

Chapter 87: Strength

The rain pelted down hard. The dirt turned into muck and mud, sloshing about as the booted feet of Riza pushed through it.

The walls of Rensenfeld were behind her, dripping with water. She could barely make out the shape of the tower amidst the heavy mist.

A heavy leather bag bounced against her back. It was rough and sturdy, made for adventuring in unknown terrain. It was filled to the brim with various pieces of armour and clothing, so much so that Riza had struggled to even get it to close.

The entrance to the nest was inconvenient and out of the way. They needed something more permanent and proper than a random hole in the forest.

Birds flew overhead, leading the way. A few of them were fresh, brand new from just the other day, while most were days, weeks, and some, even months old.

They were odd. A regular corpse would decay after just a few days and, in ideal conditions, there could barely be anything left after mere weeks. But the oldest critters Riza still had looked identical to the living things.

No rot, nor decay, nor decomposition. If this was the early version of [Animate Critter], Riza would've guessed that the constant essence drain was effectively simulating [Cleanse] and [Heal] to keep the corpse up and running.

But that wasn't the case with the passive version. They drained no essence from her and, in fact, naturally regenerated essence on their own. The only difference between them and corpses were the artificial intelligence [Animate Critter] implanted into their bodies.

With all her musings on souls lately, the implications were interesting.

The nest had spread far and wide beneath Rensenfeld. Daven and Harold were hard at work expanding it to accommodate plenty more demons but the parts Riza was heading to were thankfully situated near the surface.

Even if some of them could both live and see in the fog, not all of them could.

She quickly found the hole, covered with dried leaves and twigs.

Daven was getting better at his skills; the entrance consisted of a stone hatch with articulated hinges, allowing Riza to easily pull it open and then close it on herself once she was inside.

A quick [Message] to her critters got them covering it back up after her.

The walls around her trembled ever so slightly.

The tunnel was tight and dark. The ground was wet from the glimpse of rain, and she shook the mud off her feet.

Although the fashion of the rich appeared to one with which Riza was very acquainted with, she stuck to traditional clothing instead of Ancient: well-made but sturdy leather boots kept her feet safe; thick, warm breeches kept her legs from shivering; a finely crafted tunic covered by a coat made of the most luxurious wool imaginable made her feel like she was floating on clouds; and her head was covered by what she'd call a fur-lined beanie. All-in-all, even after trudging through that cold, winter rain, she was surprisingly toasty.

It's amazing what the right clothing can do.

Vague hints of lights flashed further down the tunnel, and Riza carefully walked towards them, a hand sliding along the wall so she didn't lose her footing.

Once she was inside the nest proper, that was when the everlight torches appeared, mounted into the walls like they were natural formations.

It was a marvellous chemical, able to keep itself alight for at least weeks at a time, it looked like. Plenty of holes leading to the surface allowed for ample ventilation, keeping the oxygen flow coming for the continual flames.

And it was smokeless too!

Klannar wasn't hard to find. He was near the entrance, lounging on an uncomfortable looking chair, reading a book. A pedestal beside him was stacked twenty books high.

As Riza entered the small room, the buy barely noticed her, casting a quick glance in her direction as he turned the page.

And then, a second later, he realised what he had saw and dropped the book to his feet, quickly repositioning himself into a more formal sitting position.

"Riza!" He nodded respectfully, unnerving her somewhat.

"Where's Tanniya?"

"She's out... punching something," He answered, looking mildly embarrassed.

“Punching something?”

“You wouldn’t let her fight a demon so she decided to do some renovation. With her fists.”

As if to punctuate his point, the room shook softly.

Riza sighed internally. This was a consistent thing with that woman; she was exceedingly restless, and her incredible stats didn’t help.

“Show me the way.”

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A cavern the size of a ballroom had been excavated right in front of Riza. She remained in the tunnel for the floor dropped drastically at her feet.

It looked like a giant underground explosion had occurred and right at the centre was the cause.

Tanniya, dressed in the same clothes she had been dug up in, was standing amongst large piles of rock and debris.

In her hand was a stone half the size of Riza. How she was holding it with her rather small hands, Riza didn’t know, but before he could wonder any longer, the stone vanished in an instant.

A thunderous boom echoed out, a shockwave quickly following. The stone shot through the air with tremendous speed, impacting the stone wall and cracking it like glass.

Chips and flakes of earth peeled off, the boulder now lodged in the wall.

Tanniya wasted no time in picking up a smaller, but still hefty rock, and lobbing it at the same wall.

A massive piece of earth, as big as Riza, was decimated under the force, falling off from the thoroughly cracked wall like a scab.

So, this is renovation, is it?

The power on display was simply insane, and she had barely any skills available to her.

“Tanniya!” Riza yelled out, quickly dropping and sliding and hopping her way over towards the woman.

Another stone fell from her hands as Tanniya suddenly looked quite sheepish, now noticing Riza.

“Hey! You’re back!” She said nonchalantly.

“What are you doing? I told you to get used to your strength, not destroy the place,” Riza said, picking her way through the debris, trying to avoid sounding accusatory.

“This is me getting used to my strength! And, I think we need the space; it gets a bit crowded sometimes.”

Riza just sighed. She wasn’t exactly wrong; when you had a power stat of ten thousand, anything you did was bound to be incredibly destructive.

“Okay. Well... I actually have a job for you. And you too Klannar!” Riza turned and shouted towards where she came from, the slight frame of the man practically hiding away in the tunnel.

“Fucking finally!”

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“There. That looks good, right?”

Riza stepped away from Tiffany, now clad head-to-toe in armour and fabric that obscured even the slightest bit of pure white skin. She had taken inspiration from Death specifically for this.

“She looks weird. There’s no way she won’t be drawing attention looking like that,” Tanniya commented.

“That’s fine. As long as you can’t tell that she’s a demon.”

“She looks scary. Where’d you get the armour from?” Klannar asked, busy disguising Nessy as well.

“The Chosen had commissioned them but left before picking them up. The smith had already been paid so he didn’t mind giving them to us.”

Andreya was a lifesaver in that regard. Her experience managing the Kratten Dominion translated nicely to Rensenfeld and all the communication and organisation Riza would panic over were taken care of by her.

When I return, I need to do something nice for her. As a reward.

“You still haven’t said what’s all this for, anyway? They going out into the city?” Tanniya asked.

Riza gave Tiffany another once-over and saw nothing out of place. She turned to answer the woman.

“No. There are some demon reports from elsewhere in the province so it’s finally time for the two of you to stretch your legs.”

“Demons? You want us to fight demons. Wh-what about Rensenfeld? You promised-“

“And that’ll happen! I’ve got a plan for how to handle that. I can’t just have you going around killing people seemingly at random.”

“It’s just one guy.”

“They don’t know that. You will get your revenge, trust me. But this is what you agreed to.” Riza vaguely gestured towards the armoured Tiffany.

“She has a point, Tanniya. We did agree to do whatever she says,” Klannar added.

Tanniya just groaned, spitting out a very reluctant ‘fine’.

Riza wasn’t too worried. If the worst came to pass, she had a killswitch.

“So... where’s this demon sighting?” Klannar asked, stepping away from Nussy having finished with the last bits of armour.

I can see why knights had squires to help them out. It’s hard enough with me helping.

“It’s way up north. A village called Edderdorf. There’s been some rumblings of a nest out there and we’re going to investigate.”

“Edderdorf... That sounds familiar.”

“Yeah, because it’s in the middle of nowhere. Didn’t your ma ever threaten to send you there if you stepped out of line?” Tanniya said.

“Can’t say that’s the case, no.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s my responsibility now. It might end up being nothing; just random shakes.”

“I hope there’s a demon. A big and scary one, as well. Something that can take a real beating,” Tanniya said excitedly, seemingly having forgotten about that minor quarrel with Riza.

“And I hope it’s peaceful. A greater demon in a village is bad news, especially something that can pose a challenge to you.”

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The walls of Rensenfeld stood strong behind a horse and cart, wearily travelling along a mud-ridden, dirt road, beset on both sides by barren fields, bereft of crops.

Early winter was cold, with heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures. No crops survived through them, and that meant a month or two of the direst conditions to try to grow any other food. Even the most cold-hardy of fruits and vegetables struggled in this climate.

But soon, spring would appear and these fields would glow with the golden light of grain once more.

Riza had received a quick summation of the current conditions of varying things once she had taken power, with the agricultural situation being just one of them. It wasn’t good but people acted like it was nothing out of the ordinary; scores of people dying from exposure and starvation was per for the course, apparently.

If you didn’t die young, you died old and cold.

It was something to think about, to consider. An improvement she could make that would definitely be appreciated by a lot of people.

Looking at the empty fields, her mind went back to Mesandra. Although half-cognizant, Daven had told her of the woman’s way with plants, able to grow sustainable food for the human body even in an underground tunnel. It was promising.

With sufficient strength or essence, a single, moderately high-level person would likely be able to maintain the production of an entire farm but in a far smaller area and in a far narrower time frame. And, it wouldn’t even care about adverse conditions too much.

The only problem was one of resources; she’d need bodies to do so. A grave was right under her feet in Rensenfeld, yes, but she wanted to wait to see if

any other avenues opened up to her before she resorted to desecrating even more bodies.

Farms weren't the only improvements on her mind either—the road was another. The cart dug heavy grooves from its load of food and Tiffany, blanketed by a canvas cover. It struggled through the slog that was mud.

The horse's hooves glooped and glopped as the mud clung to it, making each step a slog.

The rest of them—Riza, Lefie, Tanniya, and Klannar—were walking beside the wagon, but only two of them were really struggling in these conditions; Klannar, who silently grumbled every now and then when he encountered a particularly troublesome portion, and Lefie, who had somehow convinced Tanniya to carry her on her back after just the first few minutes of the journey.

Riza initially didn't want Lefie to even leave the city—it was much safer that way—but there was no way she could reject the girl. Riza sighed and reluctantly allowed her to come with after one look at her adorable, yearning eyes.

Rain storms weren't uncommon here. Muddy roads and difficult terrain were a real facet of life. At least, its solution was a lot more mundane; cobbled roads would be somewhat easy to put together and required no skills.

Getting her head out of the clouds, Riza looked over towards Tanniya, finally thinking now, that she had a long, uninterrupted time to think and process this, was a good time to consider her skills.

She has [Perfect Body] and that means a whole 14 skills out of her total of 25 has already been allocated.

That's an insane investment for just one skill but holy fuck, is it worth it; three separate stats in the realm of 10,000 at level 25. Nussy is the one with the next highest stat and that's not even 8000, and just constitution, at that.

At least the regeneration she gives me is absurd.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		684.93 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)

Daven	Raise Dead	27	256/256	136/136	66800/66800	-1.94
Sanders	Raise Dead	27	130/130	114/114	67100/67100	-2.01
Harold	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Nessy	Raise Dead	25	279720/279720	20/20	100/100	-672.82
Jupy	Raise Dead	25	100/100	100/100	14340/14340	-7.06
Ascles	Raise Dead	25	100/100	100/100	47300/47300	-20.208
Tiffany	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Gas Tank	Raise Dead	8	100/100	100/100	678/678	3.98
Tanniya	Raise Dead	25	456554/456554	65262/65262	60/60	12.50
Klannar	Raise Dead	25	100/100	100/100	14340/14340	-7.06

Even to this day, that number boggled the mind. No more scrounging around for every single essence per second—Riza now had far, far more than she knew what to do with.

Not to mention, [Manifold Mastery+] is incredible on Ascles and Jupy.

Nessy alone allowed her to support the likes of Tanniya. A summon that regenerated *no* essence? That was far too costly to previously think about but now? She was barely a blip with how little she consumed comparatively.

And onto the woman herself.

All of her skills at the moment were in primordial strength. Her three boons were [Source of Power], [Source of Constitution], and [Source of Vim]. Going purely from the numbers, she was already double the strength of Adewyn.

But power didn't scale quite so linearly. Once Tanniya had all her skills at level 10, she'd be an order of magnitude stronger.

And, Riza finally learnt how [Metastasizing Strength] worked; it did indeed level up every level thankfully and she had purposefully taken it at level 5 to get the maximum amount out of it.

It activated 5 times for a total of 25 additional stat points. The random nature of them wasn't as bad as she had thought it might be. If she was aiming for 30 in constitution, and it activated and allocated 5 points to constitution, she could just put the points she was already going to put there somewhere else.

Of course, 25 paled in comparison to what [Essential Leech] had personally done for Riza but for the cost of just one skill, it didn't feel that bad. She had even done the numbers as well; Tanniya got neither lucky or unlucky with how often it activated. The skill could be even better.

But it wasn't going to get any more use any time soon. Riza had no plans to level Tanniya up even further; a demon higher level than 25 would serve better to bring someone up from 0 to whatever than to raise an already high level demon just a few more levels higher.

There were two skill branches Riza concerned herself with regarding Tanniya: athletics and brawling. The former seemed naturally synergistic and she had discovered it after seeing [Improved Athletics] in the primordial strength tree.

The later was based on what it seemed Tanniya wanted, which was nothing more than fucking up a demon with her own bare hands.

Athletics

0th Tier

[Sprinter] (1/10)

Increase sprinting speed by 5%

[Jumper] (1/10)

Increase jumping height by 5%

[Lifter] (1/10)

Increase lifting capacity by 5%

[Thrower] (1/10)

Increase throwing speed by 5%

To start, there was nothing impressive or interesting for the first athletics skills. All of them followed the same formula but the one that stood out was [Thrower] not because it was any different but because of brawling skills instead.

Brawling

0th Tier

[Unarmed Fighter] (1/10)

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

[Pressure Point Detection] (1/10)

Gain knowledge of vital points on an entity

[Long-Range Brawler] (1/10)

Thrown objects count as unarmed attacks

Based just on these, it appeared that this skill tree was more about fighting without manufactured weapons or magic than anything else.

[Unarmed Fighter] was probably there to bring fists up to par with weapons in damage dealt.

[Pressure Point Detection] seemed pretty bad, especially if you already had knowledge of weak spots, but it was probably a prerequisite for some skills further down the line.

[Long-Range Brawler] was the most unexpected one but very welcome; giving a range option to a melee fighter was never bad.

These were similar to how the spear skill tree worked, after extracting the information out of Death. It also had skills that amplified hitting weak spots through [Vital Thrust] and ones that explicitly aided ranged attacks through [Returning Spear].

Interestingly, Meren was unaware that [Vital Thrust] even existed! And it was a prerequisite for [Returning Spear] so already, Death was been useful even in death.

[Long-Range Brawler] when combined with [Thrower] looked like they would work very well together and that made Riza think that could be the case for other athletics and brawling skills.

Not to mention, Tanniya clearly already liked throwing heavy things about.

[Unarmed Fighter] for the first one. Simple but inevitably useful.

“What did you do?” Tanniya suddenly asked, wheeling around to face Riza.

“It’s time for your skills. We’re going brawling like you wanted.”

“Fuck yeah. What else is there?”

Brawling

0th Tier

[Unarmed Fighter] (1/10) - Learned

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

[Pressure Point Detection] (1/10)

Gain knowledge of vital points on an entity

[Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

Thrown objects count as unarmed attacks

1st Tier

[Powerful Fists] (1/10)

Power increases unarmed attack damage by an additional 2%

[Swift Fists] (1/10)

Unarmed attacks are 5% faster

[Swift Thrower] (1/10)

Thrown objects travel 10% faster

Requirements: [Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

Tanniya's gaze drifted off elsewhere, presumably also looking at the skill tree. Lefie was looking between the woman, trying to see something that wasn't there and getting frustrated.

"These ones are simple. [Powerful Fists] is good," Riza said.

"What about the throwing ones? They seem fun."

"Don't branch out yet. We want more information before doing so," Riza replied and purchased [Powerful Fists] for Tanniya.

A miniscule convulsion ran through the woman's muscles as energy, essence, and muscle memory suddenly infused them.

"Pretty fucked that you can control my skills like that," She commented, although she didn't sound that annoyed.

"Part of the deal," Riza replied, focusing on the next skills instead.

Brawling

0th Tier

[Unarmed Fighter] (1/10) - Learned

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

[Pressure Point Detection] (1/10)

Gain knowledge of vital points on an entity

[Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

Thrown objects count as unarmed attacks

1st Tier

[Powerful Fists] (1/10) -Learned

Power increases unarmed attack damage by an additional 2%

[Swift Fists] (1/10)

Unarmed attacks are 5% faster

[Swift Thrower] (1/10)

Thrown objects travel 10% faster

Requirements: [Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

2nd Tier

[Concussive Fists] (1/10)

Unarmed attack knockback is increased by 10%

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (5/10)

[Thunderous Blow] (1/10)

Charge an unarmed attack for 1 second to increase damage and knockback by 10%

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (5/10)

[Swift Stance] (1/10)

Decrease your response time and increase your agility by 2%

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Swift Fists] (1/10)

[Power Stance] (1/10)

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (1/10)

Finally, some complexity.

I'm not too sure how knockback would be useful. Perhaps for controlling an opponent's movements? You could force them into stuff or back them off cliffs? That doesn't seem all that useful compared to just punching them.

[Thunderous Blow] looks like [Overcharge] but for punches. Again, not sure how useful the knockback would be, but the damage isn't actually that impressive from the outset. Without [Way of Brawling] or other multipliers, it's just a two times multiplier.

At max level, it's double the damage. You'd need to hit twice in ten seconds to equal the damage of [Thunderous Blow] and any additional attacks already surpass it.

Comparing it to [Overcharge], a single, strong, ranged attack is where it would be used, and because of [Long-Range Brawler], all the skills work together.

In that sense, I guess [Swift Thrower] and [Thrower] are multipliers like [Maximise Mastery] and [Manifold Mastery] are.

The next two appear to be fighting stances. Tanniya's current stamina regeneration is only 2 stam/sec so if she wanted to use them indefinitely, she'd need a five times multiplier. [Meditate] and [Maximise Mastery] would be good enough for that.

But that may not be necessary. With 65,000 points of stamina, that's 6,500 seconds or a bit under 110 minutes of constantly using it.

The positives: fights don't take that long so her full stamina pool would probably last a whole day.

The negatives: it would take 9 hours for her to regenerate her whole pool back. Any protracted amount of time using a stance would leave her regenerating for hours and that's exacerbated if she uses other skills or does anything else that consumes stamina.

At the end of the day, [Meditate] isn't even that bad because she has a high constitution as well. With [Maximise Mastery] and [Meditate], she can raise both her health and stamina regeneration to about ten per second.

How high could she get that if she goes all in on [Meditate]?

[Maximise Mastery+] is 5, and [Manifold Mastery+]--the reason Nussy's regeneration is so insane--is 3. Total of 30 times multiplier with [Meditate] means 60 health and stamina regeneration per second.

Pretty wild but at the cost of 7 total skill points, it just doesn't seem worth it when only 2 are needed for the stances.

[Swift Stance] seems to be pretty clear in that it makes you better at dodging stuff. I suppose it's a more defensive stance, in contrast to [Power Stance] which is just another damage multiplier.

"[Thunderous Blow] is a cool name," Tanniya chimed in with her analysis.

"I don't think it's worth it unless you have a bunch of throwing skills as well. [Power Stance] is the most complementary to what you want to do which is punch stuff really hard."

"Fuck yeah."

The skill was purchased, opening up the next tier.

Brawling

0th Tier

[Unarmed Fighter] (1/10) - Learned

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

[Pressure Point Detection] (1/10)

Gain knowledge of vital points on an entity

[Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

Thrown objects count as unarmed attacks

1st Tier

[Powerful Fists] (1/10) -Learned

Power increases unarmed attack damage by an additional 2%

[Swift Fists] (1/10)

Unarmed attacks are 5% faster

[Swift Thrower] (1/10)

Thrown objects travel 10% faster

Requirements: [Long-range Brawler] (1/10)

2nd Tier

[Concussive Fists] (1/10)

Unarmed attack knockback is increased by 10%

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (5/10)

[Thunderous Blow] (1/10)

Charge an unarmed attack for 1 second to increase damage and knockback by 10%

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (5/10)

[Swift Stance] (1/10)

Decrease your response time and increase your agility by 2%

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Swift Fists] (5/10)

[Power Stance] (1/10) -Learned

Unarmed attacks deal 10% more damage

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Powerful Fists] (5/10)

3rd Tier

[Fists of Flurry] (1/10)

Consecutive unarmed attacks are 1% faster up to a maximum of 10%

Requirements: [Swift Fists] (10/10)

[Mountain Stance] (1/10)

Decrease knockback received by 5%. Increase knockback and damage of unarmed attacks by 5%

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Power Stance] (10/10)

[Defensive Stance] (1/10)

Decrease damage received and dealt by 2%

Cost: 1 stam/sec

Requirements: [Swift Stance] (10/10)

[Unerring Aim] (1/10)

Increase distance, damage, and accuracy of thrown objects by 5%

Requirements: [Long-range Barwler] (10/10)

“Wait. Why does [Defensive Stance] make me worse at punching stuff?” Tanniya said with a hint of worry.

“Because it’s defensive. If you’re low on health, need to block a heavy attack, or waiting for a time to strike, that’s when you’d want to use it. Combine that with [Swift Stance] and your fucking absurd stats and you’re really hard to kill.”

“Can you use two stances at the same time?” Lefie commented excitedly, like she was happy to finally be able to join in the conversation.

“That’s... a good point, actually. I’m not sure. Best to assume not, then. [Swift Stance] would be for things you can dodge while [Defensive Stance] is for things you can’t, like a spear compared to a massive fireball.”

Lefie smiled at the compliment.

“Well, I definitely don’t want that,” Tanniya opined.

“It’s probably unnecessary for you as well. Although, I’m curious with how it stacks with the vim damage reduction. If it doesn’t scale to your current damage reduction and is simply additional, that could raise your reduction to 80% or something crazy. 100% may be possible as well.”

But that’s not that useful because of the minimum damage in place.

“So, I could just, never die?”

“Not quite. But you’re right; it’s not the best one for you. [Fistf of Flurry] and [Mountain Stance] are the two that make the most amount of stance.”

“What does [Fists of Flurry] do?” Lefie asked.

“The more you attack, the faster you attack.”

“Meren has a skill like that. [Flurry of Thrusts]. She says it’s really good.”

Riza nodded, taking that into consideration.

It requires [Swift Fists] though, and Tanniya doesn’t have that.

[Mountain Stance] is another stance so that makes it a bit less appealing assuming stance exclusivity.

“So, is it [Mountain Stance] next?” Tanniya asked.

“Honestly, I don’t think so. It doesn’t do anything you need at the moment.”

“That’s it? We’re done? Three skills?”

“You have eleven to spare so I don’t think so. I think three should be reserved for [Meditate+] and [Maximise Mastery] which leaves five skills leftover.

“If we level up your current skills, the remaining skill points will be for upgrades or hidden skills, so yes, I think we’re done.”

Tanniya didn’t have any disagreements once Riza explained the regeneration maths and so happily purchased the remaining skills.

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Even with a horse and carriage, Rensenfeld was *big*. It was going to take a few days worth of travel time to even reach Edderdorf.

The days were short in winter, and not long after they had left off, it was already getting dark. Their driver didn’t want to travel in darkness, especially not during a rainstorm, so he pulled up beside a large public house within the first village they passed through.

“I’ll lead these two to the stables for the night,” He patted the flank of one of the horses. “I’ll be waiting out here in the morning. Is that alright?”

Riza nodded, and he quickly drove off, finding shelter for his horses for the night.

The village, from what little Riza had seen so far, was fairly small. Although, in comparison to Rensenfeld, every village was small.

Although demons threatened villages, in the grand scale of things, the lives left weren't that significant. The greatest impact was the loss of products the village produced, namely, food.

If she could create a summon that lived autonomously and independently, growing better food at a far swifter rate, she could drive people from villages and into Rensenfeld, where it was safer.

There were numerous positives: the city was easier to defend, it already had a higher standard of living, most industries or cities were already there so the extra population would be a boon, it would be easier to govern with their current methods of communication.

That didn't mean there were no downsides; certainly, people would not like being driven from their homes and putting all her eggs in one basket was far riskier. If, for whatever reason, the demons scrapped their no-attacking-cities policy, what happened in Hotton could happen in Rensenfeld and it'd all be over.

The public house was a fully stone building. One storey tall but with a wide footprint. The windows were ablaze with activity and life on the inside.

Stepping inside, an immediate blast of warm air hit the party. It smelt both sweet and savoury, the musk of cooked meat wafting towards them.

Numerous tables were dotted around the floor, half-filled with people eating and drinking. A lot of them were men, burly men, but plenty were women and even some children too. There was a jovial atmosphere, with many smiles and laughs being heard.

Almost immediately, all eyes were on the party. Tiffany was clad head-to-toe in armour—making her out to be far richer than everyone else in the entire village—and the rest of the group weren't anything to sniff at either; their clothing and bits of pieces of armour were all finely made and relatively clean. A striking contrast from some of the mud-ridden apparel some of the men were dressed in.

Along one side of the wall sat large, metal pots directly under some everlight torches, reminding Riza of her time in Litchendorf.

At the bar, two women were standing there, either cleaning something or helping a customer. One was an older woman, with greying-brown hair and wrinkles on her face. Her movements sagged with age.

The other was a younger woman, probably a few years older than Riza, and she bore a striking resemblance to her co-worker. Likely a mother-daughter pair, Riza assumed. Both of them were wearing leather aprons over dull tunics.

Ignoring the stares, Riza walked up to the pair, where the daughter was currently unoccupied.

“Well, look at you. Those are some fancy clothes ya got there,” The younger woman leaned on the bar, bringing her closer to Riza’s eye level. “What can I get ya?” She smiled.

It was clear with only a glance that every patron within close proximity was listening to their conversation.

“Do you-can we... Are we able to stay here for tonight?” Riza stumbled through her words, a little unsettled by the situation and the woman’s beauty and friendliness.

“Why, sure you can. We have a couple of empty rooms at the moment. There’s only two beds in each and there’s not much space, though, if that’s alright,” She replied, looking over Riza at the rest of her party.

“That’s fine. How much will that be?”

“Twenty coins a person,” She answered, the same smile on her face.

The minute reactions from other patrons and the barkeep pegging them as wealthy made Riza very suspicious she was being overcharged but with the money she currently had on her, she didn’t mind paying the inflated price.

After all, compared to the total wealth of the Lord, this was still just pennies.

The coins dropped from Riza’s hand into the woman’s and she snatched them away quickly, pocketing them behind the bar somewhere.

“Well, thank you. Now, if you want any drinks, I’d be happy to help.”

Tanniya and Lefie had taken seats at the bar by this point, Tanniya looking very inclined to buy a drink. Lefie was half-dead, looking like she could fall asleep at any moment.

Klannar kept back with Tiffany, looking incredible awkward which was his normal state of being, Riza had come to learn.

Relatable.

“What’s the most expensive drink you’ve got?” Tanniya instantly asked, ignoring the unhappy look from Riza, although she definitely saw it.

“Well, well, well, a big spender. Sorry to say, but we ain’t no big pub in Rensenfeld. All of our stuff is home-grown, but that doesn’t mean it ain’t just as good.”

The woman reached under the bar again, digging around before pulling out a large, thick, yellow bottle.

No label, and the liquid sloshing about only filled it half-way. It was viscous and murky and looked entirely unlike sewage water.

“This is our biggest hitter. Couple of years and we typically only sell it to Protectors because they’re the only ones who can afford it. It’d run you fifty coins for a glass.”

“I’ll take a glass.”

A glass slammed down on the bar and the barkeep began pouring.

“And what about you, love? Want a taste as well?” She asked Riza.

“Actually...” She trailed off, looking around. “I was wondering whether you’d heard anything about demons. With the rainstorm and all,” She asked.

“Ah. You work for the Dominion or the Chosen, do you? Well, I can happily say it’s been peaceful ever since the storm started. Not a demon in sight.”

“Not the Dominion, no, but for the new Lord of Rensenfeld, actually,” Riza replied, feeling very stiff and uncomfortable.

“New Lord, you say? News like that doesn’t reach far beyond Rensenfeld’s walls. There could’ve been ten new Lords during my entire life and I wouldn’t be the foggiest.”

She had finished pouring the drink and Tanniya quickly slammed it down her throat.

Lefie slumped sideways, leaning against Riza. Her eyes were half-closed already.

Riza cradled one arm around the girl to steady her.

“Does any news reach here?” She asked the woman.

“Not much, no. Either a merchant or the Chosen come out here and that’s how we find out things but neither have much reason to travel further north. There’s nothing up there.”

Riza carried on talking with the woman for a few more minutes while Tanniya seemed intent on spending all of their coin. Riza even had to put a stop to it, not out of fear of going broke—although, that was partly the reason—but because Tanniya was barely even conscious anymore.

It was Tanniya and the now-sleeping Lefie combined that prompted Riza to decide it was finally time sleep. The woman handed them some keys to the two rooms and off they went, with Tiffany staying with Lefie and Riza while the other two roommates continued on being roommates.

The room was small. Two beds sat on either side with a chest separating them in the middle. A lone everlight torch was all the illumination they had but, thankfully, due to the stone walls, it was comfortably warm in there.

Riza stripped off her and Lefie out of the uncomfortable armour and equipment, putting them in the chest before laying Lefie to rest and tucking her in. She looked adorable, and Riza gently moved her hair out of her face before sitting on her own bed.

Tiffany remained standing in the centre of the room, staring at the door. A quick puff of fog blasted the room, gradually being consumed by Tiffany over the next coming hours.

She didn’t need to sleep but Riza did. The bed was far comfortable than the dirt ones she had grown used to but utterly paled in comparison to the luxurious, silk sheets in the Lord’s manor. Her back groaned from the stiffness of the mattress.

Her mind raced with thoughts over what she had seen, what she had observed. Improvements to be made.

And then, she slept.