

## Chapter 88: Research

The fire crackled as the firewood was consumed by the flames. The surrounding air was warm and comfy, fighting off the frigid chill all around.

The group, sans the driver, were near the fire in some way or another. Tanniya and Tiffany were sitting by it, soaking up the heat, but Riza, Lefie, and Klannar were a bit further away, doing an experiment.

Riza was practically bundled around Lefie, keeping her warm—as per the teenager’s request—while Klannar was enduring it by himself.

It was necessary for them to keep their distance for a globule of water floated through the air before settling itself in Klannar’s open hand.

It was retaining its spherical shape which meant Lefie was still expending essence on it.

Klannar’s fingers closed softly around it, barely touching, before an ice-blue glow appeared between them, centred on the orb.

“I-I am using [Freeze] at normal power. Which is the twenty *Kelvin* per second one,” Klannar said awkwardly. It wasn’t how he normally spoke, taking Riza’s advice on being detailed and verbalising everything he was doing.

Riza counted out the seconds in her head as she watched the ball slowly start to crystallise and solidify in his hand.

*Ten seconds to bring it down to 0 degrees Celsius. That means the starting temperature was 200. She turned to look at the campfire. They really get that hot?*

“Are you still consuming essence, Lefie?” Riza asked, gently squeezing the girl.

“No. It stopped just before it turned into ice.”

*Interesting. So, her [Manipulate Water] did not consider a ball of ice to be water.*

“Your turn next,” Riza said, and Lefie grumbled.

Lefie wasn’t upset about helping—she was always happy to do that—she was upset Riza had gotten her to spend one of her very precious skill points on [Alter Water], the equivalent of [Freeze]. After all, they already had Klannar so it wasn’t even useful, Lefie objected.

But, in the end, Riza won out. She was convinced these two skills could tell them a lot about how the system worked.

So, Lefie did as she was told. Another ball of water formed within her hand and the navy blue of her water essence glowed softly for a moment, taking another ten seconds to turn the water into ice.

“That’s... strange,” Lefie said at the end, with a furrow of her brow. “I... I’m still using essence.”

To punctuate her point, the ball levitated up from her open palm, floating around slowly just like the water did.

“But, it’s ice, isn’t it?” Lefie asked, to which Riza untangled herself and gestured for Klannar to approach.

The two ice balls were identical to the naked eye. Same size and shape and, upon touching them, same temperature. They were about equidistant from the fire, both with a way boon, and both took ten seconds to form.

And then Klannar’s started to melt.

“Oh no!” He quickly said, panicking, and dropping the ice ball in the mushy ice below. “Damn, sorry,” He apologised meekly.

Lefie’s ball didn’t take too long to do the same, forming back into a puddle of water.

“Lefie, another ice ball. Klannar, use [Manipulate Ice] to control it.”

The ball quickly formed and then froze in Lefie’s hand. Riza watched as the navy-blue tendrils that were holding it aloft disappeared, signalling Lefie’s non-use of her skills.

Ice blue tendrils reached out from Klannar’s hand, becoming weaker and eventually invisible until the same, ice blue glow surrounded the orb.

It rose a few inches into the air before floating over and dropping itself into Klannar’s hand.

*Facts we know: Lefie’s skills can only affect the ice she makes herself. Klannar’s skills can affect all ice.*

*Lefie has observed the ice she made and the ice Klannar made, both starting from her water, so it’s not down to whether Lefie considers only one of them water, which suggests it’s a system limitation and not a personal one.*

*Something about Lefie's ice is different in the eye of the system to Klannar's ice, which is exerted through the freezing skills used.*

Riza set out her hypothesis.

*Next test: get someone else with [Alter Water] and see if Lefie can affect the ice made using that.*

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The air crackled with energy as a tremendous clap lit up the night sky. The lightning struck a lone tree on the mountain in front of them.

Daven shivered from the cold, a warm fury cloak doing its best to keep him insulated from the elements.

Nessy, the demon that she was, didn't seem all too bothered. Even now, after all this time with Riza, he was still freaked out a bit by them.

She was wearing clothes for once. Bits of piecemeal armour covered her body and the gaps were concealed with thick fabric so not even a single inch of skin could be seen. A leather satchel hung around her shoulder.

Daven sniffed and turned around from his travelling companion. He would've preferred someone more personable like Sanders or Meren but she wasn't too bad. Quietness was nice, once in a while.

The everlight torch in Daven's hand illuminated a pair of large, sealed, metal doors embedded into an outcropping of the mountain. Metals tracks like the ones seen in Rensenfeld led away from the doors, and one metal carriage sat idly on it.

Riza would no doubt be excited at the sight of it all but Sanders couldn't quite grasp the implications. Sure, horses weren't involved in moving them but was that really more impressive than *everything* else Riza could do?

A small building sat on the edge of the excavated area, with thick, clear windows and a closed door.

The demon report was somewhere close by—a random hole that had collapsed into the nest somehow. The nearby village believed it was connected to this place, as did the delver who Daven interviewed, but there was no chance of finding it during the night and time was of the essence, as Riza had said.

So, they'd make do with what must've been the main entrance, judging by its size.

"Feel like you can pry open the doors?" Daven nodded towards their target.

"I can try," Nesy replied simply, stepping towards the large doors.

Daven gingerly stepped between the rails on the ground, making his way towards solitary building. He gently used [Earth Shape] to solidify the mud he was walking to maintain his balance, smiling as he did.

It was the little flourishes of magic like this that made him wanting to never go back to a mundane life.

Just when he reached the door, a loud, groaning sound could be heard, the scratching of metal sliding across metal echoing outwards.

Nesy had grabbed hold of one of the doors and was slowly pulling it open, the metal hinges screaming in pain.

Daven stared for a little while, amazed at the physical effort. His magic wasn't shabby but this—extreme show of strength—was what he wanted. This was what he was training to be before the demons had arrived, and he fought them to his death.

A slight slimmer of sadness broke free of his stoic exterior before he shrugged it off and went back to work.

This door was far less secure than the large one, held together by a padlock and bolted from the inside. How were people normally meant to get in? The Ancients were weird.

He tried pulling on the padlock, inspired by Nesy, but even with his better-than-average strength, it held tight, the iron bar as thick as a finger.

Next, he tried something new. Living in a place surrounded by Ancient technology for the past few days gave him plenty of opportunities to practise.

Daven closed his eyes and leaned into [Meditate], expanding his senses, like Riza had said she did. The electricity in the air, the shaking of the ground, it was all amplified to him.

[Earth sense] activated and the ground blew up in his mind. It was everywhere and *on fire*.

But there was more. Absences right beneath his feet, cuboidal in shape and long, must've been extensions of the Ancient structure.

And right in front of him, very faint glimmers of earth stood out. The door, the walls, even the padlock.

Training and pushing his senses even more, he closed off the strongest of them all, the ground beneath his feet, and focused just on what was in front of him.

The almost imperceptible twinkling of earth grew larger and stronger as his mind shifted from to adopt the metal as earth.

Daven opened his eyes, and placed an ungloved hand on the padlock.

*[Earth shape].*

Nothing happened for a second or two, as his mind was adjusting to the still unfamiliar feeling.

A very minor shudder. The quietest of scratches. And then the metal started to *bend*.

It wasn't much, and his essence was dropping quickly as he maximised the skill, but it was happening.

The bar holding the door in place grew and elongated, bending itself out of shape and pulling itself free so Daven could use his hands to remove it from the door.

He dropped the skill, panting heavily at the expired essence.

*Yes!* He screamed internally. It was done. With vigorous glee, he tore the unusable padlock free from the door and threw it on the ground.

*It worked.* The training had paid off. He hadn't even told Riza about this yet, wanting to improve and surprise her with something really impressive.

The massive doors groaned to a close as Nussy let go, one of them fully opened up now. She walked on over as Daven stepped inside the small building, his torch illuminating the interior.

There was a strange, metallic desk stretching the entire length of the room, on the same wall with the window. A chair was set before it, overlooking the sea of buttons and levers and controls.

At one corner was a large cabinet, also made of metal, as well as a locker he had observed in some Chosen facilities in Rensenfeld.

Nessy had joined him inside, looking the place over.

“Do you know what any of this does?” He asked, bending down to look at all the buttons. He knew better than to touch stuff he shouldn’t be touching, but that didn’t mean he lacked human curiosity.

*If Riza was here, she’d know what she was looking at.* She seemed the least surprised by Ancient technology out of all of them. At least, the least unconcerned with how it all worked—she was delighted to find a *tram* in Rensenfeld, after all.

Nessy pushed on past him, the space tight and cramped, and opened the cabinet. Stacks and stacks of rotten and bug-eaten papers filled it to the brim.

The demon had tried pulling one out but it crumbled to dust in her hands.

“Doesn’t look like we can take them back with us?” Daven said, making to leave the room. Nessy quickly followed.

Torch in hand, the large, metal doors were a foreboding presence into the mountain. *What was it trying to keep in?*

The lines of metal from outside carried on inside, the floor still rock and stone inside of plated metal like the quarry they had been to before.

Daven froze. It was small, but sudden. A flaring of attention in his mind. *Demons.* They felt the same as Nessy but far, far weaker.

He thought she might’ve been a distraction but this was good—an anchor, something to compare them to. There was a healthy helping of beast demons within, that he was certain.

But no fog. Not yet. He gestured for Nessy to keep quietly—which, in hindsight, was probably unnecessary—and crept forward slowly.

The large tunnel didn’t take long before descending. Some of it was a smooth slope like a ramp but stairs were carved into the stone, leading down the middle.

Each footfall echoed wildly within the enclosed space, and Daven cringed with each step. With him and Nessy, there was little that could harm them, but it was only the pair of them; best to be cautious.

The fog quickly met up with them, before the tunnel even stopped descending. Daven took a few steps back up before walking towards one of the walls and quickly constructing a wall mount with [Earth Shape] to hold the torch within.

“That’s as far as you’re going, buddy,” He said quietly, feeling a little uncertain about himself.

Nessy watching him silently didn’t ease his discomfort.

He stood just before the fog for a few seconds, taking it all in, gathering his mind.

*Deep breath. You can do this. Riza trusts you.*

Daven took the plunge.

The world went white. And dark. And quiet. Immediate pressure was on all sides as he took step after step down the steps before hitting the bottom. Cold, hard, firm earth.

The world was empty, invisible, before his eyes. He could see nothing.

[Earth Sense] made his vision blossom. The floor and walls were suddenly illuminated to his senses, sparkling with golden light like never before. There was an intrinsic, intuitive feeling to his surroundings, and he could sense the disturbance of dirt around Nessy’s feet as she joined him at the bottom.

It was nothing compared to actual vision, but it wasn’t all bad.

[Earth Sense] compared with that fire at the base of his skull combined to grant him unimaginable sight. Behind him, there were a few demons. Focusing on the feelings, he could tell not only the number of them, but their shapes. A few were bipedal, and one even had six legs and was larger. It brushed against the wall frequently. A greater demon.

And then, in front of them, the tunnel branched off and off as the rails split up, travelling down each forked route. Numerous rooms were carved into the side, of varying sizes.

He couldn’t see the whole of the underground complex, far from it, but a could sixty strides from his location was more than enough to not only know where things were but where he should go as well.

His demon senses extended a little bit further, as it turned out, and a humanoid demon was in his sights.

Compared to the quarry, the population of this nest was laughable. From the entrance, he would've been surprised if it approached a hundred demons strong.

Nessy was right at his back, following him closely.

Tunnel after tunnel, room after room, and the first demons found them. Or, rather, they found the demons.

A gaggle of beast demons, walking slowly down the corridor.

It wasn't even a fight. Nessy saw them before Daven did. Bursts of energy shot out from her. Daven recognised the flavour of essence; it was the same as Riza's. [Leech].

Dead in seconds.

They carried on, dealing with every demon that way. Too fast to even raise an alarm.

And then they found the humanoid demon. It was in an enclosed room bristling with thousands of tiny lights. The dreadful demon babies. An eye demon was there as well, including a greater demon standing guard.

Nessy handled that one as well. Even disguised as she was, the demon knew she was one of them, and so barely reacted when it saw her. It even took a few seconds to react to the skill being used on it and, by then, it was too late.

Nessy broke into the room while Daven watched from a distance. He could sense [Leech] being used but it was far weaker than what Riza could accomplish.

The humanoid demon quickly grew wise to Nessy's efforts, quickly grabbing a greatsword made of stone from the wall and slashing at Nessy.

It was futile; the weapon bounced off her harmless as Nessy landed a punch on the demon's torso, unfazed by the strike.

The battle went much the same. The demon seemed to be built for melee combat but failed to penetrate Nessy's extraordinary defence while she chipped away his health with untrained punches and kicks, in addition to a continual [Leech] Drain.

And then he was dead. The eye demon quickly followed, and Daven activated [Earth Glide] to speed down the corridor and enter the room right after Nessy, a wave of earth in his wake. The speed sent a thrill down his spine.



Cabinets upon cabinets lined the walls, with shelves containing a countless number of boxes filled with papers and trinkets and what not. This, evidently, was a storage area.

Their orders were not only to deal with the nest—which, while not fully completed, was no longer a threat currently—but also to take whatever they could back with them. Riza had gotten an idea about the Ancients and needed their relics.

Nessy quickly filled up her bag and Daven did too, taking whatever seemed important. Riza had placed emphasis on anything with Ancient writing.

Once they were done, the rest of the delve went far quicker, no longer having to care about being quiet.

The pair explored every room they could find. If there was something interesting within, they took it. If it was too large to carry, Daven made sure to remember it so he could recreate it at a later date for Riza.

The remaining demons were incredibly easy to get rid of, barely an inconvenience, and, like that, they were done.

A nest was purged.

They came back the way they entered, Daven making sure to take his torch with him.

He pulled up massive walls of rock, blocking the entrance, and Nessy pushed the massive metal doors closed, sealing the Ancient place closed once more.

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The sun could hardly be seen, obfuscated by cloudy, rain-filled skies above.

Days had passed since Riza left Rensenfeld, the journey elongated by the mud, rain, and cold, seeping into everyone's bones. The driver advised to rest the horses as necessary. [Heal] could've helped but Riza didn't want to give too much away about herself, lest the driver gossiped when they stopped in a village.

The progress was slow-going and much of it uninteresting. They had passed through a couple more villages on the way and the next was as much the same as the previous. Life was simple and repetitive for the common folk. Even demons weren't much of a threat.

No one seemed to care who the Lord was. Most weren't even aware anything had happened in Rensenfeld.

Early on, Tiffany kept tabs on everyone while they were still in range. So far, it was good; Daven had accomplished his mission and both him and Nessy apparently had a valuable haul.

Adewyn's demon turned out to be a false report. There was some sort of albino wolf-monster who was terrorising the cattle, not a demon.

Meren was still travelling to her place but the journey had been peaceful so far.

They were still walking alongside the wagon, Lefie having managed to convince everyone to let her sit in the wagon because she was small enough and light enough it wouldn't be a problem, and Tiffany was walking beside them.

The ground shook occasionally as they neared their destination, whatever it was still happening.

Riza felt like she had been shot in the head.

She froze, falling to the wagon for stability as the pain evolved into an incredible headache that quickly disappeared.

Everyone else stopped, concerned for her as she was sorting through her discombobulated feelings.

And then it hit her; not the feeling again but what it was.

She had felt it once before, something similar.

It was strong. It was demon-flavoured. It was massive.

Suddenly, it all added up. The shaking, the rain storm, and this massive feeling. She was convinced.

*A worm demon. The same type that plagued the quarry.*

And it had passed by right within a hundred metres of them. That was the range of her senses, give or take a couple of metres.

*Shit*, was her first reaction. It was big and it was strong and it was deadly. They may have won at Hotton but it could barely be called a victory with what happened.

Excitement was her second reaction. This was an opportunity. Hotton was in the past; she was younger, more uncertain, weaker. She looked at Tanniya. This time, it would be different.