

Chapter 77: Bunker

The air was stale, suffused with the essence of fog and a nitrogen-oxygen combination expelled from the palms of Riza's hands.

Daven touched her shoulder, a green glow flowing from him into her as he refilled her lost essence.

Nessy, Jupy, and Ascles were all kitted out in stone gear. A breastplate moulded to their proportions, helmets, leg and arm guards covered the non-articulated portions of their bodies. A heavy, thick, stone shield was wielded by Nessy while the other two made do with traditional wood ones. And, to top it all off, each had a perfectly formed sword as a weapon, sharpened to a point and made of enough compressed material to hold up for a few attacks before it began to lose its edge.

The majority of humanoid demons seemed to be male, perhaps representing the demographics of the Dominion and Chosen, if Riza had to guess.

Six were under Riza's command and only two were female; Tiffany and Nessy. Small sample size and she couldn't say her personal experiences were evidence for one conclusion or another but based on her time living in Litchendorf, she wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

The wall in front of them gave away under Daven's magical might, crumbling inwards but leaving no debris, like the moulding of wet clay.

Closing in on the quarry but yet, Riza didn't sense any demons. Her senses were blank apart from the three beside her, emanating a strength akin to a greater demon.

"Ah, shit. We've found a tunnel," Daven called out from the front, widening the iris of the tunnel as it opened up further.

Fog spilled out and in. Riza's borrowed senses expanded with her small critter she had borrowed from the breeding grounds. A thought flashed across her mind on whether she could give demons sight beyond fog.

Daven was first through, hopping down onto the suspiciously smooth ground a few metres from their own tunnel. Meren followed, then Nessy, Riza, and the rest of the demons.

Lifting her arm up, Riza shot lines of fog against the rest of the tunnel, the mist hitting the surfaces and then gently floating to collect in a puddle at the

bottom. It gave enough of an indication for the size of this place; fucking massive. It was like four underground train tunnels were stacked together.

“What is this place?” Meren asked, making sure not to step out of the fog. Amusingly, her sight was better in the obscuring mist than outside, given the complete lack of lightning available.

“I think I’ve got an idea. There was apparently a massive, worm-like demon plaguing this place when I arrived.”

“And it, what, burrowed through the ground?”

Riza shrugged.

“I never saw it. But I felt it. There were constant earthquakes. I guess this is why.”

“I hope it’s not waiting for us,” Daven commented, unable to hide a hint of fear from his tone. “Should I continue on?”

“Give me a moment,” Riza replied.

The critter held within her arms was about the same size as a puppy, small enough to be easy to carry but large enough it was a bit awkward.

This was one of the mole-like creatures the demons loved to breed. No eyes but they had some method of sensing their surroundings. Riza’s tentative guess was an impressive form of echolocation but she had no evidence.

Regardless of how it managed it, the result was an innate and intuitive sense of the shape of its surroundings but without details. When Riza borrowed its senses, the world remained dark to her but a flash of an idea spawned in her head and when accessed, she suddenly became aware of the constraints of her location.

It was disorientating at first and hard to get used to but she was beginning to like the omnidirectional nature of it.

Walking over to the far wall, Riza left the mind of the critter and shifted [Meditate] to target one of her working senses, sinking into a void of sensory deprivation. The muted lights of her demons bloomed slightly as her sensitivity increased.

The whole thing was like an outer body experience, Riza navigating between different sensory probes that glowed brighter the more she focused on them.

She could jump between them, away, and even seek out further, more distant, more subdued sensations.

There was training to this skill but she was getting along just fine.

And there, at the edges of her sense, she could feel *them*. Demons. Many. Sensations were rolling and climbing on top of each other, incredibly faint but in this abyss of nothing, even the smallest thing was like a firework to her.

Shifting [Meditate] to sight, Riza pulled back from the sensory abyss and rejoined her group in the present.

“I’ve got an idea where they are. We’ll follow the tunnel for a bit.”

Before they could leave, routine preparations had to be made; Riza cleaned up all the fog for use later whilst Daven quickly sealed up the tunnel from which they came from.

This subterranean shaft was eerily large and quiet. The sound of their footsteps bounced off the walls, and even their breathing echoed outwards.

No one spoke for tens of minutes as they walked, following along the one-way in complete silence. Riza could feel the demons growing closer and closer.

The quiet of the tunnel was soon replaced with a low, whistling sound, accompanied by a cool breeze blowing gently on them.

Sinking into her senses, the mass of demons made themselves known. It felt like hundreds upon hundreds were gathered together, cramped and barely moving like ants in a nest. There was a *lot* more than the last time Riza was here.

Finally feeling like they were just within reach, the group stopped walking and Daven dug into the side of the passageway, carving out a small little cave a few metres off the thoroughfare, which he sealed up behind them as the rest sat down, taking a breather.

“So, what’s the plan?” Meren asked casually.

“There’s a lot of demons but all of that is useless until we can increase their level caps. So, it’d be just like when I collect these with Daven,” Riza answered, gesturing at the humanoid demons standing like robots. “Precision strikes at the greater and humanoid demons.

“However, they can’t join a party with anyone else yet. You’re level 27?” A nod from Meren. “They need to be level 13 to join up with you. Once that happens,

everything becomes a lot easier. With our help, you're strong enough to reliably kill a greater demon. Once they're level 13, the entire bunker is ours to farm."

"So the first obstacle is getting them to kill a greater demon?"

"Yes. Jupy and Ascles can't see any fighting until after level 15 because of their health so Nessy is the only one who'll come into the tunnels with us. Her power is only 40 so she can take out beast demons just fine but a greater demon may be some trouble." Riza frowned.

"We need to weaken it first?"

"That'll be your job. They're not as strong as humanoid demons so even a couple thrusts from you could probably kill it. Is there a way to make yourself weaker but still effective?"

"I can think of something."

"Good. Daven, you'll be our way around the bunker. Just like last time, we'll avoid the tunnels and dig ourselves. Once we find a greater demon, you're on crowd control."

"And after we find, fight, and kill one?"

"We'll have two options. The numbers aren't good if we just fight beast demons. It'll take a hundred to level these guys up to 13 and even then, it's Nessy who has to do all the killing and her stamina is tiny so I have to keep an eye on her and a whole bunch of problems.

"The second option is to rinse and repeat. We target more greater demons, you weaken them, and she gets the killing blow. A very rough estimate would be around fifteen to twenty demons to level them up but then we can hide them away and start targeting humanoid demons which massively speeds things up."

"Sounds like I got my job cut out for me," Meren half-joked, half-complained.

"Time to put those muscles of yours to use."

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After all their many trips together, Daven and Riza were a well-oiled boring machine. Directions were quick and precise, Daven knowing exactly what Riza meant and adjusting his digging for that.

The clawed feet of Riza's critter dug in around her neck as it sat upon her shoulders as Riza herself held tightly onto Nussy's torso. Her arms and legs were wrapped around the demon, always in contact and constantly refilling her stamina.

The din was growing louder and louder, a cacophony of sensations inside her head as the bubbling pot of demon stew flowed through the bunker right in front of them.

The groaning of rock drew to a halt as Daven stopped digging.

"There's metal," He whispered back. "I can't dig through it."

The walls of the bunker.

"Do we need to be quiet?" Meren asked.

"No. We're going to draw attention as soon as we step a single foot inside."

Meren just nodded, pushing her way past Daven and feeling the metal panel before her.

Riza watched as she took a deep breath, steadied her feet and pulled back one arm.

The punch was dizzyingly fast, the crashing, rending sound piercing her ears as Meren's fist pierced the thick, metal plating.

The woman pushed and folded the wall out of the way, widening up a hole as she forced it open.

Both Daven and Riza were stunned for a second, watching this impressive display of strength. Meren picked up her earthen quarterstaff and then dropped into the tunnel, disappearing from sight.

Screams and roars of aggression immediately followed, snapping the pair out of their dazes.

Daven followed quickly, jumping through the hole and into the bunker proper. Nussy was next.

The corridor was filled to the brim with demons, and a pile of corpses was already forming as Meren slammed her heft weapon down on the demons' heads, cracking their skulls and liquifying their brains in one smooth motion.

Daven joined in, a layer of rock jumping from the wound in the metal and clinging to his form as his rocky shell covered him.

It continued to flow like a lateral waterfall as the rocks and stones coalesced in his hands, extruding outwards to form a sword and shield, quickly shrinking as he compressed the material and built upon it once more.

Nessy landed with a squelchy thud, carving in the ribs of the demon right below her feet.

Almost immediately, another jumped at her, attempting to bite.

The humanoid demon stepped back, narrowly dodging, as she brought her sword down upon its back.

The weapon bounced right off, having hit with the flat side of the blade.

Frantically, she swung again and again with the sword, battering the demon with blunt force until a lucky swing sliced through the creature messily, her superior strength enhancing the attack enough it must've cut something vital.

Riza was dumbfounded for a second before realisation struck. *Fuck. Nessy was a mage before she died. She doesn't know how to use a sword!*

The ground shuddered beneath them, Nessy struggling to maintain balance on a floor slick with blood.

"The big guy's here!" Meren shouted with a throaty roar. She carved through the waves like butter. Effortless.

Sure enough, just a few metres away, their target was barrelling down the corridor, knocking beast demons all over the place like a bowling ball.

Quadrupedal, its head was thick and chunky, reminding Riza of Ararth the bear, except with four large tusks protruding. Its feet were small in comparison.

Every few seconds, Riza made sure to blast a maximised [Heal] into Nessy, refilling her meagre stamina.

"Follow Meren!" She ordered, shouting over the din of fighting.

The demon did as instructed, pushing past the sea of bodies and swinging haphazardly at the demons in front of her. She was embarrassingly bad at murder.

Meren swiftly engaged the larger foe. Her staff shot out like lightning, cleaning away all the demons around her in seconds as she cleared the battlefield.

She readied herself, stance firm just like before, her foot digging into the metal floor, as the demon bowled towards her. Its jaw opened up for a tremendous bite.

And, just before it would've snapped those jaws shut, Meren struck. Her thick staff swung in an overhead arc, crashing down on the demon's head.

A thunderous clap echoed outwards as she stopped it in its tracks. The head bounced off the ground with such immense force the entire metal floor was dented inwards. Its bottom tusks were forced through its skull as the dislocated jaw and pushed upwards, blood flying out from the self-sustained injury.

Meren smoothly shifted the staff in her grip, changing from a swing to a thrust. It popped forward almost instantly, all her force transferring into the demon as it was pushed five metres backwards, sliding along the slick ground.

"It looks pretty injured!" Meren shouted, barely even breaking a sweat.

Riza watched this all, the latency of her critter's senses making the rapid pace even more impressive. In awe, it took a few seconds for her to get a grip and order Nesy to chase after the wounded greater demon.

Whatever damage Meren inflicted must've been severe. The creature still registered as alive to Riza but it was barely moving, utterly incapacitated. *Holy shit. Meren's awesome.*

Beast demons continued to flow around the body of the greater one, snapping at Nesy and Riza but Daven had caught with them by this point and both him and Meren managed to keep them at bay as even Nesy couldn't fuck up this next step.

Standing atop the nearly-corpse, she raised the sword in the air, body tensing for a few seconds, before plunging it down into its head, killing it instantly.

"Did your level cap increase?"

"Yes."

"There's another one nearby. It's..." Riza quickly focused on her senses.

"Couple metres down that way," She pointed.

“I’ve got it!” Meren shouted, kicking a demon away before ploughing down the rest in a straight line towards where Riza pointed.

“She’s, urgh, eager!” Daven shouted between attacks, cleaving through demon after demon. The rocks added extra weight to all his attacks but the main benefit was defence. It still took a good few strikes before one went down to his sword.

“Is this the last one here?” He shouted.

“Yeah! We’ll regroup after that one!”

The ground didn’t shake, announcing the presence of greater demon. Instead, the rending of metal echoed down the corridor as a giant, clawed hand ripped through the corner.

Meren hopped backwards, beating off demon after demon as a creature with four, clawed hands thrashed and flailed towards her. The sound was excruciating as even the slightest graze rent entire grooves in the metal panelling.

Ceiling lights were torn down, blood splattered on every surface, scrap metal bits flung through the air towards Meren.

She battered it all away, dodging out the way of most of the attacks. A few claws broke past her defences, nicking at skin and making her wince but never enough to get her down for the count.

Once the greater demon was closed enough, Meren finally got to work.

The next arm that came clawing towards her wasn’t batted away like usual. Instead, her thick quarterstaff collided directly with the arm, her strength winning out and shattering the bones within.

That arm went floppy as the creature howled with rage. Another arm swiped towards her, faster than before, and caught her off-guard, It ripped red streaks down Meren’s skin, causing her to stifle a cry of pain as she shrugged off its arm.

She visibly struggled to maintain her grip on the weapon as the next attack came flying at her, only for the bones to be cracked and broken just like before.

Like a feral animal, the greater demon lunged forwards, jaw full of sharpened teeth biting at her.

A quick flick of the wrist and the staff battered its head out the way, slamming it against the as it's vestigial forelegs struggled against the slick surface.

Meren quickly pounced upon its wounded form, slamming her staff against its two remaining arms and breaking them swiftly as well.

"It's wounded!" She shouted, signalling Riza and Nussy.

Daven heard this as well, ignoring the demons immediately surrounding him as their bites and claws were futile against his armour.

He rushed forwards, expertly aiming slashes and thrusts against demons in their way, letting Nussy quickly close the gap towards the lumbering greater demon.

It was an odd one. Four arms surrounded its head like petals on a flower, thick and ending in sharp claws that were as long as a human arm. Two, tiny forelegs kept its head above the ground with the hind two as thick as you'd expect for a creature this size. Its entire back was covered with quills like on a porcupine.

Nussy didn't waste any time, thrusting her sword against its head from where it was resting against the wall.

The first three attacks failed to penetrate deeply but the last one, aided by Meren adding her strength, found its mark, digging a metre deep into whatever was in its cranial cavity.

Another one was down.

They all knew the plan. Meren dashed for the opposite wall, punching her cracked quarterstaff against the panelling repeatedly until a hole was made. She dropped the weapon, reaching her fingers within and pulling the hole open with all her strength.

Daven was on her instantly, pushing open a hole faster than ever before as he climbed up and in. Meren was already pushing back the waves of demons with her bare hands and feet as Nussy struggled to clambered into the quickly deepening hole in the wall.

Once Daven had it just barely large enough for the four of them, Meren joined them.

And with that, he sealed them away from the bunker once more.

Just to be safe, Daven continued to dig deeper and away from the bunker's corridors with Riza's directions, as well as thickening up the wall he had just opened, connecting them to the bunker.

Finally far away enough from the action, a moment of respite was upon them. Riza was exhausted, the entire battle happening in just a few seconds in her mind.

Daven went around, healing everyone up. Health, stamina, essence, he had it all covered, but at the measly rate [Heal+] restored at, they had some time to rest up before they were ready for another excursion.

A perfect time to go over the spoils of battle.

They did well with the greater demons. Nessy's new level cap was 16 now, which meant Jupy's and Ascles' was as well, given they were all in a party together.

Unfortunately, a large number of the demons Nessy had killed were before her increase, which meant they were wasted. But even then, she had only levelled once after all that fighting to level 9.

Entity Manager				Excess Essence		-1.70 es/sec
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	27	218/218	122/122	66800/66800	-1.94
Sanders	Raise Dead	27	130/130	114/114	67100/67100	-2.01
Harold	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Tiffany	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	100/100	3.98
Gas Tank	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	100/100	2.48
Nessy	Raise Dead	9	888/888	20/20	20/20	4.49
Jupy	Raise Dead	9	20/20	20/20	888/888	4.27

Ascles	Raise Dead	9	20/20	20/20	888/888	4.27
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Cutting it close. Really need the level 15 for the boon to keep it manageable.

Riza had to make an executive decision. They couldn't spend much time resting up. They needed to level up and fast.

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It turns out 'speed' and 'stealth' aren't that compatible. Daven digging ensured they'd stay hidden but it wasn't exactly breaking the sound barrier and, after seeing what Meren and Daven could do in combat, there was an alternative method to getting around the complex.

So, Riza reluctantly made the decision to forgo their usual method of travel and they busted back through the wall into a pile of dead demons.

Riza had even tried to get Nussy to order the demons to stand down and not attack, just like what Harold did, but for some reason, that didn't work. It worked with Nussy—after the order, it was like she didn't exist to them—but they still attacked Meren and Daven and Riza, so that strategy was a failure.

In the end, they had to fight their way through the demons anyway. Meren made short work of it, leading the pack, and Daven was at the back of the conga line, keeping the most vulnerable one in the middle.

It was hectic to say the least but as a bonus, Nussy was killing a few wayward demons that managed to get past the perimeter.

The initial culling was just like before but it didn't take long for riza to notice a difference. Rather than the demons milling about in corridors and hallways, they were *moving*. Patrolling, even, just like the last time she was here. It made the greater demons harder to track at first but that wasn't actually the case.

After the first few went down, and Riza searched for the next one, it became obvious what was happening as she observed all the ways the demons were moving.

They were looking *for her*. They were clumping together where she had gone and they were concentrated in areas directly connected to where she now was, in addition to where she could be.

Now this, was very strange. A complete contradiction to the last time she was here. Back then, the demons were running *from* her.

Neither Daven nor Meren could offer any insight. Demons were just mindless beasts, after all, and they couldn't sense how they moved and grouped up. Nothing was odd for them.

But, hey, Riza wasn't exactly complaining. This made farming a whole lot easier and even the greater demons were joining up together to fight! It took Meren longer to stop them but they never seemed to be a threat and Riza happily watched as she took them down, propping them up for Nussy to get the killing blow.

And then the moment finally came; Nussy was level 13.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		-6.79 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	27	218/218	122/122	66800/66800	-1.94
Sanders	Raise Dead	27	130/130	114/114	67100/67100	-2.01
Harold	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Tiffany	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	100/100	3.98
Gas Tank	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	100/100	2.48
Nussy	Raise Dead	13	1248/1248	20/20	20/20	6.22
Jupy	Raise Dead	13	20/20	20/20	1248/1248	5.95
Ascles	Raise Dead	13	20/20	20/20	1248/1248	5.95

It was a race against time. Level 15 was the breakpoint needed and Riza was quickly running out of essence. Without a top up, she didn't even have an hour left.

Desperate measures were needed. With a heavy heart, Riza used [Inform].

“Tiffany. This is Riza. Use [Inform] to relay instructions to Gas Tank to kill himself. Afterwards, kill yourself.”

She was stationed at a midway point between the nest as the quarry, in case Riza’s or Lefie’s skills couldn’t reach one another.

Harold was necessary to keep all the demons in the nest docile which left just these two as extraneous.

Even though they were demons and their human selves were lost, Tiffany had been with them for so long by now that the thought of losing her weighed heavy on Riza’s heart.

It had to be done.

Minutes ticked by in the heat of battle, Riza only using the weakest form of [Heal] to conserve strength and sometimes, even having Daven do it instead.

They weren’t heading in any particularly direction, just where the demons were. The longer they took without killing, the shorter they had.

At least, now they were all in a party together, they were killing a lot more demons.

Being in a party wasn’t necessarily better, however. Sure, all the demons Meren killed—which was substantially higher than Nesy by herself—contributed but it also meant experience was divided fivefold rather than by three.

A couple more dead demons and Nesy was now level 14.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		-1.72 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	27	218/218	122/122	66800/66800	-1.94
Sanders	Raise Dead	27	130/130	114/114	67100/67100	-2.01
Harold	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98

Nessy	Raise Dead	14	1338/1338	20/20	20/20	6.70
Jupy	Raise Dead	14	20/20	20/20	1338/1338	6.41
Ascles	Raise Dead	14	20/20	20/20	1338/1338	6.41

Come on. Just one more level.

Some greater demons closed in. A group of three. Trial by fire rapidly improved Nessy's skill with the sword and as her strength gradually increased each level, the time to kill a single demon shrunk further and further.

But nobody could compare to Meren. She must've had some skill speeding up her attacks for she could wipe out a group of five or six demons in a single second. She cut through the swathes of enemies with such stupendous ease, and without any cost to herself, Riza couldn't help but watch. It was, in a sense, beautiful to behold.

And then, finally, level 15. Riza wasted no time in selecting the boons—she didn't even look over the other options.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		3.74 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	27	218/218	122/122	66800/66800	-1.94
Sanders	Raise Dead	27	130/130	114/114	67100/67100	-2.01
Harold	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Nessy	Raise Dead	15	1518/1518	20/20	20/20	5.81
Jupy	Raise Dead	15	20/20	20/20	1518/1518	4.12
Ascles	Raise Dead	15	20/20	20/20	1518/1518	4.12

Yes! There it is! Positive excess essence! Your sacrifice was not in vain, Tiffany!

A massive weight was lifted from Riza's shoulders and it felt like she could finally breath again. Energy suffused her muscles and soul and she blasted [Heal] into Nussy with glee as the demon cleaved through another beast.

"Level 15!" Riza shouted. "We just need a humanoid demon now! Let's get out of here!"

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The quietness was a welcome change to the carnage mere feet away. Tucked away in this tiny little cave sat the party, resting up for the first time in a while.

Riza was restless with joy, constantly using [Heal] on Nussy and herself as one of the few skills she could use. It felt *amazing* to no longer have to worry about everything dying if left unattended for too long.

The plan now was to leave Nussy hidden here, in this rock. She was equipped with [Message] and [Inform] just in case they struggled to navigate this labyrinthian complex but there was no way she was going to be joining in their next mission.

All that was left were the humanoid demons now.

Riza had taken her time and done a cursory search from where they were and could faintly feel where the closest humanoid demon was except, it wasn't just one, nor two, but three of them grouped together. If she had to guess, they were protecting a farm.

This was such a dangerous undertaking that even Daven wasn't going to get fully involved. He'd dig a tunnel right towards them but, after that, he was hiding himself away in the walls. A single humanoid demon was dangerous enough if you failed to surprise it but three of them together? Well, the last time that happened a whole village was destroyed.

Meren and Riza were the only two actually strong enough to withstand their attacks and, even then, it was still a risk.

For Riza, she hadn't replenished any of her parasites since she lost them, leaving her around twenty extra lives. Her health would hopefully be high enough to not let her be killed in one hit, allowing her to [Heal] herself before dying. She hoped.

As for Meren, there was apparently a skill that enhanced the conversion of power to health in the primordial strength skill tree which meant she was sitting at 22,000 health points. A hefty amount, and her distribution of stats meant she had a lot of damage reduction as well but that was still a finite amount and she could still die.

Hopefully, her skills would take her far.

But this was it. Their final goal in coming here. There was no backing down now.

Steady breaths. Riza checked her stats, her essence, and waited for everything to regenerate to full. Daven made sure Meren was good to go as well.

She was ready.