

“Most likely not, honestly I’m probably being over cautious,” you admit. “A fox is a very basic creature to summon, and given how discreet they were being about it everything seems to point towards the culprit being a novice mage that wants to avoid confrontation. The odds that it’s something just the two of us could handle are pretty high. It is getting a little late, but why don’t we try to follow its tracks back to where it came from while they’re still fresh?”

“Ha, now you’re sayin’ what I wanna hear!” Bally says with a grin. She puts her hands on the table and rises from her seat. “Should still be a good enough tracker to handle this no problem! But, couldn’t we just let the thing go and follow it back? If it’s well trained enough to steal from me, it’s gotta be trained enough to go back to its master.”

“That’s definitely an option, that thing seems almost unsettlingly determined to take off in the direction it came from... But, using it like that would force us to make a move or lose her once we find the summoner,” you reply. “If we follow it’s tracks, we’d be able to turn back if it gets too dark or things seem more dangerous than we expected, while still having the fox here as a backup plan.”

“Makes sense to me, good thinkin’!” Bally says. She turns and hurries over to the stairs. “Gimme just a second, I wanna get somethin’ first.”

While she heads upstairs, a thought occurs to you. You kneel down in front of your bag and, while Bally isn’t around to see, pull your bracers back out and strap them on. Like before, you adjust your cloak a little to make sure they’re as concealed as they can be beneath your sleeves. Right as you return to your feet, Bally comes back down.

“Alright, now let’s get out there,” she says with a grin, patting her hip. She has a proper war axe strapped to her belt. Simple and undecorated, but made of sharpened iron with a much better edge than the work tool she’d been wielding before. “Oughta be prepared if we might be fighting, right? I keep this thing for when I travel on the road,” she explains, noticing you staring.

You nod, and the two of you head back outside to the garden. Bally quickly picks up the trail, following the pawprints left in the dirt back towards the edge of the woods--the same part of the woods the fox has been trying to run towards in its fruitless attempts to break out of the cage, you note. She leads the way, occasionally stopping to check the forest floor for signs you’re still following the right trail. You make it pretty deep into the woods, far enough that you can’t see the farmhouse at all anymore, but hit a snag as you come to a point where the fox’s tracks get too muddled with others to keep track of.

“Damn...” Bally mutters. “Look around for anythin’ that might single out our little bastard...”

You nod, crouching down to get a careful look at the area. “Maybe a bit late to check, but you know how to get back from here, right?” you ask, glancing at the sky through the branches overhead.

“Of course! I know the woods ‘round the farm like the back’a my hand, and we ain’t gone too far yet,” Bally replies.

“Good, just wanted to be... Ah! Look at this,” you say, pointing to a patch of the underbrush. Looking closely, there’s a clear trail where the leaves are splattered with odd mud stains. “I think it’s a safe bet what would have caused that.”

“Nice work Adrea!” Bally cheers, giving you a pat on the back that’s strong enough to make you stumble a little. “Now let’s hurry up and find this thief...”

You follow the trail deeper into the woods using a combination of fox tracks in the dirt and the signs of dirtied leaves you’d picked up on. The forest seems peaceful, birds chirping overhead and wind rustling through the leaves. You can tell that the ground is getting a little steeper as you move further in, the foliage crawling up the slope of a large hill.

Tracing back the fox’s footsteps, you’re led to a cracked patch of dried mud breaking through the underbrush. At the center is an odd, lumpy indentation with much clearer pawprints than what you’ve been following till now leading out. You quickly draw the conclusion that this must be where the fox disguised itself, and the fact its tracks end here implies it’s probably even the spot where this mystery mage first summoned it. Bally doesn’t seem satisfied.

“Dammit, all that hiking just to hit a dead end...” she grumbles, kicking the dirt in frustration.

“Well, not necessarily, it looks like it was summoned here, so our thief must have been at this spot too. Let’s look around and see if we can find any sign of where she went,” you say.

“A person’s probably smart enough to cover their tracks if they’re bein’ this sneaky, but you’re right, no sense given’ up that easily.”

You search around the area a little bit, quickly finding something that seems a bit promising at first—a trail of humanoid footsteps. But, it doesn’t feel quite right, and on close examination they’re only going in one direction and seem to pass right by the area instead of stopping anywhere close to the mud. “Do hunters come through these woods at all?” you ask.

“Yeah every now and then, pretty good spot for deer. Why?” Bally replies.

“Thought maybe I found something, but nothing really points to these being related...” you say. “I’ll keep looking.”

Unfortunately, it seems like Bally is correct about this being a dead end. Neither of you are able to find any sign of the mage that must have been here. You glance up at the sky, noticing that the sunlight breaking through the leaves has grown more intense as the sun nears setting. With dusk almost upon you, you suggest turning back and trying to use the fox as a guide instead in the morning. Bally agrees, and the two of you make the trek back towards the farm.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” Bally sighs as you step back out onto the farm. “But first thing tomorrow, we’re takin’ this thief to task...”

“Hmm...” you mutter, looking at the fox still futilely trying to push out of its cage. “We may want to keep watch, in case the summoner comes to investigate why it hasn’t come back yet.”

“Good thinkin’! Wouldn’t wanna lose our only shot at findin’ her,” Bally says. “Why don’t you keep an eye on things while I cook us up somethin’ for dinner?”

“That works for me,” you reply with a smile. Then you put a hand to your chin. “You know, maybe we could even set up some kind of trap for them in case they do come after it?”

“Hmm... smart idea, but I’m not sure what we could do with just what I got on the farm this late in the day...” Bally says.

“Fair enough, only a thought,” you say. “I’m sure we’ll be fine just keeping an eye out.”

Bally heads inside and gets to work cooking while you stay posted outside the door. You keep watch while the sunset flares, then fades, in the sky, scanning the treeline for anything suspicious. The fox continues its incessant attempts to break free from the cage--at this point you’re certain that it was ordered to return to its master at any cost once discovered. That should make the plan of using it to lead you straight to the mage effortless, though you find yourself considering a potential problem while you have nothing to do but stand around. The summoner could simply... dismiss the fox at any moment, technically. You’d been assuming that, since it takes such little mana to maintain something that weak, she would at least get curious and investigate what’s going on first when it didn’t return, but if she takes it to mean the fox has been captured she could easily remove your one lead...

You’re snapped out of your train of thought when Bally opens the door again, startling you a little. The air wafting out of the house brings a delicious scent with it from her cooking--garlic tempered by other herbs and spices. She carries out two chairs from the table inside.

“There, now we can keep watch while we eat,” she says with a smile, placing the chairs down outside the door. You take a seat in one while she heads back inside for a moment, returning with two plates full of food. “Here, eat up! You’re in luck, one of my birds hit the point where it was better for butcherin’ than eggs just a little while ago, still had half the meat in my icebox.”

You take the plate from her, returning her smile. There’s a buttered slice of the bread from earlier, a few slices of tomato, and a small portion of roasted chicken. It’s immediately clear that the chicken is the source of the smell from before, the same warm aroma rising from your plate.

“Thank you Bally, this looks delicious,” you say. “I’m... very lucky I ran into you out here. You’ve been wonderful, not everyone would be so kind to a stranger showing up out of the blue.”

“Oh I told ya, don’t mention a thing,” Bally replies, giving you a warm smile. You notice a slight wag from her tail out of the corner of your eye. “I should thank you too, ya know. These days everyone is so convinced any stranger or outsider is a threat, or shouldn’t be trusted... it’s nice to get proof I ain’t stupid for thinkin’ otherwise every now and then.”

You smile, starting to dig into the food she provided. It’s delicious. For a moment you consider trying to flirt with her again, but given the lackluster response to your earlier attempts to woo her, you decide not to risk spoiling the moment. It’s probably better to wait until the current situation has been resolved anyways.

The two of you talk while you eat, enjoying each other’s company while you keep watch over the fox. The dim light of dusk slowly fades, until eventually night completely takes over and stars blanket the sky. Insects chirp and the leaves rustle with a slight, cool breeze. Eventually, the conversation slows and Bally yawns.

“I suppose we should probably sleep in shifts if we’re going to take this seriously. I can handle first watch,” you offer.

“Smart thinkin’,” she replies with another yawn. “And thank you... Heh, works out I guess, seein’ as I only got the one bed,” she chuckles. “Just don’t go snoopin’ through my stuff when it’s your turn to rest in there, alright?”

“Of course. I’ll wake you in a few hours,” you say.

“Perfect. The bedroom’s upstairs, if ya hadn’t guessed,” Bally says. She grabs the plates and the chair she’d been sitting in, then heads inside, leaving you alone outside to keep watch.

You sit back in your chair, doing your best to stay attentive. The lack of light has naturally made the task harder. For a while, there’s nothing, but then a harsher rustling of leaves than just the wind catches your ear. You scan the treeline, noticing some movement in the brush straight ahead...