

Chapter 98: Detained

The city was quiet. The streets were empty and the air felt dead all around Riza. She couldn't even hear a scream in the distance—a noticeable improvement to the day so far.

The sun was low in the sky, the horizon ablaze with orange. There wasn't much time left to get things done.

Her critters had worked well, herding the looters and rioters and general dissidents away from committing crime and towards the central tower, standing tall and visible from every open inch of the currently dead city.

Riza made short work of the journey into the centre, paying little attention to the dead lining the streets. She couldn't focus on them right now.

Once she got close enough to hear the murmurs, the muted talks, and even feel the warmth of life up ahead, she began to ascend.

Foggy platform stairs suddenly appeared before her, and she rose with practised ease, climbing above a lowly house to standing high above the streets before maintaining altitude.

She could see the throngs of people now; not only criminals but practically everyone was there, waiting. Near the tower itself, she could make out the ant-like shapes of her critters, standing guard and keeping all the potential troublemakers docile. She still had to work out what to do with them.

Further out, curious and intrigued civilians were clamouring and pushing, eager to see what this was all about. Many carts and barrels and boxes were being stood upon, struggling under the combined weight of multiple people.

She was disappointed to see just how many people were there.

Riza almost missed a step as her nerves caught up with her. One young man randomly looked up and saw her, quickly drawing the attention of the person next to him and like a wave, soon everyone was closely watching the small woman striding through the air with grace.

It was almost hypnotic, seeing heads turn from a macro-perspective. Riza quickly focused on her footing, finally coming to a stop in front of the tower. Like in Trotton, numerous buildings scaled the side of the tower like a climbing plant, with haphazard bridges and ladders connecting them.

Still have to go through them. Andreya said there's nothing important but... Something's up with that tower. After today, maybe I can finally see what's on top?

She dropped a couple of metres, landing on the metal roof of what couldn't have been any larger than a cloakroom. Andreya and Adewyn were there and waiting, the latter an intimidating visage with her armour, greatsword, and overall physicality.

As soon as her feet touched down, an anticipatory silence fell on the crowd. Most of the talking was done by the free folk who chose to come of their own volition, but even they were enthralled by what they were experiencing.

Some of them may be Empire agents. She frowned, feeling troubled.

She could feel her legs shaking, her hands clenching weakly as she swallowed a gulp of Saliva.

Right words. I just need to find the right words.

Riza breathed heavily, trying to calm herself with [Meditate].

"People of Rensenfeld!" She shouted with all of her strength. There were no magic items amplifying her voice, so those at the very back of the crowds were likely struggling to hear her.

"I am your Lord, Riza!" There was a subdued clamouring at that, no doubt due to the self-described 'Lord's Men'. Sweat trickled down Riza's forehead.

"Today has been a terrible tragedy but do not listen to the words of those who call themselves my men! They are traitors belonging to a rogue organisation intent on sabotaging my rule."

There was a fervour of excitement, of discussion.

Riza scanned the crowds, mentally estimating just how many there were. She looked towards the sky, the sun hanging low, near the horizon.

I've got enough time.

"This will not go unpunished. Some of you are innocent. Victims. Others, opportunists. And a handful, ringleaders. No one will return home until I determine which you are."

Immediate disruption arose in the crowd at that proclamation, and Riza's critters sensed this, bashing into people, corralling them into a docile state.

Through [Delegator], each critter had absurd physical stats for a body their size, and ordinary, unlevelled people were no match for them. A bird knocking into their chest could knock them to the ground with ease.

Riza stepped away from the limelight, turning towards Andreyra. The woman wasn't surprised, the pair of them having discussed this earlier, the reason for why Andreyra was there right now.

Adewyn quickly took control of the people closest to Riza, scaring them into submission with a shout and a hard look.

The buildings had largely been cleared by the looters already but even so, they were left in a dishevelled, haphazard state. A couple of them had been tied up and Riza entered one.

It was small, and resembled a collection of offices, mostly. Andreyra joined her as the pair of them sat down behind a mostly intact desk. A single chair had been brought in, and critters lined the hallway outside like lights highlighting a path.

Not long later, a timid looking man wandered into the room, looking about as a squirrel followed closely at his heel.

His hair was long and dark, tied up in a bun at the back. He had a scruffy amount of stubble, and bags under his eyes so dark, it was like he hadn't slept in days. His clothing was ordinary and patchwork.

"Take a seat," Andreyra said, her voice oozing confidence.

How does she make it look so easy?

Although not quite a seer, Andreyra did have [Detect Truth] and she was apparently quite proficient with it.

A list of prepared questions was asked, and boxes were checked or unchecked accordingly. Piles of paper had been prepared but Riza doubted what they had turned around in so little time was going to be enough.

It was a rudimentary interrogation, and [Detect Thoughts] was by no way a mind-reading method. The best it could do was highly suspicious activity but, considering the crimes, and that Riza was the Lord, they didn't need much more than that.

One-by-one, people entered and were questioned. They had to be fast to get everyone but it quickly became apparent, they'd be working well into the night before they were finished.

Even allegedly innocent people were questioned, those who appeared to have no involvement with the looting and rioting, but Riza couldn't risk not asking them.

They were questioned on who they were, what they did, why they looted, if they killed anyone, and if they were employed by the Empire, amidst many more questions.

Thankfully, the vast majority of the killings were done by only a minority of perpetrators. Unfortunately, it appeared to be the Lord's Men who killed people and not a single concrete connection was found with that group or the Empire, beyond the obvious.

Now, all that was left was what to do with everyone. Riza couldn't just let everyone go free, for crimes had been committed, but she also couldn't round up everyone who had participated; it would kill the city's economy without question.

No. Instead, the best she could do was a compromise; detain those she had determined to be the leaders and those who had murdered their fellow civilians.

One of the other rooms that was tidied up was a barracks, and this was where the detainees were going to be staying. Riza had her critters surround the place, giving her twenty-four-seven surveillance and all-day security.

She was going to deal with them once she got a justice system up and running, then she could also fulfil her end of Tanniya's deal.

Although night had fallen, the sky a dark black, illuminated by twinkling stars up above, there was still work to be done.

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Rich red decorated the walls of the dining room, curtains pulled close as the electric lamps hanging on the walls lit up the place. The large dining table was beset on all sides by an incredibly tired group.

Every now and then, Andreyia barely rescued her head from hitting the table, sleep deprivation hitting so hard she was perpetually in a nebulous state of consciousness.

Riza wasn't fairing too much better, the start of the day having sucked out all her energy. She was running on empty.

"They're staying there all night?" Adewyn asked, confirming what Riza had just said about the detainees.

"That's the plan. There's beds and stuff left over. Once morning comes, we'll handle food and stuff," Riza answered tiredly, mind sluggish when it came to details.

"What about in the future? All the people we're holding... they're criminals. Murderers. They need to be punished," Meren said, still somehow not that tired.

Must be something to do with physical stats. Note to self: conduct tiredness experiments in the future.

"Killing them is the easiest," Tanniya chimed in, but Adewyn shook her head.

"Even the Empire doesn't kill criminals."

"What do they do?" Riza asked.

"Whole bunch of stuff. But, usually, they join the Chosen. They've taken a life so now they're forced to protect life," She shrugged, not showing much of an opinion on the topic.

Riza nodded slowly. *Conscription. I suppose when there's a constant war against demons, that's reasonable. Not like the Empire will let them gain power beyond permission, anyway.*

"We're not doing that. *Rehabilitation* is the goal. While they're in prison, they're consuming food without giving anything back. I'll set something up to make them into productive members of society. Teach them skills and give them jobs."

"That doesn't seem fair. They kill someone and nothing bad happens to them," Tanniya grumbled quietly, but loud enough to hear.

"She has a point. If someone stole from a neighbour in Litchendorf, there'd be public consequences. Humiliation or a flogging. Doesn't sound like there's a lot of justice in your suggestion," Meren said, crossing her arms. Her face was inscrutable.

"What else should I do? If I kill them, they're now useless!"

“Not necessarily. Death isn’t the end when it comes to you.”

Shit. She’s right. I’ve been thinking of this in terms of human justice systems but there’s magic!

I wouldn’t even need to force people to fight demons. There’s plenty of non-combat roles the system facilitates. Construction, communication, agriculture... Justice can be administered without rendering them useless.

“You’re right. Thanks, Meren. I’ll take that into consideration. Maybe the harshest crimes come with the consequence of working for me directly. The lack of freedom is punishment enough.”

And the religious belief they can no longer be reincarnated.

Hmm. That’s actually quite serious. An action in one life screws up all your lives in the future.

Well, there’s still time until implementation.

“Anyway, moving on from that, there’s still the dead in the streets that we need to address. The graveyard is big but it was mostly full last time I was there. We’d need to expand it a lot and Daven’s not here yet.”

“Ascles can resurrect them!” Lefie said, sitting besides Riza. She had been looking fairly clueless throughout the discussion so far.

That’s... an option. With [Heal+], there’s certainly enough essence for [Resurrect], but essence isn’t the problem.

Riza shook her head.

“That’s not an option. I won’t resurrect anyone.”

“What? But why?” Lefie asked firmly, eyes pleading.

“Because,” Riza sighed, remembering past experiences. “It’s against their religion. A lot of people don’t actually want to be resurrected.”

“But-but... They were killed! There are children!”

“I know. But I don’t know how people will react. I don’t know what the impact of unfettered resurrection looks like, and I don’t want to find out.

“It’s best that nobody but us know that Ascles can do that.”

“But... You’re unbelievable!” Lefie huffed, sliding out her chair and stomping away angrily.

Silence reigned for a whole minute before someone spoke.

“We should still move the bodies,” Andreyra said tiredly. “The less people see of them, the better.”

There were nods, and it was quickly established that there were plenty of abandoned wagons and carts in the city that through their combined might, if they worked throughout the night, they should be able to transport hopefully all the bodies to the graveyard.

Riza sent an [Inform] to Harold, telling him to come to the graveyard. He had neither the skill nor the essence to bury everyone in a reasonable amount of the time, but he could at least encase them in stone to hide them from the populace and slow down their decay, as well as preventing general predation from any ravenous animals.

An [Inform] was also sent towards Daven to start bringing the enclave of demons they had set up back to the main nest.

There was still work to be done.

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Riza’s feet sunk into the soft, plush rug carpeting the hallway. The lamps flicker, bathing the corridor with a soft, warm glow. The window at the end was pitch black, as if it was a doorway into the abyss.

Except, I’ve been to the abyss, and it’s nothing but white.

She knocked gently on the large, oaken door, announcing her presence but not waiting for a reply.

Easing it open, the room was dark, with only a lamp on Lefie’s bedside table on. She was sitting on the bed, sulking, barely looking up at the intruder.

Quietly, Riza approached the bed and sat on it, feeling the soft fabric giving way under her weight. It was nothing short of luxurious, the way the silk sheets stretched out and glistened from the slight light.

Lefie evidently was trying to appear as if she wasn’t looking at Riza, her glances only occasional.

“You’re not talking with me. That’s fine,” Riza began, her tone smooth and gentle. Her hands were in her lap, and she took a deep breath. “I don’t know if resurrecting or not resurrecting everyone is the right decision. I don’t like having that responsibility.

“When people are resurrected, you don’t know how they are going to react. When... when I raised Tanniya and Klannar, the others with them, they reacted really badly. They called me a monster, said that I ruined their future lives. I don’t want to go through that again.

“Not to mention, I have no idea what the long-term consequences will be. If I resurrect everyone who died just today, people are going to start asking for me to resurrect people who died yesterday, or the day before, or even a year before.

“And the future as well. How will people change if they know that death is only a temporary inconvenience? Why bother trying harder to prevent death when resurrection is free? Suddenly, more people start dying because fewer safety precautions are being taken and that creates induced demand for Ascles abilities.

“Ascles will rely on me to have the essence to resurrect people. What if there’s now too many people? How do I decide who to resurrect? Money? Strength? What they can do for me? There’s no ethical way to decide it.

“So, I just resurrect nobody. It’s the only way to keep it fair and equal,” Riza finished her monologue, explaining her thought process.

“What about me?” Lefie asked in a tiny voice, as if hiding the question.

“Huh?”

“What about me? Why did you bring me back? Why do I get to live and everyone else doesn’t? Why am I special?” Lefie cried out, emotions high.

“Wha-what do you think happens when you die?” Riza asked.

Lefie furrowed her brow and finally turned to look at Riza. Faint trails of tears stained her cheeks.

“Wh... why-” She caught herself. “When people die, their souls become one with the ground, giving way for new life to form.”

“Does that happen with people from the Empire?”

Lefie nodded. "All life is a gift from the Old One, and so, to the Old One it returns."

"People from the Empire believe in reincarnation. When their old life ends, they're born in a new body, with a new life. Either way, death isn't the end for people. It can also be the start of something new."

Lefie took a few seconds to ponder upon that.

"They're still dead, though."

"Then we need to try our hardest to not let any more die."

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Tiny pebbles and rocks bounced and vibrated on the rough ground as a solid wall of stone extruded from the earth, Harold's hands guiding it as it covered the last opening in the side of the massive cavern that made up the city graveyard.

Riza wiped the sweat off her brow, her eyes straining to see in the darkness. There was no light in the graveyard, with the far walls fading to blackness. Only the white moonlight lit up the ground she was standing on, and faintly at that.

The moon was high in the sky, half of the night already passing them by. She was absolutely knackered.

"Return to the nest. Seal up the opening but leave the tunnel until tomorrow," Riza waved away Harold as she slunk back into the exposed tunnel in the wall, promptly obeying Riza's orders.

Tanniya and Adewyn had both left to get some much needed rest, leaving only Riza and Meren in the graveyard, both of them standing before the newest grave. A headstone was buried in the ground, denoting who was buried here.

Sanders.

The name was heavy in her heart, and Riza just stared at the upturned dirt. They had buried him together, without Harold's help. A human touch. It reminded her of the last time she did this, back in the quarry with Jakks.

"I wish I got to know him more," Meren commented, taking a step closer to Riza. "We worked together a lot but he was always a quiet man. I suppose I

should be happy for the time we spent together after Litchendorf. The time *you* gave him.” Her tone was wistful.

“He used his last moments to say the same things that Death said to me. That all this death and destruction was my fault.” Riza was too tired to inject any emotion into her words.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“It’s hard to ignore. All those bodies-people, we spent the past few hours moving... None of them would be dead if I hadn’t done what I’ve done, set up shop in this city. It feels... I don’t know. Anything I say is just an excuse. Just me ignoring the situation that people are dead and it’s my fault.” A heavy sigh.

Meren inched closer.

“I don’t know much about magic or what you can do. My opinion isn’t much, but I agree with Lefie. If you believe they’re dead because of you, what’s a better option than resurrecting them?”

“I know that you have your reasons, that there are obstacles, but you’re unlike anyone else I have ever known. Both Adewyn and Andreyra are from the Seat of the Regent and even they’re impressed with what you can do!”

“The reason why I joined you back in Litchendorf was to save lives. I thought, ‘you’re strong, you can help me to become stronger so I can protect people’. Back then, I was thinking of rainy days, storms, when demons attack our towns. If I could fend them off all by myself, my decision to leave with you would’ve been justified.”

“My reason hasn’t changed, but I realise I was thinking too small. If it was up to me, I’d still be walking around Moya, dealing with a demon nest every few days. You’ve dealt with multiple in the same day you’ve killed... whatever that thing was, and you’re just going to do more from here.”

“I guess, what I’m trying to say, I’d like you if you resurrected everyone who died today. I think they deserve it. But I understand if you won’t, because everything you have just have gotten us this far, and everything you will do will get us even further in wiping out the demons.”

“I trust your intentions. You’ll do the right thing in the end.”

With that, Meren was close enough that she laid a hand on Riza’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. The contact was unfamiliar, but ultimately

welcomed by Riza, savouring the warmth as Meren let go and walked away, leaving Riza all alone in the graveyard.

She turned to look at the wall, where just behind it, she knew wagons upon wagons of people were waiting to be buried.

The right thing in the end...

Riza brought up Ascles skills and looked at [Resurrection].

[Resurrection] (1/10) -Learned

Bring an entity that has died within the past 1 day back to life

Casting Time: 1 hour

Cost: 20000 es

Requirements: [Resuscitate] (10/10)

He hadn't levelled it at all but with [Maximise Mastery+] and his 47,000 essence, that's a time limit of nearly five days.

If instead, *she* was to use Resurrection, that was a time limit of 4 days. If she levelled it up, her current essence would limit her to around 13 days.

But she had 95 spare stat points, and would gain additional levels to unlock the skill in the first place.

If I had to estimate, at the level when I would finally get [Resurrection], I'd probably have a time limit of around 20 days.

If I did it in the zone of life, that's doubled to 40 days.

But at most, it's 24 people per day I could bring back. If there was a skill that reduced the casting time...

Chanting

0th Tier

[Word of Brevity]

Assign a [command word] to an active skill. Multiply the Casting Time by 0.98 when the [command word] is used

Cost: 1 es

[Word of Power]

Assign a [command word] to an active skill. Multiply the intensity by 1.02 when the [command word] is used

Cost: 1 es

[Word of Time]

Assign a [command word] to an active skill. Multiply the duration by 1.02 when the [command word] is used

Cost: 1 es

Brawling

0th Tier

[Alteration Mastery] (10/10) - Learned

Control the strength of an active essence skill with finesse

[Seeker Mastery] (10/10)+ -Learned

Multiply range of an active essence skill by 5

Cost: 5 times original skill cost

[Maximise Mastery+] -Learned

Multiply intensity of an active essence skill by 7

Cost: 7 times original skill cost

1st Tier

[Distinguish Life] (10/10) -Learned

Extend a continuous, single-target essence skill to affect 2 more entities. Additional entities experience 100% of the skills effect

Cost: Original skill cost per additional entity

[Double Cast] (1/10)

Activate a discrete skill 3 times simultaneously

Cost: 1.9 times of original skill cost

Hidden Skill

[Alteration Mastery] (10/10)

[Seeker Mastery] (10/10)

[Maximise Mastery] (10/10)

[Manifold Mastery] (10/10)+ -Learned

Control the intensity and range of a skill through -10% to +10%

2nd Tier

[Range Compression] (10/10)+ -Learned

Compress an active essence skill to increase intensity by 20% for every metre reduced

[Overcharge] (1/10)

Increase active essence skill Casting Time by 100% to increase intensity by 5%

Cost: 1.2 times original skill cost

[Triple Cast] (1/10)

Activate a discrete skill 5 times simultaneously

Cost: 1.9 times of original skill cost

Requirements: [Double Cast] (10/10)

Hidden Skill

5 metamagic skills (10/10)

[Practised Essence] (1/10)

Metamagic skill intensity is increased by 2% for each metamagic skill level

3rd Tier

[Quadruple Cast] (1/10)

Activate a discrete skill 7 times simultaneously

Cost: 1.9 times of original skill cost

Requirements: [Triple Cast] (10/10)

[Acceleration Mastery] (1/10)

Multiply Casting Time of an active essence skill by 0.96

Cost: 1.08 times original skill cost

[Environmental Negation] (1/10)

Active essence skill affects the environment at 90% intensity

Cost: 1.1 times original skill cost

Requirements: [Alteration Mastery] (10/10)

In fact, there were two.

I can save them all. If I want to do the right thing, I have to.

Which means, I have weeks to solve all the problems with free, unlimited resurrection. Somehow.