

“They are coming closer,” Mia said, tugging at her Bond and making her Familiar race back over to her. She pointed at a house. “That ugly concrete thing. They are skulking about somewhere either on the ground- or the first floor.”

“Want me to air them out?” Lina asked, serpentine tendrils of Air mana already curling around her body, growing out of her fingers.

“I want to see what they’re about to do,” Brent said, then narrowed his eyes. “But without putting ourselves at risk. Let’s put something bulletproof between us and the windows.”

The old concrete building only had five floors and sat as a lonely reminder of decades past amidst newer suburban homes taking up the rest of the surroundings.

It wasn’t the only building of its kind, Mia and co had walked past at least five more by then just on that road, but this part of the city was slowly growing into another suburban section.

The ‘something bulletproof’ ended up being the thick brick walls of one such newer building into which they easily entered through a door frame lacking an actual door. Rust Wolves didn’t take well to flimsy wooden and plastic boards standing between them and prey it seemed.

“What’s happening?” Nikki asked hesitantly, looking around with some worry etched onto her face as she held her spear of ice tightly.

“Oh.” *I kinda forgot about her.* Mia, feeling guilty, quickly caught the woman up to speed. Then continued to translate the conversation going on in a whisper for her benefit.

“Why didn’t we just pretend not to notice the guy sneaking around?” Lina asked, only her carefully controlled tone making the question not sound like a petulant whine.

“Because,” Brent started, turning to level a reproachful glare at the blonde. “While powerful, Mia’s Wards are not bulletproof and none of us know just what weapons the

skulking cunt is equipped with. I, for one, don't want to try how well my skull stands up against a sniper bullet, or a grenade for that matter."

Mia shuddered at the reminder, biting her lips as her fingers tightened around her wand. This time, they didn't get the jump on her and if she could help it, no one ever would again.

Helene gently rubbed her daughter's back, putting some of her nerves to rest and Mia leaned into the motion like a needy cat asking for more attention.

Meanwhile, she listened carefully, trying to use her non-magical senses to pinpoint the location of their little stalker, but had no success. She had even tried to search for larger spaces from where no sound emanated, but the concrete building was by now far enough away that the sounds of things as minor as creaking floorboards and rumbling gusts of wind all mixed and melded.

However, that she heard not even a hint of a heartbeat, ruffling of clothes or something of the sort, meant the magic she was feeling was even better than the one used by the peeper Camie had noticed back during the negotiations.

Worse, this one wasn't stationary.

"Let's see what they do with us not being where they'd expect," Brent said with a calculating tone, his narrowed eyes peeking out a window and surveying the concrete building like a hawk looking for prey. "If he stays still, you can try 'airing him out'."

"Okay," Lina said with a huff that concealed an expectant purr trying to creep into her voice. Instead, she went back to playing with her tendrils of air mana and went about twisting them around each other into a braid like Mia had shown her to do as a mana shaping exercise.

There would be no need for that though, as Mia felt the vague presence of the stealth magic creep closer to the street and through the window she saw the front door of the building open with a barely audible creak.

That told her a lot already. One, the guy was an amateur, and an idiot to boot. Mia would have heard that sound clearly and would have been alerted to the presence of the skulking wannabe rogue even if she didn't have Spirit Sense. Two, that the stealth

must have been the result of a skill and that the person didn't even have good control of it.

She squinted, watching the nearly translucent shadowy figure with two very prominent canine ears atop his head.

Mia watched him look around in an increasingly frantic way as his targets were nowhere to be seen and couldn't help but smile in some primal satisfaction at her sensing abilities defeating his stealth ones so thoroughly.

"The door opened," Brent murmured, his usually easygoing eyes narrowed in a way that couldn't be called anything other than predatory. "Mia?"

"He's there," Mia whispered, a hint of confusion in her tone. "Standing right on the sidewalk and looking around like an idiot. He's shadowy and almost transparent, but ... can you not see him?"

"I can't," Brent answered with a confused tone as he squinted then shook his head.

"Can't see shit either," Mark patted the man on the back. "The elf got magic eyes too, don't feel too bad."

"Still not an elf," Mia grumbled, never taking her eyes off of the canine beastman who now started skulking over towards the intersection. "He's heading after Camie ... or his friends, rather. Camie hid away, doubt he noticed her."

"Well then," Brent said, shrugging. "Can you hit the cunt with one of your non-lethal spells from here?"

"Maybe?" Mia said. "I can try. If I miss, the cat can catch him and down him with ... mild injuries."

"Define mild," Brent said, glancing at the languid cat draped across Mia's shoulder.

"I don't know," Mia said, giving a nervous smile as she remembered what the cat understood under 'non-lethal disabling' the last time she'd asked it. The annoying sergeant who'd tried to shoot her had nearly gotten his face flayed off. "Not dead. That's

all I can promise ... these elementals inhabiting my familiars aren't exactly rocket scientists. It'll already be a miracle if it knows when to stop so as not to kill a human."

"I think it'd be better to let Lina do it then," Brent said. "If your initial attack fails."

"Alright," Mia said. "He's going to be closest in a few seconds. It's now or never."

"Do it," Brent nodded and an air of tension settled across the half-ruined room they'd hid in.

Coming from the left, from where he had exited the concrete building and walking on the sidewalk opposite to Mia's spot, the beastkin skulked forwards with little regard to moving with any actual stealth.

If he wasn't covered in his strange invisibility that only those with some measure of mana sight could see through, he would have been an absolute amateur at stealth. Even by just listening to her instincts, Mia knew how to walk with the least amount of noise made, this man was like a teenager sneaking out of his mother's house through the back window to catch some secret rendezvous his parents didn't approve of.

In one brief moment, Mia's Will smacked into the blunted Bolt spell's circle and a replica of it blossomed into existence before her fingertips as it devoured the mana she had prepared for it like a gluttonous beast.

Then in a flash, it sped off with a sound of shattering glass as it broke through the window. Mia grimaced, watching as the projectile slumbered forward so slowly Camie would have dodged half a dozen times had she been in the beastkin's place.

Alas, she was not and while the beastkin clearly heard the sound, his head snapping towards where Mia stood and the spell that was approaching him, he didn't dodge. He froze mid motion, his whole body going stiff for a long second.

That was enough for Mia's spell to uncurl into a person sized sphere and smash into the man now standing only about twenty metres away and smack him into the fence by the side of the sidewalk.

"Out," Brent said. "Restrain him."

Mia dashed off, but she saw Lina was faster. Not her body, but her magic which raced past Mia in the form of thin, serpentine tendrils of mana.

Mia's runic-model was already turning, her two circles disassembling as the spell circle for Arcane Shackles was slowly being put together.

The three seconds the rather complicated circle took to form, which was also enough for Mia to reach halfway to the fallen man, was brought to her by Lina's magic, the thick serpents of Air magic holding the man down.

Then she cast her spell at the groaning man whose stealth skill deactivated somewhere along the line and was moaning out curses at everyone and their mother. Her chains of arcane power were thicker, firmer this time around but also slower as they wound around the man and tied him up.

Holding the last chain that now wrapped around her arm, Mia glanced up and looked towards the intersection, checking whether the beastkin's friends heard the fight. If it could be called that.

The answer was a yes, as shown by the head poking over the corner a moment later. They were far apart, but Mia felt like the stranger with her mangy brown hair and canine ears saw her before her head disappeared behind the corner again.

Mia listened, straining her ears, but heard nothing. Shrugging, she looked over at the rest of her group now gathering up around the tied up man who was revealed to be some kind of canine beastkin with shortly trimmed black hair.

Honestly, he looked like how Dobermanns would have looked if they were turned into humans. The ears were a perfect match, as were the clear black eyes jumping between the members of Mia's group with clear fear dancing in them.

"Wh- what?" The man stuttered. "Why?"

"Stalking is not cool, numbskull," Mark said, lightly kicking the poor man in the leg. "Are we really that famous that we deserve having sneaky cunts like you following us around? Hey, how long have you been following us? Did you watch me while I was taking a shit too? Huh?"

Mia rolled her eyes at Mark bullying the poor guy who seemed to be having the worst day of his life.

“Mark,” Helene said admonishingly.

The dwarf huffed, and with a glare, stepped back. Instead, Brent took his place who kneeled down next to the man while Clive and Lina came to stand before Mia and eye the corner along with her.

“Why have you been following us?” Brent asked calmly.

“I- uh,” the guy stuttered, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. “I was I- uh, they told me to.”

“Who?” Brent asked, his serious, but stoic tone of voice doing wonders to calm the man and drag him back from the edges of hyperventilation.

“Squad-mates,” the beastkin said, then glanced towards the intersection. He looked like he wanted to continue, but held his tongue.

“The ones hiding behind that corner?” Brent asked, motioning rightwards with his head.

The beastkin stiffened, looking like he might panic, but deflated a moment later and mumbled in a defeated tone, “yes.”

“What were you supposed to do?” Brent continued. But Mia was only half listening, her body tightening as she watched a group of beastkin round the corner in formation.

She kept silent for a moment, glancing at Clive and Lina who did as well.

“Keep an eye out ... “ the man said, clearly hesitant to continue. “I wasn’t here to kill anyone, I promise. The King would have had my hide strung up by tomorrow if I did.”

“Really?” Brent asked doubtfully.

“Yes, yes,” the beaskin said, which was about when Mia decided to notify the rest of her group.

“They are coming towards us,” Mia said loudly, making Brent twitch and rise to his feet.

The beastkin numbered around a dozen, all sporting some canine ears atop their heads. Except for the one lizard Camie had caught scent of, who stood head and shoulder above the rest of the group and looked more like a bipedal Komodo dragon than a human.

He wasn't alone in his anthropomorphic state though, as there were two beastkin who were either transformed werewolves or just wolf-people whose base state was a two metre tall humanoid wolf.

They walked in a haphazard formation, the three biggest, meanest looking of them coming first with snarls on their faces and followed by the rest who nonetheless looked to be getting ready to rumble.

“That doesn't look good,” Brent said dryly, no doubt determining that the numbers weren't on their side. “Any chance you can get a feel for how powerful they are?”

“No,” Mia said. “Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Brent said, not unkindly as he nodded. “Get ready for a fight. If this man isn't lying, they won't go for the kill so neither should we. Lina, I want a dome of Air around us in case they have guns. Mia, do you have anything like that wall, but without the falling into a coma afterwards part of it?”

“Nope,” Mia said, a hint of sourness creeping into her tone. Phalanx was good, but her spirit and willpower would be like worn dishrags after a single cast of the strenuous spell.

Getting a nasty idea, Mia glanced at the tied up beastkin. He made a pitiful sight, pale and with glistening eyes, but Mia hardened her heart.

“Cat, sit on his chest,” Mia ordered, and watched as the magical Familiar bounced over without hesitation, curling up on the now stiff man's chest. At her team's questioning looks, she shrugged tensely and explained herself. “The cat will slit his throat if I die. That should make them think twice about pulling out a surprise gun at us and shooting me in the head to free him.”

She spoke loudly, and out of the corner of her eyes saw several triangular ears twitch atop fuzzy heads as half a dozen glares bore into her from far away.

“Harsh,” Lina said with an undecipherable smile. Meanwhile, Helene looked at her daughter in worry.

Mia shrugged. “Nothing will happen to him if they don’t kill me. They shouldn’t worry unless they intend to blow my brains out.”

In reality, Mia had absolutely no intention of killing the pitiful man, but she was almost certain the beastkin with their bestial ears had a hearing as good as, if not better than, hers. They would hear everything she said from now on, since they were only about a hundred metres away by this point.

Mark and Clive were already up front with Brent standing between them and looking over their shoulders while Lina wove a dome of protective Air magic around them. Said dome was reinforced a moment later as Helene called up an Air sprite for help.

That Storm Calling Subskill of hers was really handy, granting her the ability to call on any spirit associated with the elements that made up Storm. Meaning, Air, Water, Lightning and Fire.

Sadly, only Air spirits seemed to be both readily available and willing to help her without some magical agreement or a permanent Bond.

“Good day!” The lizardman, or perhaps Shifter, — though Mia’s gut was leaning towards the former for some reason — offered as a greeting. He spoke loudly, barely under what’d be considered a shout and stopped about thirty metres away from the three men on Mia’s team. “I see you have beaten and tied up our friend there. We would like him back. Now.”

Honestly, Mia had expected him to talk in that silly hissing serpentine accent where every S was pressed and emphasised some books so liked to use for snake-like non-human characters.

Was that racist? Speciesist? Probably. Anyway, what mattered was that the lizardman spoke a clear German, though his voice really fit his towering size with its deep, rumbling timbre.

“Would you now?” Brent asked, his demeanour turning as cold as a glacier at their apparent rudeness. “Well, we would in turn like an explanation as to why the man has been sent to follow us in stealth. Or for why you have been waiting in ambush at that intersection.”

“Alas,” the lizardman said mockingly. “I don’t think you are in a position to ask questions. Give us our man back. Now.”

Mia let her Spirit Sense run wild, focusing on the group before her and trying to get a feel for their power despite knowing how futile it was.

At least it let her know none of them were readying spells. They were close enough that she would have felt the active mana outside their pools too, not just already active spells.

“Your man will be released safe and as hale as he is now,” Brent said, pausing for a moment. “After you’ve answered my questions. You might think you have us at a disadvantage, but a numerical advantage means much less in a fight than it used to a few months ago. Don’t think your victory is a foregone conclusion.”

The wolves growled in response, even the lizardman seemed to puff himself up as he let out an angry huff. Still, no skills or magic though.

Mia squinted, ignoring the three men in front whose expressions she could only guess at with their animalistic heads and watched the more human-like beastkin behind them. She saw wariness in their eyes, and an obvious reluctance to actually fight. They were more bark than bite ... but so was Mia’s group.

It made her feel silly, suddenly feeling like their two groups were like a pair of small dogs barking at each other across the fence. Harmless, and terrified of an actual confrontation.

It wasn’t true, Mia *knew* they had more than enough bite to go with their bark, if they wanted to use it, but the thought still stung.

The lizardman stepped forward, clawed fists clenched and scaled skin left uncovered on his torso rippled as his muscles swelled underneath.

Mia's hand was on her wand already, while she was a moment away from dismissing the Arcane Shackles to have something more combat appropriate spell ready for casting, but Helene grabbed her wrist gently.

For that matter, Brent didn't as much as twitch, only his hand landed on the pommel of his sheathed sword as he observed the lizardman.

"I think I'd like to see whether there is any bite to your bark first," the lizardman spat, whipping his head around at the others behind him. "Stay back."

"A spar?" Brent asked with a dubiously raised eyebrow.

"A duel," the lead beastkin said, his snout pulled into a snarl, revealing rows of shark-like teeth. "Till first blood. No killing. Me and you. If you don't turn out to be a pathetic weakling, I'll consider answering your questions after taking my man back."

"Still certain of victory, are we?" A smirk played across Brent's rugged features as he nodded. "Deal. I'm in."

"You sure you don't want to let Red butcher him?" Mark asked conversationally, leaning over to Brent as if to whisper but not really lowering his voice. "She's the best fit for a duel, no?"

"The cunt's been eying me since the start," Brent said. "No. I'll beat his scaly ass into pulp. I won't hide behind our resident vampire."

There was a wave of confusion washing over the opposing group as they scrutinised the people around Mia, probably having heard the word vampire. Alas, none of them fit the bill.

Mia almost expected her girlfriend to hop out from the shadow of some alley in an overly movie-like moment, but the vampire stayed hidden and silent as a ghost. Mia would have been worried, but she knew the woman wouldn't have been taken down silently.

Most likely, Carmilla was just using her vampiric abilities to instil a deathly stillness into her body to hide herself from the senses of the beastkin.

“Only attack if the scaly cunt goes in for the kill or if some of the others on his side join in, alright?” Brent asked, glancing back at the people behind him and when he received a round of nervous nods, he gave a boyish grin and stepped forward. “Let’s get this done. First blood wins, was it? What’s the starting mark?”

His sword easily slid out of its scabbard, which Brent detached from his hips in a practised motion and threw to the side before swinging his sword languidly down the side.

“One of your little minders can grab a pebble and throw it up,” the lizardman said in apparent boredom, looking like he was attempting to look magnanimous. “You can’t complain that way. We start when it hits the ground.”

“Helene, if you would,” Brent asked. “Please?”

“Sure,” Mia’s mother gave a tired sigh, shaking her head in the same way she did when Mia and Gabe were caught doing something stupid. She grabbed a thumb sized pebble off the ground, a piece of asphalt from the cracked road under her feet and walked forward. “Ready?”

“I am,” Brent said, and a change came over his body, knees bent, shoulders set and his entire posture slanted like a great predatory cat readying to pounce.

Mia’s Spirit Sense felt *something* vibrate around him, in him. It was not mana, of that she was sure, so it must have been that elusive Ki he had been talking off. It was like a glimpse caught at the edge of her sight, there one moment, then gone when she tried to focus on it.

“Yes,” the lizardman said, his muscles bulging as he gave off a low rumbling growl.

Without further ado, Helene threw the piece of asphalt in her hand straight up before taking a few quick steps back and readying a Lightning Bolt between her fingers as she eyed the beastkin opposite to her.

Mia watched the rock fly, reach the apex and then quickly plummet. The suspense had her stiff, her eyes glued onto the unassuming piece of rock until it landed with a weak thud.

