

Chapter 83: Destruction

Empty. Metal corridors stretched for tens of metres, with no signs of life. The ground was littered with dust and dirt and debris, with vague imprints of footprints, their parents nowhere to be found.

The sound of their footsteps echoed downwards, but never greeted in return.

The silence and isolation contributed to an eerie atmosphere, and Riza pulled tight her coat around her.

It was hard to reconcile this image of a ghostly bunker with the one filled with bustling life just weeks ago.

“To think, this was right under my nose,” Adewyn commented, looking around at the whole place in awe. She touched every surface, smelt every wall, taking it all in.

“How common are these? Relics of the Ancients?” Riza asked.

“There’s a lot more the closer to the Seat of the Regent you get. It is the centre of the Empire for a reason.”

Meren and Daven had joined them again, bringing their party to the total size of four. Bodies were the name of the game and that meant overwhelming firepower; no need to distribute experience of level cap increases.

Even to her esoteric senses, when Riza sat down and closed her fresh, new eyes, she felt nothing. No demons, and barely any fluctuations of essence.

She led them to the closest stairwell, walking the past routes she and Lefie had taken the first time they’d arrived here.

Checking up on a farm, completely destroyed. No demons, and even no remnants of the hives that bore the parasites.

The demons were doing something—or, had done something—and Riza didn’t like that. It was out of her control.

The whole thing was too risky. They were already chancing things by returning here once again.

Riza couldn’t deal with it. It wasn’t worth it. She called it quits, turning the group around and returning to the nest, to many complaints from Adewyn.

Even though their nest was no closer to the bunker, it was still a multiple-day journey, one filled with Daven extending the tunnel, and then sealing it up behind him.

He was perhaps the best example of the effect practice had on skills. When he first used [Earth Shape] only the rock directly beneath his fingertips shifted from the skill.

Gradually, the brown tendrils of essence reached out, affecting more and more surface area as he grew stronger, affecting a greater chunk of ground.

And now, with his hands planted in the centre of a circular area, the entire face of the tunnel shuddered and pulled back, melting into itself all without needing him to lift a finger. Riza did some calculations to find out he could affect a minimum area of five squared metres at once.

Just how long until he can do what happened to Hotton? Or is that a different skill?

Once they made it back to the nest, needless to say, Riza wasn't in the highest spirits. Sure, they learnt a little about the situation at the bunker but it was otherwise a waste of time, and the whole thing left her down in the dumps.

"How else will we get more bodies? Do we just randomly search for demon nests?" She complained one evening to Lefie. The pair shared a room, not due to a lack of space, and were currently sitting at opposite ends as Riza recounted the journey, pet critter in her lap that she was currently stroking, as well as borrowing the sight of to see in the fog-filled room.

"What about a graveyard?" The girl inquired, drawing an intrigued look from Riza. "That's what you were going to do anyway, right? When you have the city. Why not start now?" She shrugged a little. A loose, vague idea at best.

But, perhaps there was something to that.

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Carved into a mountain, the graveyard was massive, covering the size of an entire village. For whatever reason, there was a religious belief that you could only be reincarnated if your body was preserved whole after death, which meant burial. If you lost a part of your body during life, that didn't matter, but any destruction of the flesh after death was taboo.

For a city spanning back generations, that meant a graveyard of matching size. The oldest corpses were buried right at the entrance to the cave, nothing but skeletons now; it was the ones right at the end which interested Riza.

Her critters had done some recon earlier, with the help of Adewyn and Andreyra telling her what they knew, and now Daven had dug a tunnel right up into the place.

Giant, stone pillars held up the ceilings, creating a claustrophobic feeling similar to the tunnel they had just left.

Each grave was marked with not only a headstone but also flowers and trinkets and personalised items. Occasionally, a book was contained as well. Riza, however, was not allowed to touch the book, receiving a stern scolding from Adewyn.

The headstones were usually engraved with shaky, sloppy writing, and the stone itself was round and like any large stone you could find out in the wild. Coincidentally, these types of graves also rarely held books.

Instead, the ones with books had small headstones but ones that were clearly carved by a mason.

And then, there were the larger headstones. They couldn't take up too much room, Riza gathered by looking over the graveyard, but that didn't stop them from sticking out. Big and ornate, the trinkets and sentimental items from life were practically overflowing with these ones. It was actually surprisingly helpful.

Riza wanted someone young but strong, so they'd have the highest starting stats—a benefit human summons had over demon ones. The newest grave with a large headstone was filled with paintings, paints, vases, and overall, items that suggested to Riza they weren't what she was looking for.

No, what was more in her lane was one on the other side to that one. It was small but clearly had the touch of a mason, and a dented in helmet resided beside it. A soldier.

Daven visibly shuddered and had to keep down his breakfast as he obeyed Riza and shifted the dirt and stone out of the way.

Within, the body of a warrior, clad in armour, lay at peace.

Perfect.

Daven raised the floor of the grave like an elevator, raising the body up so Riza could off-hand it to Meren, who carried it back to their tunnel.

They proceeded like this for five more bodies, looking for still fresh but usable corpses.

Once they had what they came here for, the group wasted no time covering up all traces that they were here and sealing up the tunnel to the graveyard.

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A cave entirely to itself. The room was large, more akin to a hanger than anything else. Sat on its arse, the demon's four, stumpy legs barely reached the ground. Its body was barrel-shaped and thick but the head was where it truly shined. Like a porcupine except with bone marrow, a multitude of tusks extruded from its skull, the shortest the length of Riza.

Riza would recognise the creature anywhere; it was a boar.

Size-wise, it greatly exceeded the greater demons Riza encountered in the bunker and in Hotton, matching the one at Litchendorf in scale.

This was their first greater demon, and the oldest one too.

Size was apparently how the Empire assessed the strength of beast demons. The ones similar to wild animals were merely beasts. Those the size of a simple house were greater, and the ones that could destroy villages with ease were elders.

This was an elder greater demon and, if Riza had to guess, around the level 25 range.

They had a few other greater demons but none of them were elders quite yet, although a few were close.

A couple months and already this large. Assuming the scaling is linear, that'd suggest the colossal demon from Hotton was likely a year old. But it's probably not linear; the square-cube law would suggest each increase in size would take more and more time, more and more energy. They could be any number of years old.

Level 25 is probably in the goldilocks zone of time to grow and level.

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The group were an eclectic mix. Two women, four men, apparently. The only one who appeared to have fighting experience was the soldier; the one buried in his armour. The rest were labourers of some sort, it seemed.

The soldier was the oldest. A grizzled, white beard framed his face, his salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a tight, short ponytail.

The youngest was a stick-thin, effeminate boy, probably similar in age to Riza. His clothes were... fine, nothing spectacular, and he wore a pair of spectacles on his face. It seemed burying the dead in their clothes was a custom.

As Riza worked through the group, taking the necessary time to raise them, the currently living ones got to talking amongst themselves, and Riza couldn't help but overhear.

At the start, there was confusion. Each one, newly raised, had no idea where they were or what happened. They all talked about the last thing they remembered and it was then it dawned upon them just what had happened.

By total coincidence, they all remembered dying and then waking up here. Well, all but one, but he remembered going to sleep so it was obvious what happened there.

One of them was working on a roof that he apparently fell off of while a young woman, the first that Riza had raised, proclaimed she was murdered. She was quite insistent about it as well, much to the subdued gasps of the rest.

"It was poison. I just know it was. You should've seen his face when he handed me the cup!"

Once the last one was raised, Riza gestured for her to join the rest, curious about how they'd rationalise the situation and also to buy time for her to think of what to say. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and none of the rest of her group was around.

"Er, hello," She introduced herself, barging into their conversation and inwardly cringing at herself for her timing.

"I'm, um, Riza, and you have all died, which I think you've worked out already." She was correct; the discussion amongst themselves seemed to have quelled the shock over their deaths that Sanders and Daven experienced.

“I’m offering you another chance at life but you’ll, um, you’ll be working for me,” She stumbled through her words. She felt awkward practically ordering these complete strangers around.

Many of them were too stunned to speak but the first woman looked... angry? Riza couldn't help but feel a bit of apprehension about her.

The older man, the warrior, dropped to his knees suddenly, gazing upon Riza with apparent reverence.

“Are-Are you, Skaldur?” He asked, voice shaky with awe.

Some of the rest looked at him with shock and then back at Riza, their faces inscrutable.

“What? No, no-“

“You have to be! Who else can raise the living from the dead?” The man said, crawling forwards.

Riza hurriedly stepped backwards.

“No no no. I’m not, I’m not.” She shook her head. Her arms were sweaty, her heart beating faster than ever. Her eyes were focused on him and nothing else.

“You walk amongst us once more. Your presence overwhelms me. I pledge my un-“ The man said, reaching out for her foot before suddenly falling limp, all air exiting his lungs.

Riza was breathing heavily, looking at the once-again corpse right in front of her. She felt on fire, like her heart was going to jump out of her chest at any moment.

And, as much as she was loathed to admit it, using [Leech] brought just a little bit of comfort.

The rest of the group was silent, watching this, watching her, with wide eyes. When Riza looked back at them, some stepped back. Out of fear? Apprehension?

Slowly, her beating heart was beginning to settle.

“Are y- are you going to do that to us as well?” The woman, the last one Riza raised, asked with what was undoubtedly fear in her voice.

“No. No no no no,” Riza said, raising her hands as she stepped around the body.

“You killed him. He did nothing to you and you killed him,” One of the men said, also sounding scared.

“He was already dead,” The poisoned woman said, practically rolling her eyes.

“He was alive just a second ago!”

“I’m not going to kill anyone!” Riza shouted desperately.

I wish Lefie was here. Or Meren. Or literally anyone else.

“But you killed him!”

“What makes him different from us?”

“I-it was... Fuck! I’m sorry!” Riza cried out, eyes tearing up with emotion. She slumped to her knees.

Get a grip of yourself!

That seemed to shut them up.

“I’m sorry,” Riza whispered out between snuffles.

She croaked, trying to stifle everything as best as she could, *heavily* relying on [Meditate] to do so.

The tears started to stop, and her heart began to calm down. Shakily, she got back to her feet and looked at the group.

“He... I don’t... I’m no-I... I don’t kill people. That’s not what I do. I’m not a monster. I just... I want to make the world better. And I need your help to do so,” Riza managed to get out between sighs.

She looked at everyone in turn but no one said anything. You can’t return to your old lives. You’re working for me now and that will involve living here, underground, and fighting things. You’ll level up and be useful that way.”

“We can’t return to our lives?”

“I have a family! I’ve got two sons who won’t survive without their mother!”

Riza cringed, not meeting their eyes.

“You’re not Skaldur but you brought us back from the dead anyway. You are a monster. You’ve ruined our deaths and our future lives!”

“Send us back! If we can’t return, at least let us die!” One of the men said, drawing some agreement. It was only the poisoned woman who seemed utterly uninterested in that idea.

They... they don't want to live?

“You all don’t want to do this?” Riza asked, softly, not knowing what to do.

I can control them. I can order them to do anything. I can take their free will away.

But I'm not a monster. I'd be no worse than the demons. That's a line I can't cross. If Daven and Sanders will work with me willingly, there's no reason to force people to be nothing more than slaves.

Riza closed her eyes. A deep breath. She resolved herself to do what they said.

Everyone quieted down once Riza opened her eyes. A determination shone within them.

“You want to be dead again? I can do that. I can return you to your graves like nothing happened.” She explained.

“If that’s what it takes to be reincarnated, to find my sons in a future life, then that’s what I will do,” The mother said, looking inordinately brave to Riza right now.

“Is this really what you want?” She asked, and the woman nodded firmly.

It was instantaneous. The life left her eyes, her entire body going limp, as she fell to the ground.

Dead, again.

The two men were next, and they both agreed with the decision to die. Reincarnation was a real thing to them, and a perverted life as Riza’s slave was far, far worse than the alternative.

“I think I’m good staying like this,” The poisoned woman replied snarkily, showing no fear at all. She was surprisingly calm about everything, and that was a little unnerving.

Finally, it was the last man.

“Is this really what you want?” Riza asked. He didn’t respond right away.

Instead, he sighed deeply, as if coming to terms with something.

“I-I won’t be reincarnated. Being alive again, right now, has probably stripped that privilege away from me and, if not that, then killing myself definitely did. There’s nothing left for me. I don’t have anything else.” He looked right into Riza’s eyes. “I’ll stay.”

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What would’ve been a haul of six new members had dwindled down to two because of Riza’s uncompromising morality.

The woman was named Taniya. She was a somewhat slim woman, looking to be about average height to Riza, with wild, brown hair that fell to her shoulders. She was an apprentice seamstress who was murdered by an ex-boyfriend, or so she claimed. She had broken it off with him after withstanding what Riza could only describe as significant verbal abuse and he apparently didn’t take that too well. On the stipulation Riza would help her take revenge, she was happy to work with the group.

The guy was called Klannar and he didn’t reveal much about himself but even so, Riza felt herself empathising with him. He explained a little about how he felt in life and how he didn’t have anyone there for him. Riza forced herself to overcome the awkwardness and gave him a little side-hug as she listened. He was surprisingly short for a man, with an androgenous frame that matched his androgenous voice.

They were both currently level 5 but the plan was to get them both to level 25 quickly, and she already had an idea for the builds they were going to take.

Riza had explained the situation to both of them extensively before they ventured further down into the nest. Taniya seemed excited that they were going to take on the Empire and were using demons to do so—she was surprisingly accepting of the concept—and while Klannar was nowhere near as thrilled, he did accept it readily as just another thing he was doing that he shouldn’t.

While not happy, at least he was cooperating.

Klannar was going to explore the ice skill tree that a few demons seemed interested in using while Taniya, on the other hand, was going to be Adewyn but better.

Living in the real world, you couldn't sit on really low stats while at level 25 or you'd die sooner or later. Adewyn had to pump up her stats beyond the minimum to still be effective but that also meant the requirements for her boons get on getting higher and higher.

That wasn't going to be the case for Taniya.

Her current starting stat spread was rather unimpressive; a mixture of threes and fours for her physical stats. That meant a single stat would need to be 9 for the level 5 boon, 19 for the level 15 one, and 39 for the level 25 one. Afterwards, she could dump the rest of the stats in the final stat or distribute however she saw fit, as long as the final stat remained double the next highest.

Once the two newest members were introduced to the rest and the nest, Daven began carving out another levelling pit so they could repeat what they did the last time. Taniya was going to be sitting on 3 power for a while so they handed Klannar the sword to kill things with.

And so it began.

This ended up being a significant drain on the demon population, as it always seemed it would be whenever Riza wanted to power level people to level 25. To keep this sustainable indefinitely, they'd need a nest the size of all of Toila for the population of demons it'd need.

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Days passed as the group settled into their new home. Harold and Daven were renovating, the new trainees were getting used to their skills, and the final details of the plans were being hammered out before it was too late.

And then they were ready. Time to kill an Enforcer.

This act was intended to be a show of power, to establish Riza as a threat that demanded to be taken seriously. By travelling underground, the Empire would never know when she'd strike next.

Simultaneously, they'd begin their takeover of the city, using the entirety of it as essentially a hostage. Daven alone could probably do a lot of damage in only a day and they had far more than just Daven at their disposal.

The journey back to the old nest needed to be fast so they needed to travel light. Riza, Daven, Jupy, and Tiffany were all that were going. Like before, Tiffany was being dropped and locked midway through the journey, acting as a relay for long-distance communication. Riza was the bait, Jupy the gun, and Daven was how they got there in the first place.

And, they had demons. Large, quadruple beasts capable of being ridden. Just in case, Riza used [Reanimate] on them to ensure obedience regardless of the distance from the nest.

The trip there was going to be slow going. Riza was always cautious when they travelled, which meant sealing up the tunnels behind them, but not this time. Daven left a long, winding corridor as he dug.

Even he seemed energised by the plan, taking no breaks apart from to sleep.

Riza kept going over and over it in her head, calculating Jupy's damage, where he'd be, where she'd be, what the B team would do back at Rensenfeld. Her whole body was shaking with nerves, the realisation that they were actually doing this hitting hard.

They were declaring war. She was going to kill a man.

And she felt surprisingly little. War was just a declaration; if she didn't kill any innocent people, and neither did the Empire, then it was a cold war of threats but little violence. That, she could deal with just fine.

But Death? She was going to take his life. Not with her own hands, no, but with someone under her control.

A living, breathing human being was going to be killed on her orders. Did he deserve it? Riza wanted to say yes—the anger inside her wanted to say yes—but he was just obeying orders, wasn't he? He worked for the Empire and the Empire wanted her dead. Why blame the foot soldier when it was the commanding officer who gave the order?

Surely he'd take some responsibility? He had chosen to become an Enforcer. He seemed remarkably gleeful over the prospect of killing Riza. There was nothing but malice and poison in his words. The joy he took from hurting her...

He killed Lefie. Did anything else really matter?

I'm not going to enjoy it. That was the only thing she told herself. She needed that to be true. He needed to die but she didn't need to enjoy it.

There was nothing to distract herself with while they travelled, the thoughts bouncing around endlessly in her head.

And, before they knew it, they were there. The hallowed ground of the old nest echoed with their footsteps. The foggy corridors greeted them as Riza unfurled the critter around her neck, borrowing its sight. This one was like a weasel; long and slim and kind of cute in an ugly way.

Jupy was going to be up on the mountain, out of sight. High enough where breathing would begin to be an issue for any regular person, but not Jupy. Daven had to dig another tunnel, winding around itself, to get him up there.

He landscaped the place as well, providing plenty of cover for the demon.

They were finally ready. All that was left was for Riza to ascend to the surface. This was it; the moment she had been waiting for.

“Come on, Riza. Get up there,” Daven said, having begun digging a staircase upwards.

“It’s... I’m scared, Daven. Am I doing the right thing? Will this work?” Riza sputtered out, revealing her vulnerability. Inwardly, she wished Lefie was there with her.

The questions gave him pause, and he stepped away from his work to look Riza in the eye. He dropped to one eye, so they’d be closer to eye-level. He took a moment to gather himself, thinking about what to say.

“I-I’m not good with reassuring people. I don’t know if what you’re doing is right or wrong. My life stopped when I died, and it’s taken a while to come to terms with that. I still work with you not because I have nothing better to do but because I believe in what you’re doing. The world is greater than Litchendorf and you’ve showed me that.

“We can’t know the outcome of our own actions, and you shouldn’t wind yourself up caring about that. You should care about *why* you do what you do. Death, he-he killed Lefie! He ripped out your eyes! If I was in your position, I wouldn’t let him get away with that. At least, I’d do to him what he did to me,” Daven finished, with a warm smile on his face and a hand on Riza’s shoulder.

But, Riza just chuckled, and his smile quickly turned to confusion.

“Did-Did I say something?”

“No, not you. There’s a saying where I come from that goes ‘an eye for an eye’. It’s weirdly appropriate.”

Daven huffed and nodded, letting go of Riza and getting back to work.

For as much as he’s not good with reassuring people, he didn’t do too bad a job.

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The air was frigid and old. The burnt, blackened ground was hard and dry beneath her worn-down shoes. Riza could hear every little thing, from her breathing to the rhythmic beating of her heart.

It had been hours already, and Riza’s just been waiting. Her resolve wasn’t steady for all of it but, after she had stepped up here, there wasn’t much else she could do.

Thunderous footsteps could be heard from miles away, it seemed. The ground seemed to shake with each one.

Faster than any man could possibly be, the armoured figure came sliding to a stop near instantly, a puff of dust left in his wake.

Death.

He maintained his distance; a good two hundred metres. He looked so small from here.

“Now.”

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Crouched behind some rocky cover, Jupy was waiting. And waiting. And waiting. Not a muscle moved without order, nor did his chest emulate breathing. He was as motionless as the mountain he was standing on.

He watched as his master stepped up out of the ground and walked a short distance to the site of a crater.

The hours passed and then his target arrived. He was just as she had described him; clad all over in armour with an intimidating frame.

But not to Jupy. He felt no fear, only purposefulness. The man was well within range. He remembered his training with Riza, on judging distances and adjusting the power of his skills to compensate.

With a total range of 1200 metres, the man was standing around 400 metres away from him.

“Now”. He received the order.

Jupy pushed his hands together as he triggered the skill. Arcs of lightning shot from his fingertips and his palms, arcing from one hand to the next like they were conductive plates. The energy swirled within his clasped hands as it built and built, the essence draining out of him as he overcharged the skill.

With every second that passed, flicks of lightning discharged from between his fingers, struggling to be contained. They grew larger in size, from just fingernail to forearm to his whole body.

The seconds passed as keeping all that energy contained within his own two hands became harder and harder. Near the end, a rogue whip of lightning lashed out, striking the cave wall gouging a deep hole in its path.

The skin of his hands was burning hot, the flesh disintegrating under the heat and energy of the contained ball of lightning.

And then he released.

As soon as his hands pulled away, the overcharged lightning bolt spread its wings. Immediately, an innumerable number of arcs reached out and destroyed the mouth of the cave he was in, chopping into it like a hot knife through butter.

It flew through the air in a straight line and too fast to even see.

Fluctuating energy swirled around the central arrow, arms of lightning whipping and vaporising the air itself. It electrified gas and disintegrated the very essence in the air itself.

The bolt travelled a straight line from the mountain down into the remains of the forest. Once it was twenty, thirty metres above ground, it was finally within reach.

Whips of lightning shot down, gouging deep trenches into the earth. Trees were set aflame in an instant, the stumpy remains burnt to ash. The immediate vicinity of the bolt was being destroyed in less than a second.

And still, it travelled. A downwards trajectory.

When high up, the arcs that hit the ground carved gashes only millimetres wide. Now, rocks shot up from the sheer power. Trenches as wide as moats were excavated as the bolt left only destruction in its path.

The remnants of the fire after the last battle were utterly decimated by now as the bolt travelled indiscriminately.

The closer to the ground it got, the worse the destruction. Moats turned into craters tens of metres long, and quickly expanding.

Riza, by some instinctual twitch of her muscles, had released a dome of fog all around her, hardened through the magic static of [Manipulate Air].

Errant bolts of lightning lashed out at her, cutting away the fog and vaporising even it.

And then, there was Death himself. The landscape left in the wake of the lightning bolt was more akin to a lake than anything else at this point, as deep and as wide as the destructive power could manage.

All arcs centred on him, as if he was a lightning rod in a storm. Less than a second had passed in total, and all he had managed to do was to turn his head.

The bolt entered his body, the rogue whips of lightning suddenly reaching out all at once, simultaneously, and turning the surrounding air into the inside of a furnace.

The lightning bolt coursed through his body, cutting through the individual nerves making up his nervous system. It singed and frayed the tendons, piercing the hardened flesh and muscles.

His blood instantly boiled and vaporised, the fluid in his brain gone.

The man's heart exploded as his metal armour reflected the bolt around himself.

One moment he was alive and then, the next, gone.

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"Now."

Just before sending the command, Riza released all the fog that was contained within her, her brain suddenly igniting itself with the powerful

sensation coming from the mountain. Human reactions had no chance of competing but whatever this sense was, it was anything but human.

Like a computer was controlling her actions, her mind activated [Manipulate Air] instantly, withdrawing the fog to create a tight dome around her, holding magically stationary to protect herself.

A boom so loud it could've been from god and she'd believe it resounded an instant later, and then silence.

Almost as fast as it appeared, her fog was gone and her body burned with the heat of the sun itself. Her clothing was signed to a crisp, and [Parasite] was the only thing that saved her.

She fell some metres as the ground simply vanished from under her, landing in burnt and destroyed rubble.

And what she saw was incredible.

In less than a second, the remains of the forest were simply gone. Trees were burning but before her, and the rocks she was kneeling on felt like hot coals, needing a constant application of [Heal] to even barely withstand them.

Nothing. The skill wasn't working. Riza desperately ran and jumped off the rocks, clambering up the side of the rocky wall with all her effort before landing on the warm remains of grass.

A trench the size of craters on mars was before. The whole experience felt similar to Hotton, and the size of the gorge matched.

As much as she should've checked on Death, Jupy, or Daven, Riza's mind was Centred around [Heal].

It didn't work. [Heal] didn't go through.

She tried again. And again. And again. Nothing, three times. The essence simply wasn't flowing out of her.

And now that she thought about it, even the very air was hot around her. It was a dry heat, though—no moisture.

The whole world felt dead. Something was off about, alien to her senses, but she couldn't tell what.

"Daven? You alright?" She [Message]d. Nothing. The skill didn't go through.

Fuck! This wasn't supposed to happen.

I need to check on Death. If he's still alive then... Fuck.

Riza scrambled over to where she had last seen him, a good couple hundred of metres away.

The trench just got deeper and deeper, wider and wider, looking far more like a river as she jogged along it.

The ground got hotter the closer she walked, and her bare feet could barely stand it. She was practically running by the end of it.

Just the rags of her clothes covered her body, barely surviving thanks to the protection of the high-density fog and distance.

Finally arriving at the end of the crater, it tapered to a point and that's where she found him. Death.

And he was dead. He was definitely dead.

All his armour was deformed and even looked like liquid in places. The way his helmet sat suggested there wasn't much of his head left in there. Smoke wafted off of him and the strong stench of burnt flesh permeated Riza's nostrils as she struggled not to gag.

Yep. He's dead.