

## Chapter 70: Bear

Back in the cave, the group were huddled around a table, going over their plans for the future.

The forest was effectively scouted and secured. The *Fyllopoi* were on friendly terms and Riza and Lefie had met with one of their members capable of long-range communication so that certainly took a weight off her chest.

Still, Riza made sure to spread her flying critters over the entire shrubbery, concentrating them around the edges as lookouts.

Apparently, no one ever ventured out here by accident. The nearest collectives of people were too far for journeys to be quick or convenient, which was precisely why Riza chose to travel through there initially—to avoid everyone else.

So, anyone approaching this place was likely a part of the Dominion or Chosen and looking for the *Fyllopoi*, or so Riza heard.

Descriptions of them, in addition to the distinctive appearances of demons, were given to her critters and to report back to the demons stationed in the mountain. Tiffany, their resident Psyche specialist, had already been informed what the critters' presence meant and to contact Riza straight away in that eventuality.

Meren had withdrawn the map of the satellite villages around Trotton, unfurling it on the crude, stone table. It had suffered a bit of damage since they bought it but was still in decent shape.

“We’re somewhere over here,” Riza said, one arm propping herself up as she leaned over the map. Her hand circled an area to the west, beyond the cartographic depictions.

“Sotton and Litchendorf are to the north of us, probably around here,” She gestured at the table, imaging the map extended in her mind.

“The demon revealed itself at Hotton so our best bet starting out is to search around there. Unless we physically see it there, there’s no reason to revisit Hotton. That makes these two the next best options,” Riza said, pointing towards Hotton’s two neighbours. She could probably read their names but wanted to avoid the possibility of fucking that up.

“This one is harder to get to,” She pointed at the one that required them to pass through Hotton to the east, “So I propose we head to this one and if we

get nothing, or there's a Dominion presence, then this one." Her finger tapped on the village right on the mountainside.

The mountain range ran the length of the bottom of the map, and it looked like a village, then Trotton, the city, then another village were built right on top of it.

"Uh-huh. And after Trottor?" Meren asked.

*Damn. I read the name wrong.*

"It's called Trottor? Is it named after Trotton?" Riza let her curiosity get the best of her.

"Er, maybe?" Meren sounded uncertain. "Some villages have a similar name to cities, I've heard." She shrugged.

"Yeah. They're like extensions of the cities, when they get too big," Daven chimed in. "Don't happen no more but that's how they came about. Some of them are right weird, like miniature cities that stopped building halfway."

"You've been to some?"

"Nah, but my dad had." *That explains it.*

"Anyway. After Trottor, it really depends on if we learn anything. If we don't, we return here and figure something else out.

"So, that's the plan."

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The journey was rather easy. Cutting through the forest, the group exited onto some plains, rolling hills with coursing rivers cutting throughout. Occasionally, patches of trees or fields of crops or even pastures containing sheep dotted the landscape, farm houses here and there.

And, a few times, there were demons. They stuck to the foliage before striking suddenly, predated from stealth. In only the couple of days of travel, they attacked frequently enough and in large enough numbers they'd be a real menace to anyone else.

However, Riza didn't search for their nests, didn't want to pursue them any further. That would lead to a whole heap of trouble, the likes they had just escaped.

So, they ignored them. Kill and then bury the bodies.

As they drew closer to the villages, the demons eventually stopped attacking, about a day's journey away, snow beginning to fall.

Flakes drifted down onto their heads, the grassy fields overtaken by barren fields covered in white. Walking became harder as layers of snow coalesced upon each other, each step requiring more and more effort.

Thankfully, it wasn't as cold as the last time it snowed, Lefie managing to continue without too many complaints.

Once they closed in on the village, they stopped walking, not wanting to get too close. Instead, the critters would take over from here.

An issue raised back at the cave was Lefie's and Riza's appearance. Back in Hotton, Riza was under no illusions that she had been spotted so quickly due to her clothing and hair; so far, in all their travels, she hadn't seen another blonde person yet.

The average person would probably see them as a curiosity but nothing more while the Dominion may very well have been told to look out for them, especially considering their proximity to Hotton.

Armed with new orders, rodents and birds skittered and flew into Skalendar, slithering between buildings and perching upon roofs as they observed the going ons.

Dominion should be relatively easy to spot, clad in distinctive robes that no one else wore. The Chosen would be downright invisible, blending in with the regular patrol people. As far as Riza knew, however, the Chosen were always paired up with the Dominion.

From this distance, there was no way she could see through her critters so she had to rely on them interpreting her orders correctly, and that had never gone wrong before.

After a little while of waiting, the critters began to return. Although they couldn't speak, whatever intelligence was inside of them could understand speech perfectly so by instructing them how to respond to 'yes' or 'no' questions through binary actions, Riza could ferret out information from them.

For now, it was relatively simple. Riza described the robes worn by the Dominion and asked if they had seen any. Unfortunately, the answer was 'yes'.

*Shit. This one's a bust.*

It was too big a risk. After Hotton, everyone understood why Riza didn't want to risk entering a village with a potentially hostile presence.

So, they moved on. This village was a bust but hopefully Trottor wouldn't be, and if it was... Well, they'd decide what to do when they arrive there.

Days passed as snow continued to fall sporadically. Birds flew from the forests, carrying sticks and firewood with them as the group excavated rooms underground for temporary residence, sheltering from the cold.

The barren fields shifted back to snow-covered plains as they headed south, avoiding any roads when they could. Freezing cold rivers were easily conquered with temporary land bridges.

They had to navigate by the sun, keeping clear of landmarks such as villages, and even with a perpetually cloudy sky, they managed to not get turned around and, finally, Trottor was in sight.

The ground had been in a gradual incline for the last half a day, as the mountains in the distance loomed closer. Patches of fields were dotted about, albeit far smaller in scale than those right outside Skalendar, these equally as barren.

Trees, however, were the more common foliage. Thickets and orchards populated the farms, twiggy and barren, mere memories of what they used to be.

Further south, past the main body of the village itself, the ground inclined harshly. The soft, earthen floor turned to rocks and stone, transitioning into the mountain itself. A forest besotted the hills, as green as can be.

It seemed even evergreen trees existed here.

Now that she was here, right on the edge of Trottor, it wasn't the village that had grabbed her interest but something beyond.

She had seen it once before, from the top of the water plant in Sotton. A massive, striking, black tower, piercing the heavens, the top obscured by clouds. It was barely visible, water particulates in the air hiding it behind layers of mist.

The tower was located in Trotton, built purely from black stone and with metal accoutrements. A relic of a time long past, and who knew what secrets it held.

Riza had some sense of who the Ancients were; technology analogous to her own world, and human to match. Something had driven them off around a hundred years or so ago, she estimated.

But these black buildings? No reference, no information. Complete enigmas.

What was the point in living in this world, having all this power, if she wasn't going to explore these mysteries?

The group picked a soft out amongst a particularly dense thicket to take cover. Daven quickly excavated a little dugout, sheltering them somewhat from the elements. Nothing big, only temporary.

Orders given, the critters skittered and flew into the village. Additionally, Riza made sure to direct some of them towards the neighbouring trees; who knew what could be hiding in there.

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The trees were thick, bearing full leaves in defiance of the winter months still to come. One, insignificant tree shook with violence, shaking its branches once, twice, before toppling over.

"Yeah! Amazing!" A young woman, shorter than average but with a body built for labour, exclaimed jubilantly. She ran over and jumped onto a warm, furry, fluffy back.

The creature, seemingly used to these sudden embraces, reacted without an ounce of hostility or annoyance at all. It was a large, powerful beast, dwarfing the woman's frame entirely as it lumbered along on six legs, as thick as tree trunks. Its maw was long and wolf-like, revealing sharp teeth that could easily tear through flesh like butter.

Its head swivelled around, surveying its surroundings while the bear-like creature growled low in its throat. The woman instantly noticed this, tensing up and pushing herself into a sitting position atop the beast. "Do you see something?"

The bear didn't answer immediately, instead choosing to tilt his head from side to side. He looked about him with great interest, eyes widening as he looked up into the sky. She saw what caught her animal's attention.

A crow, as black as the night sky, sat perched on a branch, utterly motionless. No head twitches betrayed any sort of fear, no wings fluttered in panic, not even a single feather moved.

It just sat there.

The bear turned around, spotting another crow, also as still as a statue itself. The creature lumbered forwards, its head swaying to and fro as it surveyed the scene. Its head swivelled again, taking in everything within sight. Dozens upon dozens of crows flew down to a branch with unnatural precision, only to sit still for a few seconds before flying off again.

The woman was unnerved, her previous joy replaced by unease. This wasn't normal behaviour at all...

But then it clicked for her; where she had seen birds like this before.

A sharp gasp. 'Another tamer'.

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"Hello. We're here on official Dominion orders. Do you mind if we ask you some questions?" Meren inquired.

The house was like any other in Trottor--quaint and homely. Cobbled stone walls, thatch roof, and with a healthy helping of wooden supports all over.

The old, rickety, wood door had been swung open, an elderly old man standing behind it. He wore simple peasant clothes of a dark blue colour, having long lost their saturation. Long, grey hair hung down his back, and he sported several scars from previous fights.

"Of course, of course," He muttered, voice as dry as the desert. "I'm but a humble man so I'm afraid I don't have room for all of you... ah, have a seat," He said, waving them inside.

Inside, the interior was plain and simple—a few chairs scattered around, a fireplace in one corner, a table in another, and shelves lining the wall opposite. A small kitchenette stood off to the side, comprised of just a few counters and a large pot. This was what a lifetime of wealth could apparently offer.

His bones creaked as he gently lowered himself into a gnarled chair sitting at the edge of a rather simplistic table. His eyes were sharp though, and they

scanned every inch of each person there. After a moment, he sighed deeply and spoke up again.

"So, ask away."

Meren looked uncomfortable, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The old man seemed at ease even with the weapons none of them were hiding. An intrinsic trust for the Empire.

"As you may have heard," She started after quickly composing herself. "There was a demon incident in Hotton. An unusually large demon appeared and managed to get away. We were wondering if, perhaps, you may have heard about it? Possibly, it's appeared nearby?"

The man pondered for a few moments before answering. "No, I'm afraid I've heard no such thing."

A little disappointed, Meren shifted her gaze to the rest of the group.

"Thank you for your help," Riza jumped in, giving him a curt nod. She and Lefie had replaced their clothes with some normal looking ones for a small price.

The old man nodded, smiling faintly. "It's my pleasure. If anything comes up, I'll make sure to tell the Chosen. You can count on me."

They thanked him once more, and left the cottage.

"I felt bad lying to an old man like that," Meren said as soon as they were clear.

Riza shrugged. "He didn't seem bothered by the questions."

"Still..." Meren trailed off, not really having a rebuttal.

The group continued walking through the streets of Trottor. It wasn't a very big place, and was easily navigable despite the lack of street signs. There weren't many people out and about, most likely because of the cold weather. Still, they passed several groups of townsfolk going about their business.

They asked everyone they came across. No one knew anything about the demon or its whereabouts. Some even found the suggestion they'd know something laughable, as demons never appeared near cities and they were

basically on Trotton's footstep. No one seemed worried, thankfully. Fear was the last thing they wanted to cause.

Eventually, they reached the centre of town, where a fountain sat in the middle of a square, beset on all sides by shops. Most were closed for the season, but a few still remained open and offered wares and services.

"What now?" Meren wondered aloud, glancing around.

Her question was answered almost immediately, not by any of the party but by a commotion drawing everyone's attention, even the villagers.

Walking through the streets was a bear-like creature, as large as a shed. Covered in brown fur, it reminded Riza of a grizzly bear, only much more alien than that.

Tensing up, she watched the monster lumber forward, coming straight towards them. Its mouth was wide and gaping, revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth.

And, upon its back, sat a woman, wearing a simple gambeson and breeches. A bow as large as Riza was slung on her back.

Instantly, Riza's minds connected dots, not only who she was but who she belonged to.

A Chosen tamer.

Panic flared within her. Her hand trailed down to her dagger, stopping just short as she reminded herself she didn't want to make a scene.

*Deep breaths.*

The bear-like creature came skidding to a halt right before them, the woman on top smoothly dismounting. The bear snorted, nostrils flaring.

The woman was taller than herself, Riza noted, but shorter than Meren. Her skin was tanned brown, her black hair falling to her shoulders in an unkempt mess. Wide, dark eyes studied them quickly, lingering on Riza.

"Wow. Your hair is very pretty," She said.

Riza stared at her, stunned for words. This was certainly unexpected.

The woman quickly composed herself.

"Er, sorry," She shook her head. "Are you the ones who were asking about demons?" Her voice was crisp and clear, as if she practiced speaking often.

"We are," Riza answered, mind so disarmed she hadn't even thought about lying.

"Good. Then let me introduce myself. My name is Anere, and this here"—she gestured to the beast—"is Ararth!" She said with a smile. "I'm the only member of the Chosen in Trottor so if you need any information, any help, I will gladly assist."

Riza couldn't help but stare at the bear-like thing and, more specifically, its disturbingly high number of legs.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Anere said in response to the staring.

"I've seen one of them before. What is he?" Lefie asked, voice full of wonder.

Anere smiled. "He's a Great Bear"—Riza translated the word in her head. "Oh. Are one of you also a tamer? I saw some of your birds earlier," Anere asked, looking at each of them in turn.

Riza nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Then I hope we'll work together well!"

Riza opened her mouth to say something, but Anere interrupted her.

"Now, you were asking about demons? Is there a reason I should be worried?" She asked.

Riza hesitated. Was it wise to reveal the truth? Plenty of people had seen the demon in Hotton and it wasn't like they were going to keep it a secret.

"There's nothing to be worried about yet," Riza began slowly. "There was a sighting of an elder greater demon in Hotton that we're investigating."

Anere's eyes lit up, as if her mind was considering a whole host of things to say.

"I think I could help you with that!"

"You can?" Lefie asked, clasped to the side of a reluctant-looking Ararth.

Anere nodded. "The Head Steward of Trotton will definitely have information on all demon sightings nearby. If the elder greater demon has appeared again, he'll know."

Riza hid a frown. Involving herself with the Dominion bureaucracy was definitely not how she wanted to proceed. But then, the choice was between being ignorant or getting involved with the Dominion.

She sighed internally and looked at Anere. "Very well. Lead the way."