

Chapter 81: Rebirth

The ground was shaking under their feet, the squirming bodies of the demons pushing against the floor and the walls. All that pressure had to go somewhere, and Riza was struggling to keep her balance.

The air was rank and smelt of decay.

A recent explosion in population had occurred and they were not prepared. There were only so many farmer demons after all.

Each new generation of demonic critters produced a couple new pups, Riza knew, but she had failed to account for the fact previous generations continued to breed as well.

Which meant they were several *hundred* demon critters over capacity.

By some very rudimentary approximations, there were probably four hundred that they didn't have space for.

One on hand, that could be seen as wasted population growth. The culling of a group that could produce more, faster.

On the other hand, that was a *lot* of experience. She wasn't feeling that bad about it after all.

After seeing the situation up close, Riza devised a strategy with Harold on how to funnel the creatures out and into the prime location for culling.

They'd be killing the eldest excess, since they'd be the ones with the highest level and thus confer the most experience.

This whole thing turned out to be a large event. For one, all three of Riza's new demon generals were getting involved, sucking up all the juicy experience, but this was also the first time Andreyra and Adewyn would see what was going on in the heart of the nest; they could only live on the uppermost layer, since going down any further meant submerging themselves in fog and without [Cleanse] or a way to see in essence, that was practically a death sentence.

With the aid of Daven and Harold, they dug out tunnels and chambers and made sure not to fill it with fog, just so their two newest members could see.

Riza did some calculations and some estimates and, by the end of it, all three of them should hopefully be level 25.

But that wasn't the main reason for her calculations. Before it went down, Riza headed to where they stored the humanoid demon corpses, frozen in stasis by the fog. Both Gas Tank and Tiffany were there.

She pulled out Tiffany and knelt down before her, silently thanking the demon in her head for her sacrifice before placing both palms on its torso and running through the motions of [Raise Dead].

The skill breathed life into the demonic corpse. The fog shuddered from the essence, suffusing into the skin to feed the rapidly forming vitality of the creature. A gentle nudge on Riza's brain, a new imposition of essence presence.

Tiffany was back. Level 1, but still, she was back.

The early levels were insignificant compared to the later ones when experience was considered; she'd barely be a dent.

Leading the newly-raised demon back to the others, it was time to begin, as Lefie, Sanders, and Meren had joined as well.

Since the rest was level 18, they first had to bring Tiffany up to level 4.

That was easy enough. Daven manhandled the demons, pushing them into the ground and practically sitting on them with his fully rock form as he used [Essential Essence] to not waste the stat gain.

Tiffany, with Riza's dagger in hand, easily stabbed it into the head. It took a few tries to get her meagre strength able to puncture the relatively thick skull but with a helpless, pretty docile demon, it wasn't hard in the end.

And there it was. Level 2. Riza had almost forgotten just how easy the first level was.

The next two levels were much the same, Daven enjoying all that he was gaining from it as well.

Level 4 accomplished, Tiffany retreated to join the spectators, Nussy taking her place, dagger in hand as well.

Daven also returned to his station by the gate, repeatedly raising and lowering it to control the inflow of demons. This put him in prime position to grab one for an [Essential Leech] as well.

And so they went, on and on and on. Halfway through, Sanders got far more involved, earning him time with [Essential Leech] as well.

Unfortunately, not a single demon had spirit, or even essence, as their highest stat. By now, Riza had such a large sample size that those two stats were simply not naturally occurring.

It made sense; the only people who had those as their highest stats trained in magic. It was useless otherwise. Unless a wild creature somehow access to magic, there was no reason to have a high essence or spirit value.

Which meant the only opportunities Riza would have would be humanoid demons. Specifically, those who wield magic instead of physical weapons.
Great.

After a while, the spectators got a bit bored. Meren was the quickest to leave, having seen this all before with Sanders and Daven in the caldera. Adewyn was next, probably joining Meren to train together, something the pair had been doing a lot lately. Andreyra followed, having seen enough and had other work to get to.

Which left just Lefie, Riza, and the boys.

The room was shaped like a U, with benches going around the perimeter except for the flat wall, where the gate connected the killing pit with the tunnel funnelling demons from the breeding pits.

The pit in the middle of the room was surrounded by raised walls where the benches sat, leading to a separation from spectators and the killing. Down below, they were already running through the emotions, the whole thing a routine at this point.

Lefie sat on the wall before Riza, her legs dangling into the pit below. The powerful glow of essence in Riza's mind told her [Essential leech] had just been used.

And there, they watched.

Lefie wasn't all that interested. In fact, she spent most of the time talking to Riza. She had been practising with her water skills, having not touched them all that much lately.

She demonstrated a few shapes. A flying sphere was the nominal form, then moulded into a neat cube and then a loaf of bread.

She began to be more intricate and technical. Shapes with hard corners, acute angles, and smaller and more detailed over all

And then they started to move. An animated rabbit lopping through grass. A cart with rotating wheels and tired horses. Even a fully articulated Meren fighting in the arena.

It was impressive, and Riza said so, giving a brief hug with her praise.

After many, many hours, it was finally over. Harold reported the breeding pits had been culled sufficiently, and the last demon entered through the gate, only to be killed moments later by a completely bloodied and quite scary looking Nussy.

Now, to decide on their boons.

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Tiffany had all the same skills as before. With Andreyra here, she was somewhat redundant but contingencies were never bad so Riza elected to have her take the psyche skills again instead of maximising essence regeneration. At such a low level, she wouldn't regenerate much anyway.

Jupy and Ascles would be the easiest to consider, as they were essentially copies of Daven and Sanders.

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

[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

[Party Animal]

Requirements: Have been in a party for 24 consecutive hours

Effect: Intensity of all skills is multiplied by 2 when affecting a party member

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 Lightning]

Requirements: Two Lightning skills (10/10)

Effect: All Lightning skills are 2 times as effective

Hidden Boon

[Way of Metamagic]

Requirements: Two Metamagic skills (10/10)

Effect: All Metamagic skills are 2 times as effective

Not many choices. I suppose that makes sense; they haven't been alive for very long, after all. They haven't done much.

[Way of Primordial Magic] for both of them.

Nessy was where it got interesting.

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 Constitution] -Consolidated

Requirements: Constitution is 2 times greater than any other stat

Effect: Constitution is multiplied by 3

Hidden Boon

[Self-Actualisation]

Requirements: Be summoned

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

Hidden Boon

[Root of Constitution] - Consolidated

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

Effect: Constitution is multiplied by 5

Hidden Boon

[Party Animal]

Requirements: Have been in a party for 24 consecutive hours

Effect: Intensity of all skills is multiplied by 2 when affecting a party member

Hidden Boon

[Way of Primordial Strength]

Requirements: Two Primordial Strength skills (10/10)

Effect: All Primordial Strength skills are 2 times as effective

Hidden Boon

[Way of Blood]

Requirements: Two Blood skills (10/10)

Effect: All Blood skills are 2 times as effective

Looking at her pre-boon stats, although she had a spirit value of 1, she was still regenerating about 9 essence a second, entirely from her health regeneration.

The most obvious decision was [Way of Primordial Strength] and, in fact, that would have more benefits because Nussy had far more primordial strength skills than the equivalent primordial magic ones.

There was a lot of maths involved so Riza got comfortable and pulled out her book, quickly sketching up a status screen that only had the relevant information on it.

In the margins, she did all the calculations for if Nussy had [Way of Primordial Strength], what would it look like?

Name	Nussy
Level	25
Health	154,800

Power	2580
Constitution	12,900 or 15,480 DR
Health Regeneration	1,935,000/day or 22/second
Essence Regeneration	645,000/day or 7.5/second
Total Cost	9.5 es/sec

Riza had double-checked to make sure she had gotten the formulas right. As it turned out, [Meditate] had incredible synergy.

For easier numbers, say someone regenerated 10 health a second. A maximised [Meditate] was a 10 times multiplier, making it 100 health/second. [Essence Transformer] (passive) converted that into 97.5 health/second and 2.5 essence/second. However, [Meditate] *also* multiplied the essence regeneration, making it 97.5 health/second and 25 essence/second.

[Meditate] double-dipped and that was huge.

The health and essence regeneration weren't just what Riza was looking at however; she also wanted to know about health, power, and damage reduction.

As for health, wow. Riza was impressed. Without putting a single point into power, Nesy was only one [Source of Power] away from matching Adewyn but with double the damage reduction.

The most unfortunate thing was Nesy would still drain 9.5 essence a second. Far from breaking even.

But this wasn't the whole story; Riza hadn't accounted for the blood skills yet. Specifically, [Blood Sucker], [Lost Blood], and [Sturdy Blood] still had a part to play.

[Blood Sucker] was the blood equivalent of [Intrinsic Tank] and with [Maximise Mastery+], Nesy could absorb up to 10kg of blood.

[Sturdy Blood] meant Nessy's health would increase by 20% per kilogram stored, which meant a 200% increase, bringing Nessy's total health to 464,400, actually matching Adewyn.

The most interesting and most annoying part was [Lost Blood]. At level 10, for every 10% of total health lost, regeneration would increase by 10%.

This skill was interesting. If you had low max health, it would be very easy to maintain high regeneration since attacks did proportionally more damage. If you had high maximum health, it would take a lot more effort to maintain increased regeneration but you would be at a far lower risk and even at 10% health, Nessy would be at 45,000 health, which was still very high. Not to mention her incredible damage reduction as well.

What Riza wanted to know, however, was if there was an optimal proportion of health Nessy should be at.

Nessy costs 12.5 essence per second. Divide it by [Essence Monarch] and that's 31.25 essence a second Nessy needs to regenerate, which means around 120 health a second. Damn. That's insanely high.

No breaking even just yet.

I suppose that's for the better. I'd need to get Nessy [Essence Congruency] and a self-damaging skill that she must always use to maintain optimal health regeneration and that's a whole lot of hassle.

Riza shook her head and flipped to a new page.

She doesn't have it unlocked yet but it'd be easy enough. What would happen if [Meditate] was doubled?

Name	Nessy
Level	25
Health	31,080
Power	777
Constitution	7744 or 8,518 DR

Health Regeneration	2,300,000/day or 26.5/second
Essence Regeneration	1,500,000/day or 17/second
Total Cost	5.7 es/sec

Now this is interesting. None of her stats actually changed but regeneration is a lot better.

[Sturdy Blood] gets her health to around 100,000 so that's still a nice buffer. The essence regeneration opens her up to other skills that are a continuous drain rather than an up-front cost as well.

Still not breaking even, however. I guess that's too much to ask for someone with no stats in spirit?

Lastly, how about [Way of Blood]? I'm including skills this time.

Name	Nessy
Level	25
Health	280,000
Power	777
Constitution	7744 or 8,518 DR
Health Regeneration	1,150,000/day or 13/second
Essence Regeneration	750,000/day or 8.5/second
Total Cost	9.1 es/sec

On the face of it, similar numbers to [Way of Primordial Strength] but I still have to calculate [Lost Blood]. Normally, 10% for 10% will now become 20% for 10%.

Let's say a nominal health of 100,000. That's 180,000 health lost which is about 67% Increase health regeneration by 130%, then.

Name	Nessy
Level	25
Health	100,000/280,000
Power	777
Constitution	7744 or 8,518 DR
Health Regeneration	2,645,000/day or 30/second
Essence Regeneration	1,780,000/day or 20.5/second
Total Cost	4.3 es/sec

The lowest cost yet. Maybe it's achievable...

Boon	Total Health	Health Baseline	Base Cost (es/sec)	Adjusted Cost (es/sec)
Way of Primordial Strength	464,400	100,000	9.5	7.2
Way of Primordial Strength	464,400	50,000	9.5	6.9
Way of Primordial Strength	464,400	20,000	9.5	6.6
Meditate Doubled	93,240	50,000	5.7	2

Meditate Doubled	93,240	20,000	5.7	<u>-0.3</u>
Way of Blood	280,000	100,000	9.1	4.3
Way of Blood	280,000	50,000	9.1	3
Way of Blood	280,000	20,000	9.1	2.3

There's only one way, but is it worth it?

There's one more thing I haven't factored in yet; future skills.

Riza checked her entity manager. Without Nessy's boon, she was consuming essence at a rate 0.09 a second. Minimal, so she could take her time.

Let's check out what primordial strength has to offer.

Primordial Strength
0th Tier
[Well of Power] (10/10) -Learned Power is multiplied by 3
[Well of Constitution] (10/10) -Learned Constitution is multiplied by 3
[Well of Endurance] (1/10) Endurance is multiplied by 1.2
[Well of Vim] (1/10) Vim is multiplied by 1.2
1st Tier
[Knowable Power] (10/10) -Learned

10% of Power contributes to Constitution. 10% of Constitution contributes to Power
Requirements: [Well of Power] (5/10), [Well of Constitution] (5/10)

[Knowable Endurance] (1/10)

1% of Endurance contributes to Vim. 1% of Vim contributes to Endurance
Requirements: [Well of Endurance] (5/10), [Well of Vim] (5/10)

2nd Tier

[Fortress of Flesh] (10/10) -Learned

Improve armour formula by 10%
Requirements: [Well of Constitution] (10/10), [Well of Vim] (10/10)

[Hardened Flesh] (10/10) -Learned

Each point in power confers 20 additional total health
Requirements: [Knowable Power] (10/10)

[Improved Athletics] (1/10)

Your stats further increases your general athletic ability

3rd Tier

[Strength Infused Arms] (1/10)

Physical skills exerted through your arms treat your stats as 10% higher
Requirements: [Improved Athletics] (10/10)

[Strength Infused Legs] (1/10)

Physical skills exerted through your legs treat your stats as 10% higher
Requirements: [Improved Athletics] (10/10)

[Strength Infused Body] (1/10)

Physical skills treat your stats as 5% higher

Requirements: [Improved Athletics] (5/10)

[Metastasizing Strength] (1/10)

When you level up, there's a 2% chance of 5 additional stat points to be allocated into a physical stat at random.

Not quite what I was expecting. A bit vague, as well. I suppose, if you're someone like Meren, [Strength Infused Arms] will obviously help you.

But I doubt the blood skills count as physical skills. After all, [Essence Transformer] can be affected by [Maximise Mastery] and that explicitly only applies to essence skills.

[Metastasizing Strength] is a bit strange. The earliest you could obtain the skill is at level 5, so when you reach level 25, that's a maximum of 100 additional stat points. Writing it out like that, it sounds good, but the probabilities just aren't there.

It presumably levels up when you do and the most generous levelling curve would be one level every time you level, which means it reaches level 10 when you reach level 15, which gives you 10 levels leftover when it's maxed out.

Running all the numbers, that's an average of... 55 additional stat points. Huh. Not as bad as I was expecting. At level 5, that's the equivalent of 11 levels. 5.5 levels at level 15 and 3.67 levels at level 25.

I suppose a boon to double it like [Way of Primordial Strength] makes it worth it to get early, but that requires knowledge that it even exists, and that it's levelling curve is as generous as I assumed.

Anyway, too late to be useful for Nussy and she will eventually have [Essential Leech] in the future instead.

So, nothing too interesting there. Now for blood.

Blood

0th Tier

[Essence Transformer] (passive) -Learned

25% of health regeneration is converted into essence regeneration

Efficiency: 10%

[Ichor Manipulation] (10/10)+ -Learned

Manipulate 10kg of your blood

10m radius

Cost: 10 es/sec

1st Tier

[Ichor Calefaction] (10/10)+ -Learned

Modify the heat energy of 10kg of your blood by 10 K/sec

Cost: 10 es/K

10m radius

Requirements: [Ichor Manipulation] (1/10)

[Pestilent Wound] (1/10)

Convert 0.1kg of your blood into a poison to entities that deals 2 damage every second for 10 minutes

Efficiency: 10%

Cost: 5 es/sec

[Blood Sense] (1/10)

Sense nearby blood

2m range

Cost: 1 es/sec

2nd Tier

[Debilitating Wound] (1/10)

Convert 0.1kg of your blood into a poison to entities that reduces their stats by 1% for 6 seconds

Efficiency: 10%

Cost: 10 es/sec

Requirements: [Pestilent Wound] (10/10)

[Life Leech] (1/10)

1% of damage is gained as health regeneration over 10 seconds

[Blood Sucker] (10/10)+ -Learned

Absorb up to 10kg of blood from your surroundings

10m radius

Cost: 50 es/sec

Requirements: [Ichor Manipulation] (5/10)

[Expanding Blood] (1/10)

All of your injuries produce 10% more blood

3rd Tier

[Blood Transfusion] (1/10)

0.1kg of absorbed blood can be consumed to regenerate 100 health over 10 seconds

Efficiency: 10%

Cost: 20 es/sec

Requirements: [Blood Sucker] (1/10)

[Global Blood] (1/10)

All blood skills now work with any blood

Requirements: [Ichor Manipulation] (10/10)

[Infuse Blood] (1/10)

Blood can now be infused with local essence

Requirements: [Ichor Manipulation] (10/10), [Ichor Calcification] (5/10)

[Lost Blood] (10/10) -Learned

Health regeneration is increased by 10% for 10% of health lost

Requirements: [Blood Sucker] (5/10)

[Sturdy Blood] (10/10) -Learned

Total health is increased by 20% per 1kg of absorbed blood

Efficiency: 10%

Hidden Skill

Requirements: 5 Blood skills (10/10)

[Compatible Blood] (1/10)

Multiply the efficiency of blood skills by 1.1

4th Tier

[Transmuted Blood] (1/10)

Infuse Blood with aspected essence

Requirements: [Infuse Blood] (10/10)

[Manifold Blood] (1/10)

Convert 100 health/second to multiply intensity or range of an active skill by 1.2

Cost: 10 es/sec

Requirements: [Essence Transformer] (10/10)

[Blinding Wound] (1/10)

Convert 0.1kg of your blood into a poison that can limit 1 sense for 6 seconds

Efficiency: 10%

Cost: 100 es/sec

Requirements: [Debilitating Wound] (10/10)

[Suppressing Wound] (1/10)

Convert 0.1kg of your blood into a poison that increases the cost of skills by 10% for 2 seconds

Efficiency 10%

Cost: 100 es/sec

Requirements: [Debilitating Wound] (10/10)

Firstly, a new hidden skill at 3rd tier. [Compatible Blood] very enticing. Just by itself, it'd double efficiency. Definitely need to redo the calculations with that. Fuck, wish I checked the skills earlier.

[Transmuted Blood] is the sequel to [Infuse Blood] I guess you can control the aspect now? So, flaming blood? Not too sure what the point of it is; very light on numbers.

[Manifold Blood] looks lovely. All the masteries rolled up into one and at the cost of blood. Whether the cost is additive or multiplicative when used in conjunction with a mastery needs exploring.

Very costly for any on-going skills, however. Need to work out if it reaches an equilibrium with [Lost Blood]. Otherwise, enticing for [Meditate].

[Blinding Wound] and [Suppressing Wound] are basically the same. There seems to be a 'wound' path of skills which is all about inflicting negative effects on your enemies through poisonous blood.

I'll keep it in mind as I haven't decided how Nussy is going to be offensive yet.

Oh boy. So much extra maths I have to do. Why can't you be as simple as your brothers, Nussy?

Riza got comfortable as she went to work. Well, as comfortable as she could be in a chair made from stone.

Boon	Total Health	Health Baseline	Base Cost (es/sec)	Adjusted Cost (es/sec)
Way of Primordial Strength	464,400	100,000	6.6	1.9
Way of Blood	280,000	100,000	1.8	-12

Oh boy. That's a hefty increase. That's actually insane; it far exceeds what Sanders and Daven are getting me, and Nussy's total essence regeneration is higher as well. Shit. It's high enough to sustain a constant [Heal] in exchange for [Manifold Blood]

And that's not even necessary. Unless my numbers are off, at 112,000 health, that brings health regeneration up to 100 health a second, off-setting the cost of [Manifold Mastery], and her essence regeneration alone can handle the staggering 100 essence a second.

Fucking. Hell.

This can't be real. Surely not. I must've gone wrong somewhere.

It's too good to be true.

But what if it is?

Riza was shaking, and Lefie had shuffled closer. She needed to see if she was correct.

Before she knew it, Nussy now had [Way of Blood], [Compatible Blood], and [Manifold Blood].

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"It feels like she's trying to steal my wife at times," Adewyn said, taking a sip from a clay cup filled to the brim with chilled water. Although Lefie said she couldn't control the temperature, being underground seemed to help.

She was sat on one of the many benches surrounding the arena, Meren on another and Lefie dangling off the centre stage.

"Why don't you join them?" The teenager asked innocently.

"I'd be a hindrance. All that thinking and planning stuff is Andrey's expertise. I just hit the things she tells me to hit."

Meren commiserated with her. "It's a bit surprising how well Riza has taken to all this... war planning," She gestured vaguely in the air. "For someone who doesn't seem to know a lot about the Empire."

"I don't suppose either of you know where she's from? The headache of a brand new, unlicensed Healer popping up right underneath Andrey's nose was something, I'll tell you." Adewyn shook her head, a smile on her face.

Meren just shrugged but Lefie remained visibly sheepish. The two women turned to look at her and she, like Meren, just shrugged.

“Well, not like it’s the biggest secret that she has,” Adewyn said, standing up and stretching out her limbs.

Meren snuck a glance towards the entrance way, seeing that no one was there.

“There’s... actually something I think we should discuss, about Riza,” She said quietly, immediately catching Adewyn’s attention and intrigue.

“Something spicy, I hope,” She said, sitting back down.

“Unfortunately, not,” Meren shook her head. “It’s about her eyes. She still...” She threw her hands in the air. “Hasn’t done anything about them.”

“What does she need to do? She can live perfectly fine as she is,” Lefie replied instantly.

“We all know that’s not true. She’s spending all that time isolated *because* of her eyes.”

“That’s not true! She’s-“

“Developing her skills. Yes. Because she can’t use them without eyes. Lefie, think logically here.”

The girl frowned intensely but didn’t offer an immediate rebuttal.

“Are you saying we need to do something about this?” Adewyn asked, leaning forward, hand on her chin.

“I think we should try. Between us, Daven, Sanders, and the demons, there’s got to be some things that can work.”

“Well, you two are more familiar with everyone else’s skills. What options are there?”

“But Riza-“

“Riza’s avoiding doing anything about it. That’s how she treats things she doesn’t like doing. She avoids them. Like talking to people. If you care about Riza, you help her do things she doesn’t want to do,” Meren said.

Lefie, somehow, frowned even deeper.

Meren leaned forwards as well, lowering the volume of her voice as she kept on eye out for anyone.

“I think Ascles is a good place to start. Apparently, he’s basically a Healer so he could have some skills that will help.”

“The Dominion’s Healers can’t replace lost limbs. I think,” Adewyn said, struggling to recall everything she knew about them. She wished Andreyra was a part of the conversation as well.

“But they’re low level, right? Ascles is now basically a Guardian. He should be able to do it.”

“A demon Healer. She’s got a sense of humour. Maybe it would work.”

“Sanders could maybe help.” Lefie finally joined in the conversation, sounding timid and quiet. “And Daven.”

“And what can they do?” Adewyn asked.

“Sanders is a... Resurrectionist, is what Andreyra called him. He-he brought me back to life.”

Adewyn’s eyes went wide and then narrow as she traced the detail over Lefie’s face, arms, and hands. She traced the dimples, the scars, the spots, the dirt.

“You were brought back to life?”

“I-yeah. Apparently. It just felt like sleeping to me.”

“And you’re all okay? You’re just like you were before?”

“I feel the same,” Lefie verbally shrugged.

“Topic for another day. You say he can help us?” Lefie nodded.

“He’s got a skill called [Rejuvenate] which... Andreyra knows about. She suggested Riza to take it back in Kratten.”

“And Daven, as well?”

“He’s, um... He’s more complicated. He has a few life skills but he has, I don’t know, it’s silly. He has a skill called [Senescence] which can alter the age of something. Maybe, like, he can make Riza a month younger? When she still had her eyes?”

“Hey; it’s a good suggestion. The more, the better. What about you, Meren? Anything else that could work?”

“I... didn’t even know they had those skills. But not. Doesn’t sound like we can get better than that.”

“Once of you,” Adewyn pointed between them. “Will have to get them involved somehow. Keep it all quiet. See what those skills can do.” She stood up with purpose. “I will go and rescue my wife and see what she has to say about all this.”

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Back in her isolation room, Riza was making progress on her next skill.

The plans involved placing her in danger, so she needed to be sure she would survive it.

[Parasite] was coming along slowly. As a higher tier skill, it was more complex the concept and more nuanced the essence manipulation.

With everything else going on as well, in addition to her decreasing desire to seclude herself away, less and less time was afforded to skill improvement.

Which was why, as a punishment today, she was spending many consecutive hours in here and she couldn’t leave until she made a breakthrough. There was even a little bedding set up in the corner of the room as a necessity, and Daven had sealed the whole thing shut.

The hours passed as Riza alternated between pressing her hands on the critter in the room, attempting to insert a parasite through a variety of methods, and seeing through the eyes of a critter outside her room, dashing about the halls until it reached the limit of their shared vision, and dashing back.

She was procrastinating, as loathe of she was to admit it. This entire ordeal was boring.

All those hours and days amounted to far less time making progress. And with everything else that was afoot, the miniscule amounts of progress she made hardly felt worthwhile.

And then, the room opened. Which shouldn’t have been possible; it was sealed shut.

Riza shot up from the ground, refocusing her borrowed sight to see Daven walking into the room, along with Sanders, Meren, and Lefie.

Shit.

“What’s wrong? Is there an emergency?” Riza asked, panic creeping into her voice.

My critter warning system hasn’t alerted me to anything. Did it sneak past them?

“This is about your eyes,” Meren said bluntly.

“Wha... There-there’s nothing to worry about. I can function just fine as I am.”

“We both know that’s not true. You’re-you’re in here, learning to reuse a skill you’ve already used a hundred times already. Look, we’re here to help.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Really.”

And then it went dark. The presence of life hugging Riza’s shoulder vanished. No senses to borrow, critter to bond with. Just a dead weight.

Riza stumbled backwards and fell on her ass, the world devoid of light and shape before her.

“Wha-“ She mumbled out unintelligibly, mind dazed and confused.

Footsteps were rushing towards her, a mass of people crowding around. She had no idea what was going, couldn’t focus on anything.

Heart beating like a drum, Riza’s arms flailed through the air, making contact with different body parts as she felt hands pulling her, picking her up, and restraining her.

No matter how much Riza struggled, whoever had her was far stronger, holding her with ease.

And then, the first sensations occurred. A bright, burning sensation in her mind, alerting her to essence that was flowing through her body, filling her up entirely.

It tasted like... fresh grass. Her mind, warped by overt familiarity, recognised life essence as soon as it entered her system.

But nothing. The sensation vanished as soon as it appeared.

“Did it work?” She could hear Lefie asking, voice quiet but urgent.

“No,” Sanders replied, voice devoid of all emotion.

“Sanders, Sanders. Go away. Leave,” Riza spat out. *Shit. I need to order him.*

“Sanders, I order you to leave me alone!” She shouted.

“Wait! Sanders, where-“ Riza heard Meren say from above her head.

With as much strength as Riza could muster, she elbowed the stomach behind her. It barely did anything.

“Plan B. Quickly,” Meren said, followed by more footsteps.

Another blast of life essence, except far stronger and far more sustained.

It was unlike anything she had every felt before. Energy wasn't coursing through her but, rather, it was like it was being drained away by the second.

And not just energy. Hunger, thirst, anxiety, sleep. Her mind ran through caught a glimpse of her current situation, wrapped up in the strong arms of Meren, and then that was gone.

Scenes and memories appeared in her mind, in reverse chronological order. Chatting with Lefie. Planning with Andreyra. Watching the culling of demons.

Gone, gone, gone. Time eroded them to dust, her brain remodelling a new as the synapses fired once more, signals reorienting and reassigning themselves as new-old matrices of memories were created.

Her muscles shrunk and grew, her chest breathing in reverse. Her whole body felt like it was being ripped anew.

Time didn't make sense. Her knowledge of what was happening disappeared. She could barely register the arms around her.

And then the memories the battle. The last things she remembered. The pain of the fingers digging in her eye socket, the blood pooling around, the sudden pressure, the pulling of the eyeball itself.

Her mind replayed those over and over, the memories far stronger than anything else.

And just like everything else, it too reverted to the sands of a memory no longer there. Time wound and wound itself back to the origin.

Pain blossomed in her face, fire heating her eyes as her flesh burned with all the heat of hell. A sudden explosion, pinprick in size, appeared within her empty eye sockets, rapidly expanding as two spheres inflated.

Eyeballs old but new regrew themselves as they knitted back together, the nerves and synapses reconnecting as once familiar sensations reappeared.

Light bloomed into Riza's vision for the first time in a while, un beholden by the borrowed senses of her critters.

And with that light, immense and overwhelming confusion.

She saw, before her, huddled in an underground, earthen cavern, Daven and Lefie before her.

"They're back. It's worked!" Lefie cheered. Riza immediately felt the arms around her releasing, only now realising she was being restrained.

Meren stepped into view, crouching down and helping Riza steady herself.

"How are you feeling?" She asked, concerned. Her entire expression shouted sincerity.

"I... Where are we?"