

## Chapter 79: Potential

Their target was set; a pair of humanoid demons guarded by a greater demon. Beast demons filled the halls but they were barely a threat at this point.

Camped out in a tunnel just beyond the walls of the corridor, it was time to concoct a plan.

Daven and Nussy would stay hidden here while Riza and Meren would actually engage the demons.

Riza's capabilities were rather limited at the moment but she had enough physical stats to still put up a fight. She would handle the greater demon and, once done with that, join Meren in fighting the two humanoid demons.

That was a lot of responsibility to lump on the woman's shoulders but after what Riza had observed during the entire excursion here, Meren could handle it.

An emergency word was developed so Daven and Nussy knew when to come charging in and save them.

For now, that was everything. *Deep breaths.* Without Lefie, and without her skills, this was likely going to be a lot harder than before.

The metal panel fell to the floor with a thunderous crash as Meren ripped through it without incredible ease. All attention was on the pair of them as they hopped down into the corridor, Daven swiftly sealing up the tunnel behind them.

Beast demons charged without a care, lambs to the slaughter. Meren's attacks were precise and deadly, singular thrusts straight to the cranium. They didn't stand a chance.

The humanoids were already reacting. Riza's sense flickered, an overwhelming chill coursing down her body as her spine *pulled* her backwards. The air whipped past her as a shard of ice exploded in the wall just behind her, narrowly dodged.

*Just like before.*

A shattering of ice could be heard further ahead as Meren sliced an icy projectile in two before it could reach her.

One, two, three more in the next second launched at them, an icicle barrage. The mage had come out to play.

A roar echoed downwards as a tall but slender greater demon rounded the corner. Its body was light and narrow, its four legs powerful and equine. Its head sat on a long, prehensile neck, a toothy grin on its face as it charged.

Riza rushed past Meren, drawing her knife. [Intrinsic Tank] activated, vacuuming up all the fog in their surroundings, denying their enemies its stat-enhancing benefit.

The demon sunk low to the ground, its feet sliding across the slick, metal surface almost in slow motion. Its jaw reached out, wide open, as it snapped at Riza's.

She winced, bracing for impact.

The teeth crunched down on her arm, digging into flesh and splintering her bone. It's bite was immense, the force like a hydraulic press.

Riza muffled a scream as, almost immediately, she was lifted off the ground, the neck straightening out as Riza was dragged along with its head. Her muscles were tearing, the tendons hanging on for dear life.

Revitalising energy flooded through as she activated [Heal]. The pain reappeared instantly but she pushed through, throwing her body through the air as she wrapped her legs around its neck.

A shockwave blasted through her, the demon crashing into the back wall of a T-shaped intersection, unused to fighting in such tight constraints.

Another [Heal]. She was activating them periodically, blasting away the pain as her other hand held the dagger in a deathly grip.

Gaining her senses, pushing past the pain just enough, Riza stabbed into the head of the demon with her weapon, feeling the flesh give away like a balloon.

Blood sputtered out, covering her face, as she withdrew and stabbed again. The skull crunched under the impact, the bones breaking in two as her enhanced power slammed the dagger into its head.

The greater demon's legs buckled, slipping and sliding on the ground as full-body spasms enveloped it.

Another stab, carving in a section of the head and cutting Riza's hand with innumerable chips of bone. The demon collapsed to the ground, Riza with it.

The barrage was fast, almost as fast as Lefie's lightning bolts.

Meren grinned as her spear sped up, puncturing one icicle and then slashing through the next. Her whole body moved in tandem with her spear, finally reaching a speed where she let her thoughts give way to her weapon, her body running through the motions as it cleaved each projectile out of the air with perfect accuracy.

Her skills were made for this.

But the demon wasn't alone. The barrage slowed her advance, keeping her a stationary target.

A pause in the attack had Meren bracing for the next. She struggled to react as a giant, rocky maul flew through the air, slamming into the ground where she was just a moment earlier.

The metal floor crinkled and broke, a shockwave riding outwards. Screws and nuts were pulled from their tightly-fitted holes, the plates ripping apart, and Meren was thrown off her feet.

Mauls, maces, clubs. Bludgeoning weapons relying on their weight and the strength of their wielder shared only two skill trees. This was the two-handed one, which emphasised its destructive might.

She couldn't let a single attack land.

Pain flashed across her vision as an ice shard grazed Meren's skin, mostly deflected by her armour but still drawing blood. The icy feeling suffused her body, her skin tingling from its energy.

She scrambled to her feet, watching out of the corner of her eye as the massive maul flew towards her once more.

Time seemed to slow as her mind gathered itself, sorting through the various sensations it was feeling.

The air was chill and frigid, like moving through molasses. The ground was slippery with frost, cooling the metal down to a frightening degree.

And then, the watery sharpness to the shards themselves. The essence of what it was clouded Meren's brain, drowning out all other thoughts as she focused on that ghost of a sensation.

It all seemed clear to her. Time caught up in a flash, Meren's muscles running through the motions. She kicked her feet, sliding backwards as the maul slammed into the ground once more.

Before the demon could react, she got to her feet and lunged for it.

Icicles slammed into her chest but she barely felt them in the moment, languishing in their feeling.

One breath. Her hair stood up all over. Her muscles strained with cold. A full-body shiver enveloped her. A flash of ice.

And then it was done. Her spear, in her hand, was coated in a thin layer of frost. Energy drained from her body as she thrust, the half-rock, half-ice spear tip piercing the rocky body armour of the demon, the frost spreading outwards and covering its entire torso.

*I did it*, Meren thought, although the battle was far from over.

As the demon got its bearings, its movements were slow and clunky. Meren easily sidestepped its next attack, peppering thrusts between the joints before it could react.

And then the mage decided to up its game. Right as Meren pulled back, an ice ball the size of Lefie came flying through the air, hidden until now by the demon in front of her.

It slammed into the pair of them, exploding in a shower of shards and knocking Meren to the ground.

Each shard pierced her body, the floor, the walls, expanding outwards into a massive, arrow-like projectile.

An incredible cold filled her as her health dropped to a quarter.

Desperately, she reached for them, ripping them out of her body one-by-one.

Thankfully, the demon she was fighting was caught in the blast as well, struggling to get to its feet as the shards made it look like a porcupine.

Meren faltered, her legs almost buckling as she staggered up but then, the cold was washed off in an instant, a soothing warmth suffusing her limbs, infusing her muscles with strength and energy. Her health shot back up quickly as Riza appeared by her side.

She was bleeding profusely but looked otherwise uninjured.

“Can you deal with this one?” She pointed towards the maul-wielder.

“I should be able to.”

“I’ll keep the mage off you.”

And just like that, she was gone again, hurrying past the demon right in front of them.

Meren readied her weapon. Shards were still stuck out of its back and its entire body was covered in a thin layer of frost. *I can do this.*

Readying her spear, Meren began her assault.

All that frost and damage had seriously slowed her opponent. Before it could even react, she was already thrusting with her spear, piercing its white flesh in the gaps between its armour.

[Flurry of Thrusts] sped up her attacks to a mesmerising speed, all the while the ice-tipped spear poked the demon’s skin, unleashing a rapidly-crystallizing film of ice on its body and slowing its movements to a lumbering crawl.

A deadly combination. It stood no chance, Meren’s final attack thrust at its neck, cutting straight through and separating the spine in two. Blood didn’t even spurt outwards, flash-frozen against its skin as it collapsed into a heap on the ground.

Up ahead, Riza was dealing—barely—with the mage. She kept its attention but what was all, feet slipping on the ground and flying shards of ice peppering her body.

Once it saw that its companion was down, that ignited something in the lone demon.

Stamping its foot down, a carpet of ice rushed out over the floor towards Meren, coating the ground instantly. Another stamp, and shards littered the ground.

A hefty shard span around in the air for a second, gathering mass as it floated by the demon’s side, before launching itself at Riza. It caught her on the chin, knocking her backwards as the demon finished its preparations.

A sudden sheen of ice covered it as armour wrapped around its torso and limbs. Reaching into the frost-ridden floor, the demon grasped... something, and pulled out an impossibly long longsword, as if conjured from the air itself.

Once moment, it was there, the next, it accelerated along the carpet of ice right for Meren, cutting a diagonal slash with its blade.

The lingering effects of [Flurry of Thrusts] were still there, thankfully, as Meren narrowly pulled up her spear in time, the rocky shaft meeting the icy blade.

Meren knocked the attack out the way just in time. She could feel her weapon growing heavier upon contact.

Meren recovered quicker than the demon, pulling back her weapon and thrusting it again.

The ice coating travelled further down the shaft as it struck the armour, the force knocking the demon back. It slid a few strides away but Meren pounced upon it, maintaining distance as [Extended Thrust] kept her out of its reach.

Another stab, and Meren finally noticed it; the ice infusion sapped away from the demon's armour.

Her blows sped up once more, the ice enhancement translation only to speed and not overall swiftness for the demon, apparently. It couldn't even respond as Meren attacked it with lightning thrusts, one after the other.

Sure enough, she chipped away at the armour with ease, finally drawing blood. The demon wheeled back, a gurgling cry of pain.

It barely lasted a few more seconds, lacking the health of its compatriot. It joined him in a pile on the floor.

At last, the battle was over.

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As soon as Riza confirmed Nussy's level cap had been increased past 25, they got out of there as fast as they could.

The entire bunker was still awash with demons so there was still a bit fighting involved whenever they had to cut across a corridor because Daven couldn't dig around it but, eventually, they returned to where they had stashed Jupy and Ascles, after some time trying to find them, and confirmed that the pair of them had increased level caps as well.

Finally, they had gotten what they had come for. But did they have to leave right now?

The battle against the humanoid demons was tough, and they certainly needed a breather. No way was Riza going to have Meren take on even more, regardless of how fast levelling up would then become.

But beast and greater demons? There were still plenty of them around and they were easy pickings.

As much as the cautious part of Riza's brain urged her to go, they had gotten what they came here for, she didn't. The greed won out.

Nessy was stashed with her comrades which Daven sealed back up.

The demons weren't mindless. They always acted with a plan. Last time Riza was here, they had began to run away from her instead of fighting. Conserving her strength, she guessed. That wasn't happening now, and how knew when it would last.

So, they charged back into the fray, Daven as well, although Meren did the majority of the killing.

They slaughtered demons by the tens, and the occasional greater demon as well. It was like they *were* mindless, running to their inevitable deaths. Riza didn't understand it.

But she wasn't complaining. Levelling was *fast* like this. Whenever they cleared out a tunnel, they searched some more. Riza made sure they stayed clear of humanoid demons and, just like that, there was minimal risk. Daven could always create an escape route, if necessary, as well.

There was no way they were going to level everyone up to their cap, not with experience split four ways; it'd take easily over a thousand beast demons and likely even more than that.

What won out in the end was a combination of mental exhaustion as well as a growing feeling that *something* wasn't right. Demons shouldn't behave like this and the more Riza observed, the more she began to agree with the feeling.

It was like it was a trap, luring her in with the prospect of easy levels.

She had had enough, and both Meren and Sanders were happy to leave as soon as they could.

Dashing back to the entrance, they thankfully encountered no additional demons waiting for them, no ambushes they were wandered into. Nessy,

Jupy, and Ascles were still there, waiting patiently. They reported that nothing was amiss.

Collecting them, they hurried back to the giant tunnel the demon worm had made, following along it until they found the rough area of their incision tunnel. It took a fair bit of digging to rediscover it but, once they did, they left the bunker for good.

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“Wow. She really did fight him.”

“Looks like he was holding back as well. The mountain’s still standing.”

Just beyond the cusp of the hill sat the partially destroyed forest. A third of it burned to ash. The fires had long since gone out but vegetation hadn’t yet returned to the ruined land, leaving a stark contrast.

The crater and crack climbing up the mountain were the only indications that it was more than a spontaneous forest fire.

“What’s the observable distance?”

“All of the forest is covered, for one. For safety, you always imagine at least a five hundred stride buffer.” Andreyra replied, crouching down as she lined up her fingers with the view in front of her, mentally calculating the distance.

“We’re about as close as we can get, then. They’re still watching after a whole month?”

“That depends on how important they consider the location to be. Minor places are watched manually but at a high level, they can automate the process. I’d imagine that’s the case here.”

“Shit. And they’re still here.”

“We haven’t seen anyone yet so it stands to reason they’ve managed to avoid detection. Somehow.” Andreyra got back to her feet. Even just that little bit of exercise tired her sore muscles out. Days upon days of walking would do that to you.

Adewyn was fine, because of course she was. Carrying a massive backpack with enough space for both of them, not to mention her armour and greatsword, she was a bastion of strength as they travelled, and incredibly beautiful.



For as shitty a situation they were in, at least they were together.

“Time to tell them we’re here?”

“Yes. Er... who was it, again?” Andreya asked, a slight blush to her cheeks, embarrassed to have already forgotten.

“The tarny girl. Young, had water skills. Her name’s Lefie.” Adewyn filled in the gaps.

“Yes. I remember her. Give me a moment,” Andreya said, placing her hand on her wife’s shoulder as her mind ran through the necessary incantations for a silent, subtle [Message].

*“Hello, Lefie. This is Andreya and Adewyn. We have arrived in the vicinity of the location you gave but dare not to press further for the land is likely under the watch of a diviner. Where is a safe location for us to meet up?”*

The words in her head clicked together like puzzle pieces, a flash of essence disappearing with each one.

The seconds passed in silence, the pair of them eagerly awaiting a response. Tension suffused Andreya, self-doubt surfacing in her mind.

*“His! Hello. Er... if the forest isn’t safe, it may take a bit of time to get to you. Can you get to the mountain further west? That would be a good start!”* An excitable voice suddenly resounded in Andreya’s head, the same joyful, youthful tone as before.

Andreya had a strained look on her face before relaying the information to Adewyn.

“It appears that there’s more walking left,” She sighed.

“If the lady wants, I could carry you the rest of the way there,” Adewyn grinned.

“I would rather die before you carry me in public,” Andreya deadpanned.

“Leave it in the bedroom.”

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While it did take ‘a bit of time’, it was only a matter of hours before the ground on the mountainside began to shake and shudder before turning in on itself like a sinkhole except, there was no rocks or debris falling in.

A mouth opened in the ground and out popped the head of a teenage girl, looking around, her eyes landing on Andreyra and Adewyn.

“Come on in!” Lefie said, gesturing into the hole.

The pair of them looked at each other before joining the young girl. It was a short drop, nothing for Adewyn, but Andreyra landed on wobbly feet.

The quiet sound of a sword being drawn from a fur-lined scabbard echoed outwards, Adewyn shifting her feet into a firm stance and pointing her weapon straight ahead.

“Lefie, get away from that thing!” She barked with the protective ferocity Andreyra was used to.

And that’s when Andreyra saw it. A white, almost Skaldian form, except lacking all facial features and unusually tall and thin. Now she was down in the hole, her senses flashed with recognition. *Demon*.

In one hand was a torch but it made no move to attack or retreat.

“Wait wait wait!” Lefie ushered out, palms out as she interposed herself between Adewyn and the demon. “She hasn’t told you,” She said, looking like she bit off an insult. “It’s okay. It’s safe. Put the sword down.”

“Safe? That’s a fucking demon!” Adewyn replied, making no move to disarm and quickly checking Andreyra was behind her still.

“Yes, but, it’s more complicated than that. He’s safe, he’s docile. Adewyn, Andreyra, this is Harold,” Lefie introduced.

“You eve- Harold?” The confusion over such an unassuming name took precedence over what else Adewyn was going to say.

“I didn’t name him.”

“Is he under your control?” Adewyn asked, taking a step sideways and watching how Harold didn’t follow.

“Like I said, it’s a bit more complicated than that, but sort of yes.”

“He’s weak,” Andreyra said, finally joining the conversation after understanding just what about this specimen perplexed her so. “He’s not like other humanoid demons. He’s not even as strong as a greater demon.”

“That true?”

“He’s basically Riza’s version of a pet. She says he’s level 8.”

“And he won’t attack us? Won’t attack Andrey?”

“Yup,” Lefie eagerly nodded. “Riza’s had him for two months and he’s never hurt anyone. I can explain everything while we walk back.”

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*Finally, some peace and quiet.*

Riza’s party was far enough away from the bunker and its inhabitants that they felt safe enough to take a moment of respite. Daven carved out a big enough room to not induce claustrophobia and everyone was just taking a moment to rest up.

But not Riza—she had work to do. With all the murdering, all the demons were now level 18. Since the Root boons were now obtained, she was finally free to allocate stat points to other stats so she did just that, buffing every stat up to 5.

A rather annoying feature of using humanoid demons instead of people was that every stat began at 1. It meant until level 15, they were incredibly fragile with only 20 health.

To some extent, physiology affected damage received and how much health you had but it wasn’t to an incredible degree. A humanoid demon with 20 health was a bit sturdier than a beast demon with 20 health but both were still as delicate as a leaf.

Anyway, Riza finally had some time to think.

Entity Manager			Excess Essence		0.74 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	18	2058/2058	20/20	20/20	6.68
Jupy	Raise Dead	18	100/100	100/100	1938/1938	5.19
Ascles	Raise Dead	18	100/100	100/100	1938/1938	5.19

Even with a minimal increase to spirit, she was still in the green. Riza gave a huge sigh of relief.

There was still more to be done, however: skills.

Nessy was first up. With 11 skills currently, that left her with 7. First up, primordial strength.

### 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] (1/10)

Improve armour formula by 1%

Requirements: [Well of Constitution] (10/10), [Well of Vim] (10/10)

### [Hardened Flesh] (1/10)

Each point in power confers 2 additional total health

Requirements: [Knowable Power] (10/10)

### [Improved Athletics] (1/10)

Your stats further increases your general athletic ability

*The usual suspects.*

*[Fortress of Flesh] is conceptually not that interesting but it's interactions with different stat distributions is.*

*Meren says that most warriors, those that fight primarily with weapons, prioritise power above all else. It enhances your health and the damage of your attacks, after all. Constitution is nice for regen, meaning you're not out for a week after just one fight, and it also increases your power with just one skill.*

*Stamina is an auxiliary concern. Unless you have a stamina-intense skill that gets activated, you rarely have to worry about running out and, consequently, vim is typically the lowest stat—ignoring essence and spirit for obvious reasons.*

*But [Fortress of Flesh] would be the most beneficial towards those who prioritise vim and then constitution. It's nominally useful but doesn't shine unless you take boons focuses on those stats.*

*Like Nussy has. Her constitution is 5000- wait. That's a flat damage reduction of 5000, isn't that? She's not fragile at all! I need to check something quickly.*

Riza brought up [Leech] and quickly adjusted it with some metamagic without actually casting it.

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

Drain 3696 points of health from a living entity

1m range

Cost: 10 es/sec

*I cannot damage her without a maximised [Leech]. What's the minimum range if I maximise it?*

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

Drain 5236 points of health from a living entity

68m range

Cost: 70 es/sec

*68 metres and at that point, it's only 236 points of damage.*

*If [Fortress of Flesh] was level 10, her flat damage reduction would increase to 5500.*

*Hold on a minute. The only skills affecting her constitution are primordial strength skills and [Fortress of Flesh] is also primordial strength.*

*Level 25 would be an additional 75 stat points, bringing Nussy's constitution up to 186 base. [Well of Constitution] multiplies by 3, [Source of Constitution] by another 3, and then [Root of Constitution] by 5. That's a 45 times multiplier.*

*With a constitution of base 186, that'd be a base constitution of 8370 but if [Way of Primordial Strength] was taken at level 25, [Well of Constitution] becomes a 5 times multiplier.*

*Doing all the maths... A constitution of 13,950. [Fortress of Flesh] increases flat damage reduction by 20% for a total of... 16,740 damage reduced.*

*Both Lefie and I can deal damage in excess of that—Lefie especially so—but I don't think Meren can. When I calculated it before, some approximations gave me a number in the range of 5000. Perhaps after the additional levels and boons she's tripled that to 15,000 but she'd still need to break even to begin doing damage.*

*And then you have the total health pool and regeneration to consider. Taking Daven as an example, Nesity would have a total health of somewhere around 50,000—and that's ignoring [Hardened Flesh]--as well as regenerate 30 health a second.*

*Fuck me. Back when I first did the armour calculations, I thought constitution fell off at higher levels but that may not actually be the case.*

*Nesity is on her way to being immortal... but in a different way from me. What I need to remember is she would be an excellent counter to physical fighters.*

*Anyway, back to the skills.*

*[Hardened Flesh] is what Meren has to boost her health to 20,000 while retaining a relatively even stat spread. Useful but unless there's skills that synergise with total health, not a priority.*

*Next, the big one; the blood skill tree. Let's see what's there.*

## Blood

### 0th Tier

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

25% of health regeneration is converted into essence regeneration

Efficiency: 10%

#### **[Ichor Manipulation] (1/10)**

Manipulate 1kg of your blood

1m radius

Cost: 1 es/sec

### 1st Tier

#### **[Ichor Calefaction] (1/10)**

Modify the heat energy of 1kg of your blood by 1 K/sec

Cost: 1 es/K

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

*Nothing I haven't seen before. [Ichor Manipulation] it is.*

Riza went ahead and purchased the skill and, just to be sure, she got Nussy to train it up to max.

And that's when she realised, she was an idiot.

*Fuck! She still only has a max essence of 20! I forgot about that since her essence regeneration is so high! She needs to be levelled up quick. All the stats into essence and I should get [Well of Essence] as well. That's... 660 essence she could then use.*

*Damn, that's low.*

*To unlock the second tier, I'm not too interested in [Pestilent Wound] so I guess it's [Ichor Calcification].*

**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 Calcification] (1/10) -Learned**



Modify the heat energy of 1kg of your blood by 1 K/sec

Cost: 1 es/K

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 Blood] (1/10)**

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

Efficiency: 10%

Cost: 10 es/sec

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

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

### **[Blood Sucker] (1/10)**

Absorb up to 1kg of blood from your surroundings

1m radius

Cost: 5 es/sec

### **[Expanding Blood] (1/10)**

*[Blood Sense] is a hidden skill. Pretty normal; I've seen a variation pop up in life, water, and earth skill trees. Not air, strangely, but that may be because it's so abundant. Fire probably has one, though. Anyway, I'm sure sight will work just as well as this skill does.*

*[Debilitating Blood] is the next skill in the poisonous blood family, it seems. Doesn't do any damage directly but that looks very strong. Let's look at Nessy again. Health of 50,000 and if someone has a blood boon, unmaximised, that's 20% health gone in an instant. 10,000 damage for a tier 2 skill. Woah.*

*Maximised makes that unbelievable- wait. What would happen if I take this? [Lone Wolf] makes it 30% and then [Maximise Mastery+] makes it 210%? That just straight up kills them!*

*Alright. I've dealt with this system long enough to know it's not that straight forward. There's a hidden clause somewhere. The stat reduction is over time or there's a cap to stat reduction or something.*

*But something to keep in mind. I can test it with just a level 5 demon, I think.*

*Next one is [Life Leech] which really sounds like it should be in the Life skill tree but what do I know. This may be another [Solar Ray] situation going on.*

*It's conceptually similar [Leech] but as a passive instead of an active skill. There's definitely something going on between those two skills. Another thing to test; a demon which has both [Leech] and [Life Leech].*

*Good but not unique or powerful enough to be a priority.*

*[Blood Sucker] is another skill like [Blood Sense]; there's variations in other trees. [Intrinsic Tank] is the air one and judging from the earth one, there's probably skills in higher tiers that synergise with it. If I had to guess, there's at least one that boosts health regeneration.*

*Definitely a skill that Nessy is taking.*

*[Expanding Blood] feels similar conceptually to [Conductivity] and [Expansive Mind]. A passive skill that increases efficiency or one aspects of other skills of the tree.*

*Probably useful if you go the [Pestilent Wound] route but for Nessy, not a priority.*

*Efficiency seems to be a big deal for blood skills, however. I wonder if there's a skill that'll interact with that. Would certainly make [Way of Blood] a lot stronger than [Lone Wolf], however.*

Before Riza settled on the next skill to take, she checked what Daven's essence stat was at level 27 and then Meren's current power stat. 3340 compared to 864, although Meren was not optimised because of [Touched by Essence] for her level 15 boon which is obviously unnecessary for the demons.

But that was only half the picture. Nesy could have power in the thousands and, at a minimum, she'd be dealing thousands in damage by just swinging a sword around but skills still mattered. After all, Meren had less than 1000 power but could deal upwards of 5000 damage.

The main thing the questions were for, however, was if pestilent wound was a necessary skill to deal damage for Nesy and the answer was no.

Now, the biggest question for this self-damaging demon was, 'what does Riza want it to do'? She had a clear idea for Jupy but outside of 'close quarters combat', she was uncertain with Nesy.

With such a high strength, she could lean into the damaging aspect but a demon invested into power instead of constitution would be a lot better although less durable.

Instead of an even stat spread, it was a choice between 'glass cannon' and 'indomitable tank'.

Nesy was leaning towards the latter but then you get the next problem; how to get enemies to focus on Nesy instead of weaker opponents?

Riza was voicing all these thoughts and questions aloud, bouncing them off of her companions, and Daven actually had an answer to that.

It was a real problem but there were skills in the shield tree that helped. He never took them for himself back when he was alive, and didn't have access to the higher tiers, so he didn't know how helpful they could be but it was something to keep in mind.

Which added another thing to Riza's to-do list; raise a demon to unlock the higher tiers of the shield skill tree.

Trusting her intuition, Riza purchased [Blood Sucker] for Nesy.

## 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] (1/10) -Learned

Modify the heat energy of 1kg of your blood by 1 K/sec

Cost: 1 es/K

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 Blood] (1/10)

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

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] (1/10) -Learned**

Absorb up to 1kg of blood from your surroundings

1m radius

Cost: 5 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: [Debilitating Blood] (5/10)

**[Lost Blood] (1/10)**

Health regeneration is increased by 1% for 1% of health lost

Requirements: [Blood Sucker] (5/10)

**[Sturdy Blood] (1/10)**

Total health is increased by 2% per 1kg of absorbed blood

Efficiency: 10%

*Fuck yeah! I was right after all; [Blood Sucker] does have future skills.*

*And would you look at that, [Blood Transfusion] uses [Blood Sucker] to boost health regeneration. Heal regen seems to be a big thing for the blood skill tree.*

*Now that I'm looking at it, I can't actually see a skill that has an upfront essence cost. They're all ongoing costs. Does that mean I don't have to put stats into essence after all?*

*Regardless, let's look at these skills.*

*I can't know how good [Blood Transfusion] is without knowing about the ratio of injuries to blood and, even then, [Heal] is probably better and doesn't consume a shared resource other than essence.*

*[Global Blood] is interesting. It's either really strong or really weak. Needs a lot of thinking to determine all the applications for it.*

*[Infuse Blood] looks similar to Meren's skill to infuse her spear with essence. You could infuse your blood with ice essence to slow down enemies? Looks most useful for the [Pestilent Wound] path.*

*[Lost Blood] is enticing. It specifies health regeneration, no constitution, but it should still hopefully work with [Essence Transformer]. It also synergises with health and power boosts.*

*You could make a power-focused blood build where this picks up a lot of slack. Something to think about.*

*[Sturdy Blood] is pretty straight-forward. A fair few passives in this tree.*

*So, that's everything. Four skill points left.*

Deciding to focus entirely on health and health regeneration to create a truly immortal being, Riza went ahead and purchased [Hardened Flesh], [Lost Blood], and [Sturdy Blood].

[Fortress of Flesh] would be nice but required an investment of [Well of Vim] which did very little, setting the cost of the skill to 2 skill points. Not worth it right now but maybe in the future, if it would be worth that cost or Nessy gets [Essential Leech] or for another reason.

*One down, two to go.*

Jupy was up next and ever since Riza first raised him, she knew exactly the direction she wanted to take him in.

He was going to be Lefie but *better*.

Lefie was woefully unoptimised. Her main source of damage was lightning but she lacked any lightning boons and had basically forgotten about her water skills due to their limited use, especially with [Heal] taking away thirst.

So, with the benefit of hindsight, Jupy was going to be better. He was going to be a god of lightning. Or, as close as he could be currently. There was still room to improve even now.

There were two paths she could go down with Jupy; either many fast but small attacks or one slow, huge attack.

Lightning synergised far more with the former but Riza didn't want to take her chances with unknown skill trees so she'd have to make do.

Nine skill points were available.

First things first, the main course: [Lightning Bolt].

After that, the metamagic was next. All three masteries unlocked [Manifold Mastery] but they needed to be level 10 for it was time for a bit of training.

Daven carved out a lot more room so Jupy could level his skills without disturbing or hurting the rest. Thankfully, being only tier 0, the masteries took next to no time to get max level.

Finally, Riza could behold [Manifold Mastery] with her own two eyes.

## [Manifold Mastery] (1/10)

Control the intensity and range of a skill through -10% to +10%

She didn't have confirmation but after reading it herself, Riza felt that it was likely it stacked with the previous masteries.

It was only after thinking about Nesity's constitution that a flaw within Lefie's skill set showed itself to Riza; the distributed damage.

Sure, Lefie could deal 30,000 damage in a second but that was spread across three distinct projectiles, each dealing 10,000 damage. Hypothetically, if Lefie shot them at Nesity, they'd each wind up doing only 5000 damage currently or literally nothing at level 25.

30,000 damage exceeds Nesity's theoretical damage reduction of 15,000 but 10,000 doesn't.

So, Riza's eyes were on [Overcharge]. With already large base damage, that was a huge boost to power.

She purchased it as well as [Range Compression].

That left just three skill points remaining, which promptly went into the upgraded version of [Seeker Mastery]. The last two were for later, after all the skills were levelled up, in case of upgraded versions or some juicy ones from a higher tier.

All that was left was to train those skills up and Riza was beside herself with excitement. She couldn't wait to see just what he was capable of now.

*Calm yourself. There's still Ascles to handle.*

Ascles was insurance. He was essentially going to be another Sanders; a summon capable of healing and resurrection.

There was no way he could take all the skills right this moment but Riza could still plan them out anyway.

[Heal+], [Rejuvenate], [Overhealth], [Resuscitate], and [Resurrection]. Were the life skills. [Alteration Mastery] was the single metamagic in addition to his [Maximise Mastery] that he got. That left 2 skill points left over for the future, most likely towards the psyche skill tree for the [Message] family of skills.

Finally, she was done. Her army was growing.