

## 112 – Forest Thieves

The two officers looked at me with open disdain. They seemed less concerned with having their stolen items returned than having an Exorcist in their midst. Both had blueish auras of decent strength, for a Native, and I felt certain that they might be able to cast minor spells. Since realising that Mages existed amongst the Natives, I was starting to take note of their auras a bit more, as they might give me more clues. After all, even if their souls were not as potent as Otherworlders’, their colours would still inform me about their temperament and specific talents, and blue was obviously associated with magic, such as in the case of Spellhands.

“If I cannot look through your tents for clues, it will hinder my ability to properly investigate the thefts.”

“Send for a Hunter instead, at least their beastly stench is bearable.”

Armen stepped forward, oozing authority. **“You would defy the will of the King? It is by his orders that we have been sent here.”**

The officer’s face blanched. “Fine. But the rest of you will wait here.” He called over four guards with shortswords and kite shields, then said, “You are to watch the Exorcist closely as he does his work.”

I sighed.

Emily and Saoirse were standing behind me, with the Spellhand avoiding the confrontation and the Dullahan acting as her support, for some reason.

*You are not appreciated here, it would seem, she commented in my thought.*

*No shit. Can’t you just tell me what you believe to be behind this theft so I can move on?*

*No. That would be dull.*

I bit my lip, then said, “Very well.”

As the guards showed me to the first of the tents, the two officers stayed behind with my companions, suddenly keen on conversation. It had been a while since I’d experienced such open discrimination, but I let it slide for the sake of cooperation.

*Armen, see if you can extract some witness statements from them and figure out what exactly was stolen from their tents.*

I entered into a large rectangular tent with a soft carpet-like floor. Within were expensive furniture like a bed, dresser, desk, chairs, and a round dining table, as well as a wooden travel trunk, an empty

armour stand, and a small lockbox of metal-reinforced oak. There was also a unique stand holding a large staff, a wand, a focus, and a tome.

My eyes widened as I looked at them all.

*This is less a tent and more like a luxury apartment... those magical items must be worth a fortune by themselves.*

I pulled out the Energy Stone and first approached the unique item stand, the stone producing a decent glow from the ambient magic the staff and wand exuded, and exhibiting a significant response from the tome.

“Please do not touch the officer’s magical tools,” said one of the guards.

“I won’t,” I promised and took a step back.

*Karasumany, lend me a clone.*

**CAW!**

A black crow flew in through the narrow gap left in the tent ‘door’ and alighted on my right shoulder, much to the surprise and suspicious muttering of the guards.

Through its eyes I scanned the weapons and saw a faint glow around the tome, but nothing noteworthy from the other items. I checked the rest of the interior with the crow’s eyes, but, like the Quartermaster’s Hut, I didn’t notice anything unusual.

After breaking off the connection, I went over to the empty armour stand and checked it with my Energy Stone, eliciting a small glow.

On cue, Armen told me through our bond: **“Both officers had their heirloom armour and weapons stolen, though the thefts happened on separate occasions. The stolen items seemed to be mostly ceremonial, as they both are Mages who rely on their staves, wands, and spell-tomes for combat.”**

*Heirlooms, huh? Those would be worth a fortune, I’m sure.*

**“Such items are often worthless in actual combat, meaning the theft must’ve been motivated by greed.”**

*Perhaps, but it is still too early to conclude such things, I replied. Keep interrogating them.*

I checked the rest of the tent, but found nothing of note. I wondered if Renji’s Magic Sense would’ve been able to pick up anything peculiar in here.

Lastly, I took out the Bone Whistle and blew a tune, surprising the guards once again. Strands of colour appeared in the air, with most dyed in the same hue as the officer’s aura. Unlike the Quartermaster’s Hut and the Kitchen, where many different people frequently came-and-went, the

tent was a much better place to find a unique trail. Unsurprisingly, the brown-spotted orange trail was visible near the empty armour stand, but also by the wooden trunk which I hadn't checked the interior of. I went over and, despite the protests of the guards, pushed open the chest and found it to contain some valuables and relics, though nothing of any sort of metal, like iron, silver, bronze, or gold.

I closed the lid again and backed away from the trunk before any of the four men could raise a stink.

*It seems he also had things stolen from his trunk, perhaps unique relics or valuable metal. Ask him what exactly was lost. I want to know if the thieves target jewels too.*

The trail that tied the empty stand and trunk together seemed to only wander briefly around the tent interior before simply stopping. I hadn't noticed this from the trail in the Kitchen and Hut, but those two instances had also been overshadowed by the scents of other people.

*I think we might be dealing with thieves that are able to appear out of nowhere, because the trail I'm seeing just suddenly stops, as though, whoever it belongs to, appeared inside the tent, stole the objects, and then teleported away.*

**“It seems that he lost approximately two-hundred gold Crowns, jewellery with precious gems attached, and some family trinkets, though he would not elaborate on these.”**

*Saoirse, am I on the right track in assuming our thieves are able to teleport somehow?*

*My lips are sealed, she replied, infuriatingly.*

“Alright, I'm done here,” I told the guards.

The four men pushed aside the ‘door’ flap and followed me out, before leading me a few hundred metres down a well-trodden gravel path to the other officer's tent.

The interior was similar, though it also had a large empty spot where some kind of furniture seemed to have stood before.

*I'm in the other officer's tent, I told Armen, Ask them what sort of large object was stolen from here, besides his armour.*

I looked at the armour stand which was also empty, and noticed that this officer had a similar magical tool stand, upon which hung a curled staff and a small notebook-sized spell-tome. There seemed to be a place for a wand, but it was missing.

*You should also ask him where his wand is.*

**“He says there was a large copper bathtub stolen from his tent. I will ask about the wand.”**

*A tub... I thought about that for a moment.*

Running my Energy Stone over the empty spot, where the bathtub must’ve stood, produced another glow.

*Why would they steal a tub? Are they planning on melting it down and reforging it into weapons? I suppose it also doesn’t make sense that they would steal utensils.*

**“His wand was also stolen. It apparently had a silver inlay.”**

*So the motive is the metal, this is absolutely clear. I don’t think we’re dealing with thieves going after weapons and armour, but rather something motivated by the greed for the valuable components, although it seems even simple iron was taken too, based on the Cook’s testimony.*

I pulled the Whistle out again and blew a tune. There was a trail connecting the empty stand, the magical tools holder, and the spot where the bathtub had stood, and, like in the other tent, the trail just suddenly ended, as though the source had vanished through a wormhole.

It was clear that the thieves were using some kind of advanced magic.

Another peculiar thing I noticed was that, even though a robbery had taken place, there were no overt signs of theft. Whoever was behind it had been careful to not leave tracks or had perhaps cleaned up after themselves. It seemed an odd sort of consideration.

I left the tent and returned to my companions, then said, loud enough for the officers to hear. “The thieves are able to appear out of thin air, as though they utilise portals or something of that nature. Although the ambient energy is low, I am certain we aren’t dealing with any normal thieves.”

“Why would anyone go to such lengths just to steal?” asked the same officer who had brushed me off previously. It was clear he didn’t believe my theory.

“If they have such power, why limit themselves to theft, when they could strike a decisive blow to our command structure,” the other officer asked, unknowingly pointing out the exact thing I’d been about to mention.

“Their motive isn’t to cripple your army,” I said, “Or at least not openly. Rather, it seems you are targeted because you have a large collection of precious metals within your camp.”

**“The behaviour is almost animalistic in its greed,”** Armen noted.

I nodded.

“I don’t think you’re dealing with normal thieves. In fact I believe it is just one perpetrator, and I think this might be a Haunting.”