

## Chapter 65: Secession

"Stop. We're on the periphery of the village now," Riza said, eyes closed as she focused on the distant feelings in her mind.

It was pitch-black, the only sound being that of breathing, heartbreaks, and the rumbling, crunching of earth as Daven sculpted it out of the way, elongating this tunnel.

Discretion was the name of the game. Demons have shown themselves able to react to Riza's presence so the best thing to do was to keep herself hidden.

With [Intrinsic Tank], no longer did they have the problem of gradual asphyxiation. The numbers were pretty easy to work out and with her calculations, a max power [Intrinsic Tank] would store enough air for 12 days of breathing for the whole party.

However, the tunnel was ever increasing in scope, the air diffusing itself all along the length, so she pumped out more than the numbers deemed necessary. She'd run out in less than a day but that was more than enough.

The skill allowed her to focus on where it absorbed and expelled air. She wasn't able to have a sudden pocket of air appear disparate to her person but she didn't know whether that was a limitation of the skill or her own experience.

Nevertheless, she always expelled air via her hands. It was a bit of direction and made sure their immediate vicinity was always breathable.

"How many are there?" Meren asked.

"Hard to tell right now. There's a lot. Can't sense anything significant. A few greater demons," Riza scrunched up her face, mentally jumping from signal to signal as she inspected their strengths, distances.

"No elder greater demon?" Lefie inquired.

"No," Riza shook her head. "Let's keep going."

"Same direction?" Daven asked.

"No. Little to the right and... a little down," Riza explained, pointing with her hand.

Daven nodded, rubbing his hands together like he was warming them up to mould some dough. His fingers sank into the dirt like it was water, the earth peeling itself back as he pulled open the ground before them.

The tunnel tilted and turned, Riza keeping an arm around Lefie as she walked with her eyes closed. Cutting off other stimuli helped her to focus and avoid overstimulation from the sheer quantity of demons that were here.

She was getting a little better, but multiple times, she had to run back out of range to take a breather.

However, she did eventually manage to sneak close enough to get a sense for what she felt was the heart of the nest.

*Multiple greater demons. Multiple, extremely weak signals coalescing into one. Feels like a humanoid demon, though not that much stronger than a greater demon. Possibly an eye demon as well. Reminds me of the nest in the forest, without a crater entrance.*

No elder greater demons.

"I've seen enough. Let's return."

\*

"Why do you think that's the case?" Meren asked, leaning against a tree. The rest of them were sitting around, partially waiting for Daven's essence to regenerate—although, that wouldn't take very long at all—and partially planning on how to tackle this nest.

"Seems like a chicken and egg situation to me. Are there few humanoid demons because there aren't any humans nearby to convert or are they here because they don't have many humanoid demons?" Riza pondered aloud, thinking back to the various nests she's been in.

"But there's plenty of villages without a demon nest. If they're not near humans, it must be by choice," Meren said.

It seemed reasonable, Riza thought. *What does the wild offer than civilisation doesn't?*

"They're here for the animals, then. The Litchendorf nest didn't have any greater demons apart from the elder but that was more like an emergency button. This place has ten, twenty greater demons already.

"And then, Hotton. They had a disproportionately small number of greater demons," Riza was speeding up as she talked, ideas connecting in her mind faster than she could speak them.

"It's like the closer to people they are, the fewer the greater demons and the more humanoid demons."

"What about the bunker?" Lefie objected.

"That's an outlier for everything. The nests are like outposts, camps, but the bunker is more like a permanent location. We need to go back there at some point but I'm getting off track."

"So, what's the plan?" Meren asked.

"We'll target the greater demons. Beast demons offer too little experience at all of your levels. We'll do like we did before, going underground while I give directions. When we're near a greater, we'll pop out and Lefie will kill it. Let's keep the beast demons alive if we can give."

"Keep them alive?"

"Minimal disturbance. The less that changes, the longer it'll take for the nest to notice our presence. We're all good to go?"

\*

*We're here.* Riza rapidly tapped Daven, indicating to stop. They would be silent from here on out.

Right above them sat a greater demon, along with a couple of beast demons. They hadn't moved yet, likely meaning they hadn't sensed the party below them.

Riza made eye contact with each member of their group, signalling that it was time.

Smoothly, they coordinated together. Daven reached up into the ceiling and ripped open a hole, opening into the tunnel above.

Meren popped up Riza and then Lefie, throwing them upwards.

Riza was ready with [Manipulate Air]. As soon as she landed in the tunnel, she felt the air alight with essence, her senses connecting with the fog as [Manipulate Air] identified its target.

Arms in front, she could feel the fog like it was an extension of herself. She gripped her hands, feeling the tension in her will, and then whipped her arms out.

The fog split in two, shunting apart like a giant gust of wind parted it. The absence of essence revealed the bare forms of a greater demon and its four beast brethren.

Riza mentally grabbed fistfuls of fog, pulling her arms inwards to direct the flow, the fog following along.

Tendrils seeped between the legs and arms of the demons, covering them in mist once more.

Riza remembered her practice, her attempts at recreating what the humanoid demon had done to her. The nice thing about winter was that it made air visible.

Shifting her feet ever so slightly, adopting a firmer stance, she tensed the muscles in her arms, fingers collecting more and more fog. She concentrated it all in two planes of fog, bisecting the tunnel two times.

Gradually, she expanded the radius of [Manipulate Air] once all the initial fog had collected, reaching further beyond the initial area to reinforce the thin but magically fixed walls.

She could sense the demons moving, tentatively touching the fog as if with the expectation it'd just let them through, but it didn't.

She hadn't done the maths, working purely on an intuitive level. The fog was compressed, the walls as thin as she dared. For now, it had enough substance, enough pressure, to keep the demons at bay.

Lefie, meanwhile, shot up not long after Riza. She didn't want for Riza to isolate the greater demon, instead blasting it right away with bolts of lightning.

Bang, bang, bang, bolts shot out in bursts slammed into the greater demon, shocking it backwards and denting its body but never punching through it.

But that was enough. In just a few seconds, it was over.

Daven was already climbing out of the hole, having received a [Message] from Lefie. He was quickly putting up some walls just in front of the fog, blocking them in and, more importantly, cutting off the sight of the beast demons.

Perhaps they were being overly cautious but Riza didn't want to take chances. She had no idea what the demons knew, what they would find out, and what they would interpret. She knew from experience that beast demon senses were greatly enhanced by the fog, and they could barely see outside of it.

As soon as the walls were up, she dropped [Manipulate Air] and instead focused on [Reanimate], rushing to the greater demon corpse.

Thankfully, it was mostly intact. The healing energy that left her fingertips popped out the depressions in its body, whitening the singed parts as well. A minute passed before whatever artificial intelligence entered its form, bringing it back to life.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		8.26 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	18	132/132	120/120	9473/10650	4.12
Sanders	Raise Dead	18	100/100	100/100	10740/10740	4.08
Demon 1	Reanimate	5	420	100	20	1.30

Pumping most of the stats into power, it should hopefully be sturdy enough not to accidentally die and had enough power to move its large body.

Riza gave it a few, quick orders, essentially to act like any other greater demon but to avoid eye demons if it could.

And, with that, the incursion was complete. Daven hastily tore down his walls and slipped back into their tunnel with the rest of their party, closing the hatch in the ceiling above.

Riza felt the beast demons rush into the once-occupied space and then stop, having found nothing but an intact greater demon.

*One down, however many more to go.*

They continued on in this manner for six more demons until Riza's essence was now running low.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		0.48 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	18	132/132	120/120	9473/10650	4.12
Sanders	Raise Dead	18	100/100	100/100	10740/10740	4.08
Demon 1	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 2	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 3	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 4	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 5	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 6	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30
Demon 7	Reanimate	5	420/420	100/100	20/20	1.30

*Still no level ups! Sure, it's divided amongst four people but this is insane.*

Riza slumped against the wall dejectedly.

"What's wrong?" Lefie asked.

"I can't sustain any more greater demons. We need to try something different."

"So, we stop raising greater demons?" Meren asked.

"Maybe. But if we do that, we have to work with the assumption the demons now know we're here."

"Let's stop hiding. Kill the humanoid demon and everything else we can and then run," Daven offered, sounding a little bit annoyed himself.

"I suppose that's a possibility—"

"What's stopping you from controlling both the eye demon and the humanoid demon?" Lefie interjected.

"That's... huh. I hadn't considered that as an option after the bunker. Nothing, really."

"Sooo... we kill the humanoid and eye demon, raise them, and then get Daven to block off any tunnels leading here. Humanoid demons can control other demons, right? You could get them to order other demons to not attack us and we would own the caldera."

Riza looked at Lefie with fascination but didn't respond right away, mulling it over.

*Controlling the caldera. Maybe I was thinking too short term...*

*Our current goal is to level to 25 and then chase after the colossal but maybe that's too short-sighted. There are at least two colossal demons in existence: the one in Hotton and the one at the quarry. That's just one province. It's safe to say there's a lot more out there.*

*All this work just for two summons to be level 25. What if I get another one, as is my plan? I'd need to travel, find multiple other nests, and eradicate them as well. Very conspicuous.*

*Here, it's out of the way. Maybe, if we find a way to grow demon parasites, we could... farm them. Yeah.*

*Weird to think about, cultivating demons, but if they're trapped in this caldera then they're not much of a danger. And we'd be killing them to level up again.*

*There's a future there.*

Riza nodded.

"I like that idea," She said, standing up with gusto. "Let's do it."

\*

The humanoid demon was barely a challenge. Riza did the maths on Lefie's [Lightning Bolt] and figured that at a range of 10 metres, it did 25,000 damage a second, 12,500 per bolt. Two seconds, four hits, and the humanoid demon was dead, all for the low, low price of 90 essence.

That was pretty ridiculous but Lefie had invested multiple skill points and even a boon into the metamagic skill tree so it was somewhat expected it would have large dividends.

The eye demon, likewise, went down quickly as well. Daven closed all tunnels leading to the room, leaving the party, two corpses, and hundreds of demon parasites gestating in a hive.

Riza scoped up all the fog, allowing her to see.

"Ugh, gross." Meren eyed up one of the hives.

There were more here than in a single farm back at the bunker. It seems they were more spread out over there.

"These are the 'hives'?" She asked, referencing the word Riza used when she first told Meren about them.

"Yes. Don't touch them. They have parasites growing in them," and saying that made Riza think.

Fog began to billow out of her hands, flowing over and settling over each of the hives, obscuring them to Riza. She kept them there with [Manipulate Air], assuming that the parasites probably needed the fog to survive.

Her essence was dwindling as she stepped over to the humanoid demon, preparing to use [Raise Dead] on it.

The rest of the party were interested in the hives but no one wanted to get too close. They patiently waited the five minutes for the demon to be raised.

*Now, for the boring bit.*

Meren, Daven, and Sanders watched on in silent, somewhat horrified, fascination as Lefie and Riza just spoke to the demon, conversing in casual, simple sentences. Riza was happy to answer their questions about what was going on, such as the linguistics skills and how they work.

"And this is all... necessary?" Meren asked.

"Yes. [Raise Dead] requires the summon to be able to understand me to obey orders. I tried it on a beast demon the first time and it just attacked Lefie. Wouldn't listen to me."

"So it can-it'll speak? Like us?" Daven asked, enthralled by the situation.

"Once it learns how to, yeah. I think it's because it's using a human body so it retains the physiology necessary to speak."

*"Physiology?"*

"The parts of its body it needs for speech." Daven nodded in understanding.

Whilst this was happening, Riza had also raised the eye demon, the first time she'd done this.

Thankfully, the same process worked, the skill going through. Its stats were like the humanoid, beginning at level 1 and with 5 stat points every level. It even had skills! Only once it was raised did Riza realise she never thought it could even have skills in the first place but it was good to know it could.

So, she purchased the necessary linguistic skills for it as well, letting it listen in to the language lessons.

The requisite hour passed by agonisingly slowly until the demons finally learnt the language.

“Say hello.”

“Hello,” The humanoid demon spoke. Its voice warbled like it was underwater, an androgynous, inhuman tone echoing out of it.

“Fuck me, that’s freaky,” Daven exclaimed.

“I don’t like it,” Sanders opined quietly.

“You get used to it,” Riza said, turning back to look at the demon.

“You must obey all of us in this room. You are not to harm us. You are to be truthful to us. Do you understand?” Riza gave some commands. They weren’t exhaustive but she thought they were good enough.

“Yes.”

Similar such orders were given to the eye demon, locking it out of communication with other demons. Although it lacked the physical faculties to respond, it did understand what was being said.

And thus, the questions began.

Who controlled the demons? This demon didn’t know. It just obeyed orders. Where did the orders come from? Again, didn’t know. The answers were the same ones Dave gave back in the bunker, rather frustratingly.

Seeing that there was little new information to extract from it, Riza moved onto more practical lines of inquiry.

The demon parasites did need fog to survive and would die without so Riza ended up filling the room back up with all the fog that she had absorbed from it. This left her blind but she co opted the demon’s senses to compensate.

The hives weren’t just incubators for the parasites but actually created them. They converted fog into the parasites so that solved the question of how to get more of them. No manual work was required although, there were differences between the parasites.

It seemed to be a matter of potential growth. Some were disfigured, illformed, small, or whatever else. They were the lowest of the low, implanted in bugs and, more commonly, spiders.

From there, beast, greater, then humanoid demons.

That was another limitation to gaining more humanoid demons. They may have had the corpses but they lacked the parasites needed to operate them efficiently.

It reminded Riza of organ transplants. Sometimes, the host body would reject foreign tissue. It seemed something similar happened here.

So, the reason humanoid demons were stationed at the hives was simply because it was the most important location. Hence why eye demons were set up here as well.

What created fog? As far as the demon knew, it was only certain greater demons that had the capabilities of manifesting fog inside themselves and then expelling it.

This left Riza a little worried that, after all the greater demons they had killed, there wouldn't be enough left to maintain the nest but apparently, that wasn't an issue. While inside the fog, all demons had some level of capability of creating it. Creating fog where there is no fog was what required specialised physiology.

Those were the important questions regarding parasites for now.

As the command station, this was where the orders were given. All beast and greater demons within the caldera received orders to stay within the caldera and attack no humans.

Once the eye demon had sent those, Daven tore down the walls he had built up, letting fresh fog flow back into the room.

Next, the party took the humanoid demon, who Riza had now called Harold, as their navigator, leading them to all the tunnels that led out of the caldera labyrinth. Daven promptly sealed them up, isolating this pocket of demons from the rest of the world.

Everybody was exhausted after all that had happened. They made their way back to the command station and Daven, finally, began sculpting out stairs so they could leave. These were more of a permanent fixture so he took his time, reinforcing everything with compacted stone to make sure it didn't fall down and collapse.

The nest was far enough underground and the stairs a shallow enough incline that they popped up aboveground just outside the perimeter of the village.

Harold was left underground, ordered to act like everything was normal and to report no issues if any demon asked him.

Daven was really getting a workout that day and Riza still had stuff she wanted him to do.

Everyone was tired but it was only about midday which, for winter, meant they had little sun left so she wanted to be productive.

Sanders, Daven, and Lefie were grouped together and told to find a house that looked intact and large enough to home them for the time being. They would need to scavenge beds, furniture, whatever from other buildings.

Daven specifically was ordered to start building pens. They would be simple in nature—simply tall walls around an open space, currently requiring no means to get in or out. He would need to look for grassy, flat ground to do so, although the latter was pretty negligible given his ability to make any ground flat.

As for Meren and Riza, they went hunting not for food but for cattle.

There were boars in this forest and they'd have to travel a fair distance to get to them. Riza's flying critters were swift, scouring the forest, so it didn't take long to locate them and thanks to their bountiful stamina, the pair flew like the wind, jumping over logs and darting between trees.

It didn't take very long for the first boar encounter. They were so fast, it barely had time to react to their presence; Meren grabbed its torso with her strong, thick arms and hauled it above her head with ridiculous ease.

Riza recalled the types of boar there were, the different colourations. This one was a male so she ordered her critters to find one with a female fur pattern.

Thankfully, it was close by, likely the males mate. It was hanging about near a small hill protruding from the ground.

It must've heard the earlier kerfuffle for as soon as it saw Riza, it charged straight at her. Hair bristling, it seemed to be on high alert.

Once, in the past, Riza used to fear these creatures. Now, she held her ground, catching the boar in its charge.

Her feet skidded a feet or two back, arms bending beneath the impressive force the beast could muster.

One hand around a tusk, the other gripping a clump of fur, Riza heaved with all her strength, sliding one arm down the body of the boar as she stepped to the side, controlling its head.

Her hand slipped under its body as she bent her knees, slowly lifting the large animal off the ground.

*This is... incredible!* She couldn't help but be amazed as its hoof left the forest floor, the creature flailing what little it could in her arms. She was really doing this.

Not as easy as Meren, and being practically the same size as it didn't help, but she was doing it.

Her first few steps were tentative, slow. The boar bucked and whipped its tusks around, trying to catch her but she maintained control, the hand holding its head limiting its movement.

She quickly re-joined Meren, the journey back to the village longer than the first one.

Once they were in range of the black stone residence, Riza opened up communications with Lefie. She was wary of using too much essence, her regeneration now severely limited with the addition of the demons, but her pool was large enough she felt comfortable to pull from it.

Directions were given, and the pair found a large pen on the outside of the village, in a clearing that was clearly regrowing itself in the absence of civilisation.

Not any more, for Daven had cleared it out.

Daven was there, as asked for, and he opened up the wall for them. It was multiple feet thick and quite sturdy, about as tall as he was. Definitely adequate.

As soon as the wall sealed up behind them, Riza and Meren released the boars, who would have happily attacked them if not for Riza containing them in cages of fog using [Manipulate

Air]. It wasn't for long, just enough for Meren to pull herself up the wall and then to help Riza do so as well.

Now that the beasts were trapped, Riza realised, as large as the pen was, it was still too small. At best, she figured, it should be large enough to house a burrow that they lived in, to protect them from the elements.

And that thinking quickly led to a frantic [Inform] to Harold, telling him to order the demons to not attack any boars within the vicinity of the village. Not yet, at least.

Daven asked if he was finished but Riza still had one more job for him. For Meren, as well.

As a trio, they returned to the burrow they had found the boars at, albeit at a far slower pace.

Riza tasked Daven with expanding the pen and then building a burrow for the boars at the village. To make sure he got it right, however, he first had to deconstruct this one.

As he was doing that, tearing down the burrow layer by layer so he could learn the layout, he had reached the main room within.

*Aha!* Riza's prediction was correct; inside were three, little boars, looking incredibly cold in the frigid air. Three boars, three people. Everyone grabbed a boarling and brought them back to the pen.

As soon as they were gently lowered into the pen, the adult boars instantly recognised them, crowding around them and doing... something.

Riza wasn't interested in that. Instead, watched as Daven began work on the burrow. It was outside the pen, so he wouldn't be disturbed while he built it.

That, as well as the walls around the pen expansion, took up most of the remaining daylight. Riza assisted in controlling the boars while Daven took down the walls separating the old pen from the new pen, finally letting them go once Daven was back up on the wall.

They were hesitant at first, cautiously sniffing around, poking and prodding it, until one of the parents decided to venture inside.

It seemed to satisfy them for, the baby boars rushing on inside once it was deemed safe.

*Forceful relocation complete.*