

Chapter 71: City

Trotton and Trottor existed in a weird relationship. Unlike the rest of the satellite villages surrounding Trotton, Trottor was closer to being an extension of the city rather than a separate entity. Whenever demons destroyed a village, this led to a natural migration towards cities, the safe havens that they were.

As a result, some places suffered overpopulation, necessitating expansion. This was the case for Trottor, housing primarily families of refugees from destroyed villages all over Moya.

Riza didn't know how many cities there were or the scale of the provinces but she had heard only of Trotton for Moya.

The journey was short—half a day at the worst of times. The land was somewhat terraformed, carving out flat ground for the cobbled road. A dry-stone retaining wall was to their immediate left, holding back the dirt, as the ground just rose and rose into a mountain. Trees dotted the incline, obscuring sight a few metres out by the sheer density of them.

To their right, a sharp drop below. No more than a couple of feet, the ground was littered with twigs, stones, and even fallen over tree trunks. It continued at a decline, this path cutting across the base of the mountain.

The route was surprisingly busy, as well. Wagons, carts, and just random people passed by frequently, travelling between the two locations.

Anere was quite talkative. Riding on the back of Ararth, she happily chatted with Riza, who was walking alongside them, enraptured by the creature.

Saying the group didn't come from Moya was invitation enough apparently for Anere to explain what she knew about Trotton and Trottor, as well as demurely admitting that she was stationed out in Trottor as punishment for disobedience. The fact that 'nothing ever happens' was her prime impetus for helping Riza out.

"I don't know how you manage so many different pets. Ararth is enough on his own! Was it your decision or the Chosen's?"

The Chosen? Her eyes spied the bow on Anere's back. *Pet skills don't require essence.*

"My own, I suppose," Riza answered cautiously.

“You’re lucky. I was meant to do that but...” Anere shrugged from atop of Ararth. “Totally worth it, though,” She smirked afterwards.

Anere was quite talkative, not only discussing pet stuff with Riza but she was interested in learning about the others as well. Sanders was characteristically quiet, and Daven joined him as well, but Meren and Lefie were happy to join the conversation.

The tamer seemed quite happy with Lefie, who was somewhat enamoured by the large bear—she had even let the teen ride along with her for an hour. It was like watching a child fawn over a puppy.

Meren, meanwhile, dragged the conversation somewhere pragmatic. She shot a few looks at Riza when she pushed topics over skills, Anere’s bow, and so forth. Digging for information, but maintaining an appearance of interest. It was probably genuine, all things considered. Both Meren and Anere were happy to talk about fighting.

Riza’s earlier assumption proved correct; there were no pet skills that consumed essence. However, there were none that consumed stamina or health either. It existed in an ambiguous paradigm and Riza concluded that the only reason Anere believed them to be part of the chosen but not the Dominion was their lack of robes.

Lefie’s robe was too torn up to be wearable was their excuse for her. No way they could lie and say she was a physical fighter.

Like with all skill trees, the pet tree seemed to have two main ways of manifesting; that of a large, singular pet who rivalled the strength of its master, and that of a swarm of smaller, weaker pets.

The skills, Riza gathered, were analogous to her [Raise Dead] and [Animate Critter] (passive) skills. Daven, her large, powerful, singular pet while all her critters were that of her swarm.

And, apparently, swarms typically didn’t get to the size that Riza’s did. Anere had asked, rather politely, just how many pets were under Riza’s command and was stunned by her answer. Riza had even low-balled it, saying somewhere between fifty and a hundred.

This resulted in an immediate shift in Anere’s attitude. Very polite, cordial, and even a little closed off. This was only with Riza though.

Presumably, there were implied boons in her number of 'pets' that placed her an order of magnitude above Anere.

Riza just went with it.

Trotton loomed in the distance. The tree line gave away as the cobbled road curved down the side of the mountain.

Large, black stone walls encircled the city. They climbed a couple metres high in sections, but parts were destroyed, crumbling. No repair, no restoration. It looked like the city hadn't touched them at all.

The group took a moment to pause where they were. They had a slight vantage from here, looking down into the maze of the city itself. Even here, there was destruction, although not as bad as some of the villages they had seen.

The buildings were small and quaint, made out of cobbled stone and sometimes stone bricks. A frequent use of food and thatch rooves. Very medieval.

The city was circular in layout, with the origin being the tower in the centre. Three quarters of the city was like this, populated by regular people. The northern half was entirely regular, as Riza termed it.

Immediately around the black tower was where things got interesting. According to Anere, that was where both the Dominion and the Chosen had set up. Large, metallic structures of indeterminate purpose stretched up around the tower, far from reaching the top. They bubbled out into rooms and buildings around the base, reminding Riza of the water plant in Sotton.

The majority of the buildings were still wood and stone, however, albeit a fair bit larger than those belonging to the common folk. Somewhere there was the Head Steward's office, as well as a judicial district that Anere sounded like she was all too familiar with.

So far, so ordinary. It was the extraordinary that enraptured everyone there.

The city was half-built into the mountain itself. Steps and roads followed the incline and an inter-city wall separated this area from the rest.

The stonework was immaculate, not black but clearly maintained well. The houses were gargantuan, taking up large swathes of rock and with grassy fields reaching out before them in an artificial manner. Non-native trees populated the houses, clearly imported from elsewhere in the Empire.

That was clearly where the affluent people took up residence, physically elevated above the common folk.

The sky was darkening. The majority of houses were unlit, the rest of the city shrouded in darkness. This wasn't the case for the higher tier. Twinkling lights adorned each and every building, small but bright. They reminded Riza of cities back home, constantly illuminated.

The people on the ground, visible from all the way over her. Even the ground appeared to move in places, sharp slopes not requiring stairs nor a ramp. A platform of all things slides up and down sections of the district, transporting people, wagons, and anything.

It was like they were living in the twenty-first century. The contrast to the rest of the city was appalling.

And then, the tower. The most striking landmark of them all. Its girth rivalled the mountain, far wider than any building built by human hand. Even from this distance, Riza could see no deviations, deformations, or anything affecting the sleek, smooth, perfectly cylindrical shape of the tower.

The base was wider at the bottom, as if perfectly symmetrical, angular roots anchored it to the ground like fins on a dart. Walkways of metal, a labyrinth of connections between hanging buildings filled the fins like spiderwebs.

The top of the tower vanished into the cloudy sky above. As tall as the mountain range to the south. Inhuman and utterly alien.

Riza wanted to see what was at the top. The urge was strong and her mind was already figuring out what she had at her disposal to do so.

Some of the demons can fly. Maybe I can grow one of them large enough to carry me?

The rest of her party was equally stupefied at the sight, all except Anere.

"Come on, it's not that impressive," The woman said after a solid minute of appreciating the sight.

"It bloody well is," Sanders replied, a rare moment of him talking to her.

"I didn't think it was actually real," Daven commented. "I thought it'd just be like a village but... bigger,"

"What is that tower?" Meren asked. Anere shrugged.

“I don’t know. It’s always been there as far as I can remember. There isn’t even an entrance. Are you ready to go or do you want to continue staring at it?”

They descended down the mountain rather quickly and arrived before the walls while there was still a bit of sunlight left. No one was guarding them. A relic from the past.

They entered what Riza named the poor district in her head. Most houses were partially collapsed, broken into, and in no state to be lived in but as they drew further from the walls, this stopped being the case.

People were milling about, the crowds thickening up as they header into the more populated areas.

Riza could feel herself tense up as the group subconsciously huddled closer, taking up less space in the narrow streets. It felt like everyone was watching her, staring at her.

Anere gave them a quick tour. She brought them towards the densest part of the city, pointing out shops and places to stay for the night while also giving directions towards the Head Steward’s office. Riza was quiet throughout the whole thing, her thoughts heavy in her head.

Since it was late, she asked if they wanted a meeting right now or should they have an appointment for tomorrow. She was all too eager to arrange it herself.

The gig was nearly up but Riza had an idea. She agreed to an appointment for the next day, giving Anere her ‘official’ title of Protector Alum and watched the woman ride off on her bear.

Critters followed after her, as silent as the night. The rest of the group were told to find some lodgings for the evening while Riza chased her critters at a distance.

As Riza suspected, the city was massive and they had only seen a few Dominion and Chosen folk so detection was exceedingly unlikely. Even so, a few critters had stolen a wayward hat for Riza anyway, further concealing her identity.

They appeared to have arrived right in the middle of the afternoon rush, where everyone was trying to get home for the night. Pushing and slipping between bodies, Riza deftly navigated the confusing streets, occasionally stepping to the side to slink into the vision of a lone crow gliding across the sky.

Further and further she went as the crowds grew thin and the buildings larger, more metal. The tension from the claustrophobic crowds was replaced with tension from being caught by the Dominion.

This was as far as Riza dared to go. She snuck into a nearby alleyway and sank back into a critter, an owl this time. Its vision was sharp even in this darkness, and she had it hover at the edge of her reach as it tracked the distinct shape of Ararth cutting through the streets. Stealth was not its forte.

Anere plodded along with purpose. She knew exactly where she was going, coming to a stop before a towering building climbing the length of the black spire. It was multiple storeys tall, stone at the base but transforming into pure metal plates higher up.

Anere zigzagged up stairs, ascending the strange looking building before finally arriving at a door. She pounded on it and then waited, a whole minute passing before she was let in.

Looking around with her owl, Riza confirmed this was the rough area Anere had pointed out earlier, where the Head Steward's office was.

There was absolutely no way Riza was going to have a meeting with whoever worked there so that left one other option; stealing the information. Possibly a book or a map, hopefully. A journal of reports. There was bound to be some useful information.

The biggest problem was doing it without being seen. Even now, during the night, the area surrounding the base of the tower was far busier than the rest of the city.

Riza could attempt to sneak through but that'd be hard. Everlight torches lit up the streets, chasing away the shadows, and Riza had no skills for stealth. Not to mention, the office was high up and open. One person looking up would be bound to see her.

Option two: use her critters to steal what's needed. The biggest problem was Riza would need to be within range to see through their eyes—that was around a hundred metres. Without it, they'd have no idea what they're looking for.

Anere had left by now, seemingly empty-handed. A small thought appeared in her head that Riza quickly smothered. She was disgusted she had even thought of it.

The woman had hopped back on her bear, who was patiently waiting for her, and they were riding back in the direction they had come from, likely returning to their group.

Riza's time was up. She ordered some of her critters to stay and observe while she returned as well.

[Messages] exchanged, Meren had apparently paid for a couple of rooms in a local inn. It was small and cramped, squeezed between two larger buildings, but it'd do.

Daven and Sanders shared a room, Lefie and Riza sharing as well, while Meren had splurged for a room all for herself.

Lefie was already fast asleep by the time Riza had arrived, not even having gotten undressed. She had probably fallen asleep waiting for Riza, the temptation of slumber strong within her.

Not wanting to disturb her too much, Riza pulled up the thick, patchy blanket, careful to be gentle. Her hand lightly brushed Lefie's hair out of her face.

The room was surprisingly well insulated. Peeling off her coat and shoes, the tiredness in her muscles were making themselves well known. Still, Riza delayed sleep for just a moment to check on things.

The critters following Anere confirmed she had returned to where she had left the group but upon finding that they were no longer there, departed south for the night. Hopefully, they'd never meet again.

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"You're serious?"

"What other option do we have?"

The general murmurings and hubbub drowned out their conversation, the group seated away in the corner of the dining hall. Tables upon tables were filled with men and women alike, eating breakfast and catching up. It was so busy, they had to wait for a spot to open up, even though they had stayed the night!

Meren was a bit incredulous over Riza's suggestion to break in and steal from the Head Steward.

"I doubt what we want is out in the open. It'd be crawling with Dominion!"

Riza sighed. *That's the biggest obstacle.*

Lefie was slurping down her stew, the bowl tilted, obscuring her face. It clattered on the table once she was finished. The girl was only half paying attention to what they were talking about; it was far too early in the morning for her; the sun hadn't even come up yet.

She reminded Riza of a tired puppy. *Cute.*

"So we need to come up with a plan." She was far too tired last night to do that herself.

"We don't have a lot of options. None of us have stealth skills," Meren correctly pointed out.

"But we do have options. Breaking down the problem, the obstacles are: getting to the office without being caught, making sure it's empty when we get there, finding the necessary documents, and then leaving without getting caught."

"We could always do what we did with the nests," Daven piped up. "I'll dig us a tunnel directly underneath the building."

Riza shook her head.

"Wouldn't work. The office is elevated off the ground. No way to get aboveground without being seen."

Daven frowned.

"What about disguises?" Lefie sleepily offered. "So they don't recognise us?"

"That is one possibility," Riza said, not discounting it instantly. The details would need to be hammered out, as well as finding out how security checks identity, if it even does at all. Anere seemed to get through just fine but maybe she's well-known around these parts.

"If we're so worried about being recognised, what about sending another person entirely? Like Anere?" Meren added on to Lefie's suggestion.

"We'd need someone we can trust and communicate with. They'd need to know what we're looking for. It's a major liability."

"So Anere would be the best person for it. She fits all the criteria."

Riza chewed on that. The only problem would be getting Anere to steal from the Dominion. It would instantly out themselves as fugitives.

“Say we do use Anere again, get her into the office. How do we convince her to search through likely confidential material and steal something for us?”

The table was silent as everyone thought about it. Lefie very unsneakily grabbed some bread from Daven’s plate. He pretended not to notice.

“Could Anere smuggle something in? Like a critter?” Lefie said between bites.

“That’s... certainly possible. Daven could dig us underground so I’m within range and can see through their eyes. They could search the room without us even needing to be there. No need to even remove anything from the office—I can just transcribe what I see in my journal.”

“How would we get the Head Steward to leave?” Daven asked.

“He’s got to leave at some point. I doubt he sleeps in his office. As long as we hide a critter in the office, we can take as long as we need to.”

It sounded like a solid plan. All that was left was convincing Anere to smuggle in a ‘pet’. Somehow.

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She’s left. The door to the Head Steward’s office closed automatically after he had left, Riza’s mousey critter watching from a chewed-through grate belonging to the ventilation system.

It skittered out, running with its stubby legs up towards the wooden desk and began to climb. While not quite a mouse, its claws were long and sharp, its feet strangely curved and made for climbing.

The Head Steward was exceedingly organised. Tomes and papers were stacked in distinct piles, sorted by both medium and topic. Riza had her critters skim through the top-most item on each pile as she slowly extracted each word individually through her shared sight.

Her brain was struggling to translate it all, her literacy in dire need of improvement.

One-by-one, she eliminated irrelevant topics—although stowed away their importance for later. If she had more time, she would plunge into this treasure trove of knowledge without hesitation.

Ah ha! Finally, she had found what she was looking for. A binder of sorts, filled with separate parchments detailing reports from different people, each with their own date.

Now, all she had to do was search through these while looking to see if any of them mention demons.

She had grossly underestimated the magnitude of the task before her.

Her mind rattled off [Message] after [Message] towards her flying critters. They manoeuvred themselves into lines where they maintained sight of each other, ordered to do a specific action to transmit a message from one to the other like an organic telegraph.

A crow perched on the window, ready to tippity tap the glass to inform the critter—and consequently Riza as well—inside whether the Head Steward was returning.

In the middle of the day, this was a lunch break at most.

Trivial after trivial report was rifled through, mentioning nothing of interest and merely being a routine report made. The first mention of demons was from a village called Hadendorf, although that was mentioned a lone, exceedingly small and skinny beast demon. Not what she was looking for.

On and on she looked, even having to shift to another stack for she had finished the first one. Still nothing.

“This is Head Steward Andreyra. I need your help. I have been compromised. The Dominion is investigating what happened in Kratten and it’s only a matter of time before they find out. I would’ve been asked to step down from my duties if I hadn’t already fled.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to go. My whole world is crumbling down around me.”

The abrupt message echoed loudly in Riza’s head. Andreyra’s voice was wracked with worry, her tone staccato and completely unlike the last time Riza had heard.

She pulled her vision out from her critter and back into her body underground. The tunnel was blanketed in darkness, Daven patiently waiting beside her still body.

She was breathing heavily. Her heart thumped like a combustion engine.

All her thoughts were muddled, the intrusion so sudden and unexpected.

[Meditate] helped to calm her down, compose her erratic mind.

Firstly, she needed to reply. Find out more information.

“What does the Dominion know?”

It didn't work. [Inform] didn't trigger. Riza waited an extra two minutes. Still nothing. She spoke the message again. Again, no effect.

She was sure Daven was looking at her strangely.

“I got a message,” Riza said, her voice betraying her concern more than she would've liked. “From Andreyra. She's been compromised. She's asked for help.”

“Help?”

Riza nodded.

How can I reach her? Who else has [Inform]? She looked at Daven. He has [Inform] but that alone is only ten kilometres. Less than me.

Lefie has it as well as [Seeker Mastery]. Thirty kilometres for her. Tiffany is specialised in psyche skills. [Expansive Mind] is an extra 300% for forty kilometres total, and she's closer to Kratten.

Riza nodded. Tiffany would be a relay.

“Inform Head Steward Andreyra of Kratten that you carry a message from Riza. She needs to travel further West for me to be able to converse with her. Tell her to reply to me that she got the message.”

[Inform] triggered that time, Tiffany receiving the order.

Riza prepared to sit in silence. Conversations through [Inform] was slow by necessity. Not even two minutes passed before she got a response, and not from Andreyra.

“[Inform] failed. I do not know who Head Steward Andreyra of Kratten is,” the mechanical tone of Tiffany came through.

Shit. Riza hadn't fully figured out the criteria for [Message] and [Inform] to work but she had forgotten she had only had success with people she had seen in-person.

“Bad news?” Daven asked from beside her, her voice making her jolt more than the [Inform].

“I’m out of range, and no one else has met her. We need to be closer if we want to talk.

“Did you find any information from the Head Steward on the colossal demon?” He asked.

Riza shook her head before realising he couldn’t see her, and replied verbally.

“No. There’s just too much to get through. I only managed a week or two of reports and that was with barely reading any of it. I need more time.” Her critter lacked the dexterity to search through the piles efficiently.

“We either stay here and continue the search or we head back, then,” Daven concluded.

Riza nodded along. That seemed to be the case.

Or was it? A thought arose in her mind as she looked at Daven again.

He’s level 27. He has skills. He can handle himself. Meren is far better, actually being specialised for combat. I need to check one thing first.

“Send a message to Tiffany. She should be in range.” *Hopefully.*

Daven did just that, asking if she was in range. The silence was awkward as they waited for a response.

“She is.”

Excellent.

“Change of plans. Some of us will head back while some will stay here and continue investigating. Let’s head back so we can discuss this with the group.”

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“What if it’s a trap?” Meren posed the question as the group sat around another table in another pub. Not as busy this time, the morning rush having disappeared. Mosts of the patrons were old, those who had nothing better to do with their time than to drink it away. A game involving differently shaped rocks was happening in one corner.

“If they’ve been caught, the Dominion could be using them to lure you out,” She said.

Riza nodded in acknowledgement. *That is certainly one possibility.*

“Why would they tell her they’ve been caught, then?” Lefie asked. As soon as she heard the news, she wanted them to go help right away.

“Could be like an advanced negotiation tactic. Really get in your head,” Daven said.

Riza had received another message from Andreyra since the first. She acknowledged they were probably out of range. Both she and Adewyn were hiding out in the Caldera, although it sounded like they hadn’t discovered any of the remnants that were left there. She sounded desperate.

The problem required a cost-benefit analysis. Andreyra and Adewyn would be powerful allies. They were both deep in the Dominion and Chosen respectively, having knowledge that would be very valuable to Riza. Not to mention, both were high-levelled. Adewyn alone would hugely bolster Riza’s forces.

An errant thought was if word didn’t travel fast, they could even be used to get information on the Colossal demon, although that was unlikely.

The cost, as mentioned, was if it was a trap. What if Adewyn had turned on her? Could Riza win in a fight against the Guardian?

She shuddered at the thought. So far, she had gotten away with having no conflicts with the Empire and she didn’t want to start now.

But even if it did come to a fight, what was stopping her from escaping? Daven had infinite essence essentially; he could dig indefinitely. It was unlikely the enemy would specifically bring an earth mage to counter them, although Daven’s abilities were not unknown.

Riza even had a non-lethal way to hold off any hostile people. She still hadn’t learnt how to manipulate the air around her but the fog would more than work to restrain anyone she needed to. The essence poison wasn’t an issue either, with the Healer in Kratten able to cleanse them.

The benefits outweigh the cost. Even if it is a trap, I can handle it. Adewyn has already taught me so much about the Empire.

The decision was made. The party would be split up. Meren and Sanders would remain in Trotton and the surrounding villages to see what they could find. They were the least conspicuous and Sanders had the healing abilities in case of an emergency.

Riza, Daven, and Lefie would return to their demon nest and hopefully be able to reach Andreyra from there.