

## Chapter 86: Control

The next couple of days passed quickly.

For the first time in a long time, Riza felt somewhat at peace, like she could take her time and explore the city.

She felt like an employer as she told everyone to take some time off and enjoy themselves, explore the city. Everyone but Taniya and Klannar, that is; they still needed time to get to grips with their new skills, and so were staying in the nest as they practised.

As for the rest of them, they stayed in a nice inn on the Lord's money. The room was clean and well-furnished and compared to how they were living, it felt like a palace.

Daven and Sanders explored the city, re-experiencing what it was like to be alive.

Andreya was constantly in talks with the Lord, learning the ins and outs of the city, and Adewyn dutifully followed along with her.

Meren took the day off as well, which left just Riza and Lefie.

Farms stretched as far as the eye could see from the top of the Rensenfeld walls, and Lefie marvelled at the sight.

But what Riza wanted was beyond the farms. It'd take a bit of a journey to get there but with a hired horse and cart, as well as a hired driver, it wasn't going to take too long at all.

They travelled down cobblestone roads in desperate need of repair and eventually, dirt paths formed only the constant beating of hooves before eventually arriving at a verdant expanse.

The trees were evergreen, holding their leaves in winter, and Lefie sighed happily at the sight.

The driver was only prepared to stick around for a few hours, before it got dark, but that was plenty of time.

Without any other orders, Riza's critters followed her anywhere, and she sent them soaring off into the forest.

"It's like being back at home," Lefie commented as they walked into the dizzying array of trees, spinning back and forth as she admired it all.

“Where is home for you?” Riza asked, walking gently between the bushes and branches.

“I guess it’s not just one place. We mostly stayed in Droya. I think. I moved around a lot when I was younger but we stayed in one place for years until, well...” She gestured aimlessly. “It was probably somewhere between Kratten and Litchendorf.”

A group of crows swooped down towards Riza, a struggling rabbit caught in their claws.

They dropped it in her firm grip, too strong to escape.

[Essential Leech] and [Leech] killed it quickly, [Animate Critter] unfortunately failing to activate.

The energy filled her body, her stats increasing ever so slightly. It had been so long since she had felt this feeling, it was practically euphoric.

Riza’s goal for coming out here was growth. Lefie would undoubtedly prefer a forest to a city but Riza wanted more critters, primarily. She still hadn’t made up for the ones lost in the first battle with Death, and the stat increases were just a bonus.

With all of yesterday and the day before spent exploring the city, this was her last chance to take some time for herself before her responsibilities finally caught up to her.

\*

Water lapped at the steep sides of the ship as it sailed through the river water. It’s flat bottom glided gracefully across the somewhat shallow water, the wind pushing against the sail to maintain a high speed.

Only a handful of individuals were residing on a ship built for many more. The aeromancer was hard at work, continually pushing and pulling air around as was his job. He rarely had a reprieve.

Within the captain’s cabin sat a tall but lean man, with a long face and balding, brown hair. His moustache was carefully groomed and was otherwise the only bit of hair on his face.

His clothing resembled neither the attire of the peasantry nor the ostentatious garb of the Ancient-wearing nobility. Instead, it was immaculately crafted

breeches, tailored for just his body, with a jacket and vest of the most colourful purple and blue colours, so saturated it was like looking at the lake itself.

Hunched over his desk, he read through letters upon letters, rules and regulations, as he engraved them into his mind.

Candlelight illuminated the corners of the room where the sun, streaking in through the windows, failed to reach.

A gloved hand swished and flicked as he transcribed necessary details into a journal for later reading.

Three quick knocks at his door interrupted his reading, the person waiting for a response before entering.

“Come in,” The man’s raspy voice answered, the years of youth behind him.

Another man, clad in bulky armour with a large sword at his waist entered.

“We’re coming up on Rensenfeld any minute now,” He said, speaking with an unrefined accent.

“Good. I’ll be out on deck as soon as I finish it with this,” The sophisticated man said, dismissing the other with but a wave of his hand.

The armoured warrior nodded his head respectfully before withdrawing.

Stacks of papers and books were on the desk and the man quickly shuffled through them, pulling one out after the other before finding what he was looking for.

He cleared away the rest, positioning this one front and centre.

Unlike all the others, this was neither mass-produced nor hand-scribed; instead, it was a series of copied reports housed within whatever binding the person who made it had on hand, but it was by far the most important piece in his collection.

The first entry was by an Andramarch, stationed in Kratten months ago. It contained comments by the ex-Head Steward Andreyra, and Seer Grandal. Useful for establishing the start of the timeline but, by now, all the information was out of date.

He flipped through it quickly, skimming over the older information but taking his time with the newer ones.

Another knock at the door ushered him to close the book; it was time.

\*

The port wasn't the cleanest part of the city, but nor was it the dirtiest. Plenty of ill-dressed, unkempt individuals hobbled away, carrying boxes or cargo or whatever else as they went about their duties.

The boat rocked very little as it sat secured to the harbour. As soon as the man stepped out, the smelt hit him like a horse; it was putrid and full of shit, if he was being generous. No doubt, the many horses he could see around the place were responsible for that.

He wrinkled his nose and brushed it off, placing the scent at the back of his mind.

Taking his time to observe the place, the city seemed pretty normal from what he had read.

*No damage thus far.* It was a good sign. It meant wanton destruction was not their goal.

Looking up, the towering spire of black reached into the sky as clouds collected around its top. While he was knowledgeable in this matter, it looked fairly normal to his untrained eye.

A murder of crows circled overhead, not moving from the harbour. Any normal person would probably have just dismissed them as some slightly strange but innocuous animal activity but not him.

She was watching.

The reports always mentioned the crows that followed her. Some of the people who had written them speculated on a couple of pet skills. A strange combination but perhaps effective. Something to bring up after this.

"Shall we depart?" The armoured man asked, standing straight and proud at the edge of the boat, one foot on firm land, keeping it all steady.

"It will be just me this time," The lean man said, gracefully stepping off the boat. He didn't even lose his balance.

"But sir! I must insist-"

“My safety is not a concern,” He waved the issue away, thinking about the crows above him. “The negotiations demand that I arrive alone. Remain on the ship until I return.”

The warrior’s face was quickly schooled into a stoic but accepting expression.

“Yes sir.”

\*

A satchel hung from the man’s shoulder, the leather straps flipping open as he put away a metal contraption with intricately carved runes into it. The journey from the port to here was a messy affair but with this focus, it kept him otherwise clean and presentable.

With the map of the quarter vivid in his mind, he had no struggles finding his way to the Lord’s estate and knocked on the door with the golden door knocker.

Barely any time passed before the door opened up before him, a woman short of stature with hair that fell to her waist appeared. She was wearing clothing typical for a maid, alerting him instantly to her purpose.

“Greetings,” She bowed her head deeply, voice wavering. “Riza is awaiting you upstairs.” She stepped aside, allowing the man inside, before closing the door behind him.

The house was like any other, though a bit on the smaller size in his experience.

*No adjustments have been made*, he noted.

The servant quickly led him up the stairs and down a corridor to a closed door. She breathed heavily, as if worried, he noticed, before opening the door and ushering him inside.

The man froze in shock as soon as he saw who was waiting for him inside.

Riza was there, and that was to be expected. The presence of Andreyra and Adewyn were not a surprise either.

What chilled him to the bone, forced him to quickly re-evaluate all his points he developed before coming here, was the body of Death himself.

*He should be dead!*

But he wasn't. His armour was badly damaged in places and had gone through a lacklustre repair job but the man's stature, his form, his mere presence were all the man needed to know, this really was the missing Enforcer.

*That explains why they couldn't find his body.*

Whatever else this meant, it was a bad sign. The attempt to wipe Riza out had only made her stronger; she had an *Enforcer* on her side now. *The Empire needs to hear about this.*

However else this went, at least some progress was going to come out of it. If he returned alive.

"Take a seat," Riza said, her voice sounding very much not what he expected. It certainly lacked any sense of gravitas or authority.

The man obliged, sitting down in the chair in front of the desk. Both Adewyn and Andreyra remained standing by Riza's side.

"What's your name?" Riza asked, point-blank and without any build-up.

It was actually refreshing compared to all the people he usually dealt with.

"Operator Forren, Head Operator within the Dominion," Forren answered, matching Riza's matter-of-fact tone.

She nodded slightly.

"I am Riza. I take it you are here to negotiate?"

"That I am. And, if I may, I have brought with me a harmless magical item that will aid negotiations if I am permitted to use it."

"What does it do?"

"It detects authenticity. You can know that I mean what I say and I can know that you mean what you say," Forren said, not moving an inch.

Riza stared at him for a few seconds before answering.

"Bring it out."

Forren nodded and reached into his bag, pulling out a pure white, gleaming, geometric stone. It was perfectly angular and sat on the flat surface of the desk neatly.

Reaching a hand forwards, a fingertip pushed down on the surprisingly pliant surface, compressing it only so slightly before the stone hardened to expected sturdiness.

In a flash, the entire thing shifted to a bright blue colour, blinked a few times, and then returned to its previous blank whiteness.

“It is synced,” Forren said, and the stone flashed blue for a few seconds, confirming his authenticity.

“Repeat what I did and it will sink to you and then we can begin.” Another flash of blue.

Riza didn’t spend time thinking about it, reaching forward and pressing down on it like he did.

Another flash, another sync.

But, before Forren could say anything else, Riza interrupted.

“The sky is blue.” The stone flashed blue once more, and Riza nodded intently, leaning back into her seat.

“Thank you for your cooperation. I also have a ledger of information I will be using,” Forren said, raising an eyebrow and clearly showing his hand about to reach into his bag, pausing for a few seconds, and then pulling out the ledger once it was clear there were no objections.

Along with it, he pulled out a thick stylus, and flipped open the ledger to about halfway through. The page was blank.

Forren tapped the stylus three times against the page and traced along the constraints of it before the stylus flew out of his hand suddenly, barely hovering in the top right corner.

“I am Head Operator Forren of the Dominion. I have been sent to Rensenfeld in the Toila Province to handle the negotiations with Riza.”

The stylus glided across the page as soon as he started talking, automatically writing down everything that was said in perfect script.

“And if you will explain yourself, please? For the record.” He gestured towards Riza, who nodded.

“I am Riza, current occupier of Rensenfeld,” She said, looking a bit confused at how to describe herself beyond her name.

But Forren nodded affirmatively. *Good enough.*

From there, he laid out all the events that had transpired that were relevant to this situation. Namely, Riza has evaded working with the Dominion and grew in power. She travelled to different villages and one was eventually destroyed because of her presence.

She fled and then later showed up in Trotton. Enforcers were sent to all three provinces to stop her once and for all.

There was an initial battle with Death, which ended in only injuries for both of them, and then a later battle at which point Riza killed Death and took his body for herself.

At the same time, they took the Lord of Rensenfeld hostage, as well as the entire city, and called for a negotiator from the Empire to start developing a peace treaty between the two of them.

It was clear that Riza wanted to argue some points here and there as Forren talked but held herself back, which he was grateful for

At every point along the way, the stone flashed blue, confirming the authenticity of the statements.

With the background laid out, it was finally time for the terms to be laid out.

“I, Operator Forren, am speaking on behalf of the Empire and its associated parties, which includes the Dominion of Skaldur and the Skadlur’s Chosen.”

Another gesture to Riza.

“I, Riza,” She began awkwardly. “Am speaking on behalf of my group and all references to myself apply to the group,” She quickly finished, mouth racing to catch up with what her mind had decided.

“What is your first demand?”

“The Empire will stop trying to hunt us! No more attempting to kill or capture me, which includes Adewyn, Andreyra, Lefie, Daven, and Sanders.”

The man grabbed the stylus and moved it over to another page, repeating the moves before it started writing again.

“Secondly... All of Rensenfeld and Toila will be under my control. The Empire will withdraw any and all presence and influence from the province. The Dominion and Chosen can stay if I am able to come to agreements with them.



“If these two concessions are made, I will not attack any Enforcers or anyone else working with the Empire.

“I will not destroy Rensenfeld and the people living here, or any other city.

“I will not attempt to expand the borders of my control beyond what is agreed to here, and I will attempt to cooperate with the Empire through civil matters

“Toila will remain militarily independent of the Empire

“Toila will be recognised as a sovereign, independent state under my rule, separate from the Empire.

“Those are my demands.”

The stylus whipped through the air furiously, dutifully copying down everything Riza had said.

Forren’s mind ran over these demands, comparing them to the expectations he had made and the suggestions he had been told.

The flashed blue and only blue with each and every statement, meaning their veracity was not in question; this was what Riza wanted and she meant it all.

“The Empire cannot agree to those terms without adjustments being made,” He began, voice full of authority. Riza sank back in her chair a little, and the man stopped himself from grinning.

“The Empire will agree to the first term if the following adjustment is made: Riza will remain within the bounds of Toila. Any presence of Riza outside of Toila will be considered a declaration of war and all concessions granted by this treaty will be considered null and void.”

Forren paused, waiting for Riza’s response.

“I agree to that.”

“Free migration for anyone other than Riza between Toila and the Empire will be forever allowed and no policies that will adversely affect someone’s capacity to migrate will be allowed.”

“I agree to that.”

“The Empire will withdraw all of their forces if a small contingent resides in Rensenfeld with the sole purpose of observing that all terms are being upheld.”

“I cannot agree to that.” She shook her head. “Absolutely no *something* watching of Toila will be allowed.”

The stylus freaked out over the foreign words, unsure what to put down, and Forren had to reset it annoyingly.

“May you please keep your unknown language minimal.”

“Fine. But Toila will be an independent state. There will be no on-going observation of it. My word is enough that I will obey all these clauses because I don’t want to be at war.”

The stone flashed blue and Forren mentally skimmed through numerous records in his head, determining the best response.

“Very well. There will be no observation permitted within Toila.

“The final term demanded by the Empire will be an immediate announcement to the whole of Rensenfeld that it is now under the control of Riza. The Dominion, Chosen, and current Lord will be involved with this.”

Riza failed to hide the confusion on her face. It was perhaps an unusual term but one of the more important ones, he had been informed.

“I suppose I’m fine with that,” Riza said non-committedly.

“Do you agree to the term?”

“Yes. I do,” She confirmed.

“Do either party have any additional terms to add or terms to discuss?”

Riza shook her head.

“May you give me a verbal answer?”

“No.” She smiled slightly.

“Do you agree that any breaching of these terms by either party will be considered a declaration of war and the treaty rendered null and void?”

“Yes.”

“Then we are in agreement. The negotiation is over.”

And, with that, the man swiped the pen out of the air and slammed the ledger closed, barely allowing the ink to dry. Them and the stone went back into the satchel.

He stood up quickly out of his chair, holding his satchel tightly by his side, and nodded towards each of the people in the room in turn.

“Good day, Riza. Andreyra, Adewyn.”

And left.

\*

By ‘immediate announcement’, Riza didn’t really think that it would actually happen the next day; at the very least, she wanted to discuss with the Dominion and the Chosen about their situation in the province before any official announcement was made.

Leaflets could be seen on every corner, on every building, wherever Riza walked. Some were hand-written, some clearly made with the help of a printing press. Each of them said the same thing: this city and province were now under the control of Riza and the Empire was withdrawing from it entirely.

There was an uproar. It felt like the entire city was against the idea.

A simple switching of the Lord, as Riza predicted, it was not to be. It was an invasion, occupation, and annexation all at once. Riza was the enemy here.

And that’s when it became obvious why they included that term to begin with.

The Lord had offered Riza and her group his house to stay in for the time being, an offer they eagerly accepted.

For Meren, Adewyn, and the rest, they could go into the city just fine. But not Riza. Riza had no control over the announcement; all those who were making it obeyed the will of the Empire, regardless of whose rule they were technically under. Her objections fell on deaf ears.

Plenty of the leaflets contained sketches of Riza, made via a similar magic to the pen thing Forren had shown during the discussion. It was only a small minority but people shared them around and, especially after the demonstration in front of the tower the other day, soon enough, everyone knew who Riza was.

And so, that’s where Riza remained, in the Lord’s manor, lounging on a chair, eating something sickly sweet.

To say she was disheartened was an understatement.

There were a couple knocks on the door to the dining room, and Andreyka quickly let herself in.

In her arms were a couple of thick books, a little damp from the rain because of course it was raining as well.

“What’s the bad news?” Riza asked laconically, not even looking at her.

“People have already started moving out of Rensenfeld. Mostly merchants, it seems, but more people will follow.

“More importantly, I’ve talked with the Custodian and Head Steward and they’re both returning to the Empire. They said, and I emphasise this, there is nothing you can do that can get them to stay.”

*Of course. I guess there isn’t really a difference between the Dominion, the Chosen, and the Empire. They’re all a part of the same rotten tree.*

“Because of that, there’s also a lot of crime happening. People are looting the buildings the Dominion and Chosen were staying in as soon as they leave, and that’s really hurting the Lord’s finances. The more this gets out of hand, the worse off he’ll be and the worse his capability to actually do anything. Including giving people food for free.”

*Everyone’s going to starve as well.*

“Anything else?”

“There’s also been some demon sightings.”

It was like the world went quiet. Riza’s ears perked up and her mind focused instantly on the word.

“But there aren’t any demons in Toila.”

“They were exceedingly rare, yes. Maybe it’s the civil unrest, the rainstorm, or something else, but I have received numerous reports from the nearby farms and villages that there have been sightings.”

“How many reports?” Riza asked, awkwardly shifting around on her chair so she was sitting properly.

“Fifteen, twenty? A lot of them were just verbal reports so I couldn’t count them all. But there’s enough to mean something is happening.”

*Demons. I can do something about that.*

“Ordinarily, the local patrol team would defend the villages or they’d send messages to nearby Dominion or Chosen outposts but these villages don’t have patrol teams and there’s no one who can help them other than us.”

“So we need to do something about it. How far away are these villages?”

Andreya pulled open a book. The pages looked very hand-crafted; they were stitched together, of differing quality, and overall, very makeshift.

A map unfolded from the pages, inked beautifully and with so many annotations it made it hard to follow.

To Riza, with her minimal understanding of the language, it was nigh-incomprehensible.

“These ones here,” Andreya began, pointing towards the villages closest to the Rensenfeld. “Have been quiet. No word from them. They’re likely too close to the city.”

“They’re right on our doorstep.” It was true; the fields practically lead right up to the city walls in some cases.

Andreya nodded.

“All of these, I’ve received a report one way or another,” She continued, pointing out the villages further away.

It was nearly every single one. She skipped over just a handful.

“Shit. We don’t have the numbers for all of them.”

“That’s not a problem for the moment. With only one exception, the demon sightings are either not that credible or not that important at the moment.”

“And the exception?”

“Here.” Her finger slammed down on a village further into the province. It was as far from the border as you could get.

“The report is a couple days old at this point. It would’ve been right around when the announcement was made. No demons were sighted but the population complained of an earthquake that none of the other villages could experience.

“Worst case scenario, it’s another Hotton,” Riza said sombrely.

Looking over the map, it became clear just how large a responsibility she had undertaken.

*Call me crazy but this has to be connected. A rainstorm after the announcement? Potential demon nests after having been unheard of for years? It's an incredible coincidence.*

*And it's not just the timing, either. Those terms in the treaty. People are already blaming me for everything and there's nothing I can do to stop them from leaving because of it.*

The days-long rainstorm certainly didn't help matters.

Changing the cultural zeitgeist was perhaps beyond her capabilities at the moment but dealing with demons? She could actually do something here.

"How many villages have sent a report?"

"Ten villages and a couple farms."

"Excluding this one," Riza pointed to edge-most one, "That's nine villages in need of protection."

Riza mentally counted her forces in her head.

"I don't have enough to protect them if I send just one to each one. There are the demons and then there are the two newbies that I don't trust yet. People will die."

And then it clicked, in her brain.

*And that's fine. I have Daven and Ascles. Death is not the end.*

Riza was getting visibly more excited.

"I have two options; I can either send someone there to defend the village or I can attempt to resurrect them all after they've been killed."

"You're talking about large-scale resurrection."

Riza nodded.

"Daven has the regeneration. The deadline for the skills is just a matter of days. If we transport the bodies with horses, they can make it to him in time.

“In fact, we can station Daven here and Ascles here,” Riza pointed towards two points on the map. “And that would guarantee that we can get to them in time to resurrect them.”

“Resurrection, it’s messing with the natural order of things,” Andreyia protested. “And I’m not even talking morally. When it comes out that you’re capable of this, just imagine the consequences.”

“What other choice do we have? We can do nothing, and they all die. We can only send enough for five villages, and the rest of them will die. Or we do this and everyone is alive at the end.”

Andreyia was silent. She had no response.

“Maybe... it’s not as bad as you’re fearing,” She finally said, sounding uncertain.

“How?”

“Only *one* report indicated any imminent attack. The rest, some of them might not even be credible. There are reports of missing cattle or people. Toila has its own wildlife. It may not be demons.”

“But you said they were demon reports?” Riza asked, just confused.

“That’s what they have been categorised as. That’s what they were filed under.”

*Fuck me.*

“Just how many are *concrete* demon sightings.”

“Three. Four if you include the earthquake.”

Andreyia pulled out another of her books, although it was less a book and more of a folder.

She flipped through towards the most recent section and pulled out three pieces of parchment, each with unique, squiggly handwriting.

“This one is from a farmer. She described seeing something white staying near her sheep but it always ran away. Recently, a few have been attacked and one even went missing.

“This one is from a delver. They explore Ancient locations and he reports seeing something that looked like a demon. It was dark and he instantly ran

away so there's not much information there. The location he gave was just a little way from here," Andreyka pointed to a small village on the map, near the mountain range that stretched the entirety of Toila's West and Northern half.

"This one is from a hunter. He says he saw a trio of demons attacking a deer in this... woods," She located it on the map again. "He hid until they left."

"One lone demon and three potential nests, then." Riza said, leaning back as she thought about it all.

"That's what it appears to be."

"That's doable. That's doable. Call everyone here. It's time to get to work."