

115 – In the Thief’s Footsteps

Since it was very late and the darkness was making things unnecessarily difficult, even with the torches we carried, we returned to the Dusk Hill camp. We sat around a fire, warming up our frigid bodies, while a guard was locating us two available tents.

In the night sky above were countless bright dots as well as the moon, which made Meigetsu visible, though most of the soldiers were asleep, except for the lookouts, meaning there were few people who’d notice as it danced around.

The four guards who had accompanied us had all gone to their own personal tents already.

“We could have continued looking,” said Saoirse. She seemed slightly confused as to why we hadn’t, so I realised I had to spell it out to her.

“Are you not tired?”

“No.”

“Well, I am, and I can tell that Emily is as well.”

“I’m not that tired,” she said, but I could tell by her aura that she was lying.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” I told her.

“Is it always like this with you?” the Dullahan asked.

“Taking a break you mean? It is necessary for the brain to function properly.”

“Fascinating. I never really understood the point of sleeping.”

“**I suppose it is true that the Reaper never sleeps,**” Armen joked darkly.

“Even though you can see the depths of my soul and memories, you still struggle to understand some facets of mortal life it seems,” I said quietly.

“I do not concern myself with things I do not need. For me, it is unknown to understand that mortals require rest.”

A moment later the guard returned and led us to the tents. Emily and Saoirse shared one, while Armen and I shared the other. I hoped the Spellhand would not be too uncomfortable sleeping next to the sleepless Reaper.

After I awoke the following morning and roused Emily from her tent, we had a breakfast consisting of tough-but-crunchy sliced bread and a gruel spiced with some kind of herb that smelled faintly of cinnamon.

“**When we visit Evergreen, I will look forward to something more delectable,**” Armen commented, clearly not a fan of the food the Cook served.

“He’s doing the best with what he has,” I defended the guy, who had after all been nice to us from the start.

“I once Reaped a Lord and three of his vassals during a banquet,” Saoirse randomly said. “The braised red wine lamb that was served was delicious. Do you think they make such food in Evergreen?”

“I’d like cheese bread and honey,” Emily added, as though we were making a list of everyone’s wishes.

“I’m sure Renji will know all the best places,” I told them all.

“What would you like to eat, if you could pick whatever?” Emily wondered.

I thought about it for a bit. “Maybe an unagi-don.”

“What’s that?”

“Grilled eel over rice.”

Armen nodded. “**I too am a fan of eel.**”

The four guards from yesterday found us by our table near the kitchen, accompanied by the officer named Clarke. The man came to the fore of the soldiers.

“My men tell me you have found a clue.”

I finished chewing on a tough slice of bread and looked up at him. “I believe I’ll be able to locate the Demon’s den.”

His face scrunched up a bit at the mention of the entity. “You are certain it is a Demon?”

I nodded. “It has the ability to manifest a transformation of its environment, but it is possibly a lesser kind and not a True Demon.”

“I see...”

“**Rest assured, Exorcist Ryūta will exorcise this apparition.**”

I saw how Armen’s endorsement made a ripple of relief flow through the officer’s and four soldiers’ auras. The Natives of Mondus were quick to trust the word of a Crusader, even though he was my familiar, but of course they did not know that.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, I told him, *but I’ve never actually exorcised a Demon.*

“Well, I would like to stay and chat, but I have a meeting soon, so I will take my leave.”

“We should leave as well,” I said and got up from the chair. “If all goes to plan, the Demon will be exorcised before the sun sets.”

“I did not realise you were prone to such boasting and bluffing,” Saoirse commented as we were back in the Mossbloom Woods again.

Although the sun was out and it was a relatively clear sky, the forest beneath the densely-packed canopies was gloomy at best. I realised that the forest was the reason for the soldiers’ camp being named Dusk Hill, because it was as though a perpetual dusk had overtaken the place. Fortunately, we did not need torches to manoeuvre across the soft and treacherous understory this time of day.

“With some people, it is more effective to bluff than to be honest.

We were moving in a direct line towards the pyrite puddle we’d found the night before and Armen had told me he would count how many steps from the camp it lay.

“You have a good sense of direction,” Emily said.

I smiled. “I left behind a crow and have another trailing us above, so I know which direction to take.”

“Still, that’s quite clever. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

I didn’t know how to take the compliment, so I just nodded.

We found the spot after half-an-hour or so, which was much faster than the night before, thanks to us taking the shortest route.

Armen came over to me as I was standing next to the puddle. “**It is only four kilometres from the camp,**” he said.

“That’s shorter than I thought,” I replied, “But this will make locating the next waypoint, or its den, much easier.”

“**What now?**”

“First I’d like to try something to see if I can shut off this waypoint. After all, if we find the Thief, we don’t want to let it get away.”

I knelt down in front of the pyrite puddle, which had a hazy reflection of the world around it, as well as Armen and I. Pulling a waterskin from a belt bag, I squeezed it in both of my hands, and then uttered the word of my ability.

“Sanctify.”

Outwardly nothing happened, but the simple utterance had turned the well-water into something akin to holy water.

“**I could have done that better,**” Armen commented.

“Allow him to show off a bit,” Saoirse said, coming up next to us with Emily in tow, while the four guards accompanying us were watching from a few metres away.

“What’s *that* going to do?” the Spellhand asked.

“Hopefully it will destroy whatever magic is sustaining this unnatural puddle.”

“Hopefully?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said. After all, in the Encyclopaedias, there were very few commonalities between Demons, apart from the fact that they were weak to holy magic and such pure things as blessed weapons. Sanctify was a way of blessing, by making an object ‘pure’. Granted, if used on humans, it would be detrimental to their health.

I gritted my teeth, then poured the contents of the waterskin down onto the pyrite puddle. A sound like flash boiling water immediately emerged from the liquid metal, while the droplets I’d poured out were skipping and dancing across the surface, as though it was so hot that it triggered the Leidenfrost effect.

As we all watched, part of the liquid lost its shine and lustre, becoming grey, before solidifying.

Armen took a step forward and pointed his palms at the puddle, then said, “**Bless.**”

A golden light emerged from his fingers and fell like mist upon the ground and liquid pyrite, producing the same sizzling sound as the water, while the metal became dull and solidified.

I got back to my feet, taking the staff from my back and poking the solid puddle with the tip. The sound that returned told me exactly what it had become.

“It turned into stone.”

“Wow,” Emily exclaimed quietly.

Karasumany, I need to borrow another of your clones.

We were moving deeper into the Mossbloom Woods, following the direction that the camp and first puddle dictated we should go. Of course, it was quite possible that it wasn’t a straight line to the next waypoint or its den, but it was at least a good start.

Saoirse had taken the Scenting Whistle and unleashed the creature within once again, and I was glad to see that it was leading us in the same direction that we were already heading. If not for my crows in the sky marking the way back, as well as the innate sense of direction that Saoirse seemed to possess, it was almost a foregone conclusion that we’d become lost in the gloomy woods. There was almost some sense of primordial potency about the forest itself, as though it was a living breathing entity that worked its magic to trap us within.

“I see another puddle,” the Dullahan commented. It was clear that her eyesight was superior to mine, because I had a hard time spotting what she’d seen.

A couple of minutes later, I could properly see the next waypoint that the Demon Thief had left, and some minutes after that we were in front of it. Like with the first puddle, Armen used his Bless ability to petrify it and render it inert, much to the continued amazement of Emily and the guards who tagged along.

I left behind another crow in the sky above this point, and when I viewed the other two behind us that marked the first puddle and the camp, it was a straight line between them.

“It’s kind of terrifying how accurate it is at placing these,” I remarked.

Saoirse unleashed the Whistle again and the vague shape that appeared continued ahead of us, once again in a straight line. If it wasn’t for the fact that we were dealing with an animalistic creature, I would’ve suspected a trap. It made sense that it would be hiding in the Mossbloom Woods, since it was a massive forest that was hard to navigate without magic and familiars. I had no idea how long the Thief had been terrorising the Dusk Hill Camp, but its hiding spot was clearly good enough to elude the soldiers who had scoured the area.

“**There are less animals than I would’ve imagined,**” Armen suddenly commented as we were walking towards where the next waypoint ought to be.

“Maybe the Demon scared them away?” Emily guessed.

I nodded. “That seems likely.”

Although the Cook hadn’t overtly mentioned it, it seemed that they were short on meat for this exact reason, as hunting in the forest likely produced scarce results.

“Getting rid of the Thief will no doubt stabilise the ecosystem here,” I said. “After all, Demons pervert the reality of any place they inhabit. They are like contaminations in a way.”

“**Except sentient,**” Armen replied.

After about twenty more minutes of walking we came to a hollow in the ground. The dense trees had been cleared away by whatever claws had dug the small valley, however the canopies still sheltered it from above, with the greedy trees extending their branches and leaves to cover the gap. In a way, the canopy was like the outward skin of the forest and the individual leaves were platelets keeping blood from flowing out.

“We found its den,” I remarked, looking down the hollow and seeing the orange-and-brown scent trail all over the area, thanks to Saoirse still holding the Whistle.

I turned to look at the soldiers and Emily, “You need to stay out here. Armen, Saoirse, and I will go in. Emily, I want you to begin creating a potent wind to circle around this hollow, can you do that?”

She nodded. Though it was clear that she didn’t want to be left outside, there was no way I could let her go into the den. It was too dangerous and she was still far too inexperienced. Since I had no idea what exactly we were dealing with, I thought it prudent to err on the side of caution.

“What are we meant to do out here?” asked one of the guards, obviously unhappy with having come all this way and not being allowed to fight.

“The Demon may try to escape out of the entrance to the den, in which case I need you to slow it down. If it gets past you, Emily will blast it with her magic.”

“Screw that, we’re not playing guard duty!” exclaimed another.

I frowned. “Do you really wish to die? Then fine, you may enter the den first. Saoirse, you stay here with Emily.”

The Dullahan smiled viciously as she took in the apprehensive looks on the guards’ faces.

“**What are you waiting for?**” asked Armen to the guard. “**You wanted to go in, so go. If it eats your limbs, I will heal you back to full, have no worry.**”

I had to suppress a smile as I said, “Let’s go.”