

Chapter 105: Understanding

Riza stumbled through the winding darkness of the tower, her heart pounding in her chest as the oppressive weight of the mental pressure bore down on her. The flickering electric lights offered little solace, casting ominous shadows that danced along the walls of the stairwell.

Lefie followed closely behind, her steps faltering with each laboured breath. The presence of the tower had already taken its toll on her, and the humanoid demon that accompanied them offered little in the way of comfort. Its grotesque features seemed to warp and twist in the dim light, its eyeless face glowing inhumanly disturbing.

Riza had asked Lefie to leave, to find a moment of respite away from the tower's oppressive influence. But the girl refused to abandon her friend, clinging to Riza's side as they ascended the stairs, determined to not abandon her friend.

Finally, they reached the apex of the tower, where the room opened up into a vast, domed chamber. Lefie gasped in awe at the sight, her eyes fixated on the endless void that was the inky black stone that made the whole place up. The feeble electric lamps that lined the room offered little illumination, casting the chamber in an eerie half-light.

But Riza's attention was focused on the centre of the room, where the looming magical device sat ominously. With a hesitant step, she approached the device, feeling a palpable chill radiating from it as she drew closer. As she reached out to touch it, she felt a sudden surge of cold that crept up her arm, accompanied by a sense of foreboding pressure that weighed heavily on her mind, the tower announcing its presence once more.

Rapidly withdrawing her hand, Riza's mind churned with possibilities.

So far, they hadn't found any particularly useful research on the tower. The Ancients were researching it, yes, but they were a decidedly non-magical people and their interest in this place was no different than people's interest in the pyramids on Earth.

Which meant, it was all up to Riza to figure out just how exactly this thing worked and what it could do.

Hence, the humanoid demon.

It was rather unextraordinary, sitting at level 5 via [Raise Dead] with its stat points split equally between essence and spirit. [Well of Essence] and [Well of Spirit] were its only stat-enhancing skills, with translation skills taking up the rest.

Riza stepped back and gazed at the structure in its entirety. Though the purpose of the metal rods and beams was unclear, she could vaguely discern where one would sit, and gestured for the humanoid demon to take the seat. The demon clumsily manoeuvred between the errant, nonsensical metal rods, eventually settling onto the uncomfortable-looking chair.

Suddenly, the metal began to move, emitting a cacophony of creaks and groans that reverberated throughout the room. The twisted and haphazard metal rods shifted and stretched themselves out, reaching toward the domed ceiling and gliding along the walls until they formed a straight line between the throne and the confines of the room. Riza gritted her teeth at the noise, but Lefie clamped her hands over her ears to block out the excruciating sound.

Finally, the metal rods and beams stopped moving, now protruding from the throne like a pincushion. The room felt different, as if charged with an unseen energy. Her hair stood on end as the tower's presence felt just a tiny, discernible increase in her mind.

Was this a calibration? Riza wondered, taking a few steps around the room to look at the seemingly random array of metal, struggling to make out a pattern.

Perhaps a focus or amplifier, instead.

No sudden revelations appeared.

Riza kept a cautious distance from the humanoid demon as Lefie shuffled up beside her, eyeing the device warily.

The demon sat rigidly on a throne, its arms stretched out against asymmetrical armrests, its hands clenching the ends in a death grip. Its back was unnaturally straight, and its head tilted back, as if held in a vice-like grip.

Riza couldn't help but notice the creature's ribs protruding through its skin, even without the need to breathe. Its stomach was sucked in, and its whole body seemed to be straining against some invisible force.

"Do you feel anything?" Riza asked, her voice calm but curious. Her eyes were alert as she watched the faintest of wisps of essence dance around the demon's head.

"Pain," the demon's deep, inhuman voice echoed throughout the room, the geometry of the place amplifying the sound until it seemed to come from all directions at once.

Riza shuddered slightly at the disturbing sound. She could hear the weight of the demon's agony in its voice.

"Can you sense anything?" she pressed, hoping for more information. The wisp grew larger, a startling white glow.

The demon shifted in its seat, its fingers digging into the metal armrests in a desperate attempt to find relief.

Riza watched in horror as the subcutaneous muscles beneath the demon's skin grew thinner and thinner, revealing the skeletal structure beneath. The demon's chest looked more like a ribcage than a living creature, its flesh and muscle wasting away before her eyes.

A sense of dread settled over Riza as she realised the demon was slowly dying.

"Gr-gra-grass," the demon stuttered, its pained voice growing weaker with each passing moment. "Rock... mountain..."

With each word, an explosion of pure white essence blew up behind the demon's head, lasting for only a second before receding into nothing.

The last word was barely above a whisper, its skin pulling back so tightly, so taut, she swore she could see the contours of the organs inside the demon's very body.

With a sudden, shearing sound, all the metal rods around the room groaned as they dropped from their extruded, straightened forms, bending and recoiling as the demon was finally freed, its form flopping forward and dropping to the ground, lifeless.

Approaching the body with caution, sure enough, it was dead.

"Don't even think about sitting on that chair," Lefie's firm voice rang out from behind, and Riza hid a smile at her protectiveness.

“Don’t worry. I still need to do more tests,” She responded.

Already, her mind was working overtime, processing all of this information.

Firstly, there was the inconsistency issue. The Demon Lord had frequently commanded the use of this device and was none the worse for wear but yet, the humanoid demon had suffered effects resembling what [Leech] could do.

Straight away, it was clear that ‘being a demon’ was not the sole criteria necessary for operating this machine.

Conjuring up a list, Riza instantly begin filling it up with the differences between the two.

The most obvious one was that the Lord was a Lord and with all that meant. Levels, boons, stats, skills, strength...

Assuming the effects were exactly what Riza suspected—that of the life-sucking kind—that meant sufficiently high power or constitution would be all that was necessary to survive this... process, whatever it was.

She’d need to check back in with the Demon Lord on how it used the device to begin with. Maybe they skipped a necessary step that resulted in this outcome.

But ignoring those issues, this adventure was totally unfruitful; the humanoid demon *did* appear to use the device successfully, just not for very long.

Grass. Rock. Mountain. It sensed this. Are these just vague concepts or was it being more specific, like sensing a location?

Grass, rock, and mountain certainly describes most of Toila, so I don’t think it’s just a coincidence that it said these things. Maybe a stronger operator can provide more detail.

Pulling the body away from the machine, Riza sat beside it as her hands glowed softly with a warm, green glow.

She activated both [Raise Dead] and [Rejuvenate], watching as the body begin to fill out to its previous size over the next several minutes, whatever pain and damage the chair had done disappearing.

Now that it's out of the chair, let's see if it can tell us anything else.

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Two figures walked down the narrow street with purpose, their steps measured and deliberate. One was dressed in armour from head to toe, their face obscured by a visored helm, while the other, a woman, wore simple clothing that hugged their strong frame.

The street was busy with construction work, with labourers and craftsmen going about their tasks. The buildings on either side were made from stone and wood, with scaffolding and ladders jutting out at odd angles.

As they walked, the figures inspected each house carefully from a distance, their eyes scanning the exterior for any signs of interest. They made no attempt to knock on any doors or to engage with the residents, a description of the place clear in their mind.

Despite the chaos of the construction work around them, the pair moved with ease through the maze of obstacles.

After a few minutes, they arrived at a particular house and paused to inspect it more closely. The figure in armour stood back while the woman leaned forward, examining the wooden door and the stonework around it with keen interest, mentally comparing it with the description and terrible drawing she had received.

The woman cast a meaningful glance at her companion, silently conveying that they had reached their destination. Together, they approached the door, and the woman in front knocked with a firm hand.

The sound echoed through the door, reverberating in the silence that followed. A few moments later, hurried footsteps could be heard from within before the door opened, revealing a short, pale woman with brown hair pulled back tightly in a bun. Deep wrinkles creased her eyes, and her apron was in disarray.

"Um, hello," she stammered, her gaze flickering nervously to the intimidating figure clad in armour. "Can I help you?" She asked tentatively.

"Yes, I'm Meren, and I'm here on behalf of the Lord. Does Orum reside here?" Meren asked.

The woman's brow furrowed with concern. "He does, but he's currently at work. I can send someone to fetch him, if you'd like?"

"That would be appreciated. May we wait inside?" Meren asked, offering a polite smile.

The woman hesitated for a brief moment before stepping aside and gesturing for them to enter.

The interior was a chaotic scene. Wooden toys were scattered haphazardly across the floor, and at least three children were playing with them or each other, turning the space into a veritable obstacle course.

In one corner of the room, a woman sat at a small table, dressed in loose, comfortable fabrics, with long black hair that fell untidily down her back. She was in the midst of sewing a tiny dress, although her attention was entirely focused on the baby cradled against her exposed breast. The woman looked up as Meren and her companion entered, a gentle smile gracing her lips as she regarded them.

"Corsoa," the first woman called out, capturing the second's attention. "These are Meren and... her companion. They're here on behalf of the Lord and wish to speak to Orum. Could you fetch him for us?"

"No problem," Corsoa replied with a smile. The first woman gave Meren and her companion a polite nod before hurrying off to a side room, which Meren now noticed had a tantalising aroma emanating from it.

Slowly standing up, Corsoa called for what appeared to be the oldest child and told her to head towards Orum's place of work and get a hold of him, making sure to impress upon him that it was urgent.

Meanwhile, she returned to her seat, engaging Meren in very idle chatter as the pair sat at the table, her companion towering ominously behind Meren.

She seemed more comfortable and confident than the other woman in talking to them, although the conversation topics were only shallow and banal.

She talked about the kids, numbering up to seven with the oldest four apparently apprenticing at various locations around the city, and about Orum, whose profession was of being a builder's merchant. Not only was this a lucrative job as of late—which Corsoa seemed quite proud to reveal—he also possessed numerous connections within the Empire for sourcing harder-to-find goods.

The other woman swiftly returned, remembering that she hadn't told them her name of Hildra, and set down two cups of tea and opened up a small tin of baked goods.

Not wanting to offend, Meren reached in and picked up a heart, jam-filled pastry, and took a bite.

Compared to what she had eaten for most of her life, it was pretty good. Compared to what she had been eating for the past month, however, it just went to prove that all normal food had been ruined for her forever.

Hildra scurried back to the kitchen as soon as she had served the pastries, her footsteps echoing through the stone halls. Meren and Corsoa sat in silence, waiting for Orum's arrival. The air was thick with tension, and the only sound was the distant chatter of children playing outside.

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long. Orum's hurried footsteps approached, the sound growing louder until the door kerchunked loudly as he rushed in, a small child clinging to his hand.

"Corsoa?" he bellowed, his voice echoing off the walls. "What happened this time?"

Corsoa let out a near-imperceptible sigh, not bothering to move from her chair, while Hildra hastily moved to meet Orum, bringing him in to meet the rest and introducing him to the situation.

He was a tall man, with closely cropped hair and large, bare forearms that hinted at his familiarity with heavy labour. His eyes darted from Meren to her companion, taking in their appearance with a quick once-over.

After introductions were made, Orum asked Hildra and Corsoa to vacate the room, taking the children with them, while he talked with Meren and her companion. The room fell silent again, and the only sound was the distant hum of the city outside.

"So," he began, sitting down at the table with a heavy thud, "how can I help you?" His voice sounded genuine to Meren, despite the weight of his words.

"We're following up on an incident that occurred here two months ago involving Tanniya Eder," Meren explained. Almost as soon as the name dropped from her tongue, Orum's face furrowed and he drew back in his chair, crossing his arms.

"It's about that, is it?" he asked guardedly.

"Yes," Meren confirmed. "At the behest of the Lord's attempt at installing order in this city, we're investigating all prior incidents that are suitable for further investigation."

Orum let out a long sigh, his shoulders slumping. "What more is there to discuss?" he asked, his voice heavy with annoyance. "She had been sick for weeks, and it was just my luck that she dropped dead while she was here. I don't know what else to tell you." The words hung in the air like a dark cloud, suffocating and heavy.

"He is hiding something," Tiffany's voice resounded telepathically in Meren's head, her armoured figure having not moved even an inch. Orum's eyes occasionally flicked to the figurative statue in the room, clearly unnerved by her presence.

"Can you describe what happened moments before her death?" Meren asked, pulling open a notebook and stylus. The presence of a magical item did little to set Orum at ease.

"I already told you lot. I had invited her to come round, like I did often, and offered her some tea. She started drinking it and then began choking because of her-" He gestured vaguely, trying to grasp the right words, "breathing problems. Then, she just collapsed. I shook her a little, looked in her mouth, but there was nothing I could do."

"Suspicious," Was all that Tiffany [Message]d this time, prompting Meren to turn in her seat and look towards her partner.

"He knows more," She elucidated, causing Meren to frown at the vagueness of it.

Turning back around to face Orum, he was watching the whole silent exchange and seemed, at the very least, confused.

"Orum," Meren began, voice simultaneously gentle and firm. "You have to tell us the *whole* truth about what happened. Now," She returned to writing, "What was in the drink you served her?"

On and on, Meren asked question after question, recalling the instruction she had received from Andreyra on how to best utilise the limited usefulness of [Detect Truth].

Truths were easy. If someone made a statement and the skill alerted the user to the fact it was unlikely to be a lie, they knew that truth was true.

Lies, however, were more complicated. For a question with only two outcomes, a lie was functionally identical to the truth, leaving only one definitive answer.

Reality was rarely so simple. A lie merely precluded one possible answer from being the truth from a plethora of different answers.

What was even harder was when a lie was couched in truth.

Eventually, however, with the silent aid from Tiffany, and extensive notes, Meren believed she had all the details of the situation figured out and she had to admit it, it didn't look as bad as Tanniya believed it to be.

For one, she strongly doubted there was any poison involved, and Orum attested that even Hildra and Corsoa would confirm that Tanniya was suffering from frequent breathing problems due to an illness of some kind.

During the conversation, he seemed to have caught onto the fact Meren was able to dig deep into the statements that needed digging and left the more surface level ones alone, and his answers gradually veered closer and closer to the full truth.

Which still didn't look good for him. She felt confident that Orum was not the cause of Tanniya's death, but he certainly didn't help her much, and his nonchalance at her death was absolutely horrifying to pry from his stubborn mouth.

Finally, Meren declared that they were done there. She briefly paused to say goodbye to the rest of Orum's family before leaving with Tiffany, a little disturbed at seeing how little Orum seemed to care about Tanniya's death.

As she walked through the streets, heading back to the Lord's Manor, she couldn't help but think that Tanniya wasn't going to be happy about this.

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Riza gazed out at the endless expanse before her, thick, creamy masses undulating so slowly that they seemed almost hypnotic. The cloudy sky looked almost magical from this high up, casting a soft, ethereal light on everything it touched.

Turning to look behind her, she could see the majestic peaks of the mountain range rising above the cloud-filled layer, their icy snow-capped summits glistening in the light. The sight took her breath away, a testament to the sheer majesty and beauty of the world.

In front of her, nothing but fog lay ahead. She had seen it, felt it, been enveloped by it. It was out there and it was everywhere.

Riza sat on the edge of the black stone brick tower, her legs dangling over the edge. The journey up had been long and tiring, even with her enhanced physicality, but she had finally done it. She had conquered the tower, and now she was at the very top of the world.

The top of the tower was empty, nothing but a smooth flatness stretching out before her. There were no demarcations between the individual bricks, and the surface was unnaturally smooth. It was as if the tower had been carved from a single piece of stone, so perfect was its construction.

The wind buffeted against her, causing her short hair to dance on her head. The air was chill and frigid, but it didn't matter. Riza was lost in the moment, savouring the silence and solitude of the tower top.

Here, there was no life, no people, no noise. It was just her, the wind, and the vast expanse of the world stretching out before her. In this moment, Riza felt truly alive, a part of something greater than herself.

But that was enough of that. She had climbed up here just to see if she could, to see what was at the very top, but that didn't mean she couldn't be productive while she did it.

The top of the tower wasn't the only thing she discovered something about recently; experimentations with the throne within the tower were still ongoing, and now that she was up here, she felt fairly confident it was actually far, far lower in the tower than at the very top.

She had tested a few more times with standard, low-level humanoid demons but the results were the same: their life was sucked out of them before they managed to express more than a few generic, landscape observations of Toila.

But in its own way, that was good. The result became predictable, and she started shifting a few variables around. Levels, stats, skills, and the result didn't change much.

At the low level of 5, they basically died all the same, regardless of individual variation. It was increasing the level that yielded different results.

The first test was actually disastrous, however, because Riza decided to start with a greater demon. She knew she was being overly cautious, but she reassured herself that by testing everything, was she establishing good scientific rigour.

The greater demon didn't communicate anything, which was fine, because it didn't need to. All it needed to do was show the life-draining effect of the throne was still active, and, importantly, it was reversible with [Raise Dead].

It was.

That gave the go-ahead to use resources Riza actually didn't want to lose: high-level humanoid demons.

It was awkward to begin with, needing to take Rosetta along for translation. He had been working long and hard the past few days, translating all the documents obtained from the Demon Lord's nest. There were some insightful things in there, but nothing ground-breaking relating to the tower.

It seemed the Ancients were as perplexed as Riza was, perhaps even more so. They had measurements instruments, and clearly knew the tower affected its environment strangely, but they had no idea why and no way to interact with it.

In a sense, they reminded her of humans, not Skaldians, with their complete lack of magic and emphasis on technology instead. In an odd way, it made her feel proud, seeing how much more advanced they were even after how many years they had been gone and civilisation developed in their stead.

Rosetta was needed because rather than risking one of her carefully curated demons like Harold or Tiffany or Jupy, where she'd need to regrow them after they died, she decided to use one of the newly acquired humanoid demons for this process.

For this, she needed to kill it and not wanting to waste the level cap, her older demons like Harold and Tiffany now had sparkling new level caps of 23 and she now had a level 23 demon via [False Life].

But, once again, she was faced with the same issue of [False Life] on a demon would inevitably present from now on: she had no way to command it, given the language barrier. Hence, Rosetta.

Rosetta calmly instructed the demon to sit down, sink into the experience of the chair, and tell them what it felt.

Importantly, Riza decided to choose a demon with high essence stats, making the assumption that it'd be more helpful in controlling the tower than physical stats gave in simply enduring the pain.

She was quickly proven right. Not only was the draining of life slower, due to the demon's increased physical stats, what it gleaned from the tower was even greater.

What the tower seemed to be doing was a merging of senses. Once seated and connected, the perceptions of the humanoid demon rapidly expanded beyond its own body, and beyond even the tower itself.

It began by describing the nest underneath Rensenfeld–Riza's nest. Demons, greater demons, hundreds of beast demons. A labyrinthian network with people and animals and breeding pits.

Above, a hive of humans, lumbering about aimlessly, all centred around a void of perception. The tower.

All of that, Riza knew already. It was progress, but not that valuable on its own.

But the demon wasn't done yet. It continued to grunt and groan in pain, writhing on the chair as it took all of its willpower to tell Rosetta just what it was experiencing.

Mountains, forests, people. Huts, trees, farms, miniscule explosions of essence every now and then. Collectives.

Some were close, hunkering down near the mountain range that Rensenfeld called its home, but others were further away, in the far reaches of the province.

Andreya didn't know of these people in all the times Riza had talked to her, so she had her suspicions of what they were.

And then, further and further away, towards the direction of the border, the demon described a massive army, tens of kilometres long, with intermittent sparks of power and energy.

This was new. This was useful. The border was guarded, clearly, and with how many there were, the Empire must've been sending people there for a while now, and they'd presumably continue to do so.

That was all it could take. Reaching that far across the region strained the demon so immensely, its final dredges of life were sapped out of it, collapsing off the throne, dead.

This was good, Riza was thinking back then. Concrete progress, but it also represented a barrier.

Level 23 was roughly the level range of controllable but disposable thralls she could throw at it. Any higher, she'd be dipping into her loyal, invested companions, and there was just no way she was even going to ask one of them to try it.

And outside of them, her two highest levelled summons—Jormy and the Demon Lord—were both not practical.

Well, there was another one. One that was high enough level to withstand a ton of damage and pain, whilst also being able to communicate with Riza and follow orders.

Death.

Demons were one thing but humans were another. She was fine commanding demons, robbing them of their agency. They didn't really have any to begin with anyway, considering they lived in a pseudo-hive mind and were effectively just parasites. The owners of their bodies were long dead by the time Riza got a hold of them.

But Death? He was human, sure, and [False Life] instilled a basic sense of loyalty and obedience but Sanders had shown that could be overwritten and Death, out of all her summons, had the strongest desire to disobey.

If she wanted to use him, to control him, she'd have to cross a line she hadn't crossed before. Not in totality, at least.

And so, looking down at her province from on-high, wind rushing past her, Riza contemplated her position in the world.

What did she want to achieve? What was her goal? Bettering the Empire? Usurp the Regent, establishing herself as its ruler, and uplifting it into a time of technology advancement and societal equality?

That wasn't all. Demons were an existential threat and their corruption looked like it could run all the way to the top. Her goal was the genocide of a parasitic species. Was that the only solution? All the ones she had met were unintelligent followers but that couldn't surely be the case for all of them? The one at the very top, controlling everything, would have some volition, some level of self-realisation.

Genocide wasn't the only solution; the Demon Lord's nest showed that quite clearly. Beast, greater, and humanoid demons, now under Riza's command. All she had to do was usurp the one at the top and her influence would trickle down, bringing everyone else under her command.

She had the power to do that, so why was she placing limits on herself?

Why wasn't Death out there now, wiping out the army amassed at her borders, killing all the Protectors and Guardians in this part of the Empire.

After the Demon Lord, Riza could wipe out her nest, level herself up, and take on the rest of the Demon Lords. With [Delegator] anyone she killed would just be brought back stronger. Keeping people alive, letting them grow in strength themselves, was the optimal decision.

Nonoptimal, yes, but these were people's *lives* she was thinking about! She had power but that didn't give her the right to decide who lived and who dies. The right to force people to fight a war for her. The right to treat humans like Demons.

Right?

Right?

It didn't sound convincing to her in the moment, not when people were literally dying as she sat there, ruminating on it all. Her clinic had already saved many lives, and many more it could save if she built them in every city across the Empire. Thousands of deaths, every day, from something she could prevent.

And the demons, too. She had seen Litchendorf, and how many people died there from the demon attack. It was apparently worse the further west you went.

A single, high-level summon would be able to protect an entire village. Even better, with Jormy in tow, she could wipe out entire nests without breaking a sweat, riding an entire province of demons in just a matter of days.

Given a few levels, even Demon Lords wouldn't be that much of a threat, letting her traipse into their domains, killing them and gaining control of all demons in that province. That'd be a lot quicker as well.

If she went all out, absorbing all those levels from slaughtered demons, growing in power and growing an army while she did so, she could probably achieve her goal of total control in a matter of months.

People would die, sure, and the Empire wouldn't let her do as she pleased. The moment she targets the Regent, she doubted the Empire would throw anything but their all at her, including even the weakest of soldiers.

But death was merely an inconvenience. At level 66, who knew just how strong her [Resurrection] would be. Any person she caused the death of could just be brought right back.

Any person she killed and subsumed into her army, robbing them of their free will, could be brought right back to before they were dead, as free and as healthy as they could be.

So, again, Riza had to think, why was she just sitting there, feet dangling off the edge of the massive tower, looking down at her province below, not doing anything?

It was obvious, really. To her mind, the ends justified the means when the means were so incredibly reversible.

Lefie wouldn't think so. It didn't matter the practicalities, the end result, the cost-benefit analysis.

To Lefie, Riza wasn't a monster.

With a heavy sigh, she looked at her own hands. Their imperfect, calloused skin. The dainty fingers. The strength she could feel when she clenched her skin.

She wanted Lefie to be right.

Looking over the side, directly into the cloudy abyss below, Riza took a breath, and slid herself forwards, falling.

Falling.

Falling.

She just doubted that she was.