

## Chapter 79: War

“And it obeys everything you say?” Andreya asked, walking around the stationary form of the demon which she had learned was called ‘Harold’—an amusingly normal name for such an abnormal creature.

“Yes,” Riza replied succinctly, as were most of what she had said so far. From everything she had heard about the woman, being this... laconic and timid was not what she was expecting.

Even so, she had no qualms with answering any and all questions about her demons for Andreya.

They were an endlessly fascinating specimen—a perversion of the traditional pet taming process, if one was to describe it uncharitably. Riza held nothing back, including how she obtained such a servant.

Necromancy.

A fickle and disgusting practice. The Empire banned it for good reason; souls were meant to move on to another body after death, not trapped in their mortal vessel, at the whims of their master.

But demons? They were different. They weren’t even skaldian. Did they even have souls?

Sanders seemed to think so. Lefie had allowed her to talk with him while they waited for Riza and getting to speak one-on-one with a true Resurrectionist was... an experience.

Magic was an art, a science. Practise made perfect and with good instruction, anyone could do it if they had the requirements for it. A natural mage was antithetical to itself.

But rumours of Resurrectionists, the higher tier of Healers, were abound in the magic circles. The skill-induced madness that plagued their minds, the whispering of spirits that precluded sleep, the primal grasp with which they manipulated essence itself... Sanders showed evidence of all of it.

He was a quiet man—apparently, that was always the case—but half of what he mumbled out was incoherent nonsense. When Andreya asked him to describe using [Heal], she could follow along—somewhat, as a non-life practitioner—but the moment he began to explain the metaphysical contortions of [Resuscitate] and even [Resurrection], he’d lost her.

Melding of spirits, talking to souls, feeling the intrinsic nature of life as it was embedded in reality... nonsense to her ears.

That was the case with every Resurrectionist, she had heard. One of the reasons they were so rare; they'd never last long. To mess with something as divine and complex as the soul itself would never go well.

Good that the Dominion ban it for all but the most compatible of candidates, Andreyka thought.

None of that plagued her thoughts for long after, merely confirming what she knew.

And then she met Riza. Met her, face-to-face, for the first time since she saw the small woman sitting in her office in Kratten, many moons ago.

She was nothing like Andreyka expected. Lefie was just a girl; her stories of Riza were the unreliable adorations of a child. Adewyn had met her more recently but that was only brief and after a battle, no less. Fighting has an effect of sharpening and focusing the mind on the realness of reality.

And, sure, Andreyka had talked to Riza mentally before but [Message] and [Inform] were not perfect methods of communication.

So, the sheer clarity and... normality, of Riza, was slightly shocking, to say the least.

The way she talked about Harold and the demons in general reminded Andreyka of her mentors.

Completely unlike a Resurrectionist.

There was no talk of harnessing the power of a soul to fuel the corpse of a body. No backwards, immoral mutilations of the long-dead. It was almost... homely, even.

Riza described her process when readying the dead. She displayed her immense knowledge of the physiology of the body, and shocked Andreyka with her expertise in explaining how everything functioned.

It was all lost on Andreyka, technical terminology and lapses into a language unknown hiding the well of knowledge within Riza from her but the cadence of her speech and demeanour while she talked spoke volumes.

A body was to Riza as a sword is to a blacksmith.

It reminded Andreyra of the few scavenged books she had read from the Ancient's libraries. A wealth of knowledge she had only briefly glimpsed.

After talking with Riza, discussing everything, all her reservations and hesitations were gone. This was not a madwoman wielding power beyond her control but someone with a firm grasp of her own mind and just what she could do with it.

The topic of conversation eventually shifted away from the mechanics of animation and to a more general discussion of what exactly Riza was doing.

No secrets seemed to be the deal, and the young woman happily divulged the nature of her trip; the training of some demons to increase their level caps and make them stronger.

And that's when Andreyra asked the big question.

"So, what's next?"

And Riza had no answer. A general goal of 'getting stronger' seemed to be the deal but nothing more concrete than that. No hands to swing the hammer of her army, no minds to position her forces to wipe out the demons, no methods of self-strengthening.

It was embarrassing, really, and Riza shied away when she gave her answer.

"Honestly, that's it?" Andreyra almost scolded, incredulity sneaking into her tone. While Riza displayed extraordinary eminence surrounding her skills, she was severely lacking in applying them.

"I betrayed the Dominion and this is the best that you can offer?" She shook her head. "Do you have a war room? Somewhere to plan your next steps?"

Riza was quiet but complied. A room was quickly carved out on the upper layers, above the fog, by Daven. A large table placed in the middle, with plenty of space around for all skaldian members to stand beside.

A map was pulled out from a bag and rolled out before them, depicting an inaccurate rendition of the surroundings around Trotton.

Andreyra sighed heavily, wondering just what she had gotten herself into.

*I should never trust Adewyn's word again,* she thought to herself.

"The man who destroyed this forest? He's an Enforcer," Andreyra got to explaining. "The judiciary system handles the small cases of rogue Healers

and adventurers wandering where they shouldn't. They get conscripted into the army and limitations are placed upon them to keep them and everyone else safe and in-line, as you would know," She eyed a shy Riza.

Meren, Sanders, Daven, Lefie, and Adewyn were all here, crowding around the table.

Andreya was in the middle, pouring over the map and thinking on information while they poured in. Riza was to her left, and Adewyn to her right.

"When that doesn't work, or we catch them too late, or any other number of reasons, that's where Enforcers come in. There's been rogue Healers or Resurrectionists in my time that have had to be stamped out and it's always been by an Enforcer, regardless of if they were level five or forty." She tapped the table for emphasis.

"They operate outside the jurisdiction of the Dominion and hail to the Regent themselves. They only come in when there's no other option left.

"Before I abandoned my post, I received a report that three had been dispatched here, one for each province." She tapped off the map where the provinces were roughly located.

"None of them have names, beside what everyone else comes up for them. The one that found you is the one who frequently goes after Healers and Resurrectionists and even Necromancers. Because of that, some folk have taken to calling him 'Death', in contrast to the life users he takes down.

"Facing him and not the other two? You got unlucky."

"He's named Death?" Meren asked during a brief pause. Andreya turned to look at her and shrugged.

"It's what people call him."

"What are the other two called? What can they do?"

"The one for Droya was Solace, or Temperance, or Tranquillity, or whatever else he goes by. He's a lot newer than Death and not much is known about him.

"Toila is completely unknown. Never heard of the man they sent there so he can't be that experienced."

"Great. Multiple Enforcers in addition to Guardians and demons we have to worry about," Meren complained, hiding her face in her hand.

Andreya sighed again, turning to Riza, who hadn't said much of anything yet.

"Diviners are watching this place. The moment anyone steps above ground, all three of them will know." The woman nodded, so at least she was actively listening.

"Which means everything has to happen underground or away from here. Does everyone understand?" Andreya exuded authority and drew out an understanding nod from everyone.

"Our next order of business is our next steps and doing so necessitates we establish everything that's in play right now.

"Top priority: Enforcers. They are watching and we make one mistake, they're coming for us. We either work around them or take them out. Both choices have consequences.

"Normally, Guardians will be also be a problem but since we're at the very corner of the Empire and Adewyn is no longer working for them, they won't be much of a problem here. Transporting an experienced one from elsewhere will take time and if someone is promoted from within instead, well, Adewyn knows all the candidates and none of them are particularly strong."

"After that, the demons. You say they're essentially an army?" Riza nodded, shuffling forwards to take over.

"They've got a larger base in the quarry in Moya and plenty of nests in both Moya and Toila. They all communicate with each other through their equivalent of psyche skills. One humanoid demon to each nest but they can move them around like they did in Hotton."

"Another faction in play. How much of a threat are they?"

"Individually, not much, but there's a lot of unknowns," Riza frowned. "The quarry had the large worm demon and Hotton had the massive greater demon and both are unaccounted for."

"They could've gone further inland," Daven added.

"That's certainly a possibility. There's a lot we don't know," Andreya replied, taking back over.

"Lastly, we have the Dominion and the Chosen. With Andreya gone from Kratten and the quarry destroyed, they're weaker than they were months ago.

“Every other town has a small group from both, roughly, but the major concentrations of them are what’s significant and they’ve been nearly driven entirely out of Droya.

“Moya still has Trotton and its villages while Toila has Rensenfeld and the Hall of Voices as significant locations. Most of Toila is mountains and barely has encounters from demons. It’s arguably the safest province this side of the Empire.” Andreya drew a rough outline of the far-eastern province.

“So, they’re weak? Not well defended?” Meren inquired.

“They’ve never had a reason to be. And, with the mountains either side, it’s an easily defensible location from any aboveground attacks.”

“What about all the other provinces?” Lefie asked.

“Not something to consider. The closer to the Seat of the Regent you get, the stronger everything becomes. People, demons, even the weather somehow.”

Andreya had finished. She had given all the necessary information, informing everyone of the situation at hand, and now they were all digesting that information.

“Our. Next. Step.” Andreya tapped the map, emphasising each word. She looked at Riza.

“You want to get strong? That has consequences. The Enforcers are here now. What are you going to do next?”

She stepped back, giving way for Riza to take over.

The woman was thinking, stewing in her own thoughts. Thrusting a choice like this upon someone so young was rough and cold but it had to be done. Andreya had messed her own life up for this and she was going to make sure it wasn’t a mistake.

“We, er... we’ll wait. Let the demons grow and breed, and, er... the humanoid demons will get stronger?” The small woman said, sounding incredibly uncertain.

Andreya shook her head like a disappointed mother.

“That’s not enough.”

“Hey! Riza-“ Lefie began to say, only to get shushed by Andreya.

“Quiet! You’ve been coasting along on Riza’s decisions without a care so far and that’s not good enough. Through sheer luck, you’ve managed to survive this long but now that luck has ran out. An Enforcer was here. You fought an Enforcer. There is no backing down, no running away.

“All these ‘getting stronger’ notions can be thought up by anyone but you’re in charge of a burgeoning army now. A couple demons equivalent to Guardians and a host of beast demons to challenge the average foot soldier of the Chosen. Riza, you need *long-term* goals, not short-term.” Andrey’s voice shifted from cold and authority to almost nurturing.

“What’s your goal?”

Riza wrung her hands as her shoulders trembled. Her breathing was obvious as she took in deep breaths.

Andrey waited patiently. Riza needed to show she was more than just an optimistic child.

“We-we’ll, er...” She gulped. A bad start. “We *need* to be stronger. And not in a general sense.

“You-you’re right. The Enforcers are here. They’re going to keep coming here. We can’t, we won’t live underground forever, so we need to be strong enough to stop them.

“That’s... that’s going to take time. The demons need to breed, to grow stronger. The humanoid demons need experience. I... I need to get better. I need to learn how to use all my skills again and, and improve upon them. “

Another deep breath. Those were the obvious ones.

“And, after that... we can help. We can help people.

“Magic, magic gets kept from people. Life magic is useful. Not even stuff like [Resuscitate] but [Cleanse] and [Heal] too. [Cleanse] could save many lives just from ordinary dangers and the Dominion criminalising that directly leads to the deaths of many people. The same with [Heal]. Just one trusted person with those skills in each village could save countless lives.

“And [Cleanse] is even more useful further. It lets people enter fog and destroy nests. Not letting anyone use those skills means nests get turned into breeding grounds for demons, where there’s a constant supply of people for them to kill and turn into demons.

“And that’s basically the whole issue with magic! It’s *monopolised* by the Dominion and they can control who gets to use it. People die because there’s no Healers to cure disease or mend broken bones.

“People die because a fire breaks out and there’s no one who can use water skills to put it out.

“People die because it doesn’t rain or crops get diseased and don’t grow and people starve.

“It’s hoarded and kept and used to kill demons and they’re not even doing that well!” Riza finally fell into her groove, speaking with passion and far more fluency.

“Magic is, is... there’s so much you can do with it and there’s zero instruction. People have to work things out themselves and even when I was Healer, I had so little help and it was like no one knew how anything worked. [Heal] can cure thirst and hunger and repair broken bones and none of that is known when you just read the skill.

“I bet there’s tens of ways to use every skill but people are stuck to discovering that themselves. I still don’t even know how to use [Message] without speaking out loud! Imagine all the people who could contribute further but are stuck rediscovering stuff at first stages.”

“And then, and then! The culture itself is disgusting. I was in Litchendorf, I was better than anyone else at hunting, and I got no respect at all. People treated me like an outsider and men thought I was worse because I was a woman.

“Even with those who had skills, who were demonstrably equal, there was still this fucking *sexism* and *misogyny*. That was disgusting and painful and I don’t know how any of you dealt with it for so long.

“And don’t even get me started on how stupid marriage is here!

“But also, Lefie! The *Nolitos* and *Fyllopoi* and all the rest of them that are driven out of their homes, forced to live in the wild, all because they’re different. You couldn’t even get any work because people took one look at you and thought otherwise. And, what, just because Skaldur says it’s fine to kill people like you that makes it okay.

“And, like, all of that. Everything, it’s all because of this ‘Skaldur’. The Dominion and the Chosen are named after him! The Regent rules over

everyone not because he was *democratically elected* but because Skaldur placed him there!

“What bullshit! Skaldur advocates for the killing of peaceful people. He’s used as an excuse for the sexism inherent to the system. He’s the reason magic is kept within the army and used to oppress people and fight demons but ignored when it could uplift them.

“All of this is shit and I’m going to fix it.” Riza slammed her palms down on the table and turned to look at Andreyia.

“You want my long-term goals? That’s it. I’m going to fix this god-forsaken Empire and make it better. I’m going wipe out the demons, discover whatever the fuck magic actually is, figure out what happened to the Ancients and the Forgotten, uplift people to some sense of decent living, and kill this tyrannical Regent with my own bare hands all because I can!” She huffed out, finally finishing.

Silence reigned supreme after that deranged-rant-turned-speech.

It wasn’t quite what Andreyia was expecting but compared to the vague, uncertain affirmations of what they were going to do next, it was certainly an improvement. And something she could get behind. If this was what she had left her old life behind to support, she could definitely live with that.

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The burbling mass of bodies writhed and wiggled before Riza, holed up in a hole sunken into the ground and crushing the crowd within.

It was extremely claustrophobic and merely looking into it made her uncomfortable, not to mention the skeletal, alien demons crowding around the lip of the hole, watching and waiting and guarding.

Harold was there with her, standing ramrod straight as he just ordered a farmer demon to pull out their latest and greatest.

A demon on the far back wall, standing next to a currently closed tunnel that lead to the next breeding hole in a myriad sequence of breeding holes, leaned forward as it’s boney feet dug into the compacted earth and it’s skeleton-like arm creaked and bent in the air, extending unnaturally far, as it reached into the mass of demons below.

The hand was swift and precise, finding its target quickly. Its fingers wrapped around the burgeoning torso and withdrew the bundle of muscle and flesh that

was a demon, quickly restraining it within its torso as the farmer demon's hands and feet dug into the wall and then ceiling as it glided across the room, avoiding its comrades all around the edges of the hole.

Like a spider skittering across the ceiling, the primitive ape-brain within Riza reacted, twisting her gut and filling her sensation of disgust.

Reaching down, one hand still attached to the ceiling, the farmer demon deposited itself down on the ground in front of the pair of them. Its ribs cracked open as its other hand picked up and plopped the demon down on the ground in front of them.

"Our latest greater demon," Harold intoned.

It was a little different from the rest. Slightly bigger and bulbous looking, just like it was undergoing puberty.

Sitting down, Riza shifted the focus of [Meditate] from her sight to her ears, the sound of writhing collective below vanishing instantly, peace returning to her mind.

Her hindbrain was awash in sensations, the broiling cauldron of demons sitting prominently at the forefront of her mind.

Harold was but a speck in comparison, and so what this greater demon.

Like shifting a dial, Riza twisted her sense away from its generalised form as she tapped into the more specific, precise module that she used to sense the flow of essence itself.

The hole began to fall away as its large concentration failed to make up for the miniscule essence capacity of each demon in there. Harold glowed brighter as the essences cycled within his body, and the greater demon glowed too.

They were different, that Riza could tell, but she couldn't quite ascertain all the details, all the many ways in which the essence biology of the two demons differed.

She sat like that for a good few minutes, just observing, before giving up and getting back onto her feet.

"How much longer until the greater demons can be taken from the breeding holes?" Riza asked.

"Soon. The first greater demons are ready," Harold answered, switching into his demon language as he ordered the farmer demon in front of him.

It glided back over the nest, stopping on the ceiling while it reached its down below.

Riza couldn't help but chuckle, finding the similarity with the antiquated claw machines amusing.

Its prize was quickly found as it withdrew a demon, surprisingly, too large for its chest cavity.

Cracks formed in the earth around its feet and hand, the combined weight difficult to hold. The farmer demon quickly deposited what was obviously a greater demon on the ground in front of Riza and Harold, who both had to step back a little to make space.

*This was hiding within that crowd of bodies?*

Mole-like, because of course it was, the demon had six legs and six arms, all tipped with razor-sharp claws. The weird thing moles had on their face was resided and small as its head tapered to point, making its entire body look like a bullet.

Quickly, Riza tried to [Meditate] again, sensing a definite difference between this demon and the rest, even without using her more specific senses. This was, without a doubt, a greater demon.

"How do they grow? How do they level up?"

"Time. Leave them in fog and they grow."

"That's it? No... experience? Killing enemies? Nothing like that?"

Harold shook his head.

"Do they need anything other than fog? Like... exercise?" Riza asked.

Again, another shake of the head. These were simple creatures indeed, and Riza was quickly formulating a plan.

"So, they grow by consuming essence? Could we speed that up? Like, if I was to use [Heal+] constantly on it, would that help it grow?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders, taking Riza aback a second for how smooth and human-like that action was.

"How is the essence consumed? Is it just passively like *osmosis* or more active like breathing?"

“It consumes all the time.”

*Probably more like breathing, then. I can rule out shooting barrel-loads of fog down its gullet to speed up the process, then.*

No more questions, Riza set her plan in motion.

If all the demons needed was to consume fog passively to level up, that made it exceedingly easy to manage. The farmer demons withdrew all the greater demons from the nest they no longer had to care or cater for and Riza got Harold and Daven to begin digging out rooms just for the demons.

They were connected to the nest still but sealed up almost entirely except for small ventways for fog to flow in. With such large creatures lumbering around, it'd be a pain more than anything so Riza left them in what were essentially incubators.

They all had two fates available to them; slaughtered at the ripe age of 15 for either levels or a level cap increased, which wasn't the most appealing one, or wait until one potentially grows into an elder greater demon.

Harold apparently had never commanded an elder greater demon before, so he knew little about that. Apparently, the only difference between them and regular greater demons was simply age.

It was like demons were an unstoppable growing species that just kept on going and going as long as it was fed. That meant the giant demon in Hotton would get even bigger over time.

But Riza wasn't so sure. After all, not every beast demon could become a greater demon, and only a small minority of all demons were humanoid demons.

The parasites they implanted in corpses each had their own levels of potential and Riza felt it was more likely the elder greater demons had more potential than just regular greater demons, but Harold lacked the experience or knowledge to ascertain the difference between the two.

Still, that was purely conjecture. Time would tell what the answer actually was.

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Where once the table was rough and flat, it was now carved and embossed and engraved with a multitude of mountains, a cityscape of cities, and the never-ending glades of plains that made up the land around them.

Recalling from the many maps Andreyra had looked upon, Daven dutifully remodelled the war table into her liking, filling out and cutting in the elevations of the land as it transitioned into this impressive three-dimensional model of the Empire.

Far and away an improvement to the singular, inaccurate map that the group had used so far.

Already, Andreyra was worth her weight in gold. Her insight and knowledge were invaluable.

It was only her and Riza in the room, just like multiple other times this week, going over what they knew about the situation.

Riza was serious about her desire to *fix* the Empire, and she knew what she needed to do.

Firstly, the biggest threat, the number one priority as Andreyra had laid out, were the Enforcers.

Apparently, the most likely place Death was holed up was in Trotton, the only city in Moya. Before they made any other moves, they had to take him out.

Which was where Jupy would come in.

Death was apparently the epitome of a spearman, which meant the vast majority of his stats were physical and his damage reduction was high. The lightning-fast attacks of Lefie would hardly hurt him but the anti-material rifle that was Jupy was a far more compatible match.

A plan was quickly forming.

The forest above was watched constantly by Diviners so drawing Death out would be the easy part.

Jupy had trained with his skills enough by now that Riza spent his last two remaining skill points on upgrading [Lightning Bolt] and [Overcharge], vastly increasing his damage potential.

And the numbers were insane.

[Lightning Bolt+] as Lefie told her was merely a damage increase of 20, or 20% for a total of 120 damage for 10 essence.

The basic damage increases were [Maximise Mastery+] and [Manifold Mastery]. They were a five-times and a two-times multiplier respectively. [Overcharge] increased to a maximum of a one-and-a-half-times multiplier.

Just those three increased [Lightning Bolt+] to 1800 damage for 150 essence. As crazy as it felt to think this, that was still a small number.

The real power came in the form of [Range Compression] and, consequently, the ability to boost that range.

[Seeker Mastery+] and [Manifold Mastery] increased the range from 40 metres all the way to 400 and [Manifold Mastery] doesn't double-dip on the cost increase which meant it still only cost 750 essence.

400 metres was a lot of range and even being conservative and keeping at minimum, a 100-metre range, that was a 300-metre reduction. Each metre reduced was a 10% damage increase which meant 3000% damage increase.

The total damage, after all metamagic was applied, was a mind-boggling 5.5 MILLION. Riza had to double-check the zeros multiple times before it finally sank in the monster that she had created.

Even if someone had enough vim to reduce damage by 99%, that was still a cool 50,000 damage.

Truthfully, she was a bit afraid of the damage a spell that powerful could do to the world.

And it wasn't like the cost was a large down-side either; the vast majority of power came from [Range Compression] which cost nothing but range so the end result was a measly 1000 essence to destroy the universe. Riza could do that fourteen times in a row!

With Jupy on her side, what could stop her?