

Chapter 72: Preparations

Some parts of Riza felt worried, leaving Sanders and Meren behind. She knew, cognitively, that there was probably nothing to worry about—they were both high-level and could communicate with her in emergencies—but this splitting of the party left her not at full strength and who knew what the world would throw at her.

They had no specific orders. They didn't even need to stay in Trotton if necessary, although their wanderings were limited to the satellite villages around the city. Places Riza knew of. They were to collect information of any kind. Listen to what people are saying and investigate directly if they could.

The initial journey to Trotton was taken with a round-a-bout route, going from Skalendar to Trottor and then to Trotton itself. This time, they backtracked back through the mountainside path leading to Trottor and continued through the forest surrounding it.

From the looks of it, this forest running along the base of the mountain connected with the *Fyllopoi* forest, albeit with a brief gap separating the two.

Travelling was slow-going but consistent. No interruptions, no demons to fight, nothing. The landscape was difficult to traverse but not impossible with just a bit of caution.

Days passed in the forest. The group talked about Trotton, mostly. Lefie had never been to a city before, and Daven had vague memories but couldn't place them. He was too young back then.

It was unlike what any of them had expected, although for different reasons. The sheer density of the place amazed Lefie. She commented numerous times at her bafflement of how they can all fit within that city.

Daven was stricken by the architecture, the furniture, the infrastructure. Everything. Litchendorf felt basic in comparison, although Sotton did have an edge in terms of plumbing, but that was a unique situation.

As for Riza, she felt herself constantly thinking of that rich portion of the city. Electrical lights, moving platforms like elevators. So much of it, remnants of twenty-first century technology. No magic involved. Like being time travelled to the past. Or, rather, the future, in this world's case. It was complicated.

But the tower... The *Tower*... Just how tall was it? Taller than anything humans had built? An unending curiosity plagued her thoughts. She pushed the intense desire to climb it to the back of her mind. *Another time.*

Even that wasn't enough. The prospect was gone but she couldn't help but wonder how she would do it. *It's pragmatic*, she convinced herself. She was developing new techniques that would help in other situations. This was only tangentially related to the Tower.

Firstly, flying demons. Could any of them lift her up? Firstly, she'd have to talk with Harold and start growing some because she had them all culled before the migration.

Then she got into physics. She had once heard that if humans had things, they'd need to be massive in order to lift them up. Not only was it their size but their composition as well. Bird bones were light-weight, developed for flight. Wasn't the case for people.

Were flying demons the same way? How much of their lift was in excess? Would a simple beast demon not be strong enough and she'd have to wait for a flying greater demon instead?

And that roused a realisation within her; she had never seen a flying greater demon before. Why? The realistic part of her acknowledged that they were likely too large to even exist but this was a magical world so who knew what was possible. The more likely conclusion was one of mere opportunity; when the majority of greater demons are encountered underground, it makes no sense for them to be able to fly.

A bunch of unknown variables with no answers.

How else could Riza fly? What did she have at her disposal?

There was a city where she could buy stuff from. Both her and Meren had a bit of money on them. Could they use that?

Riza thought about physical methods of flight. Planes and helicopters, as rare as they were, appeared almost as quickly as she dismissed them. Impossible notions for now.

An extra ladder, scaffolding. They were possibilities but the Empire likely would've already tried it and she lacked any knowledge to improve upon them. She was a student, not a builder.

Maybe simpler ways of flight? Climb the mountain and glide onto the tower? No, the mountain wasn't tall enough for that, but it did get her thinking. Maybe a balloon?

This felt not just reasonable but *possible*. Hot air balloons had existed for centuries. They were simple to construct, just needing to be made out of a tough fabric. The basket could be weaved with simple wood. A demon could produce the flame.

That was possible. She folded up and filed away that idea for later.

There were, of course, the more fantastical ideas. Skills for flight. She had asked Lefie and Daven and outside of a few stories mentioning people who could fly, neither had any concrete information on flight.

Maybe flight was too abstract. *Think about it mechanically. All I need is a skill that provides a directional thrust.*

Of course, her first thoughts were towards the fire skill tree.

Fire

0th Tier

[Firebolt] (1/10)

Launch a bolt of fire that deals 20 fire damage

4m range

Casting Time: 1 sec

[Solar Ray] (1/10)

Fire a continuous ray of heat that deals 20 fire damage

4m range

Cost: 1 es/sec

[Solar Ray] was continuous but [Firebolt] had a short enough casting time it would effectively be continuous as well. The question was, if she managed to maximise them, would they produce enough force to counteract gravity?

Riza slapped her head; she had already thought about this!

Air

0th Tier

[Mistify] (1/10)

Convert 2m³ of air into mist or mist into air

2m radius

Cost: 1 es

[Manipulate Air] (10/10)+ -Learned

Manipulate 20m³ of air

20m radius

Cost: 10 es/sec

1st Tier

[Alter Air] (1/10)

Modify the heat energy of 1m³ of air by 1 K/sec

Cost: 1 es/K

Requirements: [Mistify] (5/10)

[Identifiable Air] (1/10)

Sense nearby air

2m radius

Cost: 1 es/sec

[Intrinsic Tank] (10/10)+ - Learned

Store and release up to 20m³ of air inside you

20m radius

Cost: 50 es

Requirements: [Manipulate Air] (1/10)

2nd Tier

[Internal Flow] (1/10)

Instead of breathing, consume 1m³ of stored air every minute

Cost: 1 es/sec

Requirements: [Intrinsic Tank] (1/10)

[Lighter than Air] (1/10)

Expend stored air to reduce your weight by 20%

Cost: 10 es/sec

Requirements: [Intrinsic Tank] (5/10)

[Obscuring Haze] (1/10)

Cloak yourself in a haze of air, obscuring your form

Cost: 5 es/sec

Requirements: [Alter Air] (10/10)

[Lighter than Air] already looked like it scaled into eventually making her a negative mass, however that worked.

She did take note of [Alter Air], the topic of hot air balloons still fresh in her thoughts, and saved that for later.

[Lighter than Air] solved her weight problems so all that was left was a method of mid-air propulsion. Again, the fire skills looked like they might be able to work but so did other skills.

Lingering on this skill tree, her eyes passed over [Intrinsic Tank]. She expelled air out of her hands. Maybe, combined with [Manipulate Air] she'd be able to direct the air to propel her?

Maybe I'm making this all too complicated. Air could be made dense enough to prohibit free movement within it. This worked for walls holding back demons and it worked for a cage for herself. The realisation was strong and sudden,

I've already flown before. When the air demon had restrained her in that air cage, she was floating off the ground.

Not even giving any more time to think about it, Riza tested it out instantly. A little bit of fog seeped out from between her fingertips, locking in place as it swirled and then solidified.

She raised a tentative foot, tapping on the small platform gently. [Manipulate Air] was active, holding it there. Bit more pressure... and it held.

Taking a deep breath, she hopped up on one leg and balanced. *Yes!* She was only about a foot off the ground but it was something.

Next test: lateral displacement while I'm still on it.

Prepared to move it about a foot forward, it had only crossed an inch before her foot fell through and she slammed face first into the dirt. *Ow.*

"Hey. Are you okay?" Lefie asked, jogging over as soon as she heard her fall.

"Yeah. I was just testing something," Riza responded.

Okay. That failed. Felt like it stopped being solid as soon as I tried to move it. I guess being simultaneously immovable enough to hold my weight and movable enough to, I guess, move me was asking for too much.

Maybe I just need practice? She shook her head. *Later.*

*

Everything was how they left it. The forest, undisturbed. The *Fyllopoi* greeted them upon return. Harold had nothing to report. The demons were growing nicely, having already filled up some of the empty pens.

Just as Riza was about to contact Andreyra, however, she received a message.

"Someone important has arrived in Trotton. Wears a lot of armour. Meren thinks he could be a replacement Guardian. Has riled up the Dominion. They've been asking around about you. Short, blonde woman with strange clothes.

"Been hearing rumours. People said you had a tarny. Some suggested you ran off into the forest. We think there might be trouble," Sanders' report came through. Whenever something of note happened, or they discovered something, he'd send a message through to Riza informing them of such.

She froze in her tracks, hand balancing on the wall of the cave.

This was indeed troubling. Andreyra had warned them a day earlier that there would undoubtedly be a new Guardian for this region, after Adewyn had fled. It seemed that she was right.

Riza messaged Andreyra with [Inform], relaying the details she had heard. Neither she nor Adewyn seemed to recognise this Guardian, although it was odd for them to be clad head to toe in armour. It might indicate they specialised in defensive skills.

The ranks of the Dominion and Chosen were entirely disconnected to levels. It was impossible to be a Guardian without three boons, putting the level minimum at 25. However, you didn't automatically get promoted upon reaching the required level. Some people didn't even want to be promoted, although that was rare.

That put this Guardian in the range of 25 to 35 but possibly higher. *Probably* higher, if his armour was anything to go by. Comparatively, Adewyn's armour was basic and easily obtainable. Her sword was the only thing that was enchanted.

Riza slid down the wall, sitting to think. The Guardian was coming here, she was pretty sure, and it wanted her. Adewyn was reasonable but, apparently, most Guardians were not.

Lefie was by her side in an instant, hands on her shoulder, her arm.

"Fuck. What should I do?" Riza asked, struggling not to panic.

"We should tell Mesandra. This is their forest."

Riza groaned, remembering the *one* condition she had given to allow them to live there.

She nodded, using Lefie to get back onto her feet. "You're right. They deserve to know."

*

Riza had only been to the *Fyllopoi* village at full capacity once before. It was amazing back then; the houses were large and spacious but entirely made out of wood, woven bark hanging between trees like natural extensions.

The *Fyllopoi* themselves were like Lefie, with the same, unusual eyes Riza didn't quite understand. Mesandra was unique in her clothing representing not only her regal position but the essence of who she was. Everyone else wore textiled, manufactured clothing made from wool, leather, and what-not.

A mass of amenities were the same as she would find in a village, albeit modified for this rural living. Carpenters still existed, as did cooks, hunters,

tailors, and even more. This wasn't like a primitive tribe living away from civilisation but more just an alternative civilisation.

None of this could be found when Riza arrived back in the forest. No, instead, it was much like the first time she had come here; empty and hostile. The dense thickets were back up, converting this land of foliage into a labyrinth of immense proportions.

Like all the fur sticking up on a cat, Riza knew what this meant.

She navigated the maze as best she could, backtracking only occasionally as she made her way to the village.

The brambles opened up for her on the outskirts, peeling away as she entered.

Carts were being loaded up with barrels and crates. An endless flow of people were coming up and talking to Mesandra as she pointed and waved with her hands, directing them. The houses, the buildings, were hardly to be seen.

Riza saw how one, the last of its goods being emptied, shrunk back into the ground and vanished.

She hurried over to Mesandra, catching her attention. Mesandra quickly finished up her current conversation, waving the young man away, as she turned towards Riza, leaning on a thick, wooden staff.

"What's going on?"

"We have received word from your companion Sanders that a Guardian is heading our way," She spat out the word with contempt. "It's too dangerous for us to remain so we are leaving."

Leaving? Riza's brow furrowed as her heart stung.

"That's... no, but- "

"Do not fret. This is not the first time we have moved before. That is our way of life."

This is unfair! They haven't done anything!

"Where are you going to go?"

“Unfortunately, this was the last forest in Moya that was left unmolested by the Empire. We will have to travel further afield, in a different province entirely.” Mesandra said, resigned.

That’s so far. They’d almost certainly be spotted.

Riza couldn’t help but watch children being lined up by their parents, listening all too intently and seriously, not an ounce of levity or childlike happiness on their faces.

“There’s no way for you to stay?”

Mesandra shook her head.

“If we did, once the Empire arrives, that would be it for me. Once you are too powerful to control, there is no hope of living. This has to be done.”

It was like she was crushing her heart. *They’re leaving because of me. Because I went to Trotton. Strayed too close to the sun.*

I have to do something.

“Can’t you hide underground? Wait until there’s no longer a threat?”

“I’m afraid that will take years. The Empire knows this is ‘tarny territory’ now. It’s not safe here. Any day, they could send an army our way and we’d be wiped out before we even know it. It’s rare that we get a warning in advance.”

“Then-then... you can travel underground. Dig out tunnels. It’d be much safer. That’s what we did,” Riza rushed out. It wasn’t safe to move above ground with this many people. She had seen the sheer number of forces in Trotton and the quarry.

Mesandra seemed a bit sad at that suggestion.

“We used to do that. The last time, Jravden dug into a nest nobody knew about. He managed to close it off but not before a few of those monsters made it through.” A deep sigh. “He didn’t make it. We are not people of the earth. The surface is where we belong.”

Riza’s mind was overrun with thoughts, calculations, emotions stringing them all together.

“I-I can help you. I can help you,” She said, putting more confidence into her voice the second time.

“It’s too dangerous- “

“It’s not. I can help with that. Make it so you don’t run into a nest and, even if you do, it won’t be dangerous.”

Mesandra’s brow furrowed as she looked at the woman, intrigued.

Riza recognised that she was being asked to explain herself. Taking a deep breath, she resolved herself to tell the truth.

“I’m like a pet tamer but, instead of animals and monsters, it’s demons,” She said, voice shaking with nerves.

Mesandra was wide-eyed but without even a hint of disgust or revulsion on her face.

“You... control demons?” She asked tentatively.

“Not all of them,” Riza shook her head. “But I can send one with you. If-if you find a nest, or beast demons, he can control them. Make them not attack you. He can even dig out the tunnel so there’s no danger.” Riza rushed the words out, not making eye contact.

“That’s... a lot to take in,” Mesandra replied, sounding a little bewildered. “You can control demons.”

“Not all of them.”

“How many are under your power? How strong are they?”

Riza looked at her, confused. *She... wants to know more?*

“Not many. Like ten?”

“And this one that you have, the one that can order demons around and dig out tunnels. Are the rest the same?”

“Sort of? Some of them can control demons as well but that’s about it. They don’t have the same skills that he does.”

Mesandra smiled slyly at that.

“Are you aware of the Forgotten?” She asked, stumping Riza with the sudden change in topic.

“I’ve never heard of them before.”

“Perhaps you are just unaware of their name. You have been to Trotton, yes? That magnificent tower in the centre, that belonged to them. They lived on this land before even the Ancients themselves.”

Mesandra must’ve seen the recognition in Riza’s eyes as she continued.

“No one knows what happened to either of them. Their relics, the remnants of their civilisations are all that’s left. But there are rumours.

“One of them details the downfall of the Forgotten, the reason that they are exactly that; Forgotten.”

Riza listened, enraptured.

“It was an age of magic, an age of gods themselves. Individuals had enough power to move mountains, level cities, destroy armies with but a wave of their hand. More than one had ambitions of world domination but only one ever managed to achieve that.”

Mesandra chuckled lightly at Riza’s confused look.

“He was, what we know of today, a master of undeath.” She flashed Riza a knowing look. “They said he drew his strength from the fallen bodies of battlefields. Every fight he walked away from, he grew stronger. He eventually managed to amass enough power to rival the armies of all the Forgotten Kingdoms themselves.

“They were forced to band together in an alliance to stop him once and for all. Some say he overpowered them in a crushing victory, reaping their souls for his own undead army and when he eventually died, so too did the entire Forgotten civilisation, with nary a living soul left to remember them.

“Others say the Kingdoms had won, and erased him from history as best they could, lest an ambitious individual sought to recreate what he had achieved but with the lessons learnt from his failure.

“But these are all rumours. No one knows why the Forgotten are as their namesake implies. Maybe it was the demons who destroyed them?”

Riza didn’t say anything once it became clear that Mesandra was finished with her story. As abrupt as it was, there was a reason Mesandra had told her this.

Was it a cautionary tale? Telling Riza that the path she was on was only going to lead to her destruction? She doubted that but before she could ask her to explain, Mesandra changed the topic as abruptly as she did the first time.

“We will take you up on the offer of a demon to accompany us underground. Thank you,” She nodded her head in gratitude, turning back to the growing crowd of people clamouring for her time and attention.

*

No more running.

Riza’s entire life in this world had consisted of running away from problem after problem. She ran from the demon nest in the forest. She ran from the Dominion into the bunker. She ran from the bunker into Litchendorf. She ran from Litchendorf towards Hotton and then she ran from Hotton back to the caldera.

No more running. Riza was going to take a stand, and that required preparations.

A war was won with communication. Her critter army grew and grew and was up to 570 by her last count. Around 200 of them were birds of some kind, by far the most useful critters that she had.

Her plan was similar to what she did in Trotton but at a much larger scale. Trotton, Skalendar, Hotton, Sotton, and Litchendorf were her targets. All villages that surrounded the forest.

She sent 30 critters to each of them with orders to adopt her awareness and warning formations. They would constantly be in view of each other and were informed of how to communicate basic ideas. They’d spread themselves out over the villages and, using the description given by the team in Trotton, would keep watch for the Guardian to appear.

With the remaining fifty-odd birds, she arranged them above the forest for much the same reason but in a higher concentration. Nothing would approach without her knowing about it.

This took some time, giving orders to all of the critters, but it would be worth it. Hopefully.

Next, she had to deal with her parasite issue. She only had twenty-eight remaining and that was nowhere near enough to hold out against a guardian.

So, she got to work. A hundred critters were gathered before her and she diligently began working her way through them.

The cost of each parasite increased so she'd either run out of time or run out of total essence to draw upon.

The hours ticked by as she sat there, the moles, mice, gerbils, guinea pigs, snakes, rabbits, squirrels, and whatever else she had claimed as her own were implanted with parasites of essence.

Daven had his own orders. He was digging out tunnels stretching from the nest and into the forest, connecting them to the surface. They were large enough for a person to get through but not much more than that.

Emergency tunnels, Riza called them. In case the forest was too dangerous, they could escape back to the nest. Daven even made it so they were collapsible; loose rock held up with branches that would seal the tunnel shut when broken.

In addition to that, he was digging out small holes for Riza's critters, the ones with the parasites. To avoid them being killed by anything other than her skill, she was encasing them within solid layers of earth so they didn't inadvertently lose any extra lives.

Harold was helping out with the *Fyllopoi* evacuation. As a being that needed fog to survive, he was given a beast demon large enough to carry him and rode that up and down the tunnels he was digging out.

The *Fyllopoi* waited every couple hundred metres in cavernous rest areas so they didn't get in the way and didn't feel too cramped together. It was a place where they could eat, drink, and sleep when it came to it.

It also allowed Mesandra to use her magic and grow some plants. She had a skill that rapidly accelerated plant growth regardless of the conditions it lived in so they were fine on food for now.

Along the way, Harold made sure to add plenty of holes to the surface for proper ventilation. Eventually, it'd take too long for him to ride from one end of the tunnel to the other. When that time came, Riza planned on raising another humanoid demon and having them take [Intrinsic Tank] to quite literally act as an air tank for Harold, except with fog instead.

The parasite work was slow going. They didn't have the whole day and before Riza had finished, she had to be forcefully convinced by Daven and Lefie to get some sleep.

No word from her warning system but Sanders had informed them that the Guardian had allegedly left Trotton in the direction of Trottor. It was indeed as bad as it seemed.

Riza woke up early. The sun hadn't even begun to rise yet. She headed straight to work.

Not even half of the initial one hundred critters had parasites in them and the cost was already rapidly increasing to more than half her total essence of 14,900.

Still, she endured and sat back down in the divot in the ground and got to work.

Daven, having finished with the infrastructure, was being aided by Riza's remaining critters. They scoured the forest for creatures to ensnare and take back for him so he could grow his stats with [Essential Leech] as well.

While he waited for that, he practised with his skills. His weapon shaping was coming along nicely, taking the lessons from Meren to heart. From that initial advice, they had worked together numerous times since and he was getting better and better. It actually looked like a sword this time.

He also spent two of his four remaining skill points, purchasing [Earth Glide] and [Essence Congruency]. With his essence regeneration, it was barely any effort to level them both to level 10.

The hours passed until, finally, [Parasite] was too expensive for Riza to keep using.

Hidden skill

[Leech] (10/10)

Animation skill (1/10)

[Parasite] (10/10)+ -Learned

Implant up to 280 parasites in summoned entities. When your health drops to 0, automatically drain all the health from a summoned entity regardless of distance

Cost: 15210 es per implanted [Parasite]

In total, she now had 77 parasites implanted in her critters and she was exhausted.

But there was still work to be done. Lefie needed her attention.

Not many skills appealed to the teenager but the ones that did were the options for a level 10 [Double Cast] and a base [Triple Cast]. She wanted to go over them with Riza.

The passive of [Double Cast] meant it was always active free of charge but at the cost of only 50% intensity. Not bad but Lefie really valued her upfront damage.

The upgraded version was more tempting. Cost stayed the same but the intensity increased to 150%.

The issue was this seemed a bit redundant as, for the same cost of a single skill point, she could take [Triple Cast] instead. [Double Cast+] was more cost effective but that wasn't the major thing she was considering.

So, in the end, she had purchased [Triple Cast].

None of this was what she wanted Riza for, however. It was instead to discuss the possibility of [Double Cast] (passive) working with [Triple Cast]. She had already tested using [Double Cast] and [Triple cast] together to create a total of four lightning bolts but it didn't work, defaulting to only using [Triple Cast].

So, Riza took one of her reanimated humanoid demons and used [Raise Dead] instead. Level 5, all stats into essence.

[Lightning Bolt], [Maximise Mastery], [Double Cast], and [Triple Cast] were its initial skills. It grinded [Double Cast] while Riza filled up its essence whenever it ran dry, finally getting it to level 10 where it purchased the passive version.

The results were in; the passive version worked with [Triple Cast]. Lefie thanked Riza, not only for this work but her effort in helping the *Fyllopoi* as well, with a firm embrace.

The day was not yet over. About half of it still remained, however short that turned out to be in winter. The last thing Riza could do to prepare was growing her stats with [Essential Leech] but first, she wanted to test something.

Naturally, creatures that don't use magic have no reason to have invested in essence or spirit but what if a creature was subsumed in the stuff? Surely, by way of osmosis, it would have a significantly higher essence and spirit? Perhaps, even high enough to be her highest stat?

Riza wanted to test it. She made her way through the cave and down into the demon nest, locating the pens. Upon request, Tiffany accompanied her and

ordered one of the farmer demons to withdraw one of the animals from a pen and deposited it before Riza.

It was as weak as any other animal. [Leech] finished it off in an instant. Riza quickly checked her stats and then used [Essential Leech].

Name	Riza
Level	29
Health	2050/2010
Stamina	4688/4744
Essence	14900/14900
Power	5(102)
Constitution	5(121)
Endurance	5(237)
Vim	6(194)
Essence	5(745)
Spirit	108(3615)
Health Regeneration	51038/day
Stamina Regeneration	81601/day
Essence Regeneration	7/second

Damn. Spirit and Essence haven't changed.

No luck. She ordered her demons to dispose of the body before making her way back to the surface.

The rest of the day was spent utilising her critters to grind her stats with [Essential Leech].

The hours passed slowly. She sank into though, chatted with Daven and Lefie, and checked in on the *Fyllopoi* and Harold as she waited for her essence to regenerate.

At some point throughout the day a bird swooped down and pecked her right on the head. She waved her hand at it momentarily before realising what it was.

Calmed down, she watched as it danced around, flapping its wings and lifting its legs in a pattern linked to the village it was observing.

Trottor. The Guardian really was coming for them.

The rest of the day was filled with anxiety from the moment forward. Any minute, Riza expected another peck on the forehead announcing the arrival of the Guardian to the forest.

But that was absurd! It had taken days to travel from Trottor to here. They still had time, however little it was.

The sun began to sink below the horizon once more. The air cooled, growing frigid as its warming gaze left them under the chilling stare of the moon.

The trio retired to their cave where they went to sleep on loaned beds, worrying about the day ahead.