

116 – Shining Hoard

By the time we made it down the slope and to the open maw that led deeper into the earth, I could already hear as the wind whipped into a frenzy around the Thief’s Den. Emily had become a lot faster at wielding her Affinity Control.

The soldiers in front of Armen and I were nervous, but also excited, as they led the way forward into the darkness. Before any of them could complain about visibility, Armen had produced a powerful golden light from his hand. The Crusader was carrying a flanged mace and a triangular shield that Saoirse had conjured with her black smoke, and, judging by his aura, he was definitely ‘in the zone’, as it was even and tempered. In contrast, the soldiers’ auras were a jumbled mess of emotions.

Meigetsu, stay close to me, I ordered the Moonlight Dancer and it quickly zipped down the slope and arrived next to me, where it began orbiting my body, as though the moon to my planet.

Since I have no idea how to exorcise the Demon, let’s try to kill it with your holy magic, I told Armen through my mind.

“**Understood,**” he replied.

I knew the guards would be of little help, except as a distraction, but I wondered if I should try my Drain Spirit with the Singing Branch, even if Saoirse had advised against feeding it the souls of Demons.

The air in the tunnel we were moving down was stale and warm, as though a furnace burnt below and belched out exhaust fumes that rose up through the den and out the exit in the hollow. The ground underfoot was soft and showed barely any signs of disturbance, as though the Demon Thief only ever used its teleportation power to leave its home.

Saoirse still held the Scenting Whistle, but I could no longer see the trails it revealed, though I didn’t need them to be able to pick up the scent of the Thief, because it was a pungent aroma that swam through the warm air. The smell was like heady oil, acrid copper, and some kind of animal musk, which, combined, produced an overpowering odour.

We only had to walk for a couple of minutes before we came to a plateau, after which the tunnel seemed to curl around itself for a bit. Eventually, it straightened out and at the end of the tunnel came a warm honeyed glow, which made me wonder to what extent the Demon had altered its surroundings to make itself feel at home.

One of the guards, who hadn't seen the Thief as it appeared in the Quartermaster's Hut, was looking around and muttering something about the size of the creature that'd carved these tunnels.

Then we came to the mouth of the tunnel and were greeted by a vast chamber filled from floor to ceiling with shining things. My head immediately started spinning as I tried to take in the sheer magnitude of what I was looking at. It wasn't anywhere close to the estimate of how much I thought had been stolen from the Dusk Hill camp. No, there was way more stuff here than there ought to have been.

I think I made a mistake, I remarked. This Thief clearly hasn't just been stealing from the soldiers.

The four guards immediately moved forward, climbing up onto the first slope of stolen treasure near the tunnel exit. They stepped over jewellery, armour, and weapons, as well as ceremonial statues and relics, with a fortune in coins and jewels filling the gaps.

“There's enough wealth in this one place to found your own city,” Armen observed.

The two of us followed after the greedy guards, who were already rifling through the mountain of precious metals to find things for themselves, which they began stuffing into their pockets.

“Should we stop them?” I wondered. Stealing from a Thief probably wasn't illegal in Mondus, but I was certain the Dusk Hill camp, and by extension the Crown, would want to confiscate all of this.

Before Armen could comment on it, an unsettling laughter began filling the room, while something large shifted near the peak of the treasure mountain inside the large underground chamber. Coins, jewels, gilded goblets, a silver-inlaid wand, and some metal-wrapped tomes started tumbling down the uneven slope of stolen wealth. From the peak came first a horn and then a golden-brown furry body like that of a great bear, but with human-like hands.

The soldiers were slow to react, and before any of them could retrieve the weapons they had discarded, the Demon flung an object with its prehensile tail and hit one of the men directly in the face.

Armen hurried towards the fallen soldier, while I aimed my Branch at the Thief and fired off a Repel. The black bolt shot from the tip of my staff, but the Demon had already charged straight for the soldiers, so it ineffectually hit a bit of the treasure mountain and sent a gilded table flying instead.

An iron axe flew towards my neck before being deflected off to the side by Meigetsu who immediately got in its path. Unlike in the Hut, it was far more aggressive and focused on offense, perhaps because it was protecting its stolen hoard.

The stricken soldier got to his feet, while his three fellows covered him and Armen with their shields, as the Demon thundered down the mountain of finery towards them. With his healing complete, the Crusader broke from their group and ran to meet the Greed Demon, his flanged mace glowing with a golden light, while his black armour trailed a shining mist, as though his very skin exuded the same holy energy that suffused his weapon.

“**Judgement!**” he exclaimed as he swung his mace to meet the Demon head-on, but in an instant the bear-like creature disappeared into itself, sending his strike wildly off-course. A second later, it sprang out from under him and lifted his body into the air, only to slam it back down against the weapons and armour that made up the slope near them.

“Get out of here!” I yelled to the guards, who quickly realised they were in over their heads.

Saoirse, I need your aid!

Of course.

“**Repulse!**” Armen’s voice roared, echoing off the treasure and chamber walls, as a ring of bright energy exploded outward from his body and forcefully tore the Demon away from him, its claws having already pried the front of his chestplate off.

Though deeply foolish, I started running up the slope to where they fought, hoping I could give him the opportunity he needed to beat the creature back.

As soon as Armen was back on his feet, he charged for the Demon, using his shield to block a vicious swipe of its claws, before smacking the head of his mace into its left knee, producing a pained and angry grunt from the creature, momentarily interrupting its gleeful laughter.

“**Bless!**” the Crusader intoned, pointing his mace-head at the Demon, but it teleported away before his ability could affect it, only to leap out of a shiny mirror behind him and grab his body in a bear hug. As it squeezed him with all its might, I came to a halt and aimed the head of my staff at it.

“Repel!” I shouted, infusing my staff with a lot more energy than usual. The result was something like a cannonball of dark smoke that fired from my weapon, zipping across the short space between me and the Demon, before connecting with its flank and making it suddenly let go of Armen.

For just a moment, my Repel had given it pause, but then it trained its focus on me. Almost like an afterthought, it grabbed the Crusader around the wrist and flung him down the side of the treasure pile, then began running towards me on all fours.

“Shit.”

Get ready Meigetsu, this might be rough.

The Moonlight Dancer came so close that I could reach out and touch it, while its orbital velocity increased tenfold. A dagger, a goblet, and a bathtub were flung at me in quick succession, all of which my Lifeward deflected, so that they only narrowly missed and hit the slope behind me instead.

Down below, I could hear the sound of the soldiers getting out of the chamber, and as I watched the infuriated Demon gallop towards me, I could only hope for the Dullahan to come to my aid.

A tail came suddenly out of nowhere, aiming to grab my ankles, but the Moonlight Dancer intercepted the strike so that it flew over my head and spun the creature around. It quickly turned back to face me before I could exploit the opening. Three quick swipes followed from the beast, all of which the Lifeward turned aside with what seemed like gentle nudges that happened with tremendous speed.

I pointed the head of my Singing Branch at the Demon and said, “Drain Spirit!”

Before the ability could take effect, the Thief disappeared into itself and emerged from below me. Instead of repositioning the enemy’s entire body, Meigetsu’s cloth-like form enveloped me and spun me around, such that I only narrowly avoided being grabbed from below. The Demon shot up out of the treasure slope, pausing as it failed to grasp me and I tried the same ability again, only for it to vanish once more.

This time the Demon appeared between Armen and I, shooting out of a copper necklace and knocking over the Crusader who was running to my rescue.

“I have arrived,” Saoirse announced, her voice echoing through the chamber. Behind her was Emily.

“Emily! You shouldn’t be in here!” I yelled to them, but then I saw the girl point her wand into the back of the Dullahan, before a *woosh* came from the tunnel behind her.

Like she was shot out of a cannon, Saoirse was propelled through the air and up the slope by the blast of wind that Emily had conjured from outside and brought into the cave with her. The Dullahan was sent flying over me and landed gracefully on the Demon’s back. The beast let go of Armen, who it had been busy pummeling.

While holding onto the fur of its large back, Saoirse’s greatsword became a spiked whip in her hands that moved on its own to wrap around the Demon, while her dark smoke seeped into its fur. It fell to the ground and scattered treasure around it with the weight of its impact.

Sitting atop of the beast like a veteran hunter was the Dullahan, with a shit-eating grin on her face.

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

“How about we make a purse out of this thing?” she asked and I had a bad feeling I knew exactly what she wanted from me.