

114 – The Elusive Trail

“Is this really a good idea?” Emily asked. She was wearing her tunic and woollen pants, with a travel cloak of black surprisingly-soft fur wrapped around her to stave off the cold wind that brushed through the dark forest. Saoirse had made the cloak out of her peculiar magic, but it seemed to help the Spellhand stay warm. I wore a thick scarf of the same fabric around my neck where my robe coat didn’t cover, but my ears and forehead, as well as the tip of my nose, were frozen cold.

“You could’ve stayed behind in the camp,” I told her.

“Not with the way the Quartermaster was looking at us!”

I chuckled.

After the failed attempt to capture the thief in the hut, the two officers from earlier had shown up, heard of what we had seen, and then sent us off into the forest to find the monster and its stolen goods. Four guards were also accompanying us, but they hung back with Armen, while Emily, Saoirse, and I were up front.

“The Crusader was quick to ingratiate himself to the soldiers,” the Dullahan noted. There was a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

“Healers are popular,” I replied, while scanning the darkness and the few visible scent trails of living creatures. The Bone Whistle was in my hand and we’d been wandering around near the treeline, which almost perfectly ringed-in the Dusk Hill camp, for about two hours now. But we’d found no tangible tracks or trails. I’d spotted a few night-time predators, owls and foxes mostly, but that was about it.

“I wonder if there’s an easier way to do this,” I said out loud, briefly contemplating if I should summon a Tracker familiar.

Saoirse came over and took the Bone Whistle out of my hand, then held it in an outstretched arm and said, “Unleash Scenting Whistle.”

A deep thrum filled the air around her, and, thanks to our Soul-Pact, I saw the scent trails that were manifested, however, there was a notable difference. In front of the Dullahan was a vacuum where no coloured trails existed and it bore an uncanny resemblance with the Scenting Tongue that I’d contained within the whistle. What’s more, she somehow knew the true name of the Possessed Object, which seemed a requirement for the Unleash ability.

As I looked at the strange nothingness that, through its elimination of surrounding colours, made itself ‘seen’, I heard Saoirse say, “Find the trail of a Demon.”

Something swished through the air and it took me a second to realise that the strange colour-vacuum shape was extending its tongue to find the trail. Then a second later it started moving in a straight line, delving further into the forest.

“We’ve got a trail!” I yelled back to Armen and the Guards, who all upped their pace to stay close, while Saoirse and I followed the Unleashed shape of the Scenting Tongue, with Emily right behind us.

How did you know the true name of the Whistle?

I can see it.

See it?

For my Power of Death to work, I require the true name of an entity. Thus I have a gift that lets me know the names of anything I see, so long as it is living.

Is a contained spirit, even one where only a part of the soul remains, considered living? It was a realisation that made me uneasy about partial containments, such as in the case of the Whistle and Foresight Glasses.

Of course. A soul is living, no matter the shape it is forced to take.

Does that mean you can see the true name of any creature? Even apparitions?

Of course.

...That’s very powerful. With that power, I’d be able to defeat any Summoner or Exorcist in my path by Banishing all their familiars. Hell, it would make forming new Pacts super easy as well!

“**It is certainly a gift of tremendous powers,**” Armen commented, joining the conversation in my head.

Do not think to abuse this power of mine, Saoirse warned. It is meant for a Reaper alone.

“**Have you not just used it to aid Ryūta?**”

There was a pause, then I heard Saoirse let out a laugh.

“It seems humans are a bad influence on me.”

Emily gave her a confused look, since she clearly couldn’t tell what we were talking about.

Will you not allow me to utilise this power of yours?

Perhaps we can imitate the God whose demesne is Knowledge.

What do you mean?

The Tome Warden likes to barter, giving knowledge in exchange for knowledge. If you wish of me to tell you a name, you must give me knowledge in return.

“I do not know the intricacies of Soul Pacts, but are you not able to understand the depths of Ryūta’s soul? Would this not mean that anything he knows is already available to you?”

You are a clever one, Theodor Grey, Saoirse remarked, deliberately using Armen’s true name.

I frowned. Armen was right, this sort of agreement would mean that I would never be able to utilise her powers.

What if I receive the knowledge from someone else? I posited.

That would suffice.

Then I agree to this deal. The power of knowing true names is too strong to ignore.

“I have knowledge to barter for when you need it,” Armen said.

“You are fortunate to have such good friends,” Saoirse remarked out loud.

I smiled a little.

We were already far enough into the dark Mossbloom Woods that the treeline and distant camp had vanished into the horizon behind us. Somehow it seemed far more ominous than the Whispering Wilds, perhaps because the only sound was the wind. Although it was nighttime, the forest had a peculiar dusk-like haze, as though a sparse bit of light was trapped below the canopies of the densely-stacked trees we manoeuvred between. The understory was soft, thanks to dead leaves and an abundance of dark-green moss, and aside from the trees, there weren’t really many plants, nor even grass. The ground itself sloped and dropped in places, forming miniature mountains and valleys that, along with the moss and mulchy leaves made for unsure footing.

The none-entity we were following, that missing space taken up by some vestige of the contained Scenting Tongue, moved across the ground in a fixed direction, locked in on a specific trail that was yet unseen to my eyes, as the air was only filled with vague mostly-grey ribbons. It was possible that the Demon Thief’s trail was amongst them, but I simply couldn’t tell.

I looked over to my Companion and saw that Emily was clinging to her right arm for comfort. Part of me was worried about bringing the girl along to something potentially dangerous, but another part of me knew there was a danger inherent in leaving her alone within a camp full of soldiers.

Suddenly I had an idea that, quite frankly, should’ve occurred to me much sooner.

“Emily.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you can redirect the wind such that it blows against us from the direction we’re headed?”

“I can try. But why?”

“The scent-trails are carried by the wind, so it may help.”

It was obvious from her aura that she didn’t fully comprehend the point of it, but she didn’t argue as she let go of Saoirse and took out her wand, moving it gently through the air.

After some minutes of walking, the effects of her wind manipulation were starting to make themselves felt, and, though it made my face cool down even more than it already was, I was now able to spot fragmented parts of the orange-and-brown-dotted scent. They were like tiny clusters of colour that were only slightly noticeable in the dusk-like forest gloom.

For the next twenty minutes or so, we followed this sparse and elusive trail, along with the vague outline of the Scenting Tongue that’d been unleashed, while the cold wind made me glad to have the scarf Saoirse had conjured. Behind me, I heard the guards complain nonstop about the wind and temperature, while Armen stoically walked on with not a care.

“You can halt your manipulation of the air,” Saoirse told Emily.

I saw then what the Dullahan had noticed, as, about a hundred metres further ahead, between four evenly-spaced trees, was a puddle of gold. It was so out-of-place that, for a moment, I thought I was hallucinating from lack of sleep or that the Whistle was showing a strange trail, but then Emily said, “Is *that* gold?”

Somehow, all four of the guards heard the word ‘gold’ and suddenly didn’t seem so interested in complaining anymore, as they hurried to catch up to us.

When we came within a few metres of the puddle of gold that was just inexplicably there, Saoirse had a knowing smile on her face, perhaps because this further reinforced her guess of what we were dealing with. As I looked at it, I knew for a fact that I’d never read about this entity in my Encyclopaedias before.

“I wonder if it melted down its stolen goods in its stomach or something,” I muttered, as I knelt down next to the puddle.

Saoirse can you make me a container to store some of it in?

Without anyone noticing, Saoirse fed a small amount of her smoke into the palm of her black gauntlet and it quickly took up the shape of a bottle with a cork stopper. She handed it to me and I pulled the stopper out, scooping up some of the liquid gold with the bottle she had conjured, while the four guards were looking at the precious metal with naked greed in their eyes.

After half of the one-litre glass bottle was full, I put the stopper in to close it. But already I knew it wasn't gold.

I handed the bottle to Emily and asked, “How much does that weigh to you?”

She hefted the bottle, instinctively assuming it would be heavier than it was, but then seemed to draw the same conclusion as me. “Maybe two kilos?”

I nodded.

“This isn't gold I said.”

Armen took the bottle from Emily's hands, swishing it around, before answering, “This is Fool's Gold. It is too light to be real gold.”

The guards seemed visibly distraught at this revelation, while I only had more questions than answers. “I highly doubt that this is leftovers from stolen gold, as none of it would've been made from pyrite. Plus there's too much of it. With everything that was stolen, this puddle has a volume too great for the amount of gold missing.”

“Maybe it reduced other metals to this?” Emily speculated.

I thought about it for a bit, then asked. “How far is this from the camp?”

No one seemed to know the exact answer, so I connected to Karasumany in the sky above the canopies and sent a bird back to the camp, straight as the crow flies.

When it had made it to the Quartermaster's Hut I concluded: “There is no more than six kilometres from here to the camp.”

“And?” asked one of the guards, clearly unimpressed with how long it'd taken me to come up with that number. “This forest stretches on for dozens of kilometres.”

I smiled, then said, “Did any of you see how the Demon Thief emerged into the Quartermaster's Hut?”

Two of the guards nodded, they had been stationed within after all. “It came through the reflection of a silver mirror.”

“My guess is that it has the ability to instantaneously move between the reflections of metallic surfaces. But why would it keep hitting the camp over and over? Perhaps it is guided towards antagonising you soldiers and prevent you from mobilising, or maybe it is because there is a limit to its powers.”

“I don't understand what that has to do with the puddle of Fool's Gold,” said the first guard.

“If it’s power has a limited range, it could make use of a puddle such as this to extend its range. I’m willing to bet that if we continued in a straight line graphed between this puddle and the camp, we’ll find its den or maybe another similar ‘waypoint’ it can move between.”

I looked over to Saoirse. She was smiling at me. It seemed like she was impressed.

There was just one problem: the puddle of pyrite was a sign to me that the entity was able to manifest an unnatural change in the world, which was a skill normally reserved for True Demons whose very existence warped their surroundings and bent reality to their whims. It clearly wasn’t just a lowly sub-type of a Demon we were dealing with here.