

Chapter 101: Cooperation

Harold was pulling double-duty while Daven was away. Not only was he managing the nest and all that it entailed but he was also Riza's only resident earth user, frequently being pulled away to handle something or another.

This time, he had carved out a section not too far from the graveyard. Riza made sure he gussied the place up, making it all angular and purposeful rather than just looking like a cave, like the rest of the nest. This was actually going to be seen by other people.

That also meant compressing the floor and walls so there was no dust or loose earth, as well as dragging in some furniture and decoration they could find for cheap. A large rug was placed in the waiting hall, where a large, thick, earthen door connected it to the outside.

A group of five men were waiting, all dressed in neat, fine clothes, but nothing to expensive. Two of them had tried pushing the door, after seeing how easily Riza had opened it herself, but it didn't even budge!

They talked amongst themselves as they waited, quickly finding out they had all been interviewed when applying to be an official Healer of the Lord.

The role was described very similarly to a Healer of the Dominion, a rather prestigious and mysterious position for those in their profession. Since the Dominion had left the province, this was the next best thing.

Although, the interview was quite strange in parts; some of the questions were incredible technical but in a weird way. The Lord had asked questions concerning blood and internal organs but she possessed an unnaturally wide body of knowledge for a job that she did not have and did not practise. Many concepts and phrases she had used were wholly foreign, and the men spent a chunk of time speculating on what she meant.

Not to mention, there were plenty of questions regarding their loyalty to Skaldur, the city, the Lord, and the people of Rensenfeld itself. Questions very unrelated to their jobs, but yet they answered anyway.

It wasn't so much their duties or the money that brought them here, but, rather, the promise of being even better than a Dominion Healer.

It was common knowledge that Healer's had levels, and some of them asked whether that was going to be the case for themselves, with some hesitancy. Unsurprisingly, they weren't exactly fighters.

The Lord had insisted that it was perfectly safe, but didn't divulge more information than that. Part of the interview enquired as to their ability to be sworn to secrecy, and the fact that none of the others mentioned that part, was indicative enough itself.

One of the men, however, did mention some information he had heard, from the far reaches of the province. Up north, a few days ago, there was apparently a massive fight that the Lord was involved with. A giant demon of unimaginable proportions.

And, after the fight, she did something, performed a ritual, and the demon *obeyed* her.

The atmosphere in the room changed swiftly once that was known. A person who could control the demons?

Unfortunately, no more discussion could take place, for the Lord returned, pushing open a different set of stupidly heavy earth doors that lead further into the mountain. For someone who was smaller than everyone else in the room, it said a lot about just how much stronger than everyone else she was.

"One at a time. Arvil, come in," The Lord said, looking towards the man, hunched over with his hands clasped together, sitting closest to her.

Arvil nodded and stood up. He was by far the largest of the five and as he walked into the room, hushed discussion erupted as soon as the heavy doors swung shut.

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She was finally doing this. Someone not a part of her inner circle was profiting off her demons, gaining levels while not being under Riza's control.

Even now, she still had reservations, but this had to be done. It was an inevitability that others would be involved.

The room was empty and, unlike the waiting room, completely raw. The rocky wall and floor were uneven and covered in debris. It was ovaloid in shape and grossly uneven.

Arvil walked in after Riza and squinted as the doors closed. A few torches lodged into the walls dimly light the room, and he looked around, confusion evident on his face.

“Open up,” Riza said, using [Message] to speak to a fully armoured Harold who was standing just beyond the far wall.

With a sudden grinding sound, Arvil jumped backwards as the entire back wall slowly dissolved into the floor, revealing Harold and a precise number of beast demons.

In addition to theorising a farmer build, Riza had also spent a not-insignificant amount of time building up a perfect Healer.

This, thankfully, was far less demanding. The farmer, frankly, had an absurd essence requirement for what she wanted it to do but there was no need for a Healer to be constantly expending millions of points of essence per day, so she had far more flexibility in what she wanted to achieve.

At a minimum, they only needed to be level 5 to have enough essence and regeneration to use a level 10 [Heal] or [Cleanse] on anyone who walked in through the doors. Then, they'd only need five minutes to regenerate that back. Perfectly sustainable.

However, the final build Riza had settled on was a level 8 Healer, since they'd have level 8 level caps anyway. Not only was their regeneration significantly better, they would also have access to [Rejuvenate] as well.

They'd also have maxed out their level cap, which meant they wouldn't be able to level up any further and take skills without Riza's permission.

“Am I going to fight all of them?” Arvil asked, voice trembling with his. Long ago, Riza might've been intimidated by the 36 beast demons standing before them but now, all she could feel was slight sadness at just how few would be remaining after this entire process.

“They're perfectly safe,” Riza said, passing him her dagger.

Harold was a fine judge of demon strength. All of them assembled before her were level 8, a typical beast demon strength. Annoyingly, she still had no idea how much experienced a single demon gave so she was taking this opportunity to test it.

Assuming the pattern followed that level 5 required 5 demons, level 6 required 6 demons, level 7 required 7 demons, and so forth, 36 demons was the exact number required to not only activate the system, increase Arvil's level cap, but to also bring him to level 8 at the very end.

The man fumbled a knife a little, his hands shaking with nerves. The demons were waiting peacefully, ordered by Harold to not do anything.

Riza approached them and picked one at random. She reached for its neck, her hand digging into the taut skin as she dragged it out of the group with the same amount of ease and casualness of someone dragging an empty bag.

This demon was mole-like, with super sharp claws and an insignificant mouth.

Arvil was frozen to the spot as Riza dropped it to the ground, standing on its two front legs as she straddled its back, pushing its head into the ground.

“Come here,” She said, simultaneously activating [Leech] for a second to weaken, but not kill, the creature.

[Leech] (10/10)+ -Learned

Maximise Mastery: OFF

Manifold Mastery: 1.3

Seeker Mastery: OFF

Targets: 1

Adjusted Range: 1 m

Alteration Mastery: 0.067

Final Damage: **412 hp/sec**

Final Cost: **0.87 es/sec**

She had done some fiddling after her revelation. This way, she had a greater understanding of just how each metamagic option affected her skills, in addition to the fact that custom interfaces actually allowed for non-integer numbers.

Arvil approached very cautiously, holding the dagger with two hands and trembling as he walked.

Riza grabbed the demons head and twisted, allowing for a good spot to stab.

“Stab it,” She said.

The man didn't move. Sweat trickled down his forehead.

“He won't hurt you. Stab it. It's killed many humans. You're saving lives by killing it,” Riza said deadpan, not wanting him to figure out it was a lie.

“I... I’ll be saving people?” His hands tightened on the weapon. She nodded.

Taking a deep breath, the man crouched down in front of Riza, in front of the demon, and looked at it in its eyeless face.

He gathered his resolve and stabbed, thrusting the knife into the creature’s head.

It tried to squirm in pain, a squeak getting through its clenched jaw, but Riza’s pressure held it steady.

“Again. It’s not dead yet.”

The man stabbed again. And again. And again, until, finally, the creature fell limp.

“I... I’m level 1,” He said, almost in disbelief. The knife fell from his hand as he stared at nothing in front of him.

“Don’t do anything,” Riza said forcing, shocking him back into awareness.

“Don’t spend any stat points and don’t spend any skill points.”

“Wha-what level are you?”

Riza just stared at him coldly. He looked away.

“Right, yeah, secrecy, sorry. We shouldn’t tell anyone our levels or skills. I forgot. That won’t happen again.”

“Pick up the dagger,” Riza said, getting off the demon and throwing it into a corner.

Arvil watched that display of strength with undisguised awe and a tad bit of envy. Undoubtedly, he was thinking about becoming that strong himself, Riza thought.

They repeated this many more times, with Riza subduing and weakening a demon while Arvil got the killing blow. This simple levelling session took a fair amount of time, and that time was going to be quintupled by the end of it.

Normally, she’d just have them join a party together and one person would do the killing, levelling them all up simultaneously. However, the Healer build Riza concocted used [Lone Wolf] as its level 5 boon. It was mostly because it was the boon with the single greatest effect but Riza couldn’t deny its utility as assurance that these non-fighters would need to kill powerful enemies

themselves to level up. Something that's especially difficult considering their complete lack of offensive skills or stats.

Overall, once Arvil was level 8, it was abundantly clear that Riza had miscalculated.

The first demon to die served a dual-purpose; it made Arvil level 1 and gave him a level cap of 8. This one gave no experience.

The levelling should've taken an additional 35 demons. However, in the end, out of the original 36 demons, 14 remained.

Riza sent Arvil away so she could get started on both the maths and the cleanup, with the very insistent order that he does not touch either his stats or his skills otherwise there'd be dire consequences.

Subtracting the original activation demons, that meant it only took 21 demons to achieve level 8.

She had counted up the demons and quickly jotted them down in her notebook to avoid forgetting them.

Level	Demons Killed
2	2
3	1
4	3
5	3
6	3
7	4
8	5

Riza quickly copied over the numbers when she had done this with Daven and Sanders, working out how many demons they killed to level as well.

Level	Demons Killed
21	21
22	22
23	23

24	25
25	27

The 2 at the start is strange. I suppose it required between 1 and 2 demons and the leftover experience is why level 3 only required 1 demon.

A pattern can be seen where fewer demons than the level are required, then the same amount, then more demons than the level. Since the demons don't change, and therefore, the experience doesn't change, I think, that means this is definitive proof that experience requirements for levels does change

To make this easy, let's just focus on levels 2 to 8. To avoid decimals, let's use a magnitude of 100.

To start, assume that level 2 requires 200 experience. Level 3 300 and level 4 400. That's the pattern.

All together, that would mean 3500 experience for levels 2 to 8. If a level 8 beast demon gave out 100 experience, that would mean 35 beast demons needed to level.

However, that wasn't the case. Therefore, we can conclude the ratio is heavier towards beast demons than my initial hypothesis suggested.

I had levelled both Sanders and Daven up to 25 and they required the exact same number of beast demons to do so. Since their total amount was over 100, I feel that I can confidently conclude that there is little, if any, variation in experience given between beast demons of the same level.

Therefore, we can simply divide the 3500 experience by the 21 demons needed and come to a conclusion of... 167 experience for a level 8 beast demon.

However, Daven and Sanders would require 11,500 experience to level from 21 to 25. Using the 167 number, that means just 68 demons necessary but the actual number was 118 demons. Therefore, the conclusion is that the increased experience requirement for each level is not linear.

Rather than an additional 100, it could be closer to 120 or something like that.

And then we have me for my final test. I levelled from 35 to 40 entirely from beast demons in the nest. This would be an expected 19,000 experience

needed, for 114 demons total. In the end, it was 203 demons. Not far off double.

Assuming the 167 value for beast demon experience is correct, that means Daven actually required 19,700 experience and I required 33,900 experience. That's an increase of 70% for Daven and 78% for me.

Hmm. Interesting. The greatest increase likely happens around level 15, then, I'd guess.

Riza groaned. Levelling was annoyingly obtuse, but she couldn't spend much more time on it.

She wandered over to the corner of bloodied and dead beast demon bodies and got to work using [Resuscitate] on them. For whatever reason, resurrected demons no longer gave experience but they would still be useful one way or the other. She made sure a few would be kept isolated in fog to be observed. After some time, she'd kill them and see if they gave any experience at all.

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Night had fallen, and the city had gone to sleep, but stirring underneath, beneath expansive layers of rock and stone, a lone demon was imprisoned in a sparse, bare, and isolated cavern.

Barely larger than a broom cupboard, the only thing connecting it to the rest of the nest was a small ventilation shaft, ensuring a steady supply of fog to sustain the demon.

The demon was tall, although you couldn't tell from the way it was sitting currently. Four long, lanky arms lay against the floor as the demon sat stationary.

Suddenly, the wall opposite the demon shunted upwards, opening the room up to the rest of the nest itself. Riza walked in, along with Harold, a critter on her shoulder.

As excited as she had been right after killing the Demon Lord, with the prospect of using its power for herself, that excitement had dimmed significantly once the practicalities made themselves known. Since then, it's just been here, waiting, reanimated through only [Reanimate].

That was going to change today.

She still wasn't ready for [False Life] but [Raise Dead] she could handle. Finally, there was a bit of free time in her day to question it.

Approaching the body, she placed both hands on it, used [Leech] to kill it quickly and then used [Raise Dead], raising it at level 5.

The demon looked around, confused, and instantly spotted Harold. A warbled voice echoed from its toothy mouth, but Harold didn't react.

"What did it say?" Riza asked, a slight tone of concern eking through.

"To obey it," Harold replied laconically.

"Ignore its orders. You obey me, not it," Riza said.

Interesting. I know hierarchies still exist with [Raise Dead] but I hadn't thought about the fact the Demon Lord technically supersedes all of my other demons. I need to make sure it's either mindless or has no contact with the rest of the nest.

For the next hour, Riza had the newly raised demon take the linguistics skills and slowly learn the language. Whereas before, she could have a regular humanoid demon translate in lieu of linguistic skills, she doubted that would work here. Only she had the ability to order this demon around, after all.

Finally, it could speak.

Riza asked it a few basic questions at first. It was indeed a Demon Lord, and its nest was even deeper below Rensenfeld than Riza's, which reminded Riza she really had to get on top of that sometime soon.

Its voice was strangely androgynous, with an alien, echoing quality to it. It was even less human than Harold.

She had so many questions, she didn't know what to ask first. Breathing deeply, she sunk into [Meditate] to calm her burgeoning excitement.

Firstly, she needed to establish a timeline of events, of motivations.

"Why did you ascend to Rensenfeld to fight me?" She asked.

"I was ordered to," It replied simply.

Ordered? So there's someone even above a Demon Lord?

"Who ordered you?"

“The King.”

That has to be the final cog, right? Top dog in the house?

“What was the order? Why were you told to fight me? What did I do?”

“I was ordered to dispose of you.”

She had primed the demon with orders of honesty, truthfulness, and to not hide anything. If it wasn't saying anything more than this, it was because it didn't know anything more than this.

Damn your lack of inquisitiveness. I'll have to move to a different question.

“Why did you throw me off the island? What were you trying to achieve?”

“To kill you.”

Riza's eyes rolled. Over time, demons grew more accustomed to the way humans talked and, subsequently, were far less annoying to talk to.

“You could've just punched me a lot. Were you told how to kill me?”

“I was aware of your weaknesses.”

Good. We're getting somewhere.

“What were you told of my weaknesses? How just throwing me off the fucking island tie in with that?”

“You are physically weak and slow. You have low health and defences. You require sight to use any of your skills. You have no mobility skills,” It answered succinctly.

Out of date even at the time of the fight. Seems the demons were unaware of my physical stats and my recent innovation with [Manipulate Air]. Certainly means there's no mole in the inner circle, thankfully.

“How did you get that information?”

“Communication and observation.”

Right. Some of it you were told, some of it you observed for yourself.

“Expand on that. Each of my weaknesses—how did the demons become aware of them?”

It felt like talking to a highly intelligent baby at times; she had to be super specific to get what she wanted. An innate intuitiveness to language, this demon did not have.

The demon went on to explain how each and every data point was acquired, and it was disturbingly thorough.

The very first bit of information they had ever got of her was from Kratten. Specifically, Seer Grandal's interview with her. The old fellow who asked about her stats and skills.

That was the basis for their knowledge of her stat distribution, and each and every encounter afterwards only served to confirm that she invested in spirit and nothing else. Specifically, her extensive use of animation skills basically confirmed even at level 29 that she had invested in nothing other than spirit.

That of course meant that she had low health and defences, and apparently, even the battle with Death confirmed this as well. Unbeknownst to her, although she could've guessed, after their first encounter, he had written up a report on it, analysing everything she had done.

As it turned out, there was a very specific reason why he was sent, and she had experienced it first-hand.

They were aware of what caused Riza to be so hard to kill: [Parasite].

That lightning spear of Death's that took off many parasites every second? That was all purposeful. Throwing Riza off the island so she couldn't benefit from [Parasite]? Also intentional.

If there was one thing she could rule out, whenever the demons sent someone to kill her, they weren't going to use one big, strong attack to do it. No Lefie or Jupy for her.

What really made her uncomfortable was just how much information the demons had that was sourced from the Empire itself. Of course, there was that small suspicion that the two were working together, but it felt practically undeniable at this point.

She had to ask.

"Are-Are you working with the Empire?" She could feel the tension in the air as the words left her mouth, emanating solely from her. In some ways, she didn't want to know the answer.

“Yes.” The answer was heavy on her shoulders.

Seconds passed in silence as Riza took it in.

They are. They were coincidences. The rains, the demon sightings, all of it. It was a coordinated attack once I took over Rensenfeld. There was a purpose behind it.

She gasped as a realisation took hold.

The looting, the rioting. The Lord’s Men. That was when I killed and raised the worm demon.

It all adds up but why? Why do that? Why anything? Why?

She focused on [Meditate], attempting to calm her swirling thoughts.

“Ho-how are you working with the Empire? How do you and your nest specifically work with the Empire?” She asked, voice wavering as she attempted to reign in her emotions.

“Information and communication,” Was the answer.

Information? They just swap intelligence around?

The Demon King. It was them who ordered it to attack me in Rensenfeld. Fuck. The Demon Lords are powerful but even they are just middle management. They have no individuality, no agency. Decisions are made at the very top.

This is big, but I need to confirm something first.

“Does the Empire know you’re working with them? The Regent, Enforcers, Guardians, or Protectors? Who knows about this?” *Just how far up the chain does it go?*

“Communication is held with Princeps Steward Xalta and Warden Diatrem.”

Even more positions I have to remember. Yay.

But I’ve heard about the Princeps Steward before. Andreyas told me that Head Stewards report to them. They’re the ones who manage an entire province for the Dominion, and I imagine the Warden is the same but for the Chosen. The difference is, they’re not typically within the province they manage.

“Are they at the Seat of the Regent?” Riza asked?

“Yes.”

That’s an expansive communication network. Cooperating with the people on the ground, like a Protector or Head Steward, would be much faster but instead, information is sent all the way to the other end of the Empire, and it’s sent all the way back here.

Shit. [Delegator] looks a lot less impressive now.

But that doesn’t answer my question about who else might know. That’s only the two that this Demon Lord knows about, but do other Princeps Stewards and Wardens cooperate with demons? Do Enforcers and the Regent work with them as well?

Is it a systematic issue or an individual one?

More importantly:

“What is your purpose here?”

“To create demons.”

A predictable answer. Riza had already worked that one out for herself but it was nice to get some confirmation.

“How do you do that? What’s the process?”

Again, it was nothing new. Demons tunnelled out nests as they slowly grew their beast demon numbers and once it was time, they opened up to start grabbing humans and making humanoid demons.

That was it. More humanoid demons. It was as simple as that.

Which, of course, begged the question of why. Unfortunately, the Demon Lord couldn’t answer why the Demon King wanted more and more humanoid demons. So, Riza had to stick with her idea that it was simply reproduction for them.

Which, in a way, it was. The Demon Lord did confirm that it was actually just a humanoid demon. An extremely old humanoid demon, but a humanoid demon at that.

Which did bear a little insight into the history of the Empire. Even though demons lacked calendars and concepts of years, the Empire didn’t, so the Demon Lord could confirm it was several hundreds of years old, and most

other Demon Lords were about the same age. There weren't really any new Demon Lords.

The Empire was several hundred years old as well. It existed before this Demon Lord did, anyway.

At some point in this conversation, Riza couldn't help but ask, how did they control the weather? It had been bothering her since she first talked to Lefie about it, and considering the constant rainstorm when Riza took over as Lord, it was basically confirmed that the demons could control it.

The answer? That massive, black tower sitting in the middle of Rensenfeld. The answer shocked Riza a little, and she asked if it was the same case with the tower in Trotton. It was.

That's what they were; weather controlling towers. They were actually hollow on the inside, and connected to the Demon Lord's nest.

In a way, it shouldn't have been *that* surprising. Riza had followed up with Lefie after she made a comment of putting out fires with 'one big rainstorm'. She had used the skill [Call Storm] to conjure rainstorms when the Lord's Men had lit fires in the city, so the idea of magic altering the weather was that far-fetched.

To control the weather across an entire province, however... that would require an indescribable amount of power and essence. Hence, the towers, apparently. They were immensely magical, and meant even someone far weaker than a Demon Lord could control the weather.

All of this also explained why rainstorms were so often signifiers that demons were going to attack. They were vulnerable to fire so, once a Demon Lord received word or gave an order for a nest to attack a village, they'd simply start a rainstorm in that location and improve their chances.

It was sort of horrifying to realise just how insidious it all actually was. Working with the Empire, controlling the weather, massive tunnels beneath the very land they walked on? Riza didn't want to think about it.

Riza continued to talk to the Demon Lord, draining it dry of as much information as she could. She stayed up well into the night before sleep threatened to take even her, and she decided it was time to finally leave it there.

Just in case, she killed the demon and raised it back up with [Reanimate], removing its soul from the corpse in the meantime.

She had gotten what she had wanted and now it was time to sleep.