

## Chapter 64: Home

“So, I’ve been wandering,” Riza said, taking deliberate steps between gnarled, knotted roots as the group trudged through the forest. “Just how much damage can you do?” She looked at Meren.

“I’ve never worked it out,” The woman replied, walking through the dense undergrowth with substantially more ease.

“But aren’t you curious?”

“It’s always been enough. Well, apart-”

“The humanoid demon,” Riza finished for her. She had heard about Lefie needing to intercept on Meren’s behalf, similar to her own situation.

Meren sighed in silent acknowledgement.

“I got lucky. Stupid of me to think I could’ve taken it on alone.”

“That’s... okay,” Riza said, struggling for words.

“I won’t make the same mistake twice. Next time, I’ll plan something. Make sure someone’s with me. It was a stupid mistake and won’t happen again,” Meren said, more to herself than anyone in particular.

Riza silently nodded along, her mind wondering about the maths.

After a minute of quiet contemplation, she spoke.

“How much power do you have now?”

“Er... 189. Why?”

“Just to get an idea of how much damage you can do. Are there spear skills that just multiply the damage?”

“Yeah, a few. [Piercing Thrust] and [Versatile Weapon] are two that I have.”

“And what do they do?”

“They both double my damage, but [Piercing Thrust] only doubles thrusts.”

Riza nodded, taking it in.

*A good few punches to the head can kill someone. One good punch can do that but we’re talking numbers here. Average power is 5 and power directly*

*translates to damage. Therefore, if Meren punched a regular person with all her strength, they would die instantly.*

*Man. That's insane. And weird.*

*But, anyway. Weapons multiply the damage further. I don't know how much but let's say by 5, just as a number.*

*That's 189 multiplied by 20. 3800 damage. The demons underground had around 45,000 health but these latest ones were a bit stronger so let's said 50,000.*

*50,000 over 4,000 is 12.5 attacks.*

*But wait. I haven't accounted for armour, both physical and numerical. Daven's [Rocky Carapace] completely nullifies attacks. There isn't even a damage minimum unlike natural armour.*

*Let's say, in theory, the demon's armour was like Daven's. Without a spear tip, Meren was dealing 760 damage. Daven survived single attacks so his armour was mitigating at least 640 damage with each attack.*

*Apparently, natural armour conferred by constitution stacks with manufactured armour so how much constitution would a humanoid demon have?*

*For assumptions sake, let's say all their physical stats were equal. Level 27 means... 215 stat points. Let's say 216. Divide that by 4, you get 54. Vim as well.*

*Ball park, let's say the demon was mitigating 1000 points of damage. Meren was dealing 2800 with each hit.*

*18 attacks to kill. 150% of the original number. That's a substantial increase.*

*And then, there's skills to account for as well. Unlike the ones underground, this one was clearly physically specialised. Skills boosting health and armour may have existed.*

*"How much health do you have?"*

*"No longer calculating how much damage I can do?" Meren asked lightly.*

*"I'm past that. I want to know if it was a fair fight."*

*"4914, if you must know."*

*Damn. That little. That's insane compared to the demons. That's incredibly unfair!*

"This is ridiculous. Damage scales way harder than health. Lefie can do, like, 50,000 damage in a second!"

"What? No I can't!" The youthful voice of Lefie called out, closely followed by the rustling of leaves and bushes as she made her way over to them.

"But you took [Way of Metamagic], didn't you?"

"Yeah-"

"You worked out how much damage I could do?" Meren interrupted, drawing looks from both Riza and Lefie. They had stopped stomping through the forest to talk.

"Uh, yeah. Lower bound is 3800 but the armour combination meant it was closer to 2800 when fighting the demon."

"That's... wow. That's a lot."

"It's nothing compared to magic," Riza replied, looking back at Lefie. "Didn't [Way of Metamagic] 'quadruple your damage without costing anything'?" She asked, quoting the teenager.

"Actually, no. It didn't," Lefie said, prompting a confused look on Riza's face.

"I thought it would but it doesn't work like that. You know how with [Maximise Mastery], if you double the damage, it doubles the cost? [Way of Metamagic] makes it cheaper. Like, lightning bolt deals 120 damage for 10 essence but if I increase the damage to 240, it only costs 15 essence," Lefie explained, looking like she was enjoying knowing something Riza didn't.

*It's increased efficiency, huh. Strange. Wait, but-*

Utterly baffled, Riza accessed one part of the system she very rarely looked at.

### **Consolidated Boons**

Hidden Boon

**[Lone Wolf] -Consolidated**

Requirements: Have never been in a party

Effect: Intensity of all skills is multiplied by 2 when not in a party

Hidden Boon

**[Source of Spirit] -Consolidated**

Requirements: Spirit is 2 times greater than any other stat

Effect: Spirit is multiplied by 3

Hidden Boon

**[Way of Life] -Consolidated**

Requirements: Two Life skills (10/10)

Effect: All Life skills are 2 times as effective

She had no way of seeing what boons were available for her at level 35 but could see the ones she had already taken.

And this is where she noticed the difference in wording between [Lone Wolf] and [Way of Life].

*Huh. That actually matters?* The system was strangely inconsistent at times. [Manipulate Air] and [Manipulate Water] had the same naming scheme and worked the same with their various aspects. They were clearly from the same template.

However, [Ichor Manipulation] followed a different naming scheme but the same skill description template.

Then you had [Earth Shape] which was even weirder, not having 'manipulate' in the name even though it was obviously a manipulation skill.

*Whoever designed this system was seriously lacking design documents.*

Riza backtracked to earlier thoughts.

"How did [Way of Metamagic] change the other skills?" She asked Lefie.

"[Seeker Mastery] works like [Maximise Mastery] but [Alteration Mastery] doesn't. It works like [Maximise Mastery] before the boon if I increase the

intensity to more than what it normally is. [Range Compression] works like I expected. Just doubled the bonus.”

*That’s- huh. All interesting.*

*Seeker and [Maximise Mastery] both became more efficient. [Range Compression] did as well. [Alteration Mastery] is the odd one out.*

“And [Double Cast]?”

“The additional one costs only half as much, now.”

### **[Double Cast] (1/10)**

Activate a discrete skill 3 times simultaneously

Cost: 190% of original skill

*Again, different. Summarising the differences, [Lone Wolf] increases the maximum while [Way of Metamagic] increases the efficiency.*

*Odd. Very odd.*

*I have a way skill, don’t I? Do any life skills experience that same thing?*

## **Life**

### **0th Tier**

#### **[Heal+] -Learned**

Restore 380 health, 4 stamina, 4 essence to a living entity

Cost: 10 es/sec

#### **[Leech] (10/10)+ -Learned**

Drain 220 points of health from a living entity

80m range

Cost: 10 es/sec

#### **[Cleanse] (Passive) -Learned**

You have immunity towards any toxin, disease, or contamination

### 1st Tier

#### **[Sapping Curse] (1/10)**

Prevent a living entity from recovering health for 4 hours

Casting Time: 1 sec

Cost: 5 es

#### **[Animate Critter] (passive) -Learned**

40% chance after killing an entity for the entity to be raised as a level 0 zombie

#### **[Life Sense] (1/10)**

Scan for either a general or specific form of life

4m radius

Casting Time: 1 m/sec

Cost: 1 es

#### **[Last Words] (1/10)**

Extract thoughts from an entity that died within 4 hours

Casting Time: 1 min

Cost: 5 es

Hidden Skill

Requirements: [Heal] (10/10)

#### **[Rejuvenate] (1/10)**

Restore 200 points of health and regenerate any wounds to a living entity

Cost: 15 es

## 2nd Tier

### **[Reanimate] (10/10) -Learned**

Raise a corpse into a level 36 zombie

Casting Time: 1 min

Cost: 28 es/sec

Requirements: [Animate Critter] (5/10)

### **[Inanimate Life] (1/10)**

Bestow the gift of simple life to an inanimate object

Cost: 100 es

### **[Remnant Memories] (10/10)+ -Learned**

Summoned entities are created with a 200% higher level

Cost: 30 es

Hidden skill

[Leech](10/10)

Animation skill (1/10)

### **[Parasite] (10/10)+ -Learned**

Implant up to 20 parasites in summoned entities. When your health drops to 0, automatically drain all the health from a summoned entity regardless of distance

Cost: 2102 es per implanted [Parasite]

## 3rd Tier

### **[Resuscitate] (1/10)**

Bring an entity that has died within the past 4 minutes back to life

Casting Time: 1 minute

Cost: 1000 es

Requirements: [Rejuvenate] (10/10), Animation skill (10/10)

### **[Amalgam] (1/10)**

Combine 5 summoned entities into one entity

Casting Time: 5 min

Cost: 500 es/entity

Requirements: [Heal] (1/10)

### **[Senescence] (1/10)**

Alter the age of something by 4 minutes per second

Cost: 50 es/sec

Requirements: [Rejuvenate] (1/10)

### **[Raise Dead] (10/10)+ -Learned**

Raise a corpse into an undead version of itself beginning at level 20

Casting Time: 5 min

Cost: 1 es/sec per 2 levels

Requirements: [Reanimate] (5/10)

### **Hidden Skill**

Animation skill (5/10)

### **[Essence Monarch] (7/10) -Learned**

Gain 28% of each summoned entity's essence regeneration

## **4th Tier**

### **[Resurrection] (1/10)**



Bring an entity that has died within the past 4 day back to life

Casting Time: 1 hour

Cost: 10000 es

Requirements: [Resuscitate] (10/10)

### **[Chimerical Spawn] (1/10)**

Bestow the gift of complex life to an inanimate object

Casting Time: 10 min

Cost: 1000 es

Requirements: [Inanimate Life] (10/10)

### **[False Life] (1/10)**

Raise a corpse into an undead version of itself beginning at level

Casting Time: 1 hour

Cost: 1 es/sec/level

Requirements: [Raise Dead] (10/10)

Hidden Skill

[Leech] (10/10)

### **[Essential Leech] (8/10) -Learned**

Choose a living entity. Upon death, drain 3.2 stat points from its highest stat if possible

Casting Time: 5 secs

Cost: 22500 es

**5th Tier**

*Damn. Basically all of them are affected the same way by either [Lone Wolf] or [Way of Life]. With [Alteration Mastery], doubling the effect or halving the cost is basically the same thing.*

*Do any skills not experience that?*

Riza quickly scanned down the list, finding only one skill that she owned.

*[Raise Dead]. [Lone Wolf] multiplied the cap which I already know is bullshit and did nothing but [Way of Life] actually halved the cost.*

*This is confusing.*

“What did [Party Animal] do again?” Riza asked Lefie, scrounging for more data.

“Doubled the effect of skills that affect party members, I think?” She scrunched up her face.

*Sounds like it might've had the same effect as [Lone Wolf], then. Is it an idiosyncrasy to way skills?*

*Ugh. Why couldn't the system just make sense.*

\*

Travelling through the forest was significantly slower than through open plains but Riza relished the discretion. She wasn't on a time limit so taking it nice and slow, and out of the way, was the plan as far as she was concerned.

There was nary a demon to be found, and animals and monsters were relatively rare when they first entered the woods but after the first couple of days, the fauna exploded around them. They could barely find any space where there weren't obvious signs of animals nearby.

Lefie's magic was a bit too big and loud so the task of keeping everything away from the group and the various, temporary camps they set up was delegated to Meren, Daven, and Sanders.

For the most part, it was unnecessary; the animals kept well enough away that they had to largely do nothing. However, a few isolated, energetic ones tried their luck. It was rare, no more than a handful over the course of a few days, but enough that Daven and Sanders managed to level up from it, now level 18.

With each night, they set up camp in the exact same way, the fire and earthen dome providing no problems and insulating them from the cold.

After a few days, the chill creeping in, the first dredges of snowfall appeared. It was sprinkling down lightly when Riza woke up, coating everything as far as she could see in a thin layer of frost. Not heavy, and probably only just begun.

The trees were clearly evergreens, retaining their leaves even during winter.

Everyone else woke up and joined Riza outside not too long after and, to her surprise, none of them showed delight at their surroundings—not even Lefie.

It didn't take much conversation to discover why. Winter was a harsh, deadly month. Left outside, you'd freeze to death. Left inside but without firewood, you'd freeze to death. No farming could be done, and many animals were in hibernation. Food was scarce and if there was a problem in the months prior, you might not have enough to survive the coming months.

A winter wonderland was but a dream in Riza's culture, memories of a time long past. She had seen snow in images, movies, but never in real life.

Travel was even slower as the snow continued to fall. As it covered the ground, each step took more and more energy. The biting chill of winter seeped into their bones, through their clothes, sucking their energy from them.

Whatever positive disposition Riza used to have for winter was quickly diminishing. There was nothing pleasant about this.

Even Meren wasn't doing too well. Constitution or vim, in addition to mitigating damage, seemed to help insulate against uninhabitable temperatures as well but it wasn't fool proof. A slightly colder air was fine for Meren but seemingly overnight, the temperature fell to sub-zero.

Lefie was doing the worst of everyone, the poor girl.

Shivering, she could barely respond to any words, inaudible mutterings leaving her mouth. Even [Heal] wasn't having much of an effect.

It got so bad, Daven quickly made a small hut and Riza a small fire and sealed both Riza and Lefie inside. No air holes meant it was up to Riza and [Intrinsic Tank] to keep the air breathable.

Riza had ran some experiments since getting [Intrinsic Tank]. Although she lacked the modern chemistry equipment to identify different elements, she managed to make do.

Normal air was around 20% oxygen, 80% nitrogen, and around 1-2% other gases. Nitrogen wasn't flammable while fire needed oxygen to burn. Therefore, testing if oxygen was present was very easy.

Riza would sit in a stone box and use [Intrinsic Tank] to isolate elements while there was a fire in that room. She'd focus on oxygen first, absorbing it, and the fire quickly went out, confirming the absence of oxygen.

A bit more testing meant she now knew how to use [Intrinsic Tank] expel air in the 20:80 ratio for oxygen and nitrogen, allowing her to fill a room with breathable air.

She would also have to absorb all the waste gases like carbon dioxide as well but that was easy enough.

So, what this all meant was that Riza was now in an air-tight room, insulated as best they could, with a fire and was now partly focusing on making sure it was breathable. She hugged Lefie close as the teen was beginning to warm up.

"How are you feeling?"

"Cold," Lefie finally managed to speak, voice weak and quiet.

"Yeah, it's freezing." A failed [Conjure Water] earlier confirmed that fact. The water froze before Lefie could do anything. Sitting near the fire, Riza wrapped herself around the smaller girl, Lefie sitting on her lap.

The fire grew erratically, reacting to the influx of oxygen. Its presence set a time limit on their conversation, the ravenous flame eating up the oxygen.

"Do we need to stop for a while?" Riza asked, injecting as much concern into her voice as she could.

"N-no," Lefie answered faintly.

"Are you certain?"

"No," the teen relented.

That was enough for Riza. Truthfully, she didn't want to be out walking either.

She [Message]d the other members of the group, informing them of her decision to rest, waiting for the weather to clear up somewhat. No one complained.

For the remainder of the day, after Daven had expanded the hut, everyone stayed huddled around the fire that Riza kept supplying oxygen to

[Intrinsic Tank] was somewhat of an esoteric skill; it lacked many details. How much air did she already have stored? What ratios? A bunch of useful information was lacking.

So, Riza delved into the system once more. Incorporating automated system was difficulty, and she hadn't yet tried to build them from scratch, yet. Her entity manager referenced her essence regeneration as that was already pre-built.

Her critter manager, however, required all data to be inputted manually, not referencing any other elements.

Riza's new interface for [Intrinsic Tank] would work like that, just doing calculations for data she manually inputted.

It took a bit of time to get working, as they always did, but she was happy with how it turned out.

Intrinsic Tank		Excess Capacity	166.40 m <sup>3</sup>	
Gas	Ratio	Density (kg/m <sup>3</sup> )	Volume (m <sup>3</sup> )	Mass (kg)
Nitrogen	0.78	1.25	400.00	500.00
Oxygen	0.20	1.43	96.00	137.28
Carbon Dioxide	0.02	1.96	9.60	18.82

She had to name the gases manually but their volumes were taken directly from the [Intrinsic Tank] skill. There was a problem that every time she used the skill, the latest entry would be undefined and if it belonged to a gas already in the table, Riza had to manually merge the data together.

The ratio was a simple calculation based on total volume already absorbed and the excess capacity subtracted the stored volume from a fixed number, the fixed number being a maximised [Intrinsic Tank] compressed to a radius of 1 metre.

Once the gas was inside her [Intrinsic Tank], Riza innately knew it's mass. She had to input that manually but the density calculation would be done automatically.

Strange that the skill worked on volume but not mass, however. All the gases involved were at atmospheric pressure but if she altered the pressure or temperature, she could alter the density and, essentially, have more gas within a finite space, increasing the efficiency of [Intrinsic Tank]

#### **[Intrinsic Tank] (10/10)+ - Learned**

Store and release up to 672m<sup>3</sup> of air inside you

1m radius

Cost: 350 es

Requirements: [Manipulate Air] (1/10)

An interesting quirk of the skill was that to store up to the maximum, she needed to spend 350 essence but to withdraw a smaller amount didn't cost 350 essence.

With this newly-made interface, Riza kept an eye on everything she needed to, occasionally requiring Daven to let her outside to refill.

The smoke was interesting. A wood fire naturally produced smoke and, normally, inadequate ventilation led to smoke inhalation and its associated effects, often leading to injury or death.

Riza volunteered as the test subject to observe how both [Cleanse] and [Heal] would interact with smoke. Daven isolated her and the fire while Riza ran the test.

Smoke was a mixture of gas and particulates. [Intrinsic Tank] could handle one but not the other but, for a control, Riza opted to not do anything just yet.

Breathing normally, it didn't take long for the smoke to become an annoyance. The moment it entered her throat, she didn't even start coughing.

No effects, not even once it was in her body. Riza concluded [Cleanse] must've considered it a toxic substance and so, ensured it had no effect.

She decided to periodically open up the hut and shoo the smoke out as even if it had no effect on the body, its presence took up space, decreasing the proportion of nitrogen and oxygen one would be breathing.

Time progressed and, eventually, night fell. Thankfully, the snowfall had stopped, although the air was still cold. Ventilation holes were poked into the building, a necessity as even Riza had to sleep.

The group huddled together on the floor, conserving body heat, as the unfazed, undead critters kept watch on the fire.

For the next few days, snow was periodic, the temperature still harsh. It massively hindered their progress but, unlike before, they would rest only temporarily, warming up, before moving on as much as they could.

Finally, after about a week of straight snowfall, the first morning of green occurred. When Riza exited the hut, she could see the leaves on the trees, the slushy, brown mud beneath her feet, and an ever so slight warmth of the sun on her face.

It was amazing.

Progress rapidly improved from there. They returned to the days of mostly walking, trekking through the forest and, eventually, they reached the end of the trees.

Keeping the mountain range to their right, of which the forest sat at the base of, they had been heading east all the time. Well out of range of their map now, Riza was relying on haphazard memories of where people said they were ages ago.

The mountains continued on, even as the treeline ended. If she was remembering correctly, they curved south, meeting up with the caldera. If they continued east, rather than southeast, they'd end up in the village where everything began.

The terrain was hilly, many large rocks and boulders dotting the uneven landscape. No snow, slush, or long grass to hinder their movement. Instead, it was elevation.

Lefie groaned at the sight, and didn't hide her multitude of complaints, although she soldiered on like a champion.

Riza's many critters kept an eye out, her mini army having grown in size through their journey. It was so nice to finally be able to use [Essential Leech] again, out of sight of any pesky Dominion.

And her growth was shocking. Forest were rife with animals and with an army over a hundred strong, constantly searching for prey to bring back for her, she was never without a morsel to use the skill on.

At a cost of little under 7000, she gained 1 stat point. To regenerate that, it took her around 15 minutes so she could use it 4 times an hour. When every day was walking for 16 hours, constantly in new territory, it added up.

The snow made it difficult. Preoccupied, and everything hiding away whenever they could anyway, she hadn't used the skill but for a rare few times anyway. The vast majority of her growth was for the first couple days when they entered the forest, before the snowstorm.

<b>Name</b>	Riza
<b>Level</b>	29
<b>Health</b>	2010/2010
<b>Stamina</b>	4668/4744
<b>Essence</b>	14900/14900
<b>Skills</b>	
<b>Power</b>	5(100)
<b>Constitution</b>	5(119)
<b>Endurance</b>	5(237)
<b>Vim</b>	6(194)
<b>Essence</b>	5(745)
<b>Spirit</b>	108(3615)
<b>Regeneration</b>	
<b>Health Regeneration</b>	50198/day
<b>Stamina Regeneration</b>	81601/day
<b>Essence Regeneration</b>	9/second



*Holy shit. My base endurance basically matches my spirit. That's... that's just fucking absurd. Why does this skill exist? Sure, it's not as useful without a lot of essence regeneration but I'm operating at about a third of my potential and I can still get this.*

*At level 15, the boys were regenerating 11 essence per second, basically double what I am now. That would work out to the same growth I experienced at level fucking 15!*

*My vim has basically experienced 29 levels of dedicated stat points to it! Combine everything else, my stats are equivalent to level 50, 60, or maybe even higher.*

Overhead, dozens of birds of various breeds were flying around. An avian army. They were the most instrumental to her cause, spotting and carrying prey to be consumed.

And that wasn't the only way she grew stronger. The increase in critter size contributed not only to her regeneration, as minor as each one may be, but to the levelling of [Essence Monarch] as well. It had finally reached level ten.

Entity Manager				Excess Essence	9.55 es/sec	
Entity Name	Skill	Level	Health	Stamina	Essence	Cost (es/sec)
Daven	Raise Dead	18	120/120	120/120	10650/10650	4.12
Sanders	Raise Dead	18	100/100	100/100	10740/10740	4.08

Critter Manager		
Number of Critters	Number of Parasites	Total Regen (es/sec)
371	28	0.17

She hadn't replaced all of the parasites she had lost, instead focusing on [Essential Leech] and damn, was she glad that she did.

*That's a lot of health regeneration, isn't it? [Meditate] increases all regeneration so it affects that too. How much is that per minute?*

<b>Health Regeneration</b>	34/minute
<b>Stamina Regeneration</b>	56/minute
<b>Essence Regeneration</b>	9/second

*Wow. 0.5 per second, then. I need to see [Essence Transformer] again.*

#### **[Essence Transformer] (10/10)+ -Learned**

Convert health into essence

Conversion rate: 20hp/sec

Efficiency: 10%

#### **[Essence Transformer] has reached level 10.**

You can choose to spend a skill point to upgrade the skill or turn the skill into a passive.

#### **[Essence Transformer]+**

Convert health into essence

Conversion rate: 20hp/sec

Efficiency: 50%

#### **[Essence Transformer] (passive)**

50% of natural health regeneration is converted into essence regeneration

Efficiency: 20%

*I don't care for health regeneration. Let's say I take [Well of Constitution] to raise my health regen to 2.5 per second. 10% of that is 0.25 essence a second passively. Not bad at all. Bit annoying that I have to multiply the*

*efficiency. What does [Essence Transformer] (passive) look like without the [Lone Wolf] bonus?*

**[Essence Transformer] has reached level 10.**

You can choose to spend a skill point to upgrade the skill or turn the skill into a passive.

**[Essence Transformer]+**

Convert health into essence

Conversion rate: 10hp/sec

Efficiency: 50%

**[Essence Transformer] (passive)**

25% of natural health regeneration is converted into essence regeneration

Efficiency: 20%

*Ah! It affected proportion of health regeneration, not efficiency. I guess [Way of Blood] would increase the efficiency instead. I wonder if it can go above 100%?*

*The important thing is, [Essence Transformer] (passive) is finally viable. That's something to keep in mind.*

It was like Riza was floating on air for the whole day—even her companions could tell she was very happy about something.

Unfortunately, the hilly landscape was rather devoid of life compared to the forest but not even that could drown her spirits!

The group continued to walk over the scraggly rock, small streams and even what those that formed large rivers, Daven raising a temporary bridge to allow them to cross.

At night times, rather than constructing a conspicuous hut that could probably be seen from miles away, they elected to have Daven dig out a hole in the ground instead. This turned out to be a bit easier than what they had been doing previously, Meren making sure to comment that Daven was a bit of a stone stair specialist by now.

Even with the irregular landscape, walking was a lot faster compared to the forest, taking only a couple of days before the landscape before them started feeling familiar to Riza.

*We're nearly there.*

She began to faintly recognise the meandering river, pastures and fields, and the gentle elevation.

And there, off in the distance, was the wall of the caldera. The land climbed up steeply, joining the mountainous perimeter.

To the east, the group could see the village where Riza and Lefie first met. It was too far away to make out details but it was still standing so that counted for something.

The last stretch of the journey was accomplished hastily and with discretion. Not stopping around, taking minimal rests when needed. As they climbed, Riza knew they'd be visible from a decent distance.

But, at least, climbing past the lip of the caldera, the ground began to descend once more as the titanic, large trees filled their vision.

Leafless and barren, it was a sad sight contrasting Riza's memories of their gorgeous orange, autumnal colours.

Her mind lit up in recognition and recollection. She eagerly pushed the group forward as she followed her feelings, intuitively knowing exactly where she was. As soon as she saw the place, everything came back to her in a flood of memories.

They travelled swiftly, Riza practically running at points, as she quickly found the stream she had once followed so long ago. Orders were given to her flying critters, giving directions on how to get back to the black stone village half-buried in the dirt.

And then, in the midst of one [Message], she felt the line go dead. It was the same sensation when targeting something that did not exist.

A critter had been killed.

But this was not a worrying moment. Riza recalled an abundance of flying demons resided here.

A journey that took days in the past was mere hours now. Lefie was exhausted and had to be carried by Meren but even Daven and Sanders were feeling the burn.

Eventually, enough complaints got to Riza, overwhelming her intensity. She agreed to rest up for the night. Daven got to work constructing a hut again, this time above ground lest the massive root systems of the trees would interfere.

Lefie was enthralled by her surroundings, constantly asking questions of Riza. She knew this was where Riza first awoke, and couldn't get enough of hearing about how she survived all on her lonesome. Wide-eyed and in awe, the teen absorbed the stories like a sponge.

Even Meren was impressed, listening in and not trying to hide it.

When the sun had set, and everyone had gone inside, Riza sat on top of the hut, staring into the night sky. Her mind was on overdrive. She couldn't sleep.

Innumerable thoughts rattled about her head. Her heart felt like it might explode in excitement.

She was back.

\*

Bark-like tendrils unwrapped from around the sinewy arms, the cavernous interior of the tree opening up like it was breathing, releasing the form held inside.

A tall, slender woman, withdrawing her arms from the inner reaches of the tree, stepped out of the trunk, gently resting her hand on it as the hole she had just left gradually closed up, bark bending outwards like a cave-in in reverse.

A few seconds, and the tree was whole once more.

A long, ornate dress made from colourful leaves impossibly stitched together hung regally on her form. Accents of bark, petals from the most wonderful of flowers, accessorised her look.

A young man wearing simple, hand-made clothes stood before her, out in the recesses of the wood. Trees hovered clothes by, granting a sensation of privacy, as long as you were not bothered by what the trees could hear.

"Have you discovered what they want?" The man asked respectfully.

“They were just passing through.”

The man heaved a sigh of relief, nodding his head.

“I-I’ll inform the rest,” And, with that, he ran off.

The woman turned around, placing her hand comfortingly on the tree.

“It seems as if they are getting sloppy.”