

## III – The Camp Dusk Hill Theft

It was a little past noon when our carriage reached the outskirts of the military camp. Though the motion was unfelt within the vehicle where we sat, it was clear that we slowed down significantly. The shadow-born steeds at the front took up a spirited trot as we rolled up a slight incline on the road, before we came to a crest that led down into a bowl-shaped area where an enormous town-sized camp lay. At the crest of this bowl were lookouts and palisades of wood, and the road we followed led to a small gate with several guards stationed in front of it and atop two watchtowers.

“Bring the carriage to a halt,” I told Saoirse, and we quickly stopped before any of the guards could force us to.

I let Armen exit the carriage first, before following after him.

*Meigetsu, stay close, just in case.*

The orbiting Moonlight Dancer zipped closer to me in an instant, the ring it traced around me reduced to a diameter of roughly three metres. I didn’t expect trouble from the soldiers, but I felt it prudent to be on guard nonetheless.

Four soldiers clad in layered cloth with chain hauberks on top and simple iron caps on their heads came forward, three holding tall lances and the last a shortsword and shield. The man with the shield asked, “What business do you have in Dusk Hill?”

I pulled the quest flier out of my bag and showed it to him, while Saoirse exited the carriage behind me, suddenly wearing her plate armour and greatsword again. Emily stayed within, which was probably a good idea.

“You don’t look like no Hunter to me,” the guard replied, after looking at the flier.

“That’s because I’m an Exorcist.”

“...An Exorcist?” he replied, his demeanour souring and his aura becoming hostile. “Are your kind not meant to chase ghosts?”

“If you would like, I can return to Altar and fetch the Branch Master who assigned me this quest.”

The man frowned. “That won’t be necessary, but I will need to see your Guild Card for verification.”

*Uh oh...*

*Fret not, Ryūta, I can obfuscate its information.*

*You can? That’s a relief. Please just show my two ‘normal’ Pacts and hide everything about my Pact with you and Armen, as well as about my Possessed Items.*

*Of course. I will also hide the curse.*

*Oh, I forgot about that one somehow.*

*We will have to resolve it soon, she replied ominously.*

I pulled out the Card and looked at it first, marvelling at Saoirse’s abilities, before realising that this was similar to the trick that Owl had pulled on me.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Exorcist</i>		<b>RANK:</b> <i>Eminent</i>	
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Male</i>		<b>AGE:</b> <i>18</i>	
<b>ACUMEN:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>DEXTERITY:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>INTELLIGENCE:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>LUCK:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>PACT:</b> <i>A</i>	<b>SOUL:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>STRENGTH:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>VITALITY:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist II’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Lifeward)’</i>			

As I showed it to the guard, he scoffed. “Only a ‘Rank Two’ Exorcist, yet already ‘Eminent’? They must give out such titles for hardly any effort these days.”

Armen stepped forward, making the four men turn to look at him. To their eyes he probably looked dangerous. Then he said, “**Exorcist Ryūta earned his Eminent Rank through his efforts to save Helmstatter from the Flayed Noble’s rampage.**”

The lead guard was taken aback by this revelation, but just replied, “I see. And what of your companions?”

“I am accompanied by Armen here, who is a Crusader, as well as the Blademaster Saoirse, and Emily, a Spellhand. Do you require their Guild Cards as well?” I asked, dreading the answer, but hoping the Dullahan could finagle her way through such a deception.

“No, that will not be required. Quite a retinue you’ve brought for an Investigation though,” he remarked, insinuating that I was simply carried on the shoulders of their abilities, which was perhaps not entirely untrue.

“The Altar Branch Master insisted that this Quest be handled with proper care, thus she sent us. If you do not mind, I would like to begin my investigation immediately. If you know any witnesses or persons familiar with what was stolen, please show me where I can find them.”

Begrudgingly, the guard with the shield nodded, before yelling, “Open the gate!”

Then he turned to look at me and said, “I will escort you to the Quartermaster.”

I returned to the interior of the carriage, where I settled onto the bench with a sigh. Saoirse went up in front and grasped the reins of the horses, while Armen walked next to the vehicle as it slowly rolled through the opened gate and down the slope of the ‘bowl’ wherein lay the camp.

It was slightly odd to have to untether the horses from the carriage and assign them to a stable, but it was a necessary deception, since it would draw suspicion if our eye-catching vehicle just suddenly vanished along with the animals that’d dragged it into the camp.

The four of us left the carriage behind and trudged after the guard who was guiding us to the Quartermaster, walking through the soft clay-like dirt that splattered everywhere on our boots and clothes. Everything in the camp was built from timber harvested from the nearby Mossbloom Woods, though it seemed the soldiers and aspirants all slept in simple tents, rather than the basic huts that doubtfully protected against the elements.

We came to one such hut, wherein were racks of weapons and armour stands, as well as the equipment to maintain it all, like oils and such. The air was metallic and heady, and the person in charge was a tall and imposing woman, whose red aura was very close to being on par with an Otherworlder’s, though she was evidently a Native, based on her appearance.

From just a cursory glance, it was clear that over half of the inventory of the Quartermaster’s hut was missing, either stolen or currently in use.

“Theophanie, this here is an Investigator sent by the Adventurers’ Guild in Altar.”

The tall woman cast me a glance, before her eyes moved over the armour of Armen and Saoirse. She didn’t even spare Emily a single look. It was clear where her attention lay.

“Quite expensive equipment you have brought for an Investigation,” she said. “From the looks of you, you are a Crusader and a Vanguard of a sort, I’d wager.”

“**A well-informed guess,**” Armen remarked.

“Would you mind explaining what was stolen from here?” I asked, trying to take the lead. Meanwhile the guard who had escorted us left the hut to return to his duty.

The woman, although shorter than Armen, had a very intimidating air about her and she let this be felt as her eyes settled on me. To her, I must’ve looked like a child. She quickly turned her gaze back to Armen.

“It began some weeks back. First it was small weapons, like daggers, knives, and even some cutlery from the kitchen. Then it was jewellery taken from officers’ tents, before it escalated to larger weapons, and then armour. Lately, it has been every other night that something has been taken right out from under our noses.”

“Was everything stolen made of some form of metal?” I asked, making a mental note of common traits of the items.

“That’s right,” she said, refusing to look at me. “None of our few magical tools used by our Mages have been touched, despite these being worth more. Perhaps it is because they do not contain metal or perhaps the thieves are simply morons.”

*They have Mages in the army? Like Native ones?*

“**Yes, but they are quite weak and even a novice Spellhand can outperform them within just a few weeks of training,**” Armen commented in my mind.

Emily seemed to find this mention of Mages and magical tools interesting as well, but she stayed behind Saoirse, trying to disappear into the scenery.

“What about your lookouts? Have they spotted nothing?”

The Quartermaster turned to me with a scowl on her face, as though she thought I’d just called her incompetent, but then she released a frustrated exhale and said, “I have taken to watching over our inventory every night, and yet things are still taken from right under my nose. I believe the thieves possess some tricks of illusion, otherwise I do not know how to explain it.”

“**There are some Goblin Shamans who have been known to possess such magic,**” Armen commented.

“Might it not also be an enraged Forest Spirit?” Saoirse postulated. “After all, a camp such as this would surely enrage the guardians of the woods.”

I thought about Saoirse’s theory, but couldn’t think of any ‘forest spirit’ that matched such a trait as stealing metallic objects. In my mind, it felt more likely that it was an inside job. No doubt some soldiers were siphoning equipment from the camp and selling it elsewhere for profit.

*Let us not make a theory based on conjecture*, I then quickly told the two, almost falling into the trap myself. *We will see what clues we can find.*

“**Might I suggest we start by looking for traces of spirits?**” Armen replied in my mind.

I nodded, then told the Quartermaster. “I’d like to look around for clues here.”

“Be my guest. I’ll wait outside if you have questions.”

As she walked past me, I pulled out the Energy Stone, a tool I hadn’t utilised in a long while.

“What’s *that*?” Emily asked, finally feeling comfortable enough to come further into the hut, now that Theophanie had left.

“It’s a tool that can detect traces of spirits and such entities. I’ve used it in the past to find objects of significance, which are utilised in exorcism rites.”

I handed it to her, then said, “Try and hold it out in front of my Moonlight Dancer, it should glow when you get near.”

Emily took it from my hands carefully, then went over to where my Lifeward was slowly following the orbit around me. Sure enough the stone began to glow with a warm light.

“Wow.”

“If you don’t mind, could you go around the room while seeing if there are any places it glows?”

“Okay, but what are *you* going to do?” she asked.

I pulled out the Bone Whistle and showed her.

Saoirse followed Emily as she walked around the hut and checked the displays, racks, and stands. Although Theophanie had mentioned magical tools, it was clear none were stored in here. I wanted to check other parts of the camp, so I was sure we’d get to those eventually.

As I blew a note in the Whistle, coloured ribbons appeared in the air. There was a prominent red trail all over the place, which obviously belonged to the Quartermaster, as well as minor faint trails of other people. It was hard to tell any of them specifically apart and know which were significant or not, but as I also walked around the hut, past the stands and displays, I noticed that there was one trail that didn’t match the rest. It was barely-visible, but had a vibrant orange, a bit like that of a Librarian’s aura, and was spotted with brown stains.

“Maybe this trail belongs to a Goblin Shaman,” I wondered. I’d never really noticed what kind of aura Goblins had, but it was definitely faint enough to not be immediately noticeable, and last time

I’d seen a Goblin near Ochre, I hadn’t made a note of it. My Spirit Sight had become more advanced since, so I wondered what their auras would look like to me now.

“Is this evidence?” Emily suddenly asked. I came over to where she stood near an empty weapons rack. The Energy Stone in her hand glowed faintly, meaning that the essence it picked up was either from long ago or the cause was something very weak.

I thought about it for a moment, but still felt there was no immediate conclusion. “It’s possible it’s residue from a spell, but it could also be from a spirit... but if it was a spirit behind it, I feel like there would be more evidence or witness reports.”

“Some spirits can make themselves invisible,” Saoirse commented as though I didn’t know.

“I’m aware,” I replied, “But such entities, like shades and wraiths, tend to leave behind Spirit Prints and often produce a stronger response from the energy stone.”

“Fascinating, I had no idea.”

We continued looking through the hut for a while, but besides the orange-and-brown trail, the faint bit of energy left behind, and Theophanie’s testimony, we didn’t have enough evidence to build an investigation on.

I put the Whistle away and called down one of Karasumany’s clones. It flew in through the door and alighted on my black hand. Through its borrowed vision, I did another scan of the hut’s interior, but there was nothing.

Biting my lip, I contemplated what else I had to make use of, before remembering the Gravelight Ring on my finger.

*Kōtama, dispel any illusions within this hut.*

As light was beginning to form on my hand, Saoirse’s voice filled my head, *Little Gravelight, do not dispel my illusions.*

There was a brief pause in the light’s growth, before it adjusted to this additional parameter and released a golden pulse of light across the interior. I was surprised that the Dullahan could affect my commands, but it made sense when our souls were interlinked. In the eyes of my familiars, she and I were perhaps just two vessels holding the same soul.

Emily looked around in awe, as fine particles of light twinkled in the air briefly before vanishing.

“What was that?” she asked in astonishment.

“An entity I bound to a ring, called a Gravelight. It allows me to dispel illusions.”

I looked around. Nothing seemed changed.

“Let’s check the outside before moving on to the kitchen.”

After having the Quartermaster introduce us to the camp Cook, we repeated the investigation for clues, but found the same results: the orange-brown trail, a faint energy signature detected with the Stone, and testimony about how things had been stolen from right under his nose.

“This is much harder than I thought,” I commented as the four of us were sitting by a table, the Cook having decided to make us an early dinner as a sign of goodwill. He was by far the most amicable person we’d encountered in the camp thus far.

“**It is peculiar,**” Armen commented.

“I think I know what it might be,” Saoirse revealed.

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

“I have seen it before.”

“What is it?” Emily asked.

Saoirse grinned. “It would be no fun if I gave it away.”

I sighed. I had kind of known she’d take such a stance. Perhaps it was because of the Soul-Pact, or maybe it was just because I’d figured out what kind of person she was. She liked to watch humans interact and struggle, so of course she wouldn’t interfere in the investigation once she had realised the answer.

“Is the cause something you have encountered before?” I asked her, wondering if I could somehow access her memories like she had gone through mine.

“My lips are sealed,” she replied with a fiendish grin.

The Cook arrived with four wooden bowls of some kind of stew and gave each of us a wooden spoon to eat it with.

“I’ve taken to making replacement utensils and such from wood. Plenty of it around here after all.”

“Good thinking,” I replied. “Say, do you know where they keep the magical tools? I’d like to check there next.”

“It’s on the easterly side of the camp, near the officers’ tents.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded and said, “Enjoy the meal.”

Saoirse and Emily had already begun digging into theirs, and I followed suit. It was a hearty stew but rather weak on the flavours I thought.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Emily asked Armen, who was sitting there just watching us eat.

“**I...**”

*It’s okay Armen, you should be able to eat in this form.*

*Worry not about your appearance, I will obscure it,* Saoirse added.

Armen pulled the helmet off and set it on the table next to his wooden bowl. His hair was like I’d seen it before, as were his eyes, but his skin was changed from the slate-grey colour to a warm amber tan, similar to the kind many Natives of Arley had.

Emily paused to look at his face, her eyes lighting up at his beauty. I was likewise floored. I was sure that in life he had been so handsome that someone like Harleigh would seem bland by comparison.

Armen carefully took a spoonful to his mouth and, as though he had forgotten how to eat, held it in front of his lips for a long moment. Then he put the spoon in his mouth.

Saoirse, Emily, and I were all watching him, though for different reasons I was sure. Emily was simply fascinated, while Saoirse no doubt found a kind of novelty in it, but I was sure that only I understood what he was going through. He had been a Wraith for hundreds of years, obeying the whims of various masters, and it was clear that his life as an incorporeal entity had been longer than his life as a human, so for him to once again experience a facsimile of mortality and have the ability to eat: it was no doubt a profound moment for him.

“**It is quite bland. I will go ask for some spices.**”

I blinked in surprise at his words, then burst out laughing.