

## Chapter 66: Birth

The house was clearly old. The rotting, wooden floorboards creaked below foot, the pitch-black stone bricks crumbling all over, and there were only a few holes in the black shingles that made up the roof.

Vegetation was growing wildly around it, vines creeping up the side of the wall and grass as high as your waist.

Voices can be faintly heard from outside, the sound of a quiet gathering echoing from inside.

A fire flickered inside, casting strong shadows on its surroundings. Bundled up in heavy, winter clothes, some even huddling together, a group of five sat around the flame, soaking in its warmth, escaping the frigid air outside.

The lumbering motions of demons outside could be heard. The frequent crunch of dry leaves, subdued footfalls of large beasts resounding through the room. A constant reminder of where they were.

"It's... insane," Daven said, not looking anywhere but the fire in front of him. "We-we're trying to create demons. *Demons.*" His emphasis was quiet, the extra meaning imparted on only himself.

"Fuckin' insanity," Sanders chimed in.

There were no chairs, all furniture long gone. Everyone was sitting on the floor, their bedrolls placed underneath to offer some level of comfort.

Lefie was sitting practically on top of Riza, the young woman's arms wrapped around the Lefie's waist, sharing their body heat.

"Not much different from farming cattle," Riza said, imparting her views on the matter. Half her focus was on the conversation, half sleepily focused on the teenager in front of her. This was nice.

Lefie yawned, eyes barely open as she lazily stared at nothing.

"Cattle don't try to kill you. Not unless you provoke 'em first," Sanders said, rubbing his hands.

"We're meant to be killing demons, not growing them. Even this is unnatural," Daven said, looking around. "Demons, right on our doorstep, and no reaction. We shouldn't be here."

As if to emphasise his point, a sudden scrambling of feet and claws scuttled past the building, the room silent for a moment.

*Unnatural. Caging, selective breeding, periodically milked or sheared or whatever. Farming is unnatural. Farming demons just gives a different resource.*

Riza sat on the thought for a minute. There was an easy option, to end the debate, the conversation. All she had to do was to order Daven and Sanders, to agree with her, to not disagree, to not talk about their issues, or any other order like that.

She had done this a few times before. With [Raise Dead] came loyalty. For something lacking awareness like the beast demon, even it knew not to attack Riza.

For something far more complex, like a human, a feeling of trust was engendered. Without really knowing Riza, the pair of them had willingly, and easily, left their village and delved into dangerous depths without much objection.

They still kept their own mind, own opinions. Riza suspected, if they were simply ordinary people and not ones who had levels, they'd have been far more hesitant, likely outright disobeying the things that they had done.

But that wasn't all the changes [Raise Dead] had made. Loyalty was more complex than just a feeling of trust. The skill implanted something in their minds at a fundamental level, rewriting their wills, ambitions, volition.

She had done it a few times already. Orders. Say something as an explicit order, they would do it. Riza hadn't brought it up to anyone else, and she didn't know if either Meren or Lefie noticed.

The boys would do something without complaint, instantly, if she phrased it correctly.

So far, she had only ordered minor things, things that she could easily lean on their loyalty to get them to do anyway. The orders merely expedited the process.

Underneath his stoic veneer, Sanders was fuming. He had barely said a word since they left Harold underground.

They were both morally against this plan of action. She could order them to do stuff, to not argue, but they'd keep their opinions. Was that a violation of their free will?

Or, Riza could order them to change their opinions entirely. Order them to see things her way, to understand the necessity of farming demons. To change their minds.

The thoughts made her heart race. Lefie could probably feel the quickened breathing on the back of her head.

She couldn't do that. The boys were their own people, as dead as they may be. Riza couldn't overwrite their personalities, their thoughts. Mould them into what she wanted.

She scoffed internally. She'd be a hypocrite if she did. She was better than that.

"It's safe. The tunnels are closed off. Harold is entirely loyal to me. No demons will leave the caldera," Riza said.

"You can't know that. They're *demons*. No one knows how they work. What if Harold is lying or-or, he doesn't know what he's talking about? What if one of your plans doesn't work? The demons escape? What about a storm? Will they stay the same?" Daven rushed, his thoughts tumbling out.

Riza internalised everything. He had complaints and she should acknowledge them.

That was hard. Daven was wrong, in multiple ways. Demons... they were just animals. They functioned logically. The loyalty, the information, she felt calm in her knowledge.

A storm was the only real weak point. She still didn't know how to affect them. Was it simply an opportunity? Rain means less fire so better to go all out there? Or was there a physiological effect involved? Something that couldn't be overwritten with orders.

Riza drowned out her surroundings as her brain kicked into gear, thinking of solutions. Walls around the village. Buffing the walls around the caldera. Using Lefie to stop a storm entirely. Even more options with what Sanders could eventually do.

"Riza... Riza will handle it," Lefie said sleepily.

“It’s... unusual,” Meren finally joined in the conversation, having been silent so far. “It’s safe, yes? You have reason to believe it’s safe? Under control?” She looked directly at Riza.

A small nod.

“It’s necessary for us to get stronger?” Another confirmation.

“I trust you.”

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“How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Sanders said in reply to Riza.

Down below, in a small, earthen cage, sat a beast demon. It sulked about, head low to the ground, walking idly.

Sanders didn’t seem fine. He was pacing up and down the walls, unable to keep still.

“Just like we practised. Shouldn’t be any different,” Riza said, in an attempt to reassure him. She didn’t know what bothered him, and he didn’t want to say.

There had been a lot of testing beforehand. For days, Riza had Sanders learn and practise [Resuscitate]. It took a while before his first success, unable to utilise Riza’s understanding of biochemistry and the mechanics of how life worked.

Instead, he drew upon two wells of knowledge: that of the spiritual and cultural, how souls worked, and the innate knowledge taking the skill lent him. The latter informed him of how to mould the essence to his will while the former was a direction.

Trial and error but, eventually, he did it. A small, squirrel-like animal was pronouncing about like it was alive. It skittered away as soon as it woke up. Sanders confirmed it drew no essence from him. An independent being.

This was larger, its results more impactful. All they had to do was wait for Meren to arrive.

The test wasn’t that complex. Boar in tow, Meren can jogging towards the cage, jumping up the earthen steps with remarkable alacrity, and laid the beast down before Riza and Sanders.

Riza jumped on the creature, helping to hold it down as she activated [Essential Leech]. Her dagger killed it quickly afterwards, her enhanced power sliding the blade deep into the boar's head and neck.

“Now. Do it,” Riza said, taking a step back. Sanders took her place over the corpse. He laid his hands on the boar, emulating what Riza did with her reanimation skills.

A minute passed. The boar stood up, legs shaky but as thick and powerful as it had been just minutes earlier.

Riza wasted no time, grabbing onto it again as she activated [Essential Leech] and then forcefully kicked the large creature into the cage before them.

The boar hardly knew what hit it.

It landed with a heavy thud, a small puff of dust blowing up around it.

The beast demon, with whatever senses it had, immediately turned toward its prey. Body low to the ground, it crept towards the source of the sound with caution until, suddenly, its body shifted like lightning.

Tension spread throughout its muscles before it sprang like a coiled spring, lunging towards the confused and startled boar. Its large mouth housed innumerable teeth, all of which were expertly used to pierce the boar's flesh.

Large chunks were torn from the creature, squeals of pain echoing out of the cage.

Sanders forced himself to watch, face stoic. Riza was focusing on her journal held up in front of her and a floating blue box to her right.

<b>Name</b>	Demon
<b>Level</b>	4
<b>Health</b>	419/420
<b>Stamina</b>	19/20
<b>Essence</b>	20/20
<b>Power</b>	
<b>Power</b>	21(21)
<b>Constitution</b>	1(1)

<b>Endurance</b>	1(1)
<b>Vim</b>	1(1)
<b>Essence</b>	1(1)
<b>Spirit</b>	1(1)
<b>Regeneration Rates</b>	
<b>Health Regeneration</b>	100/day
<b>Stamina Regeneration</b>	100/day
<b>Essence Regeneration</b>	100/day

*No level up.* Riza checked her stats. *Power up by 2.* [Essential Leech] worked both times. She looked down at the demon, looking a bit aimless with what to do with the corpse. It wasn't eating it, nor was it attempting to drag it back to its nest.

Meren sighed, leaning over the wall to look at the demon. A crow attempted to land on her shoulder but she swatted it away, used to their annoying habits by now.

"Do we need more?"

They did, and Meren diligently ran off again, following Riza's critters that she had sent with her.

They conducted the test a few more times, five in total; it took time for Meren to collect all their test subjects.

[Essential Leech] always worked, giving Riza the quantity of stats she predicted. The demon, however, didn't level up at all. She had yet to determine whether it was because the boars gave too little or no experience at all. More data was needed.

Sanders had gotten some practise with the [Resuscitate] skill, albeit reluctantly. He was still uncomfortable with using the skill but he pushed through anyway.

All-in-all, a productive day.

Deep underground, sequestered away from any entrance to the surface, sat a large, hollowed-out cave. A deep pit, filled with squirming bodies. Footsteps, clawing, wailing—all manner of sounds resounded. It was a hellish cacophony of animalistic echoes.

Lefie could hear it from dozens of strides away, a wavefront of sound she was pushing past.

At her side, in this empty maze of tunnels, was Harold. Strikingly tall, sinewy and with ropey muscles emphasising his skeletal body, each step of his was two of hers, his hand as large as her head.

“And where are we going now?” Lefie asked, a smile on her face. She could see only ten metres in this fog-filled habitat.

“The farms,” The demon answered succinctly, his voice monotone and impersonal.

“Farms?”

They rounded a corner and there was her answer.

Dozens upon dozens of brown, grey, a little bit of purple bodies lay before her, an eternal struggle to move.

Lefie gasped, the sight taking her breath away. She froze for but a moment, not knowing what she was seeing.

Around the pit was an elevated walkway, connecting to the rest of the nest. More demons, ones she had never seen before, stood guard.

They were large, reminding Lefie of greater demons, but with the slim form of Harold by her side. The bones in their arms were as long as her, with an extra bone and two elbows. Four short, stocky legs sat beneath a massive torso with a large, gaping hole inside.

Rib joined with thin, white flesh, outlining the bones, housed a chest cavity big enough for multiple beast demons.

They sat like sentries upon their watch, sitting with their hands on the ground like a mutated cat.

In a word, disgusting. In another, fascinating. Contradictory revulsion and intrigue pulled at Lefie as she found herself walking towards the closest of these demons.

“What are they?” She asked,

“Farmers.”

She accepted the answer happily, lost in her observations.

As she drew closer, the demon, standing as still as a statue, suddenly turned its head to regard Lefie.

She startled, drew back a little, before letting out a relieved sigh. It hadn't moved, just its head.

And even its head was skeletal. She could see the depression in the taut, white skin where the eye sockets were, the shape of its skull reminding her of a deer., albeit far larger than any she had ever seen.

“Wha-what do they do?” She had to ask, turning around to look at Harold, who hadn't moved from his spot.

“Feed. Move. Guard,” He listed.

“And them?” She asked, pointing at the mass of non-white bodies below.

“How are they alive? They're not demons, right?” They looked distinctly more animal than demon, their colourations exuding life.

“Farmers,” Harold said, looking at the tall demons. “Feed. Keep alive.”

She couldn't help but feel a little awe, not at the demons but at the animals; managing to survive underground, in fog, was remarkable. How was it even possible without skills?

But all this intrigue and awe was drowned out as realisation and understanding took hold.

Farms. Underground. In fog. They were farming animals for beast demons. Even if they sealed up entrances to the surface, a nest could still grow.

Back in Hotton. There was a seemingly endless amount of demons. They never stopped. Was this why?

Although she wasn't as good as it as Riza was, Lefie could vaguely sense the presence of demons. It helped with her aiming, letting her lightning strike true. Greater demons were easier, their strength a blinding light in the darkness, but she was good enough to sense beast demons as well.



But not these. When she closed her eyes and focused on the feeling, she could sense Harold, and the farming demons, but none of the animals below.

A blind spot. You had to see them to know where they were.

Demons populated the tunnels of the nest like a festival was happening. As soon as she had descended, it was a fight to even move.

But, the further they walked, the less and less dense the demons were until, eventually, there was no one else but them.

This farm was on the periphery of the nest. The tunnels were a maze, endlessly long and impossible to navigate without a map—or a demon.

“Are there others? More farms here?”

“Yes.”

Lefie caught herself this time, not letting her shock show on her face.

At Hotton. Litchendorf. They never destroyed the nests. There'd still be hives for parasites and farms for bodies. All it needed was a humanoid demon to return and take charge.

Lefie's eyes went wide. Hotton. That happened in Hotton, exactly like that.

One of the farming demons moved. Unlatching its hands from the ground, the impossibly long arm reaching into the writhing pit of life and grabbing something.

The twisting and turning of the arm, its joints that shouldn't be there, made her stomach squirm as it lifted the large body of a vaguely wolf-like animal up.

The ribs opened wide, the chest cavity presenting itself. Reaching, white tendrils shot out from within, grabbing the legs and torso of the animal, pulling it inside as the demon let go.

Its other arm grabbed something else, pulling it up and within. The demon repeated this a few more times, filling up its torso until the ribs closed back in, like someone was holding a breath.

Lefie grimaced as she watched the four legs struggled to move beneath its massive weight. It leaned on its hands, pushing itself up and turning away from her. A hand reached for the ceiling, bony fingers digging into the earth as it pulled itself forwards and through a tunnel it barely fit within.

“Wh-where’s it going?” She asked Harold, a hint of fear creeping into her voice.

“To me.”

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The farming demon squeezed itself through the passageway, the iris of the tunnel just large enough for its bloated torso.

Harold and Lefie were back in the heart of the nest; the parasite room.

She had communicated with Riza about what she had seen, and whether they should let what was going to happen to happen.

The answer was yes. Lefie was to see how demons were born. And she was going to ask questions, too.

“How do you decide between a beast or greater demon?” She asked, focusing not on the horror in front of her but as Harold withdrew a parasite with remarkable precision.

The fleshy walls of its cell within the hive clung to it like honey.

“Potential.” He held up the one in his hand to show Lefie. It was fat and pulsating. “Large. Lively. Greater demon,” He explained.

He turned towards the farming demon and gargled. The sound reverberated through her body as the alien words rang out.

Obediently, the farming demon opened up its torso, the animals trapped within piled up and restrained messily.

The double-jointed arm bent around and reached in, digging between the front-most bodies and grabbed one from the back.

As it withdrew the animal, the others bent and squished around it like they were nothing but sacks of meat, no bones.

From here, Lefie could see the tendrils pulsating much like the parasite. She could see white, scraggly lines course through the animals’ bodies, originating from a point where the tendrils had injected themselves into their bodies. It was like the demon was pumping something into them.

She resisted the urge to gag.

The animal it chose felt familiar. Its head was disproportionately large and pointing outwards were two small tusks. Boar-like but not quite. The legs were wrong, and the colouration was totally unfamiliar.

The boar laid still on the ground, not moving. A single tendril was still connected to its side.

The farming demon's hand was large enough to cover the entire body. Six fingers dug into the ground around it, like a skeletal cage, as the tendril let go with a quiet *pop*.

The beast immediately squealed and flailed, feet kicking the bones but finding no room to move.

Harold was there, crouching over the creature as he shoved the parasite into the hole the tendril had left.

The change was slow. The white lines became thicker and thicker, small tributaries forming, reminding Lefie of veins. She began to pulsate and the beast stopped moving. It drew laboured breath, an occasional twitch of a limb.

As Harold stood up, she could see where the parasite had entered. Not white but blacked. As dark as tar, it was like the aftermath of a lightning strike.

The large, bony hand picked the demon back up before she could watch any further, withdrawing the animal back into its torso.

And, like that, a greater demon was born.

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"You've finally found me," Riza smiled. Her legs were dangling over the side of a building, sitting high up where she could overlook the entire village. The purpose of this tower was a mystery.

"You-you could've- told me- where you were," Lefie huffed with exhaustion as she walked over, practically falling on her butt as she sat down beside Riza.

"You needed the exercise." Lefie just scowled at that.

Darkness had taken over, night time well under way. A small fire sat to Riza's left.

She reached over and wrapped her right arm around the teenager, drawing her into an embrace.

“How are you? Too cold?” Riza asked.

A nod. Lefie shuffled closer, soaking in more of the heat.

“I’ve got an idea about this. Not sure if it’s possible but I’m working on it.”

“You always have ideas,” Lefie chuckled.

They sat together for a quiet moment, watching the demons lumber about within the village, illuminated only by the moonlight.

It was a spectacular scene.

“You see all those stars, up there?” Riza began, pointing upwards.

The dark, night sky was busy. An inordinate number of twinkling lights dotted the black canvas, far greater than anything Riza had ever seen.

“Uh-huh,” The girl nodded.

“Each one of those is like our sun. A bright, shining star. And each one of them has numerous *planets* floating around it.”

“*Planets?*” Lefie repeated the foreign word.

“Yes. Balls of rock hurtling through *space*, just like us. This ground we’re standing on, it’s part of a *planet*. And the sun? We’re going round and round it, our *planet* rotating and it’s this rotation which gives us night and day. Day when we’re facing the sun, night when we’re facing away.”

“This is confusing,” Lefie pouted, drawing a light laugh from Riza.

“It’s not important. But on all those *planets*, there could be life, just like us. People going about their day, looking back up into the sky and seeing all those stars and so much more.” Riza wasn’t looking at Lefie anyway, lost in the vastness of space instead.

“But they’re so small.”

“It’s because they’re really far away. Even if you could fly all the way there, it’d take hundreds of lifetimes to reach.”

“Wow,” Lefie said in subdued awe.

Riza sighed happily.

“I’m just talking about things. Where I come from, I could never see a sky like this. All those stars? Gone. All I saw was black, as far as the eye could see.”

She took a minute to appreciate it. The impossibility of space.

"It's beautiful," Riza said, unreserved emotion in her voice.

"Where do you come from? It's not the Empire." Lefie finally asked, the question clearly brewing inside her.

All it took was one glance over at the teenager for Riza to feel that she could trust her with the truth.

"I don't know why I'm here. Those stars, those *planets*, one of them is called *Earth*. That's where I come from."

Lefie's eyes were as wide as saucers, darting from Riza to the sky above.

"You're from out there?" She asked with emphasis.

"I have to be. All of this—magic, demons, floating islands—" Riza struggled to not laugh at the last one. "Is real. I don't know how or why, but it exists. Something brought me here, from *Earth*."

Her gaze trailed down from the sky to the village below. She remembered what Lefie had told her, of watching the demons create a baby greater demon.

*There's magic beyond our knowledge. What I do not know far out scales that which I do. I've barely even touched the surface.*

"Do you... do you miss it?" Lefie said gently, making sure to strengthen the hug she was giving Riza.

"Sometimes. I guess... I don't really think about it. Easier that way. If I think about everything I left behind, then-then..." Riza sighed, feeling her emotions about to break free.

Lefie turned inwards, hugging her with both arms.

A tear trailed down Riza's cheek.

"Fuck! I do. I miss them. I- fuck! I miss them so much. I can't ever go back. I can't ever talk to them again and-and," She hiccupped, and cried, unable to get the next words out.

*Fuck fuck fuck! Why why why? Why am I here? Why me?* Her brain was barely making coherent thoughts as she sank into the sea of sadness, the emotions overwhelming her senses, her thoughts.

Tears poured out let dam had broken, all of her repression and constraint unable to hold back.

Lefie held on tight, through the shudders and the shakes and the tears.

*Goddammit.*