

Chapter 68: Profit

Just on the edge of the village, away from the roving demons prowling through the desolate streets, Sanders is hunched over the barely breathing body of a beast demon. His hands move swiftly to manipulate the dead flesh as he works the skill. No brains or *electricity* here; he was working off his own knowledge, the knowledge imparted by acquiring the skill.

Head first, residence of the soul. He grasped for essence, the faint feeling all around him. It had been happening for a while, now, the sensation of being watched, of the world breathing on him. It all made sense once he gained [Resuscitate].

His hand grasped the air, clutching nothing but invisible, intangible essence. Faint and nearly indistinguishable, this felt right. This was how it worked, not whatever Riza did.

The green tendrils, impossibly luminous, writhed around in his hand aimlessly, seeking... seeking *something*.

He pulled down his arm, placing his palm on the corpse and instantly, the same green tendrils straightened and shot straight into the body, perforating the flesh like needles piercing skin.

"That's different from how Riza does it," Lefie quietly commented from the crumbling wall she was sitting on, kicking her legs occasionally.

Sanders didn't look up at the girl, just kept working. "It doesn't matter."

They were both silent again until Sanders finished, pulling back his hand. The beast demon looked exactly as if it had never died, except for some minor discoloration where the green tentacles had pierced the body. The white skin was slightly blackened, as if it had been bruised. But otherwise, there wasn't any visible damage.

The demon struggled to its feet, wobbling unsteadily before standing firmly. Its head turned towards them, shaking faintly.

"Still freaks me out," Meren commented, standing a little behind Lefie, maintaining a respectful distance.

The demon, seemingly uninterested in the three humans, turned lazily and walked away, hobbling back to the village.

Meren took a few steps back as it passed her by.

"Just a demon," Sanders said.

"Yeah, and it should be dead," Meren replied with a shake of her head. She reached down beside her, picking up another corpse. "What about this one? Missing a head. Think it'll still work?"

She tossed the corpse at Sanders' feet. He rolled his shoulders, stretching out his limbs from his kneeling position. He could feel his muscles protesting after spending so much time bent over.

Sanders grunted as he got to work.

"Riza says it won't work. They need a head."

"Well, Riza doesn't even have the skill. Maybe it works differently," Meren rebutted.

Tuning out the background distractions, Sanders got to work. His hands followed the same motions, manipulating the essence of reality around him. His fingers stretched, reaching out for that elusive thing, grasping at thin air. He found it, though, the essence, the tiny, almost undetectable tingle, and pulled it down, filling his palms.

He brought his arms together, then opened his hands, releasing the essence into the corpse.

Skin folded over itself, growing rapidly as it sought to repair the hole where its head once was.

A sudden spasm ran through the body, and it shuddered, shuddering like a living creature shaking off the cold. Lying on its side, its feet kicked idly and aimlessly, the headless demon struggled to stand.

Sanders watched as the demon stumbled upright and then immediately falling over, tripping over its own legs and stumbling along the ground. With a heavy thud, it hit the dirt, collapsing onto its stomach.

"That's just not right," Meren couldn't help but say.

"It worked." The demon's legs kicked idly at the ground, throwing up dirt but failing to stand back up. "Sort of."

"Is it supposed to be doing that?" Lefie asked. She hopped off the wall and crouched down next to the struggling demon, looking intrigued and slightly concerned.

"Is a demon. Who knows what they're meant to be doing," Sanders answered, not hiding his dislike for the things in his tone.

Instantly, the demon was dead, a spear stabbing straight into the creature's body. It lay on its back, twitching feebly as it slowly faded away.

Meren placed a foot on the corpse as she withdrew her spear, the blood sticking to the dirty blade.

"Did you level up?" Lefie asked with a voice of earnest.

"Did I-" Meren rolled her eyes, a small smile creeping on her face. "I wish."

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A low, ethereal glow illuminated their surroundings, moonlight shining on the grassy glide, the blades of grass glistening with frigid moisture. The luminous, white fog of impossible brightness filled their vision as far as the eye could see. They sat side by side atop a large, sloping hill, overlooking this strange view.

"In all my years, I never thought I'd see something like this," Daven said, voice sounding wistful. "My dad, um, he was born in another village. Moved to Litchendorf before I was born. Travelled a lot, doing something for the Chosen, I think. Didn't say much what he did, and I learnt to stop asking. But, anyway, he used to talk about views like this. A white ocean. That's what he called it." Daven chuckled lightly, as if remembering a joke.

"Used to say dozens of boats would sail through it, docking at ports and trading their wares to the empire. Underground civilisation would occasionally tunnel out of mountains to help with mining. Can't say I believed too much of what he said." He shrugged, shaking his head slightly.

"Do you miss him?" Her words were blunt. All intention, no execution.

"Nah. Kicked the bucket years ago. I think about him sometimes but he wouldn't want me to grieve. 'Don't be sad, son,' he'd tell me, 'We'll meet again one day.' So, I try not to feel bad when I remember him. Not because I don't love him or anything, just that there are more important things than grief."

Daven glanced over to her, nodding briefly, then turned back towards the distant fog. "What about you? Miss your parents? You haven't mentioned them."

A bundle of mixed, tangled feelings suddenly formed in her chest.

"That's a complicated question."

"Ah. Say no more; I understand."

She nodded, sighing softly. "No, it's... fine. I've told Lefie, sort of." Deep breath. She could already feel her primitive emotions threatening to burst out of control. [Meditate] was thankfully keeping them at bay for the moment.

"I wasn't close with either my mum or my dad. I don't have much to say about them. I miss my sister more."

Her eyes drifted up to the sky. Night had fallen some time ago. Stars twinkled brightly against the backdrop of blackness. The breeze blowing across the grass made ripples appear and disappear, causing a gentle, constant shimmer.

The silence grew between them. Riza was content to let it be.

Daven, apparently, was not.

"Sometimes, I wonder if anyone misses me. If they're looking forward to seeing me again. Or do people simply forget about us after we die? Just a thing, gone forever once our flesh rots away?"

He sighed heavily, staring off into space.

A twinge of guilt ate at Riza, not only with Daven but with Sanders and Meren too. They just... left. No goodbyes, no telling people they're okay. It'd be the worst with Meren; everyone probably assumed that she died with the rest of them

She looked at him, a man who should've been dead. Who shouldn't even exist anymore. And yet here he stood.

What was she feeling guilty about? People think he's dead and they're right. She had given him a new chance of life. So what if he didn't get to say goodbye; what she gave him was invaluable, irreplaceable.

Whatever guilt she was feeling vanished

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Deep underground, the churning of stone reverberated throughout the cavernous corridors. Rock crunched like it was being eaten by a massive wall. The sounds originated from a small room growing larger by the second.

Riza and Harold watched as Daven hollowed out what would become another breeding pit.

This was the third one he had made so far, the hundreds of demons and monsters they relocated from the other nests needing a place to live.

The farms that Harold had built were far from the heart of the nest, spaced out and on the periphery. It was apparently safer that way, in case a part of the nest collapsed or was destroyed or invaded or whatever. Decentralising the reproductive hubs made sense.

But Riza wasn't interested in doing that. For one, it was a pain in the arse to navigate down there and she didn't feel like doing a fuck ton of walking so she made the executive decision to have all the nests near the stairwell connecting the heart to the surface.

Harold had no complaints, although Daven did mumble something about being a workhorse. Maybe the fact Harold was instructing him like one wasn't helping.

Occasionally, Riza would ask questions, sometimes pertaining to what Harold had said or sometimes, just things that were on her mind.

It turned out that it wasn't always humanoid demons with earth skills that carved out the nests. For fine work, like the farms, it usually was but the large, expansive tunnel network? There were apparently worm-like elder greater demons that chewed through the ground like butter.

Immediately, Riza thought back to the reports of a giant demon worm back in the quarry. *Was that what it was?*

A very helpful piece of information was that for every nest that contained just one humanoid demon managing it, that humanoid demon always had earth skills. They seemed to be a necessity for the job.

Placement of the nests wasn't too interesting an affair. It seemed the only variable was local fauna. Although they could theoretically stage a nest anywhere with their farms, they prioritised locations where they'd have abundant access to animals to fuel their demon propagation.

So, what made the demons set up nests near a village? Riza used to think it was so they had a supply of humans for humanoid demons and she wasn't wrong. It was a bit of a complicated process, with all the complexities involved, and Harold wasn't exactly descriptive with his words.

As far as Riza understood it, once a nest got to a certain size, the demon managing it received an order to establish a nest near a human settlement and begin the production of humanoid demons.

Hopefully, that wouldn't happen here.

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Hundreds of demons roamed the streets, roads packed to the brim with bustling creatures, packed in so tight they could hardly move. Lefie, Sanders, and Meren sat on a mostly intact roof of a black stone building, watching the chaos below.

Riza and Daven had left them hours ago, and this exodus of demons from below shortly followed. Lefie could hardly believe there were this many demons hiding underground.

If they attacked all at once, no village would be able to resist.

"They're all... safe, right?" Meren asked the teenage girl, concern evident in her voice. "The demons? They absolutely won't attack us?"

"Yep! Riza said she made sure to have Harold give them all the same orders. It doesn't matter which humanoid demon they get them from, apparently."

"Sorry. It's just..." Meren rubbed her head, looking down at the ground. "I'm so used to seeing them as mindless monsters. When there were fewer, it was easy to imagine them like the ones directly under Riza's control but... that's a whole army, down there."

"We should kill them," Sanders remarked calmly. The two of them looked up to him, sitting higher on the roof. "They're still demons," He grunted quietly, the entire explanation for his statement.

"What if Riza loses control?" Meren asked, looking back to Lefie.

"She won't," The girl replied resolutely. She definitely won't.

"But what if-"

"It's fine. Riza doesn't miss anything. There's nothing to worry about." Lefie gave a reassuring smile, and Meren returned an awkward one of her own.

"I wish I had your confidence in her. It's unreal, what she can do," Meren commented, looking at Sanders. "Hard to reconcile that with girl I met in

Litchendorf. And you too," Meren nudged Lefie with her shoulder. "Little miss 'master of lightning'."

Lefie was silent for a moment, pondering over whether to say something.

"Riza's never let me down. She always has a plan, always knows what to do." Lefie shrugged. "I trust her."

Before Meren could make a response, movement caught both their eyes, figures ascending from the tunnel below.

Riza was caked in dirt and dust but seemed no worse for wear. Daven looked exhausted, his entire person covered in sediment and debris from the earth.

She looked around for a little before spotting the group on the roof, her face going from confusion to indifference in a second.

Lefie quite enjoyed watching her squeeze her way through the mass of bodies as she fought her way to them. Daven seemed content to wait by the tunnel, which the demons kept a wide berth of.

"We're ready to start," Riza shouted upwards.

"Start what?"

"Killing demons."

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The spear skewered the demon with ease, hiding in the shadowed corners of a cage that reminded Riza of a canal lock.

The demon fell flat, Sanders, planting his foot on its body as he pulled out Meren's borrowed spear.

"Level up!" He spoke loudly, making sure even the people on the walls could hear him.

Fucking finally. Riza tallied off another death in her journal. *That was eighteen demons for level 20. That's a lower bound.*

Riza quickly stowed her journal away as she crouched down from the top of a wall. Meren was in the cage with Sanders, as backup in case any demon turned out hostile when attacked (which hadn't happened yet).

She had the corpse in her hands, lifting it up so Riza could take it from her and throw it over to the growing pile of bodies. *I'll figure out what to do with them later.*

The current goal was to level Sanders—and only Sanders—to level 25. Riza was taking count of how many demons that took in hopes of reverse-engineering how much experience they gave to figure out how many are necessary for a level up.

When she and Daven went to each of those nests, taking control of their humanoid and eye demons, she made sure orders were given, directing all their demons towards the caldera. She hadn't counted, and no way was she going to *feel* out how many there were, but conservative estimates were a hundred demons per nest. With five nests, that was five hundred demons to potentially consume for levels.

As for the humanoid demons from those nests, they were lying in a clump in the heart of the caldera nest. Riza had only used [Reanimate] on them so leaving them as corpses represented no loss, and she needed all the essence she could get right now.

“Ready for the next?” Daven asked from his position, sitting above a tunnel leading underground. Grunts and affirmations rang out, letting him know to let through another demon.

He had been putting in practise with his skills and it showed. Rather than needing to be down in the cage, lifting up the rock like a strong man, he sat atop the walls, letting his brown tendrils of essence drill through the rocky wall, lifting up the earth like a portcullis.

The walls were compacted and mostly stone, thick and heavy. Daven's carpentry knowledge meant he knew a thing or two about supporting structures, allowing for this unobtrusive method to work without the whole thing collapsing beneath them.

Lefie fired off a [Message] to Harold, letting him know to direct another beast demon towards them. Communications were handled through her as, sooner or later, Riza would start eating through her reserves as Sanders climbed up through the final levels.

The walls shook slightly, the stone tearing apart at Daven's discretion. Foot thundered from the tunnel, a beast demon shooting out and coming to an immediate standstill.

It looked around, mostly blind from the lack of fog.

Sanders squared his shoulders and charged.

Spears were amazing. A weapon that emerged during the stone age and stayed relatively the same and impactful all the way up to gunpowder and even then, it was simply altered into a bayonet.

A sharp stick was simple, intuitive, and effective. Sanders used a greatsword but his lack of familiarity with his weapon didn't matter; the beast demons were weak and docile.

As soon as the first thrust connected, the spear tip digging into the flesh with ease, powered by the strength of a bulky, fully-grown man

The demon whimpered and scampered away, clawed feet kicking up dust as she ran for cover.

It ran aimless until suddenly turning towards the wall, its confines finally registering for it.

The creature was deer-like, with long, sinewy legs and bony protrusions all over its head like antlers except they emerged from the mouth, the jowls, and even the neck, like someone had heard a vague verbal description of a deer and tried to draw it.

Digging its feet into the wall, it climb with desperation, scrabbling for footholds.

Riza was ready. As soon as it covered a few feet, lifting its head equal to the top, she shoved it hard with a thick, weighty stick, right on the head.

Muscles tense, she exerted all her power in the shove. The resistance the creature's neck offered was weak, its head thrown back and claws forcefully pulled out of the wall.

It fell onto its back, unable to get up before the spear met it again.

This was par for the course of how the demons acted. Under orders to not attack humans, when presented with hostility, they ran. Self-preservation was in play, like with any beast.

The initial tension from the start, worrying how it would work and if everything was safe, had quickly dissipated after the first few demons were slain. It was obvious there was nothing to worry about.

Dropping her stick, Riza withdrew her book, marking down another tally.

They continued on like this until Sanders levelled up for another time. *Twenty-one this time. Same as his level.*

Thirty-nine demons total have been killed for two levels. Assuming the number of demons is equal to the level, levels 22, 23, 24, and 25 will take an additional 94 demons. Say I'm underestimating and Sanders requires 50% more. That's 141 demons.

We have enough, for both Sanders and Daven, and maybe Meren as well.

Although killing demons to level up was a worthy use of them, Riza couldn't help but feel somewhat unhappy with that. Draining hundreds of demons to level up three people?

She had no other ideas for how to use beast demons but she doubted they'd have another opportunity to have hundreds of them in one place, under her command, for a long time.

They were a renewable resource. One part of her brain wanted to optimise this, to only have Sanders kill as many as they could replace, but Riza knew that was silly. This was worth it.

With a sigh, she pulled up Sanders' regeneration, marking that down as well.

Increase from level 20 to 21 was around 1 per second. I get 40% of that so 0.4 for me. Each level from [Raise Dead] costs me 0.5 essence a second. Overall, each time Sanders level ups, he costs an additional 0.1 essence per second.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		1.22 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	19	132/132	120/120	11243/11550	4.20
Sanders	Raise Dead	21	100/100	100/100	8243/13440	4.33
Harold	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	120/120	2.50
Haroldson	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	120/120	2.50

Tiffany	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 1	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 2	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 3	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 4	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 5	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50

I've got enough.

*

Levels	Demons Killed
20	18
21	21
22	22
23	23
24	25
25	27

Annoying. It's not linear. Either, the demons give different amounts of experience or the amount needed for level up changes. All the demons were similarly levelled and he killed so many it should've averaged out. 115 is a large enough sample size.

So, the amount of experience increases each level. That's fun.

Levels 22 and 23 require the same number of demons as their levels. That's possibly a rounding error or excess experience is carried over between levels. The problem here is resolution; beast demons award too much experience.

I don't think I can do anything with this data. To do: conduct experience tests with a beast demon using squirrels as the experience source.

Riza's sigh was heavy as she slammed her journal close with a not insignificant amount of frustration.

"Hmm?" Lefie audibly showed her curiosity, sitting beside Riza.

"It's nothing. Just something for later," Riza waved her off. "For now, I need to decide on Sanders' boon."

This had the opposite effect, invigorating Lefie as she jumped to her feet in excitement. Riza tuned her out as she bought up the list of boons.

You have reached level 25 and can now choose a Consolidation Boon

[Boon of Labour]

Effect: Non-combat skills level up twice as fast

[Boon of Body]

Effect: Physical skills level up twice as fast

[Boon of Mind]

Effect: Non-physical skills level up twice as fast

Hidden Boon

[Source of Spirit] -Consolidated

Requirements: Spirit is 2 times greater than any other stat

Effect: Spirit is multiplied by 3

Hidden Boon

[Lone Wolf]

Requirements: Have never been in a party

Effect: All skills are 2 times as effective when not in a party

Hidden Boon

[Self-Actualisation]

Requirements: Be summoned

Effect: For each level gained, the cost of maintaining existence is 1% cheaper

Hidden Boon

[Root of Spirit] - Consolidated

Requirements: Have no stat points allocated to anything other than Spirit

Effect: Spirit is multiplied by 5

Hidden Boon

[Way of Primordial Magic]

Requirements: Two Primordial Magic skills (10/10)

Effect: All Primordial Magic skills are 2 times as effective

Hidden Boon

[Way of Life]

Requirements: Two Life skills (10/10)

Effect: All Life skills are 2 times as effective

Hidden Boon

[Way of Psyche]

Requirements: Two Psyche skills (10/10)

Effect: All Psyche skills are 2 times as effective

Hidden Boon

[Master of Life and Death]

Requirements: Have died and have resurrected an entity

Effect: Whenever you drop to 0 health, you have a 50% chance to restore to 10% health. All healing and resurrection skills are 2 times as effective. Gain a skill point for Life skills

Hidden Boon

[Way of Metamagic]

Requirements: Two Metamagic skills (10/10)

Effect: All Metamagic skills are 2 times as effective

Only one new one this time but holy fuck, that's interesting. A whole skill point?

Not to mention, this makes you really fucking hard to kill. Completely negates death half the time and doubles your sustainability.

Not something I'm interested in at the moment, however.

[Way of Primordial Magic] and [Self-Actualisation] are the only ones in contention right now. So, time to do some maths.

Let's lay out all the numbers. Sanders base spirit is 193 and his base essence is 2. [Well of Spirit] and Essence will both increase to 5 times multipliers. That's 965 and 10 respectively.

[Knowable Essence] increases to 20% conference and this amount is after Source and [Root of Spirit] affect spirit.

So, 965 multiplied by 15 is 14,475. Wow. Big number. Essence becomes 150. 20% of that is 30 so Spirit is 14,505 total and essence is 3,045. Massive increases to both.

Anyway. 14,505 times 20 is 290,100 essence a day. [Meditate] and [Maximise Mastery+] is a 10 times multiplier, leaving total regeneration at 2,901,000 essence a day. That divides down to... 33.5 ish a second.

Fucking hell. Double my current regeneration. Out of curiosity... 40% of that is about 13.5. More than the 12.5 it costs to maintain him at that level so he'll officially be making a profit of essence! Fucking amazing news!

Riza jotted all the numbers down in her journal as she was doing the maths. Lefie's infectious energy had gotten her, her hand scrawling like a mad woman; she was so excited to see how the other boon worked out.

[Self-Actualisation] is a 25% decrease currently. 75% of 12.5 is 9.375. Sanders current regeneration is 20.125 a second. 40% is 8.05. Doesn't even break even.

Makes the choice really easy. [Way of Primordial Magic] it is.

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It took a couple of hours for the levelling of Sanders and by the end, the sun had set, the darkness of night taking over. No one felt like doing more work, not after such a productive day.

The next day was much like the first except with Daven levelling this time. Riza jotted down how many demons it took for him and it was exactly the same as Sanders.

This was useful information. For as far as Riza could remember, every time one of them killed a demon, they were always in a party with each other, so how far into level 19 they were should've been identical.

That meant the experience needed for levels was the same between the two of them. Whether this was because they were both summons, a universal truth, or something else, Riza didn't know, but she currently assumed it was the same for everyone.

Sadly, Daven didn't have any interesting boons to choose from so she stuck with [Way of Primordial Magic] for him, finally accomplishing what she had set out to do all the way back when she first raised the two boys.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		11.54 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	25	198/198	122/122	57800/57800	-0.86
Sanders	Raise Dead	25	130/130	114/114	58100/58100	-0.93
Harold	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	120/120	2.50
Haroldson	Raise Dead	5	100/100	100/100	120/120	2.50

Tiffany	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 1	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 2	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 3	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 4	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50
Eye Demon 5	Raise Dead	1	20/20	20/20	20/20	0.50

This is it. Nowhere to go but up.