the building. She touched one of the smooth round stones in the wall and her skin nearly stuck to it.

“Freezing cold,” Beatrice uttered, recoiling her hand before her skin froze to the stone.

“It has to be,” Ember said with a smile and went to the two-story house. The others followed.

“Who lives here?” Beatrice asked.

"A butcher," Ember answered with a smile and knocked on the wooden door. Nobody answered. Ember knocked again and shouted, "I know you're in there, Samuel! Why are you hiding from me?"

Silence. Then Beatrice heard footsteps. She heard metal scraping against metal, then the door finally opened.

Inside stood a rather short, aging man. His ginger hair was fighting a losing war against the grey strands on both the man's beard and receding hairline. He was barely taller than Olivia and twice as wide.

*At least, he's not starving,* Beatrice thought.

The man's greyish, dirty shirt was probably once white. Over it, he wore a brown leather apron that had visible stains of blood.

"How you've been?" Ember asked cheerfully, spreading her arms for a hug. Samuel did not reciprocate. He did not even so much as force a smile. Instead, he kept staring right into Ember's eyes. It was obvious to Beatrice that the man was not happy to see the redhead.

"You..." The old man uttered, growing paler by the second. He acted as if the undertaker had arrived. "What do you want?"

"Is that any way to greet those closest to you?" Ember asked and—not waiting for an invitation—welcomed herself inside Samuel's home. She walked past the man who did not dare stop her and looked around.

From what Beatrice could see inside past Samuel's wide figure, was a rather simple abode. A candle burned on a wooden table. And the succubus's gaze immediately fixed on a pile of red apples, that laid on the table next to the light.

"Not bad, not bad," Ember said, shaking her head in approval of Samuel's home. "How are your knees by the way?"

"... Fine..." Samuel mumbled.

"Fantastic!" Ember turned around and clapped her hands. "Then you won't have an issue with holding up to your part of the deal, right?"

"I already asked you—what do you want?" Samuel repeated.

"So cold! Do you get that from your daughter?" Ember joked, pretending to be hurt. "But don't worry, I don't want anything much. Just a warm supper for me and my friends, and a place to stay for the night."

Samuel looked behind him, at Beatrice, Olivia, and Tabitha that still stood outside.

"I don't have that many—"

"Sure you do!" Ember interrupted the butcher. "This place is big enough to house a dozen people! You'll figure it out, right?"

"One night?" Samuel asked Ember.

"One... Maybe two. Can't you at least invite my friends inside first?"

“... Make yourselves feel at home,” the butcher said solemnly to Beatrice and the others and gestured them inside.

“Thank you,” Beatrice said before stepping over the threshold. Olivia bowed her head slightly to the man of the house and followed the succubus inside. Even as Beatrice walked inside, she couldn’t help but feel like the man was being blackmailed *at best*.

“What deal are you talking about?” Beatrice whispered to Ember while Tabitha entered and Samuel closed the door behind the mage.

“Oh, nothing much—just saved his kneecaps from some loan sharks, as well as his daughter’s virtue... Isn’t that right, Samuel?”