

Chapter 63: Forest

Not even a day of walking and already Riza wished they had a horse and cart again. Unfortunately, they were killed during the initial collapse, their wagon destroyed, and no intact specimens made it out of the ordeal.

Compound that with Riza not wanting to display her necromancy skills in front of the Dominion and that left them with sweet fuck all ways of travelling that wasn't just on foot.

Thankfully, everyone—barring one specific individual—was used to long walks and demanding, physical work and so walked without excuse.

Their journey had been loosely plotted on the map. Trotton had a few satellite villages in a semicircle with the remaining side composed of a mountain range. Hotton was to the north-east and their destination was to the south east. Trotton, and most of the villages, therefore being to their west, meant they could luckily avoid civilisation for this trip.

The fields of wheat had long since given way to tall blades of grass, unkempt and unmanaged for years. You could barely see the ground. Riza's group stuck close to the trickling brook, a tributary of a major river that passed through all the villages.

Originating from the mountains in front, barely peeking over the treeline from this distance, the stream broke off and diverted for a bit. The ground was soggy and soft but at least they could see it. No risk of tripping over anything here.

It was actually her first time seeing mountains. From the urban sprawl of cities, the vast majority of countryside remained in the great unknown. From this little glimpse, the snow-capped peaks, a small thrill shot through Riza. She wanted to get closer, maybe even to climb them.

She shook her head and stretched, the long walk getting to her. As she stopped, so did all of her companions. Daven and Sanders joined her in stretching. They were used to hard work but currently lacked the stats they used to.

Meren, however, seemed totally fine, like she could continue for days, even with carrying Lefie on her back, a position the teen seemed very happy to have achieved. Even now, she was smiling.

“How long it’s been?” Daven asked, looking behind him as if to see where they’ve come from, then up to the sky. “Sun’s low. Gotta be a good amount.”

With satisfying clicks, his joints popped as he stretched them all out, grunting with each one. “Not as strong as I used to be,” He mumbled bittersweetly.

Sanders didn’t say anything, just giving a loud yawn instead.

Riza knew she should be tired—and a small part of her was—but she still had over a hundred stamina left. Watching these two large, muscle-bound men visibly tire before her was amusing.

“Looks like a good place to stop. We should set things up while there’s still light,” Meren said, looking equally unbothered by the journey. Even with her additional burden, she powered through it all with ease. The muddy ground barely made her break a sweat.

“I don’t know what you’re all talking about. I’m raring to go!” Lefie smiled smugly, followed by a curt squeal as she was unceremoniously dumped onto the ground. “Ow! That was mean, Meren.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Meren smiled a smile of self-satisfaction.

“What are we doing? We don’t have any tents or bedrolls,” Daven said, bringing the conversation back to practical grounds.

“No, we don’t, but we have you. I hope you practised because you’ll be using a lot of [Earth Shape],” Riza said.

What followed was a slow but careful terraforming. They had moved a good distance away from the river, finding solid ground, before starting. First of all, the grass.

Everyone got to work with their respective bladed weapons, chopping it down to a length where they could now see the ground. From there, Daven got on his hands and knees, kneading the dirt like dough.

He was able to affect earth in a radius of about half a metre from his hands, an improvement over when he first started but Riza knew that eventually, like Jakks, he’d be able to use that skill without even touching anything.

The ground swallowed up the leftover blades of grass like water, creating a bumpy but barren surface. They did this for a wide enough area they could all comfortably sit and stand in.

Afterwards, Daven began work on their sleeping arrangements; a large hut. He pulled up the ground, moulding the walls like clay pottery, sliding his hands up and down as he thickened them up.

Riza constantly gave directions. Air holes were added all over, supports created throughout to hold up the roof, of which there were no holes in case of rain.

The entrance was small but also temporary. They would be sealed in once it was night.

As he was doing that, Riza's trusty birds had flown away, retrieving bits of wood, sticks and twigs, for a fire in addition to whatever meaty animals they were able to catch.

At level 0, the critters were no stronger, and even sometimes weaker, than their alive variants but with their hive-mind mentality and strength in numbers, they made up for quality in quantity.

A few sticks were noticeably moist and unusable. Riza tossed them away but not before considering whether Lefie could do something about that with [Manipulate Water]. Something for future Riza to think about.

Hut constructed, wood and kindling attained, Riza went to work starting a fire. Easier and easier it became with every time she did this but that wasn't practise but her stats. The exhaustive nature of the work was miniscule in comparison to her stamina, and her improved power meant she could sustain the necessary strength with ease.

And, finally, after so many days of a lack of growth, Riza was finally able to use [Essential Leech] again. She didn't want to use it in the vicinity of the Dominion but now they were all alone, she dropped right back into it.

As they walked, her critters brought her live subjects, destined to be slayed by her hand. [Essential Leech] fed off them, bolstering her stats right at the moment of their deaths.

Still got it, Riza thought as the fire grew and grew before her, consuming the offerings.

"Nicely done," Meren commented.

Diligently, Riza's critters had returned with a few morsels of meat which she promptly got to chopping up horrendously.

Thankfully, Sanders quickly stopped her, taking her knife from her as he went about skinning and cutting up the animals with professional precision.

“You make it look so easy,” Riza lamented.

“If he didn’t, he’d be a terrible butcher,” Meren said.

“You’re a butcher?” Riza asked, the information a bit surprising.

“Aye. Fightin’ demons ain’t our only jobs,” Sanders said, skewering a chunk of meat on a stick and passing it around.

Riza couldn’t help but inwardly cringe, the knowledge of how many germs were all over that living rent free in her head. [Cleanse] might’ve meant there was no risk but that wasn’t enough to overpower her modern sensibilities.

“So, you’re a blacksmith. You’re a butcher. What do you do?” Riza asked Daven.

“Carpenter, mostly. All those tables in the cafeteria? That was my work. Mine and my family,” Daven answered, holding his meat over the fire.

Huh.

“What about you two?” Daven pointed between Riza and Lefie with his stick. “It’s been two or three weeks and I barely know more than your names.”

Riza looked at Lefie, urging her to start.

“You already know most of it. Met Riza with the Dominion. Sent to a quarry. Lived underground for some time, and then we arrived at your village.”

“What did you do before meeting Riza, though?”

“I lived with my tribe.”

“And where are they now? Why’d you leave?”

“They’re gone.”

“I woke up in a forest,” Riza quickly said, distracting from Lefie’s past. “The caldera we’re heading to, that’s where I woke up. Got my bearings for a couple of days and then I left. Not much longer, I arrived at the village and met Lefie.”

“You woke up in a forest? Do you have any memories from before that?” Daven asked, fully enthralled by this information.

“... It’s complicated.”

“I can hardly imagine. Even after a heavy night drinking, I’ve never woken up in a place like that before.”

As they all spoke, Sanders had diligently cut up and offered meat to everyone. Conversations naturally died down as they ate.

Riza was the first to break that quiet.

“Are any of you married?” She asked suddenly, drawing a few surprised looks at the unexpected question.

‘Nope’, ‘no’, ‘there was this girl...’ were the responses that she got. She immediately latched on to the closest one to a ‘yes’.

“A girl?”

Daven chuckled, a bit embarrassed.

“It wasn’t much yet but I like to think, you know, there was something there. She probably misses me...” He reminisced.

Riza’s stomach dropped a little, imagining what the woman must’ve been thinking, feeling, after what happened as she looked at the dead man in front of her.

“How does marriage work? How do you get married?”

“What’s prompted these questions?” Meren asked, getting into the conversation herself.

“Adewyn’s married. Talking about your pasts, it got me thinking,” Riza swiftly explained.

“It’s quite simple. You have a child, you’re married. Easy as that,” Daven explained.

“Wait, seriously? You don’t have to, like, tell the Dominion or something?”

Daven shook his head. “It’s not like they need to know.”

Riza remembered what Adewyn said to her: *‘That’s just what I call her. No one else sees it that way’*. She immediately frowned.

“That’s pretty bullshit.”

“Huh?” Daven was a bit taken aback by her sudden exclamation.

“It’s... sorry,” Riza quickly calmed herself. *I need more information. Maybe something got lost in translation.* “Does anything come with being married or is it only a word to describe two people who have a child together?”

“Well, you live together. Often work together. Have more children together. You’d get a better answer asking someone who was actually married.”

So, no legal changes or anything like that. Doesn’t affect taxes. Just changes you’d expect from having a child with someone.

I guess the ‘wife’ symbolises commitment which is why Adewyn uses it but the lack of a child, or even a man in the relationship, is why other people don’t see it that way.

That’s... reasonable, right? Fuck, it’s annoying that I don’t like. I bet it’s because I’ve translated it like I have. It’s a different word with different connotations. It’s a fucking mistranslation is what it is and shouldn’t upset me.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

“It’s different in the Chosen,” Sanders suddenly said, catching Riza’s attention. “Hafflon’s married—works for Protector Asum,” He quickly added, explaining who the man was. “Has a few wives but doesn’t live with any of them.

Wait wait wait...

“He has multiple wives?”

“Every man’s dream,” Meren scoffed.

Sanders nodded.

“That’s-that’s allowed? To have multiple wives?”

“Nothing’s stopping someone from having multiple children,” Daven said, sounding slightly confused. “Just a bit uncommon, is all. Not enough women to go around.”

That... but- no. Stop your assumptions. If you have a child with someone, you’re married. You can have a child with multiple people so you can have multiple wives. That checks out.

“So a woman can have multiple husbands?”

“Well, technically, I suppose so. Never heard of it happening, though,” Daven said.

Fucking hell. This is not marriage and I should never have translated it as that. Damn Renald, living with a woman in a long-term, monogamous relationship and messing up my perspective on the nature of sex and relationships in a foreign world.

“So, a woman can’t have a wife?”

“Unless they somehow find a way to have a baby together, no.”

That sucks.

“This place is weird.”

*

They were making steady progress. The first night, sleeping on the hard ground with nothing but their clothes on their back, was supremely uncomfortable but they made do. Riza didn’t want them to show themselves in civilisation again until *all* of them were competent in combat.

They woke up bright and early, eager to travel. A few of Riza's flying critters swooped low, depositing a few morsels to cook and eat before going on their way.

The sun rose higher into the sky as they travelled, the air warming around them although retaining a chill typical of the winter months. Riza was thankful her thick coat remained relatively intact, insulating her against the cold.

The day progressed smoothly. The map they had allowed them to steer clear of villages and roads. The plains gave way to more hilly, rocky terrain—they even struggled to hike up a few mounds here and there—and the mountain range in the distance drew closer and closer.

Nearer the base of the mountain, trees sprouted up, culminating in a forest that stretched as far east as Riza could see. She estimated no more than two more days of travelling before they reached the treeline, then following it as far as it went.

*

“Let’s see how much you’ve improved,” Meren said, swinging around a weighty length of rock. It was in the shape of a uniform pole—long and thin, qualifying as a spear for spear skills. Unlike the uneven, naturalistic form of Daven’s very first weapon, this was much, much better.

Weight was good, no curve, felt natural to use. If she had lower power, perhaps the material would be an issue but, as it was, this would do nicely.

For precaution, the end was wrapped up in cloth, softening any blows.

Standing ten strides away was Daven, fully armoured up in his [Rocky Carapace], wielding a slab of stone in one hand and a sword in the other.

Practice made perfect and, for Daven, vastly improved his shaping abilities. He had gained experience in compacting rock, consequently allowing him to shape something much more narrow but much stronger as well.

Of course, the sword was still nowhere close to the thinness of a metal weapon, the inflexibility of rock making such width unreasonable to achieve, so the sword was closer to a club than an actual slashing weapon.

But it could still pierce. And it had the necessary shape for sword skills. Maybe further training, advancing the skill, or another skill entirely could truly allow for Daven to make a perfect simulacrum of a sword but if so, that was far in the future yet.

As for now, Meren took a step backwards, adopting a firm stance as she lowered the spear in front of her. This was an unfair matchup but she couldn't deny being intrigued in how well he could fend for himself. That, and she would appreciate the levelling of her new skills as well.

Daven took his first step forwards, signalling the beginning of their spar. Meren copied him, taking a step back and keeping him at reach, taking advantage of her spear. Here, she controlled the combat.

Daven circled for a few steps as Meren turned slowly. She made the first move.

With a sudden lunge, her spear darted through the air, almost looking like it was growing in length. Daven reacted too slowly to full block the attack, shield swinging in and hitting the shaft, bashing the spear away.

Not to matter, the weapon slid backwards in Meren's hand, instantly popping forwards again in another attack. This time, his shield got in front of it in time,

Again and again, Meren peppered him with thrusts, each one faster than the other as [Flurry of Thrusts] sped up each consecutive attack until, finally, the last one made it past him, slamming hard into his armour and shoving back a stride.

Meren heard the rocks crack from the blow, the speed of her attack amplifying her power.

They quickly reformed on Daven's torso, the damaged ones falling off as streams of pebbles and earth ran up his legs like water falling in reverse. It was an odd sight, but that was expected with magic.

"One to me. Are you going to do something new or just block everything?" Meren asked, not in a teasing way but one of sincerity. After all, they were both trying to improve here.

"Give me a moment. This is all new to me. You just have to stab stuff," Daven replied in a light-hearted manner, taking a step closer.

Once again, Meren steeled herself. Firm grip on her spear, she waited for her opportunity. Her number one goal was to not let him get close.

Once again, she went on the offensive. First few lunges and thrusts were blocked as Meren got a feeling for him, letting her far faster attacks be the definitive ones.

Daven continued to block them, struggling more as they sped up. The length of the spear allowed Meren for swift redirects, moving the spear tip erratically and wide with only minimal movement of her hand.

However, Daven changed things up. The first attack that would've made it past his shield, overwhelming his reaction, was suddenly blocked as a length of rock jutted out of the shield. Not too far, and not too fast, but just enough to get in front of her spear before the rest of the shield could.

Meren grunted as she continued to her assault. More and more of her attacks were blocked not by Daven's slab of rock but by fast moving tendrils of stone intercepting her thrusts. The margins were narrow, and if she was faster, perhaps she could have landed a hit.

But [Flurry of thrusts] capped out at doubling her speed, too slow for Daven.

It was smart, using his shield as a source of [Earth Shape].

Time for a different tactic. Meren hopped backwards quickly but Daven didn't let her get away; he stepped into her range, hiding behind his shield as she attacked.

This time, her thrusts were solely focused on the centre of the shield, where it was the thickest. With each strike, she stepped into them, hitting with as much power as she could infuse in her spear.

Faster and faster, the blunted end of the spear slammed into his shield. Each attack, the force was enough to push Daven back slightly as Meren kept up her assault.

It wasn't just her stats and levels doing the work; [Piercing Thrust] and [Versatile Weapon] amplified her damage while [One With the Spear] enhanced her stats themselves.

Soon enough, the shield was cracking. Rocks were rushing across Daven's arms, seeping through the cracks and holes in a desperate attempt to repair his defence.

Too little, too late. A final, loud crack resounded, Daven's shield falling to dust and debris. Meren's thrust sailed past his arm and, finally, landed on target.

The blow was strong and unexpected, Daven stumbling back a few steps as an impact crater as large as his fist was left in the centre of his rocky breastplate.

"Take any damage?" Meren asked, partly out of concern and partly out of curiosity.

"Yeah, a little," Daven replied, the rocks tumbling off him as he dispelled [Rocky Carapace]. "10 points of damage with that one."

"That armour is really impressive."

"It feels amazing. It's like, I haven't lost who I was. I can still fight. I can still use a sword and shield. It's..." Daven trailed off, looking like he was struggling for the right words.

"Don't go feeling like you're invincible. You still took damage even with a blunt and padded weapon. Could you improve the armour a little?" Meren asked, striding up to him.

"Yeah, you're right. I can but it gets a bit cumbersome. The more essence I put into it, the more rocks that get added. I'm bigger but it's hard to move around in. I need to experiment with [Earth Sense] and [Earth Shape]. See if I can condense the stone or can use sturdier material," Daven explained, reminding Meren a bit of Riza when she talked about skills.

It was always the same with magic types. Numbers, practice, experiments. Meren liked the spear. She stabbed things and they died. Simple.

*

Night had fallen. Riza huddled around the fire, coat wrapped tightly around her, as she warmed up her chilly fingers over the flames. They were well and truly in the forest now.

The leaves lay desiccated on the ground, old and crunchy. The trees stood naked and bare amongst their brethren.

Daven was busy constructing the hut. It would be larger, this time, working its way between the trees. They'd incorporate a vent for smoke, for they planned to have a fire inside it to maintain warmth.

Sanders was busy chopping up a large, woolly animal. As big as a horse, it snuck between trees stealthily but alone. It reminded Riza of a cat, albeit far larger and had a part-time job as a sheep.

Like before, Sanders expertly sliced the borrowed knife through the flesh, handling the blade with finesse.

Lefie was huddled up right beside Riza, trying to absorb her warmth, but Meren seemed fairly ambivalent about the temperature.

As it turns out, the damage resistance conferred by constitution and vim affected temperature as well, somewhat. Meren was still wrapped up in thick clothing but her stats did work to soften the worst of it.

The three of them were talking, trying to take their minds off the climate, when Riza swore she could feel something suddenly. Not physical, but her obscure sense was tingling. Not a demon either.

She looked around, losing focus on the conversation. Even with their barren forms, the trees stood tall and intimidating. They were large and thick, foreign sights to those that lived in cities from where Riza was from. The rough, imperfect bark, the abandoning of their leaves in winter, their hap-hazard and dangerous roots sticking out of the ground.

But beyond the trees, the scattered leaves, the bushes clinging on to their leaves, the grass peeking up from underneath it all, Riza heard—or saw—movement. She thought.

It was dark, hard to make out. It felt like she was being watched.

We're in a forest. Of course there's other things here. Probably just a squirrel. She played it off in her mind, reasoning it away. It was fine.

Night eventually arrived proper. Everyone was eaten, was full, and made their way inside the spacious, earthen hut. Daven closed up the entrance, pulling up rocks from the ground to seal the whole thing shut.

Riza got to work with the fire, having carried the remnants of the one outside with her. She cleared the ground, Daven having already done the brunt of the work there, and placed the flame in a pile of kindling.

She fed it sticks, breathed oxygen on to it, as she watched it grow. Gradually, the frosted air began to absorb the heat, goosebumps on her arms receding as she accepted the warmth.

A few, strategically positioned holes allowed for some of Riza's critter to enter and exit the hut. They were all on watch, vigilant, over a night time, prepared with instructions to wake Riza up if they saw anything unusual.

Likewise, a couple of them were watching the fire, in case it grew too fierce or too small. A small pile of flammable materials was left to the side, free for the smarter ones to try feeding it again.

Some animals, it turned out, were remarkably intelligent.

And so, they slept, hidden from the watchful eye of the moon.

The forest around them groaned and swayed as if with a non-existent breeze. Forgotten leaves on the ground barely moved while the bushes right besides them shuddered from an invisible gust.

Along the ground, a bumpy line emerged. Solid parted, a long mound forming as a wooden tip poked above the surface. It snaked and curved as it grew impossibly quickly, swerving between stones, climbing over other roots while burrowing beneath some.

Like a worm, it slunk slowly towards the hut, digging through the earth before finally popping above ground once inside, subjected to the heat trapped within.

And there, it stopped.