

Chapter 89: Boring

Riza wasted no time in calling the cart to a stop and grabbing Tanniya.

Whatever the thing was, it was *fast*; they needed to make haste if they wanted to catch up with it. Travelling off-road would be too slow for a horse-drawn cart and Tanniya and Riza were the only people capable of running at a faster speed.

So, Riza grabbed the woman without explaining anything and just sprinted west.

Lefie immediately sent a [Message] and, between lungfuls of air, Riza quickly explained what was going on.

Unfortunately, even Riza wasn't fast enough to catch up with the massive demon, but Tanniya was. Taking inspiration from Lefie, she quickly hopped onto the back of Tanniya and off they ran.

One foot, then another. The wind rushed past them as they ran headlong into the storm, the rain soaking the pair of them.

She was gradually speeding up, Tanniya's feet getting more and more used to the ground, her strength, and her speed. A gentle jog to an all-out sprint and they were moving at a speed Riza swore could rival trains.

There! They were catching up. The intense sensation suddenly burned at the back of her skull again, just in front of them and a little to the right.

By the smallest margin, they were barely faster than the thing. It was moving in a straight line for now, and they were closing the gap.

And then it turned, all of a sudden. The burning feeling blinked out from Riza's head as she frantically tapped Tanniya to direct her where to go like she was riding a horse.

Tanniya slid to a near-stop, muddy dirt piling up at her foot before leaping towards a new direction, abounding across the slick ground.

There it was again. Just on the brink of awareness.

There were no more drastic turns and they were catching up with it. For someone to be able to dig through stone this fast, and that large, was simply incredible. Even the best technology that humans had was only a fraction of the speed.

Tens of metres were closing between them, and it seemed like they were going to be upon the thing in mere minutes. They needed a way to get to it.

It wasn't that far under the surface, Riza judged. Daven wasn't here so there was no way to move the earth out of the way, but then Riza remembered how she had found Tanniya 'renovating'. Maybe they could dig down to it?

And then, out of nowhere, it sped up *massively*. Riza barely had any time to recognise the change in feeling before it had vanished entirely from her senses.

No!

She urged Tanniya onwards, even faster, but it was no use; the demon was far faster than them.

The woman skidded to a halt and Riza jumped off. Tanniya was breathing heavily, and Riza was shocked by the stamina drain.

Running at superhuman speeds is exponentially more tiring, it seems.

"What... What were we even chasing?" Tanniya asked, having fallen onto her butt and taking the time to rest her muscles.

"An elder greater demon. They're gigantic. I think this one was a worm demon. That's how it travelled so quickly underground."

"So that's... It's big. It can put up a fight?"

"Don't underestimate it." Riza said, staring in the direction she felt the demon leaving in.

Is it the same one? Why is it here? The one at the quarry was because there was a massive demon nest there but there's nothing to indicate the same here.

She looked back at the way they came from. The grass was flattened like a steamroller had rolled over it all.

An idea twinkled in Riza's mind.

"We're not done yet. Come on."

Tanniya grunted and huffed but got herself back to her feet and followed after.

They didn't walk far, only to where Riza had lost the demon for good. They were following directly behind it which meant where they were standing should've been directly above the tunnel it had just dug out.

All that was left was getting down to it.

The first thing Tanniya did was trying to grab and pull out large chunks of rock but all she grasped was bunches of mud.

Next, she tried stomping onto the ground. With a raised foot in the air, it came crashing down.

Riza wasn't even standing that close and she felt the ground shake significantly for a moment, the muck acting as a poor shock absorber on top. It was an impressive amount of strength.

Another stomp, and then another. The muddy upper layer had been shaken loose and cleared away, leaving the currently dry but soon to be wet dirt open to the elements.

The cracks were beginning to show and, taking advantage of it, Tanniya reached down and thrust her open hand into the dirt with a powerful jab.

Her bare fingers dug in deep and she grabbed a large chunk of the ground. She pulled out a solid, volleyballs-sized portion of earth, held together with stones and twigs and roots.

Chucking that aside, she kicked at the hole she had just made, sending dirt flying as she deepened it. She kept digging until all the loose soil was now somewhere else and she was standing on the hard, compacted ground beneath.

This was much easier for her to dig through, resembling much of what she already had experience with.

Large chunks of dirt and stone came flying out of the hole, and Riza had to step aside to avoid being hit.

The ground shook frequently as Tanniya got to digging.

Digging a hole was no small feat, even with equipment. All of this paled in comparison to what Daven could accomplish but compared to regular human labour, it was downright miraculous.

“I found it!” Tanniya suddenly shouted as the ground stopped shaking from her work. Riza rushed up to the hole, now a good fifteen or so metres deep. It was frankly astonishing that Tanniya managed this.

But that wasn't what she was called over for. No, instead, at Tanniya's feet, was an inky black void. Or a hole, it could also be called.

“That's the tunnel?”

“I think so. I dropped a rock in and it didn't fall for long. It's very dark, though,” She replied.

Riza looked up at the cloudy sky, unable to see the sun, and frowned.

We've still got time. I think.

“Come back up. Return to the group and grab some everlight. We're going in.”

Tanniya nodded and literally crawled up the side of the hole like a spider. She struggled near the top, where it had quickly turned back to mud, and ended up filling in the hole a bit with her struggles, but eventually made it over the top and back on to solid land.

And, she shot off, running back in the direction everyone else was still waiting.

Riza took the time to send some [Inform]s to Lefie, telling her of the situation. Her orders were for them to carry on to the village but to not do anything proactive. They could defend themselves if they were attacked but mustn't do anything to put themselves in danger and to wait for Riza to arrive.

Riza didn't have to wait long before Tanniya returned, lantern in hand. The flame was burning bright within, although too small to combat the chill. Riza was almost looking forward to being underground again, away from the rain.

I really am a mole person, she smirked to herself.

“We're going to need to widen the hole again. It's a bit covered up.”

“And by 'we', you mean me while you just watch?” Tanniya smiled at Riza's sudden awkwardness before jumping back in.

It wasn't hard to do as she was told, and the hole was quickly widened to comfortably allow someone to slip through.

“Should I go down? Check it out first?” Tanniya called up.

Riza peered down, confirming there was no fog, and gave her assent.

Tanniya dropped down quickly, her lantern finally shedding light down below.

“I see nothing. Just a big, empty tunnel,” She shouted back. “Gonna join me?”

Riza nodded back and then quickly thought about something other than just dropping in.

Let's try this.

As was customary at this point, her [Intrinsic Tank] was mostly filled with fog. She summoned a little bit of it out and then formed it into a solid plank with [Manipulate Air].

Gingerly, she placed her foot upon it and tested it. No issues. Then she stood up and put all her weight on the fog. Still solid.

And then she let go of [Manipulate Air] and immediately fell to the ground as her foot sank into and through the foggy gate.

She tested it with two planks at once and managed to maintain solidity on both. She could even move one but not the other and not fall through.

Finally, she felt confident enough to test it for real.

Walking up to the edge of the hole, she placed one step right above it and stepped onto it. No problems there.

Another step slid around to just below the current one, and she stepped onto that one. All good so far.

She repeated it, slowly, taking one step at a time, as she slowly descended through the air. A few times, she almost lost her balance, having nothing to hold onto, but she caught herself just in time.

Down and down she went, passing through the iris of the hole and into the tunnel itself, finally reaching the ground where she stepped off the floating, white fog and onto the solid stone below.

“Wow. That was impressive,” Tanniya commented earnestly, and Riza smiled shyly. “So, this worm dug all of this?”

Riza looked around. Sure enough, it looked identical to the massive tunnel they had encountered near the bunker. The same type of demon. She nodded.

“You weren't lying when you said it was gigantic.”

Lantern in hand, the pair began walking slowly. As strong as Tanniya was, she was still a regular human when it came to fog, lacking any boons or skills to protect her from it. Without someone with the regular [Cleanse] skill on hand, it was practically a death sentence if they accidentally ran into some down here, so they decided to take it slow.

Riza quickly lost track of how long they walked through. The air was cold and chilly, the lanterns providing their only source of heat and light. Every now and then, Tanniya swore she could see shadows dancing, but didn't know for certain.

Each metre they walked, Tanniya seemed less and less sure of herself when considering fighting the demon.

"If it's this big, then it can destroy villages. I mean, it can even destroy Rensenfeld! How am I meant to fight it? By punching it to death?"

Where before, it was Tanniya walking ahead, now it was Riza striding forth into the unknown. Contrasting their current speed with the worm's, there was no way they were going to encounter it further ahead unless it decided to stop randomly for a rest. Riza was more interested in anything else they might find along the tunnel, perhaps another nest, even?

The tunnel wasn't a straight line. It shifted and curved, climbing up and down. Riza had completely lost track of where they were in actuality, and was just along for the ride at this point.

At some point, after how many hours of walking, they decided to call it quits. It was definitely late by now, and they hadn't discovered anything. Far better to return lately where there was no worry of fog so they could run through it as quickly as possible.

The sprint back was hell on Riza's legs. All that walking had tired her muscles out, and she promised herself not to rely on Tanniya for this section, a promise she swiftly regretted.

But, finally, they found the hole they had made again, thankfully still open.

Now, they were faced with the problem of getting out.

"I could jump up to it?" Tanniya said.

"Could you?"

“I don’t know. I’ll give it a go,” She replied, handing the lantern to Riza and crouching down.

She burst up like a rocket, surprisingly fast, and smashed her head in the ceiling, missing the hole entirely.

Her landing was similarly ungraceful, face planting in the wet mud at the bottom.

“For a first try, that wasn’t too bad,” Riza commented. Tanniya just groaned.

She tried again and again, and, on the fifth attempt, managed to dip her hands into the ceiling and was able to hand from.

She swung her legs before kicking them deep into the hardened roof, keeping them into their small holes.

Like a spider again, she reached and crawled her way out of hole in a stunning display of athleticism.

Riza, thankfully, had a far easier time of escaping. Her fog stairway worked just as well in reverse, letting her climb up at a relaxing rate.

Once she was out and at the top, and she hopped back onto solid ground and sucked the fog back in, she briefly considered the black tower in Rensenfeld.

If I have some free time, I suppose it’s possible for me to try climbing that as soon as I can.

It was *dark*. Without the lantern, you wouldn’t be able to see your hand in front of your face. A cloudy night sky meant absolutely no stars could light your way, and the wet grass and mud squelched disgustingly underneath your feet.

“It’s too late to head to the village. We’ll need to camp out here for the morning.”

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Pelting rain disguised the sound of Meren’s footsteps crunching on wet leaves and loose sticks. For the first time in a while, in her hands, she wielded a spear not made of stone, carved by Daven’s hands, but one made of wood and metal, crafted with skill and competence Meren recognised instantly.

The report said of demons sighted within this very forest. A village was close by and used the forest to hunt and forage, neither of which were very frequent in these winter months.

She stalked through the woods as quiet as a mouse. The demons were problematic, yes, but their presence here could very well mean a nest as well.

Meren held a glistening stone in her hand, carved with intricate details of mysterious magical meaning. Another item looted from Death; these could apparently detect life. Meren didn't know the details except it would be helpful in her mission.

A thin sliver of stone on the item glided impossibly smoothly on the surface as it repositioned itself to point in a direction. It was like the rock itself was malleable and flexible but when Meren touched it, it was as solid as any other stone.

Magic, She sighed.

Following the direction on the stone, she headed further into the forest, the only thing lighting up the way were the remnants of sun percolating through the branches. She didn't have long left before even that left her.

It didn't take long for Meren to catch a glimpse of a white-fleshed creature dancing about in front of her. She hunkered down instantly, hiding within a bush as best she could as she watched a demon dash forward and lunging towards a deer.

It leaped through the air, claws out, and collided with the creature, tumbling to the ground as another demon rushed to join it, quickly tearing into the neck of the poor beast.

But that was it. No more bloodshed. As soon as the deer stopped moving, the demons stepped away. It felt so alien to Meren, watching a predator not tear into its prey for sustenance.

The pair of creatures dragged the body away, and Meren stayed still until they were just barely out of sight.

Stone in hand, she followed quietly.

The hope was that they would lead her to the nest, where the deer would be converted to a demon.

And they did. A pile of leaves near a raised section of the ground. The two of them disappeared within it, pulling the corpse down with them.

Meren waited a little, surveying the area, before deciding to follow them. The hole looked big enough for her to fit through, although it'd be a tight fit.

The crawling and scraping against the walls of the tunnel were uncomfortable but not unbearable, and soon enough, she tumbled and rolled into pure white fog, her eyes quickly adjusting to see.

She was in.

There were no demons in her immediate vicinity but the stone was flicking back and forth, suggesting a heavy population was close—close enough to confuse the pointer.

Meren breathed and carefully got to her feet, trying not to make a sound.

Walking forward, it didn't take very long at all to encounter the pair of demons she had seen outside. They dropped the corpse they were dragging and *screamed*, an unholy scream echoed off the walls.

Rumblings from further within could be heard, and Meren swore the ground shook slightly.

Before the first demon could even close its mouth, Meren's spear came shooting through the air and pierced straight through the ceiling of its mouth, flying out of the other side of its head with bits of brain stuck to the spear.

The weapon embedded itself in the far wall and [Returning Spear] activated, the spear dislodging, bouncing its butt on the ground, and flying in a straight line back towards Meren.

She positioned herself and her hand just right so the spear pierced through the other demon standing in its path, finally ending in the clasped hand of Meren who grabbed it straight out of the air.

Her practice was finally coming in handy.

Already, she could hear the rumble of footsteps echoing down the hall. The nest was alerted.

What followed was a massacre of bloody proportions. As the demons filled the dirt corridors, they made for easy target practice. Meren's enhanced strength further even more by her acquisition of [Perfect Body] meant a single throw of her spear could penetrate through tens of layers of demons in a blink of an eye.

She didn't even need to get herself dirty to kill them.

Finally, utterly exhausting the fodder, the humanoid demon was left. Its guarding greater demon lay dead on the floor, with a hole the size of her head in its head.

After the battle of Hotton, Meren expected a challenge. Little did she know just how strong she had gotten since then.

The humanoid demon was barely even an inconvenience. Its lightning strikes merely energised Riza's muscles, and the near-instantaneous jumping around and fists of lightning failed to stop the inevitable spear tip from finding its target.

And, just like that, the nest was empty. She had killed every last demon residing here and barely broke a sweat doing so.

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"But what if demons actually attacked? That they're in danger?" Riza worriedly asked Tanniya on the way back to the hole.

"For the last time, they're going to be fine. They're both really high level and the worm demon was the thing making those shakes and it definitely isn't there anymore. Calm down," Tanniya once again repeated.

Tanniya was right, but that didn't mean Riza couldn't stop worrying. Toila was renowned for being not exactly dangerous, and with both Lefie and Klannar, there was very little that could affect them.

And, besides, Riza could check Klannar's stats. His health was good and while he had clearly spent a substantial chunk of essence, there was nothing to indicate that was because they were fighting something. Especially after the experiments they had done previously.

So, the pair decided to head back to the hole and chase after the worm; an elder greater demon running loose in Toila was a massive danger they needed to control as soon as possible.

Hopping back down into the hole, Riza climbed up onto Tanniya's back, lantern in hand, and they ran.

Tanniya sprinted down the dirt tunnels as fast as a speeding train. The ground shook underneath with each footstep as she pushed off it with intense might.

In astonishing time, they had made it back to where they had last left off, marked by Tanniya on the wall.

Instead of walking like they did last time, Riza decided to have them travel at a light jog, doubling their speed but not too fast to accidentally stumble into anything.

An hour or so later, they came across the first obstacle in their path: fog.

It was a solid wall, from floor to ceiling, and Tanniya just stared at it for a few seconds as Riza climbed off.

She glanced at the lantern in her hand, and then at the fog, and grimaced slightly.

“We’re going inside that? That miasma?” Tanniya asked, a hint of nerves in her voice.

“Not quite,” Riza replied, walking in front of her.

She brought up a maximised [Manipulate Air].

[Manipulate Air] (10/10)+ -Learned

Manipulate 140m³ of air

20m radius

Cost: 70 es/sec

Only 70 essence a second. That’s sustainable. A bit of [Range Compression] and that can cover the entire area.

With one hand holding the lantern, she thrust her arm forwards, hand outstretched. She closed her eyes and sank into [Meditate], gently adjusting it until essence lit up her senses. A bright, harsh wall of essence bared down on her.

Opening her eyes, she tapped into the skill, feeling each and every metre coming under her control until the totality of the wall was frozen in space under her control.

And then she *pushed*. She walked forward a metre, and the wall retreated that much. The immense amount of essence behind the seal she had made was compressing and compacting.

Another step and the wall moved again, obeying her will.

As she marched forward, the wall moved back as if in fear.

“Wow. That’s impressive. It’s like when Daven does his thing,” Tanniya commented, walking forward to join Riza.

“Yeah, well, it’s going to be slow-going from now on.” Tentatively, she sped up a slight bit, still maintaining control over the wall. Who knew what would happen if she let go. Hopefully it'd just stay in place but if it worked like a spring...

Riza glanced back at Tanniya and bit her lip in worry.

“Keep a bit of a distance, just in case anything happens.”

“Will do,” Tanniya replied, putting her hands in the air and waiting for a few seconds before following once more.

They continued travelling down the tunnel like this for a good while, with absolutely nothing interesting happening. It was just like the rest of the tunnel, except filled with fog.

And then Riza froze. There, on the edge of her senses, were demons. Nothing serious—just a few beast demons—but it was something in a proverbial sea of nothing.

Slowly, she took another couple of steps forward, her senses expanding to include even more demons.

The situation was becoming obvious to Riza; this was a nest. The worm demon had tunnel into a nest. She was partly expecting this.

“There’s a nest up ahead,” Riza whispered to Tanniya, who nodded determinedly.

“What do we do? I can’t... go in,” She gestured at the fog wall in front.

“Nothing for now, but if they come out, kill them.”

Riza took a moment to extend her control, pushing the fog back and putting herself at the maximum distance between where she was and the wall of fog she was controlling. It wasn’t much but at least it was something.

Beast demons. It’s been so long since I did something like this.

Riza dropped [Meditate] and focused her mind on [Leech] in preparation. Damage was set and [Distinguish Life] was applied.

Her feet crept along slowly as she walked closer and closer to the demons. They were no longer in front but a bit off to the side and as she neared, a tunnel appeared in the right wall of this main corridor.

That must be a part of the nest itself.

Tanniya had kept her distance but Riza gestured for her to come right up close.

Next, Riza dropped some of [Manipulate Air] and, to her relief, the fog stayed in place. Now, only half of the tunnel was under her control but she extended the other half to the fog in the nest tunnel and slowly pushed that back as well.

Both her and Tanniya stepped in, and Riza kept an eye on the worm tunnel as she released [Manipulate Air] there. Thankfully, it didn't come rushing in. Riza could breathe a sigh of relief.

The demons were close now, Riza could feel. And there were a whole lot of them. Nothing like the quarry, but certainly enough to indicate the nest was alive.

They walked further into the nest, pushing the fog back like before, and Riza's eye twitched as she felt some demons sense her and rush towards her. The sound of their footsteps echoed down the tunnel as she steadied her feet, and Tanniya prepared herself too.

They didn't come. Sounds of bodies hitting a wall could be heard as Riza sensed the demons crashing into her solid wall of fog.

Disorientated, the demons righted themselves and then pushed back into it, biting and clawing at the wall in attempts to get through.

Riza readied her mind and then dropped [Manipulate Air].

The demons tumbled through it, the unexpected lack of resistance throwing them off, and died instantly to Riza's prepared [Leech]. They didn't even stand a chance.

The rest of the nest proceeded in much the same way, with the amount of demons gradually climbing as more became alert of them and they made their way further into the centre, where the demon concentration was higher.

Finally, a greater demon arrived but even that was disposed of in a second flat.

“It’s insane how you just look at them and they die. It’s like you can cause instant death in anything.”

Riza shrugged at the comment.

Not quite anything.

In fact, the humanoid demon took three seconds to die, so not quite instant either. It had no time to react, Riza’s control of the fog acting as the ultimate barrier in a fight.

“We’ve destroyed the nest. Are we done here?”

“No. Demons are in fact, far more useful in death than in life,” Riza said, crouching down before the corpse of the humanoid demon.

“Can you move some earth to seal up this room?” Riza asked, not even looking at Tanniya.

“I’ll try.”

By the time both the humanoid demon and the eye demon were back alive and under Riza’s command, Tanniya managed to carve out some chunks of rock and relocate them to the entrance. She slathered dirt onto the gaps as best she could.

Finally, Riza dropped [Manipulate Air] and used [Intrinsic Tank] to utterly clear the room of fog. She’d be keeping a constant eye on any fog that seeped in but this was already far easier on her.

“That’s-that’s what you did to me?” Tanniya asked, and Riza nodded.

“I’m... I’m just like them,” She said, and Riza struggled to make out her emotions.

“You’re not just like them. You’re different. You have a personality, your own free will. These are basically just *robots* that do nothing without orders.

“But still...” Tanniya ended it there.

Riza had both the newly raised demons take the requisite linguistic skills and informed Tanniya they were going to be there for a while.

The woman seemed done with moping and spent most of the time helping Riza with teaching the demons the language.

“Can you say hello?” Riza asked for the eleventh time by now and finally, the humanoid demon responded.

“Hello,”

“That’s creepy,” Tanniya shot out instantly.

“What are you doing here? What’s your goal?” Riza got right down to the chase.

“We wait until the other nest is ready,” The demon responded.

“Other nest? Is there one under Edderdorf? Was that why the worm demon was there?”

“Yes. The worm demon makes tunnels connecting the nests.”

“You were told to leave this nest? To go to the one under Edderdorf?”

“Yes.”

“When did you receive the order?”

“Five days ago.”

Shit. The timing is so close to when I gained the city. The demon Lord or whatever is in charge of them must’ve been aware of what was happening. This was orchestrated to time perfectly.

“Did any other nests receive this or a similar order?”

“Yes. Another nest was going to move into Edderdorf.”

“Lefie’s not safe,” Riza instantly said, talking to Tanniya. “We need to head back immediately.”

“But we’re in the middle of-“ Tanniya was cut off.

“We have to! We don’t have any time to waste.”

“Lefie’s strong enough to take care of herself. So is Klannar. This is valuable information. We can’t just leave.”

Riza moaned and shook her head like a child.

“Fine. Fine. You’re right. We need to finish this up quickly.”

She turned back to the demon, who was watching emptily.

“Why were you ordered to move? What was the reasoning?”

“We did not have many demons, nor did we have a way to get more,” The demon gestured around, at the lack of hives or parasites that Riza hadn’t noticed yet. “Our two nests would have combined.”

“There we go. Even if Lefie’s in danger, it’s a weak nest. Nothing to worry about.”

“Where is the worm demon now?”

“Gone. It is making more tunnels.”

“More tunnels? To where?”

“Other nests.”

I should’ve expected that.

“Okay, okay. Are you able to control the worm demon?” Riza asked, on the off chance it actually could.

“Yes. Orders are relayed to the worm demon through the eye demon.”

Riza's eyes lit up at that.

They can order the worm demon about. And I can order them. I can order the worm demon?

That’s huge. I can get it to stop tunnel or attacking or anything!

But this demon doesn’t have authority. Other orders can supersede it; I’ve seen that with other humanoid demons under my control. I can’t keep it trapped somewhere forever without wiping out all other eye demons within range of it.

Just keeping it in one place is a waste, though. It’s big. It’s strong. It’s undoubtedly a high level. That’s a resource I can’t produce yet; levels beyond 25.

I can use that. I need to capitalise on it.

Riza quickly came up with a slap-dash plan. She informed both the humanoid and eye demon to continue operating as normal, except with no demons and no attacking humans. They needed to maintain the illusion that everything was fine.

From experience, this would give Riza a couple of days to a couple of weeks without the demons finding out what had happened to this nest.

They were done here. Tanniya tore down the wall to the room and Riza resumed [Manipulate Air].

The journey back was confusing and hard to follow in the labyrinthian tunnels but they eventually made it back out into the worm tunnel and then out of the fog all together.

Sprinting back, they climbed out of the tunnel and Riza smiled when she saw it was still day.

Good. Time to join up with Lefie.