

Chapter 75: Mortality

The torches glowed dimly, as if their light was continually being sucked away.

Everyone crowded around Sanders, watching him work. The better part of an hour had passed but no one said anything, the immensity of the situation weighing down on them.

The man, hunched over Lefie's small, frail body, would occasionally grasp at thin air, pulling down an intangible spirit before thrusting his palms at her chest, pushing the remnant parts of her soul back into her—or, at least, that's how Meren had clumsily explained it.

It was both horrifying and fascinating; Riza couldn't look away. There was no science, no understanding of the biological mechanisms that constituted a living, breathing person. This was entirely spiritual, reminding her of popular pseudoscience conspiracies.

But yet, it apparently worked? The man's skill had levelled up, Meren had *seen* it work, so there was some merit to such an outrageous method.

Still, she said nothing, stewing in her thoughts and worries as she watched on.

Flashes of bright, green glow coated the room in strong, blinding light for but a second, as the pieces of the soul entered the body.

Many, many tendrils reached out from Sanders' body, grasping the air and pulling them towards him, into Lefie. It was like watching a Lovecraftian monstrosity at work.

Sweat dripped from his brow as he focused. The essence drain was immense; tens of thousands of points vanishing from his body, enervating him in one, exhaustive action.

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Lefie's eyes flashed open. The forest was gone, replaced by the ceiling of a cave, illuminated by orange flame. Confusion swarmed her mind briefly, wondering what had happened in that second of unconsciousness.

Her breath was raspy and weak, her whole body exhausted to an unbelievable level. Muscle sagged like they were lifting a thousand weights, her lungs barely capable of taking in the air necessary to survive. It was all she could do to turn her head and see the rest of her party watching her.

Riza was crying, her cheeks a mess with tears. Meren wiped at her eyes, trying to hide something. Daven was barely holding himself together, it seemed.

Lefie could sense Sanders on her other side, kneeling over her.

She tried to move, failing and instantly drawing a pained groan from her mouth.

Riza was on her in but a moment, crawling over and embracing the teen in the strongest hug ever as a revitalising wave of energy crashed through her. Her muscles inflated, chest expanding, as strength and vitality returned to her body, her hazy mind realising she had been low on health.

Confused for a second, Lefie gave in to the embrace, return it with all the love and warmth she always did, a muffled 'this is nice' spoken into Riza's shoulder.

"I've missed you. Fuck, I missed you," Riza hastily got out, her voice sounding like she had been crying for hours.

"What happened?"

Riza didn't respond, not wanting to stop hugging her, and no one else sought to answer the question.

The silence lasted for minutes until Riza finally wrenched herself off the girl. Her eyes were full of tears but with a smile on her face.

"You were... I can't..." She rubbed her eye, sniffing loudly. "Fuck, Lefie. You were *dead*," She finally answered, voice low.

Dead? The word rang hollow. *Well, I'm alive right now*, Lefie thought. It didn't compute.

"Dead?" She asked. Riza nodded.

"But... how?" The biggest question in her mind. One moment, she was hiding in the forest, waiting to act. The next, she was underground, surrounded by her friends. Time was missing, Lefie knew that, but it felt so *natural*, just like sleep. It didn't feel like *death*, however she expected that to feel like.

Lefie looked to Meren, who in turn looked at Daven, who in turn stayed silent. No one gave an answer to her question.

Lefie decided to just bathe in the moment while it lasted.

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“It’s time for some answers,” Meren asked Daven, the man having taken both her and Sanders away from the incapacitated Lefie and Riza.

“I don’t know much. I stayed underground for most of it but I could hear the destruction. I could *feel* it as well. We made some preparations but they were all fuckin’ pointless.

“Riza woke us up and left early in the day, which is when the guy arrived-“

“The guy?”

“Never got a name, and he’s definitely stronger than a Guardian,” Daven said. Meren looked slightly worried.

“Anyway, she went to meet him and the fighting started not long afterwards. Whatever happened between them, that’s what left the forest an ashy battlefield and a massive crack in the mountain.

“Once it was quiet, I found Riza barely conscious, crying over Lefie’s body,” He sighed. “She had already lost her eyes by then.”

The other two were speechless, taking a few seconds to recover.

“Well, we can’t stay here. It’s too dangerous,” Meren finally said.

“I agree but Riza didn’t want to move. She’s, er, heavier than she looks,” Daven said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

Meren looked like she was trying to formulate some words but lost them before they even left her mouth. She walked around a little before sliding to the floor against a wall.

“How are you holding up?” Daven asked, looking at Sanders instead.

“Fuckin’ spectacular,” He replied. “Right pile of shit we’ve found ourselves in.”

“Well, we’re all still alive. Mostly,” Daven added quickly.

“Is it even worth staying with Riza,” Meren said, not directed at anyone in particular but drawing both Daven’s and Sanders’ attention.

“Riza is nearly dead and Lefie *did* die and they’re not going to let up now.” She voiced her thoughts, echoing down the dark tunnel.

“We’re not going to stop you from leaving,” Daven finally said. “There’s... some kind of obligation, I guess, that’s keeping us here but that doesn’t affect you.”

Meren shook her head.

“I’m a wanted woman now. If that’s the strength of the Empire, I’m going to die with or without you. Fuck!” She ran a hand through her dark hair, as if combing out the stress. “I’ve got a better chance staying. Getting stronger. Defying death, even,” She looked pointedly at Sanders. He shivered under the stare.

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“Pupil, sclera, iris, retina, cornea, lens...” Riza sat in a dimly lit room, the walls an uneven earthen shape, as she repeated components of an eye back to herself.

A soft, green glow emanated from her empty eye sockets, flowing through the close eyelids easily.

A heavy sigh filled the room.

Still nothing. I guess if it was that easy to create parts from scratch, it’d be more [Creation] than [Heal].

Her dainty fingers lightly tapped the bottom of her cheek, tracing their way upwards slowly. Her hands started to shake the closer they got, the movement harder and harder until they just stopped altogether.

“I guess I’m-“ A snuffle. “Pretty lucky, that-that this is all-“ Voice caught in her throat, all the saliva in her mouth evaporated in an instant as an image unbidden appeared in her head.

Heartbeat speeding up like a supercar, Riza froze entirely as the helmeted face of the man appeared before her.

The memory was as vivid as ever. Kneeling over her, she could still *feel* the metal tips of his fingers on her skin, the way his head blocked out the sight, the blossoming pain as he reached in and *dug*.

Her whole body convulsed, the man in her mind ripping out the first eye, aftershocks of pain reverberating throughout her body. And then the other eye.

And then it was back to the start. The man was kneeling over her, both eyes still in her head. His hands on her face, his fingertips digging in as the experience repeated itself.

Her body refused to move, her mind unable to think about literally anything else other than this.

The memory went through the motions: kneeling, digging, ripping. Kneeling, digging, ripping. Kneeling, digging, rip-

“-Riza. I’m here, Riza. It’s okay. You’re safe.” Lefie’s soothing voice drifted into her mind.

The presence of the young girl wrapped around her, arm gently rubbing Riza’s back, gradually made itself known.

Heart still racing, Riza’s mind untangled itself from the memory. Sweat dripped down her brow, her arms, and Riza’s eyes watched the doorway to the room with eagle-eyed attention. Tension suffused her whole body still, but at least her mind was hers.

“I’m right here. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be fine,” Lefie repeated over and over, not paying any attention as to whether Riza was listening, but she was.

Eventually, over how many minutes it was, Riza’s taut muscles began to relax, her heart beat settling back down to something normal, and the invisible bogey man never crossed through that doorway.

Riza’s shoulders slumped, enervated. Her mouth was dry and her entire body felt like she had just run a marathon. A deep, heavy breath was all she could release.

“Are you okay? Are you good?” Lefie instantly said after sensing her change of state. Her eyes were crinkled and worried, her tone gentle but earnest.

“I’m- I think, I think I’m good,” Riza hesitantly replied.

“Are you really?”

Riza uncontrollably laughed. A weak, flaky laugh, but a laugh nevertheless.

“Fuck, no,” she shook her head and Lefie enveloped her in a hug. *This... this should be the other way around. I’m not the one that died.*

“Do you... do you want to talk about it?” Lefie asked, voice muffled against Riza’s chest.

“Not really.”

Lefie nodded, not saying anything but not letting go either. Riza wrapped her arms back around the girl, returning the hug.

The pair stayed like that for minutes, losing track of time.

“I love you,” Lefie said quietly. “You’re amazing. You saved me.” She pulled away to say the next part. “And before you think that I, ha, that I died-“ She laughed shortly, the idea apparently funny to her. “Because of you, that’s not true. It was my decision to be in the forest so I could *help*. Daven stayed in the cave and he lived. You saved me. Again. You won. The man ran away and we’re still here and you won.”

“It doesn’t feel like I won,” Riza sighed.

“But you did! Everyone’s alive. Any fight you walk away from is a win.” Riza chuckled lightly at the end.

“No, no. He’s still alive. He turned up again, looking for me. That’s not a win.” Lefie frowned but Riza ignored the girl, following this train of thought.

“His strength, the damage he dealt, he was multiple boons stronger than Meren. Level 45 at least.”

“But isn’t the strongest-“

“The Dreaven is level 60, apparently, but I’m starting to doubt that’s the case.”

“That’s... wow.”

“They really want to get rid of me.” A deep sigh. “No more half-assing shit anymore.” *No more pretending we can coexist peacefully.*

The story Mesandra told me. Strong enough to rival multiple kingdoms. Maybe that was a warning but maybe it was something else. The man was strong but nobody is invincible. If I had a little more time, I could’ve won. Not through myself but through my demons. My summons.

My own armies.

I need demons. Lots of them. And strong ones too. The breeding nests here will fuel the level ups but the viable demons and the level cap increases needs to come from somewhere else.

It's time for an invasion.

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Preparations had to be made. Their destination was the quarry, which Riza still didn't know the actual name of. It had plenty of humanoid demons and she was sure there was far more to discover there.

Riza's goal would be to have more humanoid demons available and to have [Raise Dead] summons with a level cap of 25. The quarry could provide both.

The quarry would be rife with demons for experience. She'd have to bring along the humanoid demons already here and for such a long journey, they'd need fog to sustain them.

Riza wasn't sure how the mechanics of it all worked yet. Did demons consume fog like humans breathed air? Was it closer to how gills in fish worked? Or did they profit off fog without consuming anything?

Just to be safe, she'd have to talk it over with Harold. Possibly even wait for a greater demon capable of producing fog to grow as well.

Then, there was the situation with Adewyn and Andreyra. By now, Riza was confident they weren't leading her into a trap so she used [Inform] directing them to Sotton. It was close enough that anyone could reach them with [Inform] from the nest.

As for Riza herself, she needed to train badly. Her skills were inaccessible but she felt on the cusp of a breakthrough.

Settling herself in a room away from the rest, with only the rat on her head and a humanoid demon at her side, she got to work.

The demon was a test subject for [Heal], having been raised through [Reanimate] and thus granting Riza access to its status.

Looking through the eyes of the rat didn't help at all. It lacked any capability of seeing essence, possibly contingent on its own essence stat. So, she had to make do with her vague sensations.

Riza prepared herself for however long this was going to take.

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Days passed. All surface entrances were sealed up, with only ventilations shafts reaching the fresh air above. The remaining torches quickly burned up, leaving the entire nest in darkness.

Occasionally, Daven and Sanders would venture up to the highest levels of the nest, devoid of fog, and open up a window to the outside, acclimating back to the brightness of the sun.

By now, the first, large batch of fog-dwelling monsters were giving birth. Travelling from nests all over Droya to the one centrally in the caldera and then all the way here, just outside of Trotton. About a month had gone by, some monsters giving birth before Riza had reached them, some during the journey, but most now producing offspring.

This would effectively, at a minimum, double the current monster population and thankfully, Daven had prepared breeding chambers for the sudden influx.

These monsters were bred for purpose. Highly fertile, short gestation period, and no reliance upon the time of year.

There was one factor that Riza hadn't expected, however; the number of offspring. Humans typically give birth to one child at a time, and rarely more, so she had naively been expecting just a doubling of the population.

This was not the case. The first monster that ended up with five pups? Dismissed as a rarity.

The second with four? Coincidence and nothing more. The next with three? Perhaps there was something to think about here.

All of these occurred during the journey over to this new nest, where limited resources could be applied to breeding.

But now that tens of monsters were giving birth at a time, all producing, on average, three to four children, it could no longer be ignored.

Daven and Harold hastily went to work, carving out enough chambers for the expected quadrupling or quintupling of the population. They wound up working throughout the day and night, barely getting any rest for as soon as a new chamber was finished, it was quickly filled up with pups and their parents.

The birthing process seemed to go smoothly without any intervention. The demons in charge were able to identify when a monster would quickly go into labour and moved it to a less congested location to give birth.

Whilst Riza was focused on her spiritual self-discovery, the rest of the group still had to eat and drink. They made frequent journeys down the endlessly long tunnel to the *Fyllopoi* to get food, which Mesandra graciously provided after informing her of the situation. They seemed content to wait until Riza was able to help them again, not in any particular rush.

Between Lefie and their own hydromancer, there was plenty of water to go around.

The tentative plan for the journey back to the quarry that Riza had set in place was to split the group once again. With the stunningly large number of demons here at home, they needed guarding. Lefie and Sanders would stay here, guarding the place and eventually aiding Andreyra and Adewyn once the pair finally arrived, if Riza had left by then.

Meren and Daven would travel with Riza and her entourage of humanoid demons to the quarry where they'd begin their assault. Daven, with his earth-shaping abilities, was an invaluable asset in enemy-controlled land but Meren, with her bountiful health, ability to perceive through fog, and high-damage, close-quarters fighting ability would massively help to sure up security without Riza worrying about her dying with just a gentle gust of wind.

Harold and Tiffany would remain here, of course. Although they were currently the highest levelled demons, they both provided skills that were needed.

Meanwhile, Meren trained hard. Physical skills were a lot harder to train, a lot more draining on the body, and with harsh requirements. She had plenty of skill points left over but didn't meet the requirements for any new skills in the spear tree yet.

Riza didn't divulge much information about the person who attacked but one thing she did say was that they fought with a spear.

This tiny bit of information ignited a fire within Meren. A spear could do this level of damage?

Her days from then on were filled with training, the honing of her body and skills, and, eventually, new skills all together.

There was a limit to what a spear could do alone, apparently. The first fifth-tier skill she had purchased was [One with the Spear]. With her [Way of Spearmanship] boon, the skill increased all her stats by a fifth whilst wielding a spear. Not too much on its own but physical skills were all about synergy, compounding upon the skills that came before it.

Her sights weren't on a sixth-tier skill, however, but another fifth-tier instead: [Conductive Spear Tip]. The skill infuses a spear tip in aspected essence for the next attack only. It let her have little control over the aspect, instead 'soaking in local essence' but it was a gateway skill. Meren had seen the destruction of the forest, no doubt through a fire-aspected spear. She had seen Lefie's extreme specialisation, rendering humanoid demons dead in just a few bolts of lightning.

This was a start. If she wanted any more skills like this, was she going to have to train hard. Luckily, there was an abundance of essence to do so.

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Tendrils of green energy drifted from Riza's fingertips, crossing a distance between tip and skin as they sharpened and dug into the pure-white flesh of the humanoid demon.

With its status window open, she watched as, finally, the lost health was instantly restored.

Yes. Yes! It worked! She could barely contain her excitement, shooting to her feet and pacing the room.

It was long and arduous to get to this point but she had finally done it.

Normally, using [Heal] just required a simple visualisation of essence, a visible imposition of her will on the essence inside her, to get the skill to work.

Except for when she used it on herself. It was second-nature by now, all requirements for the skill so intuitive she checked them all in less than a second, the mere desire to use [Heal] on herself being all that was needed for the skill to activate.

On the other hand, it was more complicated than that.

Since, before this happened, she would visualise the essence inside the person she was trying to affect, trying to sense the flow of essence inside another seemed like the best place to start.

By default, whatever the esoteric sense was, it seemed finely tuned to demons and external essence. Whenever a spell was cast, she could sense it preternaturally. *If that's the case, are demons just the result of an essence skill? I'm getting ahead of myself.*

The problem came to sensing the essence *inside* a person. Sitting down and meditating, Riza managed to muffle the pull of external essence, as she was dubbing it, fine-tuned her sense into feeling the vortex of essence within an entity.

The faint flares of essence use far away resided and the whirlpool inside the humanoid demon before her blossomed into sensation. It was faint and vague but she could feel the movement through the body, filling the arms and legs. If Riza focused, she could make out the distance between them, of only a foot.

Focusing on the feeling, she extended her arm, resting her hand on the demon's shoulder.

She focused on the swirling essence, the faintest of tinges of life emanating from it. They weren't particles, not really. It was like a string, or a stream; a constant, continuous form of energy.

The entire cauldron that was Riza was empty to her senses, all apart from her hand. A trail of energy roused itself, leading from the centre of her chest, coursing through her arm, and breaking apart into five forms in her hand.

And that's when it happened, when the essence broke through her fingers and pierced the flesh of the demon. When [Heal] finally worked on someone other than herself.

No conscious thought, no cognizant observations, occurred. The entire activation of the skill was like a fever dream; an intrinsic understanding of reality that vanished as soon as she attempted to think.

By now, she had finished pacing, staring at her hand in wonder.

And then it hit her, a gentle thudding inside her head, a faint pain behind the eyes. The adrenaline and excitement were wearing off and the residual effects of what she had just done were catching up.

A wave of fatigue hit her hard, forcing her back onto the earthen bench she was sitting on. The lines of energy clouding the humanoid demon's body had been replaced by the faint sensation of presence, of distance, of strength.

Urgh, Riza groaned tiredly, trying to shake it off. Even [Heal] didn't help with what was now obviously a headache. *I've had worse*.

Closing her eyes, Riza sank into the tranquil thought-space that was [Meditate], shrugging off the headache to the best of her abilities.

This was progress. Her eventual goal was reacquiring [Raise Dead] and [Leech] and, hopefully, finally getting to use the latter without sight.

But, for now, some stress tests were necessary with [Heal].

Daven wasn't hard to find, the constant flashes of essence Riza could sense belonging to him. The nests were still requiring renovations, demons still constantly giving birth. With him here, Harold had returned to help out the *Fyllopoi*.

He was busy but none of this was particularly urgent.

Riza told him of her progress, referencing their conversation a few days ago, and he did seem to show genuine interest in her progress. Daven happily agreed to be a test subject, although Riza didn't put it in those terms.

Deep breath. She steadied herself, hand on his large arm as she tuned out the rest of the world, which was pretty easy in her current state.

Her recognition of external essence faded away as she mentally twisted a dial, shifting to internal essence.

The faint energy of life and health made itself known to Riza first, lazily dancing throughout Daven's body. Flimsy and ill-defined, it felt similar to the humanoid demon.

Stamina was next, pulsating through his body like electric shocks. They pulsed on a rhythm, spanning from his central organs outwards like a heartbeat.

Riza couldn't even begin to understand the flow of essence inside him. The next thing she knew, her muddled thought coalesced and she was face-first in a pile of vomit, her headache feeling like a knife in her head.

Even just trying to think left her reeling in pain, the brain felt like it was on fire.

Daven was under her quickly, saying... something, as he picked her up, wiping the gunk off her face with his sleeve.

Her carried her someplace as a mindless Riza periodically flashed [Heal] throughout herself, trying to wash away the pain.

But it didn't work, the intense discomfort lasting through the skill usages. Thoughts jumbled and a mess, her body recognised the bed she was placed in but her brain didn't.

Her mind was lost in a swirling swarm of fugue while her body settled itself to sleep.

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The room was one of the remaining rooms to still be lit up by a torch. It was small, barely even a cupboard, with a lone, earthy shelf carved out to sit on.

Sanders was hunched over, rubbing his hands together. The light provided a sombre feeling.

Lefie was alive. He had done that. Her soul was back in her back, grabbed from whatever place it was going to next and unnatural thrust back into the decaying corpse of a teenager.

And he had done that.

Shivers ran through his arms at the memory. The hour-long, exhaustive ritual. It was like he could *feel* the spirits of the dead swirl around him, the long-deceased still inhabiting this forest. Souls of tarnys, unable to participate in the cycle of reincarnation.

They were everywhere. They didn't speak, didn't do much of anything, really, but were constantly *there*. He couldn't get rid of them.

One drifted slightly too close as he whipped his arm through the arm, slicing through its incorporeal form.

The soul vanished, reappearing just a few strides away.

This, this was new. And all because of Riza. When he purchased that fuckin' skill on the road, that's when they appeared. He wasn't sure of it then—they were only the faintest of whispers—but they were definitely there.

And it only got stronger since. Levelling up the skill made it so much worse. They were ignorable but now, in places like this, sealing himself away was all he could do to avoid the silent cacophony.

Just how long until he started to see them?

He was a monster. Lefie should've been dead. She died. That was it. And he perverted that beautiful, natural process.

The thoughts plagued his memories. If only he could go back, if only he stood up to Riza. That fiery compulsion inside him exploded once he saw the teary, empty eyes of his master.

His arms moved out of his control, his legs bringing him to the corpse, and his mind compartmentalised his will and overriding his volition as it activated the skill for him.

This wasn't him. He wasn't some kind of evil monster, bent on destroying the cycle of life.

He was, he was Sanders. He was *normal*. He was *good*. This wasn't him.

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Fuuuuck, Riza groaned, sitting upwards as sleep finally drifted away. She felt like she had slept with a metal blanket, her entire body stiff and painful. The remnants of a headache were still there from yesterday but bearable.

The rat beside her bed responded quickly, jumping onto her lowered hand as she placed it back atop her head, switching to its vision for the day.

No one else was in the room. Lefie's bed was empty and the table still had scraps of food on it.

Riza's bones creaked as she stretched, confusion over the events of yesterday drifting to the fore of her mind. She couldn't even remember how she got to the bed!

[Heal], unfortunately, did hardly anything for her headache so she soldiered on.

It didn't take a lot of walking to find Daven or, rather, for Daven to find her. It was like he was looking for her.

"Hey, Daven," She said tiredly, mind as sharp as water.

"You're awake," He said, sounding glad.

"Barely. What happened yesterday?"

"Yesterday? It's only been an hour."

The confusion on Riza's face must've been evident, her lack of words indicative, for Daven quickly elucidated.

"You came to me asking to use [Heal] and when you did, you collapsed into a puddle of your own vomit. I carried you back to bed. That was an hour ago."

That explains the headache. Riza rubbed at her forehead, still not feeling great.

Let's sort through these shitty memories. I managed [Heal] on a demon, that I remember. Made my way towards Daven, yes. Talked a little. Started using [Heal], sensed his essence then... Fuck! She winced as phantoms of the pain licked at her from inside her head.

Dark from there. Even just remembering it hurt.

Lesson learned. No using skills on non-humanoid demons yet.

"I remember."

"Good. Is there anything else you need me to do or should I get back to digging?"

"Do you know where Sanders is?"