

## Chapter 85: Consequences

Darkness.

A man gasped. A sharp inhalation of breath as air filled his lungs like a baby taking its first breaths outside the womb.

Light illuminated the room as he opened his eyes, taking time to adjust to the sudden luminosity before it gradually calmed down. A singular everlight torch extruded from the rocky wall, looking as if the wall had grown around it. Its orange glow bathed everything in the room.

The air was cold and frigid, his skin covered with goosebumps. He could even see his breath.

The room was empty, and small. From where he was sitting, he could see three walls, two corners, and both the floor and ceiling just a few strides in front of him. There only other thing there was a chair, directly in front of him.

And sitting he was. Once he became cognizant of his position, as he muscles started to ache from the uncomfortable alignment, he moved instinctively for relief, and found none.

His hands pulled against taut rope bindings, unable to break free. The strength he so adored failed him. He started to breath faster.

The reason the room was so cold became clear; he was devoid of clothing, utterly naked. Bare feet touched the ground, his buttocks in contact with the uncomfortable stone chair, wrists tied up before.

A shiver ran through him and not just from the temperature this time. He felt like death.

Finally, he lifted his heavy up, stretching out his back and straining to see.

Footsteps. From right behind him. In all his panic and confusion, he had ignored his senses; the breathing, the thumping of a heartbeat, even his ability to sense a general presence had all failed him in the moment.

Air got caught in his throat as the figure revealed itself before him, walking around and sitting itself down on the other chair.

Riza. That bitch.

Indignant rage fired through his veins as the man pulled and pulled at his bindings, failing to break them. His muscles even began to tire of the effort.

“This? What have you bound me with? What magic is this?” He asked rapidly as his mind ran through his knowledge of magical items.

The woman leaned forward and slapped him. Hard. The sound resounded in the tight room, his cheek stinging with fire. His head whipped around from the incredible strength. His health definitely fell from that.

“You don’t get to talk,” She snapped, echoing his words he had said right back at him.

All that rage and anger was quickly replaced with confusion and befuddlement. *That hurt?*

It didn’t make any sense.

Before his mind could linger on it any more, it ran.

“You don’t realise what you’ve done; kidnapping me. You can’t get away with this. The Empire will find me. They’ll send Enforcers after you. You won’t survive this.”

Riza, however, didn’t seem to care. Her facial expression didn’t change, still carrying that look of disgust.

She leaned back in her chair, like she was in no danger at all.

“When I killed you, I felt nothing,” She began, the man feeling nothing but complete confusion at those words. *Killed?*

“I was expecting to feel *something*, after all you did to me. But I didn’t. I saw your smoking body and it was just that; a body. A corpse.

“And then it hit me; why I felt nothing. Because, for some odd reason, in my mind, I treated you like a demon. Just another obstacle in my path, something I can kill without thought or remorse. Killing you is a *good* thing, my brain said.

“But I’ve talked with demons. I know why they do what they do, why they attack humans. There’s nothing personal about it. Simple *Darwinism*. It’s how they reproduce. When a demon attacks me, I know it’s not because of something I did or even who I am. I know it’s the same logic and thought that I use when I hunt animals for food.

“But with you? It *was* different. It *was* personal. You *hated* me,” Riza said the words with such contempt and vitriol the man felt his stomach go cold.

“And I didn’t know why. I still don’t.”

“Like it’s not obvious,” The man spat out, looking Riza straight in the eyes with a hard stare. He swore he could see her flinch for just a second.

“Shut up! I order you not to say another word!” She shot up out of her chair as she spoke and the man wanted to say something.

He even opened his mouth.

And nothing left it. The air got strangled in his throat. Odd, croaking sounds were all he could make as words after words decompiled on the journey out.

That was when the fear well and truly set in. An inkling that had been burgeoning throughout this entire conversation. Trapped, alone, naked. It was a scary situation but he was *Death*. He had suffered through worse.

But not this. That bulb of fear blossomed outwards as Riza’s words settled in and all his muscles and brain failed him.

He pulled against his bonds even harder, feet pushing him up off the seat but still constrained to the area, completely unable to free himself.

The croaks devolved into throaty growls as words of indignation and threat and annoyance failed to actualise.

A light laughter filled the room, drowning out his struggles. He turned his head to look at Riza, at the smile on her face.

“I order you to raise your right arm,” She said, demonstrating with her own.

And he did. His arm, out of no volition of his own, pulled against the wrist bindings with all of its strength as it struggled to raise itself.

She cackled even louder as the pain became evident on his face. They were tightening, chafing his wrists, and his muscles pulled something out of place with a ‘pop’.

“You can stop now,” And he did, much to his relief.

The man sank to his seat, whatever previous energy he had, gone. His head fell before him, so heavy he couldn’t even keep it up, as he stared at his bare feet.

Riza leaned forward—leaned right into him, even—as she placed a hand on his thigh for balance and grabbed his hair with the other, raising his head to look her in the eyes.

“That’s right. I’ve trapped your soul in your decaying husk of a corpse. And I’m not about to let you go.”

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The chair had fallen over. Blood splattered the ground profusely, pooling around the bloodied and mangled head of Death as he lay there, dead.

In Riza’s hand was a torn-out eye, crushed under her strength and with the optical nerve attached. Her hands were so completely red you couldn’t even see her skin anymore, like she was wearing red latex gloves.

She threw the remains of the eye off to the side, where it bounced and rolled to a mushy pile with the rest.

Dave was with her, and so was Sanders. Both of them initially didn’t want to help but after a little convincing with Daven, and a small order to Sanders, there they were, helping.

It was the technique they had used on Riza. At only level 5, Death could withstand a decent amount of damage but Riza easily killed him by ripping out the eye and crushing his skull. That was where the pair of them came in.

[Senescence] restored Death’s head to its complete form, along with an uncrushed skull and both eyes intact in their sockets. Sanders ensured he’d remember all the pain from having his eyes ripped out, just like Riza did.

It weirded Riza out slightly that both of their skills still worked on the dead. Initially, she wondered if it was because he had just died but when she used [Heal], that didn’t do anything.

Once they were done, she shoed them off once more, to wait out in the corridor, and raised Death once more.

The man gasped like a goldfish as he came to, spitting up blood. Riza let he flail on the ground, still tied to the seat, before pulling back up into an upright position.

“And you’re back,” She said, leaning over him.

“Y-you...” Death said, struggling to get out any words. His voice was heavily strained and weak, even though his stamina and health were full.

*No healing to emotional damage.*

“Have you had enough?” Riza asked with a light, almost playful tone. She put in no effort to hide her enjoyment of this.

“Fuck! Yes! Just stop. Just please stop.” He cried, blubbering like a fish out of water. The tears and snot were mixing together on his face horribly.

“Hmmm,” Riza said, tapping her chin as if in deep thought. “No.”

Her thumb depressed his skull in and instant as she grabbed his head, her right hand shooting forwards and drilling into his eye socket, ripping out another fresh eyeball.

A blood-curdling scream of pain rang out.

\*

When Riza had arrived back at the nest, Lefie wasted no time in expressing her happiness that she was okay. Anxiety had apparently been eating up at her, even with all the messages sent between them, and the girl did not leave Riza’s side for the entire day.

After all that travelling and riding on the back of demons to speed up the journey, the first thing Riza wanted to do was sleep but, unfortunately, far too many things had happened in the meantime.

For one, Daven went straight back to work sealing up the tunnel they had just used. At present, it presented a huge liability to their security and needed to be dealt with.

For Riza herself, she needed to be brought up to date on the negotiations and, thankfully, she could breathe a huge sigh of relief after hearing how Andreyia had conducted it all.

Further details were hammered out. The Empire was sending someone from further West to negotiate; from the Seat of the Regent itself. That showed they meant business.

But such high qualifications and from so far away meant it’d take time to get here. A week’s worth was projected and a couple of days had passed since, leaving a few more days until the auspicious day itself.

Initially, Riza had wanted the negotiator to be alone and with no levels. A complete non-threat. That apparently wasn’t feasible and some concessions had to be made.

For one, he was travelling with a small entourage. One of these included an aeromancer, which apparently sped the trip up by quite a bit for the negotiator was travelling by boat. Every city in the Empire was settled next to a river which meant the fastest way to travel between cities was by water.

There was also going to be a Protector along with the Negotiator, in case they stumbled upon any deadly situations. And this was a Protector from the heart of the Empire, not out here on the edge. Based on what Adewyn had said, that meant they were likely stronger than most would assume.

Andreya, in turn, was most intrigued when Riza began laying out what she had experienced.

The anti-magic effect of the attack was apparently a known bit of collateral damage, although Andreya had never experienced it herself, and the Dominion actively tried not to proscribe builds that could achieve it.

As it turned out, Riza had likely dealt irreparably damage to the forest. Such a strong attack infused the area with overwhelming lightning essence that it completely suffocated any other aspect from even existing. It would take decades to even centuries for it to return back to normal.

As Riza listened, she couldn't help but compare the situation to radiation fallout from a bomb or nuclear power station failing which then gave her an idea.

*Todo: test the effect of lead or thick concrete on magic.*

The collateral damage turned out to be the least interesting thing that had happened; when Riza showed Andreya the reanimated corpse of Death, she was frozen to the spot, too stunned to speak.

Lefie asked who he was and Adewyn answered for her.

"Death. You killed him."

"I did," Riza answered calmly. "He's not impressive anymore, though. When I bring him back, he'll be level 5 like all the rest."

"So he's just another body for you? Ethically sourced this time?"

"Even better. They'll recognise him. His armour's a bit destroyed," Riza commented, tapping one of the many holes in his chest plate. "But they won't know he's no longer who he once was. We dress him up nicely and just have

him standing there, there's no way to know he's not at Enforcer-level strength anymore."

"What are you suggesting?" Andreyka asked, sounding just a tiny bit horrified.

"I don't know yet, but we shouldn't hide him. Maybe even bring him into the negotiations, to show a greater threat to not accepting a peace treaty; real, hard evidence that anything they throw at us will just make us stronger." Riza said excitedly.

"He's the one who killed me?" Lefie added, to which Riza nodded.

A soft thunk reverberated through the man's greaves as Lefie kicked his leg. She winced from the pain, hopping away.

"That's what you get!"

"There is no peace after death with you, is there?" Adewyn asked, sounding nowhere near disgusted or upset at the notion.

"Being a servant of mine will be the least of his troubles."

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"It's just so different from the forests, and even Litchendorf!" Lefie exclaimed, enthralled by the builds surrounding her.

Riza was walking with her and, after seeing that there was nothing that required her immediate attention, decided to explore the city that would, hopefully, soon be hers.

"And what is it even made of! I've never seen a material like that before," Lefie said, staring at the red and brown brick construction. For a foreign, medieval city, it felt surprisingly familiar to Riza.

"It looks like they're bricks. I think they're made of clay and-Holy shit, is that a tram?" Riza had started to explain, only to be cut out by the sight of a metal box car coming right towards her.

The straight grooves in the otherwise cobbled road were suspicious at first but this all but confirmed it. That, and the overhead wires which the tram was currently connected to, no doubt drawing current to power its engine.

The pair of them watched as it came to a stop at a station marked with an amusingly primitive sign in comparison. Before Lefie could even say anything, Riza had grabbed her hand and whisked her off towards it.

They managed to reach the little tram before it started moving again and Riza took a good look at it. It reminded her of ones she had seen from photos of the past, a small, boxy canister made of metal. The windows were the clear glass she had seen in the buildings around them and the thing lacked a door, leaving it open to the elements.

Hurriedly, Riza jumped on and waited an embarrassingly long time before the driver before realising they didn't have to pay anything.

As soon as they stepped in, there was a noticeable shift in temperature. The cold, cool air suddenly felt like stepping into a sauna and Riza could see numerous, red stones embedded in the roof, emitting a red glow typical of essence.

"It's warm," Lefie commented, removing her hands from her arms.

The seats looked odd; they were plush and comfy but would fit far better in an old, historical building than a modernised tram like this.

Everyone else around them were also highly unusual and, amusingly, Riza's clothing that was meant to help her blend in was what made her stand out.

The traditional, hand-made clothes she was wearing were everyday wear in all the villages she had been to but here, everyone was wearing something that wouldn't have been that strange to see from Riza's world. Ancient clothing.

Without Lefie by her side, it would've been easy to convince Riza she had simply gone back in time rather than to a whole other world.

Lefie was excited, and hugged the window seat as the tram moved on. She started down at the road moving beneath her, then up at the buildings passing her by. She commented on every little interesting thing that she saw, and Riza did her best to tell her what little she could.

As she sat there on that tram, a smile slowly crept onto her face at the normality of the situation. It felt so familiar and... comfortable.

They weren't just the only tram on the tracks either; Lefie nearly screamed when the other ones showed up, gradually quieting down as it became obvious just how many there were. It was like you couldn't go a whole minute without seeing one.

*What does it say about home when Rensenfeld has better public transit than it?*



Although the rest of the passengers kept looking at the pair of them, none of them said anything or made any kind of commotion, content to just let them be.

Whenever the tram came to stops, a bell would ring and the driver would announce where they were. Most of the information was useless—street names and locations wholly unfamiliar to her—but this one wasn't useless.

She grabbed Lefie and hopped off with some other passengers, coming to a stop on a large hill.

Behind them was the rest of the rich, affluent district, where high technology resided. There was a clear hold-over of Ancient technology both her and in Trotton; likely how these cities even formed in the first place.

Both were high up, partially built into the mountain ranges the cities sat on. Maybe the Ancients used these places as research stations? Perhaps there were more bunkers underneath the ground?

Whatever the reason, these districts contained an abundance of Ancient technology, from the lamp posts and trams, to the platform right in front of them.

It was large, capable of containing numerous wooden carts if needed. The whole thing was flat metal, incredibly shiny as it reflected the cloudy sky above. Sitting in one corner was a man, distinctly not dressed in Ancient clothing and thus marking him as a mere plebian of society. Before him was a plinth housing a few buttons and levers.

Riza and Lefie stepped onto the platform, with a few other people. The man checked behind them before pressing a button, and four red lights on all four corners suddenly illuminated.

A kerchunk was heard as the heavy turning of gears resounded below, suddenly shaking the ground they were standing on.

Lefie squealed and hurriedly grabbed onto Riza for support.

The platform started to move. It began sliding down a diagonal slope, descending into the rest of the city.

On both sides were buildings and trees and footpaths, all of which essentially created a canal through which the platform travelled.

The whole thing reminded Riza of an oversized escalator.

For the whole duration of the journey, which only took about a minute or two, Lefie didn't let go. In fact, she maintained a deathly grip around Riza's arm, ushering them to stand in the very centre where it was safest.

From there, they had a great view of the city below. And, just like in Trotton, there was a tower. A great, big, black stone tower reaching into the clouds above, situated in the very centre of the city.

*Or is that why the Ancients constantly made cities here? Because of the Forgotten tower?*

Riza's earlier thought came flooding back to her, from when she had first seen one of these. Back then, climbing it was a fantasy; it represented a supreme amount of danger that she just couldn't accept. But now?

She shook her head. *Later. When there's more time.*

The city below was far more like what she expected. The builds were mostly wattle and daub, with some stone thrown in here and there. One or two storeys, again with exceptions.

Interestingly, it seemed there were far fewer abandoned or destroyed buildings than in Trotton, although that didn't mean there were none. Again, on the outskirts, where a large stone wall codified the constraints of the city.

The platform came to a stop of the large slope, smoothly connecting with the ground and the red, flashing lights came off. Passengers started to disembark but Riza had a few questions first.

She headed over towards the attendant running the thing, who at first didn't notice her but then became increasingly nervous.

"Do you get paid to run this thing?" Riza asked without any greeting or introduction, catching the man off-guard.

"Ye-yeah. Of course," The man responded, looking slightly confused at the question.

"Is it enough to live off?"

He nodded. "Like every other job?"

"Is all you do just sit there and press buttons all day?"

“There’s a bit more to it than that. When it’s just passengers, it’s simple, but the moment you add in cargo, there are documents, permissions,” The man began listing things off on his fingers, regaining confidence as he talked.

Riza listened intently as Lefie just watched by her side.

“You need training to do this,” The man finished.

“Thanks,” Riza said, and abruptly turned around.

Lefie thanked the man as well before rejoining Riza.

The moment the pair of them stepped out into the rough, dirt and stone streets, the stench finally hit.

A mixture of human shit, horse shit, and whatever other shit all combined into a foul odour that wafted through the claustrophobic streets and alleyways, a vast departure from the otherwise clean roads they were just in.

Riza gagged and held her nose as she struggled to acclimate to it again.

[Meditate] helped a little, and so did [Heal], but neither drove the smell entirely away.

The rest of the city was like she expected; not that dissimilar to what little of Trotton she had experienced.

The quality of housing, the cleanliness and hygiene of the streets, and construction of the road were all things she immediately began thinking how to improve on.

Interestingly, she didn’t see one person begging and no one looked malnourished, although that was likely hidden by the thick clothes people were wearing to combat the winter chill.

One area she did want to see was immediately around the Tower, and Lefie had no complaints being dragged along behind her; the teen was quite enjoying the sightseeing.

Like Trotton, the Tower was situated in roughly the centre of the city, and housed what seemed to be the barracks and offices of the Dominion and Chosen. The thick jackets and warm clothes were replaced by robes and armour, the houses far sturdier and bigger.

Almost immediately, after Riza had wandered into the area, people were looking at her. No one said anything, nor interacted with her, but she had not gone unnoticed.

That set her heart racing but through sheer will, she powered through it.

*There's no need to worry. Nothing will happen to me now. I'm allowed to be here.* She squeezed Lefie's hand in reassurance, and Lefie squeezed back.

While she was there, Riza thought she may as well talk to their respective leaders, to get a sense for how they operate within a city. It would be pertinent knowledge not too far into the future.

To avoid asking random strangers on the street for directions, Riza instead sent her entourage of flying critters to look for anyone that matched Andrey's description. They flitted in and out of windows, under feet, and through small nooks, before reporting back and leading Riza away.

She was led straight to a tallish building built partially onto the Tower. Like in the affluent district, there was a metal frame housing the building, although constructed with carved stone bricks rather than red ones. It was four storeys tall and tapered, with each storey smaller than the previous.

Walkways proceeded from the first three levels, connecting to other buildings nearby like a cobweb of footpaths while the tippy top was isolated.

It was not wrong to say a crowd was forming around Riza at this time. Everyone knew this building, after all.

The heavy, wooden door was unlocked.

The ground floor was quite ordinary, reminding Riza of that inn she had stayed in. There was a foyer containing a desk of which behind sat an older gentleman, with greying sideburns and a squarish head. He was balding on top and made no effort to hide it.

His bushy eyebrows raised slightly at the pair's intrusion, but didn't move his eyes away from the book that was open on his desk.

"All skyways are open. The fourth floor is closed for a meeting," He announced laconically, not paying them any further heed.

Riza gave a small nod.

“It’s a bit plainer than I expected,” Lefie commented, letting go of Riza’s hand to look down one of the corridors. “For where the leaders work from, it looks like just another building.”

“We haven’t seen the top yet. Come on,” Riza replied, walking towards the stairs.

The next two floors were similar to the first. Nothing that interesting outside of being a collection of hallways and doors.

It was when they had gotten to the fourth floor that they found themselves in a small, windowless landing at the top of the staircase.

A door stood before them, barred with metal and requiring a key. No noise could be heard from the other side, not even muffled voices.

*That’s odd. I thought they were here.*

Tentatively, Riza gripped the door handle and tried pushing it open.

Locked.

*Do I want to intrude that badly? It’s a rather poor first impression.*

She shrugged internally, letting go of the handle.

“Are we not going in?”

“It’s locked. We’ll come back when they’re free,” Riza explained, walking back down the stairs.

She was not prepared for what awaited her outside. Whatever stragglers that had initially watched her walk in had now grown to an actual decent sized crowd, waiting for her to return. They formed a semicircle around the building.

A group of men, and one woman, were separate from the circle, clearly having walked forward.

Instantly, Riza was on edge. She gently nudged Lefie behind her.

*There’s five of them. Three wearing armour, two in robes.* She began analysing.

“Can I help you?” She asked, voice shaky as she tried to disguise her nerves.

A man stepped forward from the group, glad in mail armour with a gleaming helmet on his head. He was holding a glaive.

“You think you can walk into our city, acting like you own the place?” A soft murmur of agreement resounded from the ground.

*Shit. Of course there's opposition. Word spreads.*

The man raised his glaive, pointing it at her.

“No one wants you here. You need to leave.” A stronger round of agreement this time.

They were clearly agitated, and raring for a fight.

“A-and if I don't?”

“Then we'll make you leave!”

*They want a fight. Do they seriously think they can win?*

*Even with five, it's impossible. They're out of their depth. I should just go.*

The shuffling of Lefie behind her reminded Riza of her presence.

*But they might not let me go quietly.*

*Plus, this could be an opportunity. Test out fighting people. I'm limited in options if I don't want to kill them; [Leech] is out of the question and fog is quite lethal. If only it was misty...*

*And a show of strength. Show them there's no fighting their way out of this situation.*

“Stay behind me.”

“Are you actually going to fight them?” Lefie asked incredulously.

“Don't worry. I won't kill them.”

And with that, Riza stepped forward, not even withdrawing her knife.

“If it's a fight you want...” She said, looking at the ground to build confidence.

She raised her fists, adopting what was most definitely an incredibly incompetent fighting stance.

“Well... come on!”

The man with the glaive charged instantly, sliding to a stop and swinging quickly.

Riza was not prepared; the curved axe head slashed at her forearm as she hastily moved to block, digging an inch into her skin before she used a maximised [Heal] to mitigate the damage.

*They're trying to kill me!*

An arrow came out of nowhere, hitting her in the shoulder with surprising force, forcing her to take a step back from the shock of it all.

The next attack was a rogue icicle, aimed right for her head. This time, she could dodge it, ducking down as soon as the hairs on her neck stood up in warning.

The glaive came smashing down on her back, knocking her prone as she muffled a scream of pain.

Even with her constitution reducing damage by 120, the attacks were still strong enough to hurt.

Riza grunted as she rolled away, swiftly hopping back up onto her feet.

A woman had joined in the melee, slicing at Riza's feet with a sword as soon as she stood up.

Riza narrowly avoided that, hopping just in time, and quickly reoriented herself.

*I need to power through it. Finish it quickly.*

She could only see three people currently; the man, the woman, and the robe just behind them.

She launched herself at the closest, throwing her body towards the woman who quickly raised her shield.

A sword came swinging it, slicing through to Riza's collarbone.

She ignored it, the pain red hot in her mind but ultimately meaningless.

Riza grabbed at the shield in a power of strength and managed to rip it away with both hands as the woman pulled back the sword, now coated with a layer of blood.

Riza didn't even bother to heal herself as she grabbed the woman's sword, bare hand on blade. It was much easier for her to manoeuvre in such close quarters thanks to her lack of a weapon.

Riza pulled and pushed, hand on her chest, and knocked the woman prone. Her helmeted head hit the ground with a hard thunk.

Another burning hot sensation ripped through Riza's back, her clothes getting torn as the glaive cleaved onto her spine.

This time she did [Heal], the flesh quickly stitching itself back together, popping the weapon out just a bit.

There was no way Riza could knock these people unconscious; she was too unskilled a fighter to do that without also risking killing them, so she tried the next best thing.

The sword was unenchanted. Regular gear given to foot soldiers. With two hands, it gave barely any resistance to being bent completely out of shape.

From there, the rest of them fell one-by-one. They could deal no real damage to Riza; it was simply inevitable.

A bevy of deformed weapons lay at Riza's feet at the end. She was covered in blood from numerous cuts and scrapes, her clothes torn and rent in sections, but otherwise still functional.

The crowd of onlookers had slowly distanced themselves during the fight, and the general excited atmosphere had diminished.

Riza scowled at them. She couldn't help herself.

She stretched, feeling her bones and joint pop from the sudden exertion. She ached all over. The taste of blood filled her mouth.

She paid her assailants no heed, turning back to Lefie who looked not that concerned with the situation.

"Thanks for not hurting them too badly," She said with a smile as Riza approached.

"Of course. I'm not a monster."