

Chapter 96: Lord

In a kitchen looking on to the raging fires of the city below, a servant was standing before a table, a silver platter resting on it.

In her hands was a teapot, tilted over and pouring out tea—a moment frozen in time.

A clock rang out, a minute passing by. The rusty metal of the second hand ticked over, chiming the start of a whole new second.

The pot tilted glacially, the tea sliding down the spout like a viscous goo as it fell through the air in slow motion. The surrounding particles were heating up from the contact with the hot liquid.

The stream of tea made contact with the bottom of the tea cup, splashing against the sides as it would now begin to fill.

The clock chimed again, a second having passed.

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Somewhere, out in the city, stood a demon, tall and slender. Its arms split in two and flexed slightly.

Power coursed through its limbs, the world frozen to a standstill as it looked down the street, towards its target.

Riza.

The demon was well aware of what this Skaldian could do. It knew her methods of attacks, and her weaknesses.

Although it lacked eyes, its sense of its surroundings far surpassed that of a measly little beast demon, or even the improved senses of a humanoid demon.

Somewhere, a clock chimed. It was a new second.

It took a step. Its long, curved leg sliced through the air like a hot knife through butter. Its foot made contact with the ground and the cobbled road exploded around it, cracks snaking away from the impact for many metres as small, broken bits of debris began their journey into the air. A small shockwave began to spread.

A depression, a couple inches deep, now encased the demon's foot, but it didn't trap it.

The demon took another step, another depression, another shockwave. It tensed its muscles and pulled its foot back up and *pushed* off with its other foot, powering itself through the air with incredible strength.

A foot landed in front of the other, no longer forming a foot-shaped depression but instead, a small crater. The last shockwave had reached halfway to the buildings on either side of the street now.

And then, the demon began to *run*. Step after step, it sped up, powering down the street with its thunderous feet, shockwave after shockwave left in its path.

It was like the world was frozen in time as the demon sprinted towards its target, her eyes not even having moved an inch.

Tens and then hundreds of metres were covered in an instant, the very first shockwaves now having reached the buildings. Their doors collapsed instantly, windows shattering, wood and stone walls crumbling from the sudden pressure hitting them.

Before Riza could even register what was happening, the demon was before her, with only destruction left in its wake.

An arm reached out, bending unnaturally. The lower hand thrust into Riza's abdomen, its claw-like fingers piercing through her clothes and skin with ease. It sliced through her organs and grabbed the bones of her spine.

With its upper hand, the fingers enclosed around Riza's throat, crushing her soft, fragile trachea.

And then, in an almost lazy way, the demon pulled Riza into the air, reached back, and *threw* her towards the wall of the city.

A clock ticked, another second having passed.

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On a random street in Rensenfeld, two figures stood alone at either end. On one end, a rapidly panicking Riza who was now going through her skills and desperately buying primordial strength skills in the vain hope that she could survive whatever this creature was.

On the other end, a demon standing stalwart, getting a sense of its surroundings. It exuded strength and confidence.

And then, the demon *moved*. One second, it was there, the next, it was in Riza's place, a trench having formed in front of it from the intense, tremendous shockwave and rapidly flying Riza had produced.

In its wake, the houses were flattened to mere piles of rubble. The street was upturned and folded like motionless waves of stone. Dust and dirt coated every surface.

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There it was. Unmistakable.

It was humanoid, but only just. Its legs were curved like a kangaroo's, its arms sinewy and long, splitting in two at the elbow joints for a total of four hands. Its head was completely smooth, with the only imperfection a deformed, crooked mouth that reached across from one side to the other.

And it was tall. Comparing it to the buildings on the street, at least two and a half metres tall, maybe three.

Shit.

Without even thinking about it, Riza opened up her skills and purchased all the primordial strength skills she could. All of her stat points went straight into power, giving her something of a health buffer for what was to come.

And that was all she could do because, the next thing she knew, she wasn't in Rensenfeld anymore.

Wind rushed past her as she felt her body instantly become weightless. The image of the street before her, a demon standing in the middle, vanished just like that, replaced by a swiftly retreating Rensenfeld and grassland that was quickly catching up to her.

By the time she regained her wits, she met the ground with lethal velocity. Her bones shattered on impact as she collided with the cold-hardened ground, immediately kicking up a trench as she bounced, rolled, and then slid the last hundred metres before, finally, coming to a stop, groaning with pain as the bones knitted themselves, the blood poured through her body again, and all her limbs popped back into place as parasite after parasite was consumed.

What the fu-

Before Riza even had time to finish that thought, the demon was before her again. A gigantic dust cloud was thrown up behind it, blocking Rensenfeld from view.

With a cough of blood, she struggled back to her feet, the demon seemingly doing nothing.

Why does everything I fight have to move faster than I can react?

Her limbs and joints ached with pain as she moved, somehow managing to get her bearings and attempt to use [Leech] on the thing.

Except, it didn't work. Not like it didn't work with Death, who was so covered that the skill simply didn't register him as a target. It didn't work because when she tried to use [Leech], the demon was no longer in front of her.

Or, more specifically, she was no longer standing where she used to be.

The world once again became a rapidly moving image as she felt the chill rush of air surround her, the clouds above moving like she was watching a time lapse.

She landed with a crash, digging herself a hole metres deep into a hole as her arms twisted and broke and all air was kicked out of her lungs upon impact.

[Well of Power] [Level up]

[Well of Constitution] [Level up]

[Well of Endurance] [Level up]

[Well of Vim] [Level up]

Riza could only manage a sly smile and a half-hearted chuckle at the notifications, using [Heal] to get herself out of this hole she was now in.

Twigs and stones scraped against her raw, freshly replaced skin as she moved like a zombie—sluggish and uncoordinated.

She fell to her knees once free, coughing up a disturbing amount of blood onto the frost-tipped grass.

I can't keep doing this. I need some help.

“*Andreya, I-*” Riza began to use [Inform] only to be taken off-guard by the demon again, apparently able to teleport.

This time, she didn't instantly get sent flying. Instead, she could watch and feel the demon reel back, see the way its muscles bulged in its arms as if applying a skill, see the tension in its limbs, wound up tight like a spring.

And then, it released. She was sent flying so quickly, concussive shockwaves pummelled her as she sailed through the air, threatening to knock her unconscious.

Rensenfeld was so far in the distance, getting smaller by the moment.

The grassy fields she had first landed in looked so small. The rolling hills she was just at, tiny in comparison to mountains lining the backdrop of Toila.

The next thing she could see was whiteness. Rensenfeld transitioned to plains which transitioned to hills which were all replaced by overpowering, all-consuming whiteness.

Toila was gone. There was nothing to be seen, nothing to be heard, nothing to be felt than the gentle static, the tranquil hum, of fog.

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Her heart was racing. She hadn't been to the forest often, and still didn't know the location of the entrance by heart, but luckily, Harold had come through, opening up a tunnel right on the outskirts she could drop into.

It was tight, and the ground so slanted and gravelly than Meren slid down it as it twisted and turned, landing harshly in a cavern overflowing with beast demons.

She couldn't waste any time; Andreya had implored her to go quickly, emphasising how urgent it was.

Meren's spear whipped around in a flash, slicing through the soft, fleshy bodies of the beast demons before thrusting and throwing the weapon like a boomerang.

It bounced around the room, piercing straight through the bodies and ricocheting off the floors as she culled the demons in great numbers.

As soon as a level was obtained, it was converted into a skill. No conserving strength, no planning for the future; she needed to be as strong as she could in this very moment.

Thankfully, they had a little information on just what they were facing. A demon too fast to see. In a single second, it managed to wipe out a whole street of buildings. It cut Riza off before she could even send two words in a message.

Ordinary attacks wouldn't work; it could just dodge them.

Meren thought back to Death, to the conversations she had had with him. They were few and infrequent but valuable all the same.

She hoped she had just the skill that would work.

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No no no! Riza panicked, flailing around in the air, or fog, as she glided across it effortlessly, the momentum carrying her far.

She knew there was no ground that would catch her, no end to her endless flight unless she did something.

It only took a few seconds for incapacitating terror to resolve itself into mostly-capacitating as her mind scrambled through her skills and focused on [Manipulate Air] to save her.

She tried it once, and the fog went sailing out of her grasp before she could even do anything.

Tried it again, the same thing, unable to focus and solidify it around herself to catch her before it was out of range.

So, next, she upped the range to its maximum amount and somehow managed to twist herself around in midair to look in the direction she was travelling—or, at least, the direction she assumed she was travelling; it was hard to tell considering the pure white void that consumed everything around her, including her own body.

Rapid, hyperventilating breaths filled her body as pulse after pulse of essence left her, hoping just one would work.

Her body folded and crumpled against nothingness, chest compressing and bones breaking and twisting as she began to fall, mind whirring to target the fog just under her as well as the wall.

She landed with a crunch, so enervated she couldn't even shout out in pain.

Her limbs popped back into place and her chest filled with air once more as [Parasite] and [Heal] got to work repairing her battered and bruised body.

I'm safe now. It's okay. I'm not going to fall as long as I focus on the skill. She told herself repeatedly, making sure she did not lose her focus for even a second.

The platform was large, in an attempt to make sure she didn't miss, but invisible, blending into the fog all around her.

Standing out here, hearing nothing and feeling nothing but winter chill, it had an ethereal atmosphere to it all.

She shook her head. *Focus!*

First thing she needed to do was get rid of distractions, to make herself feel grounded once more.

Tuning into [Manipulate Air] once more, she targeted *all* the fog around her and pushed, moulding and shoving it out of the way as her legs and arms and torso suddenly reappeared from under her.

I'm still alive. Still okay. Just... shit.

She looked upwards, sensing the location of the wall she had placed to stop her lateral movement.

I need to keep that there forever. It's the only sign that points me back in the direction of the island.

The island. A hollow laugh left her mouth.

I'm off the fucking island!

Looking around, there was nothing. No sight, no smell, no sound.

Fucking nothing.

She couldn't help but feel a little deflated at the fact.

Her head suddenly whipped around, her eyes focusing uselessly on the fog before her.

I swear... I heard a sound. But no matter how much she kept her ears open, she doubted she had heard anything other than her own heartbeat.

Never mind. There isn't time for that. I need to get back.

Relax. I've done this plenty of times before. Just... one foot in front of the other. A fog platform forms underneath. There we go.

She was now a foot in the air, the multiple times using [Manipulate Air] in such a way filling her with confidence.

Big steps. Let's take it slowly. Don't want to miss my footing now, do I.

One after the other, she slowly began to step away from her platform, sensing the fog wall to her back.

I need a little elevation as well. No doubt, I'm under the island right now.

Being as careful as she was, it was going to take some time for Riza to return. Plenty of time to begin strategizing how to beat the demon.

Her only attack strong enough to deal damage was [Leech] but that dealt damage in one second increments. If the demon managed to escape her line-of-sight before a second had passed from activating the skill, Riza was fairly sure no damage would be dealt.

Which meant, she'd either need to somehow figure out a way to get the skill to deal damage instantly, or somehow manage to avoid it leaving her line-of-sight.

The latter seemed easier than the former. With [Manifold Mastery] and [Seeker Mastery], that gave [Leech] a maximum range of 1,200 metres. If she just got high enough, maybe that would work.

But I'd need to consider the angles.

Using Pythagorean theorem, if I'm the same height I was with Lefie when we fought the worm, that's the distance on the ground would be between 1,100 metres and 1,200 metres. That's still very far.

To move 1,200 metres in less than a second, that's like triple the speed of sound. My ear drums haven't burst so I don't think the demon was going

supersonic when we fought, so [Leech] would be active long enough to deal damage.

But then we get into the issue of damage. That demon was clearly stronger than the worm, which means it has crazy damage reduction—like 90% crazy. I'd need to work some [Range Compression] numbers to see what works.

From the get-go, 1,200 metres is just not viable. 4,000 damage? Pathetic.

1000 metres gives me 190,000 damage, or 19,000 after reduction. The demon's health is likely in the millions, so this would take literally minutes to kill it.

Speed of sound is about 300 metres per second. Let's double that and say 600 metres as the range. That's... 560,000 damage. Or, 56,000. 20 seconds to deal a million damage.

That's workable. If I stay up in the air and they have no ranged attacks, I can kill it like that.

Okay. Plan A, we'll call that.

Plan B will be somehow defending myself in close-quarters so I can compress the range to something tiny and it'll become a battle of attrition, with me being able to get a second here or there of damage in.

Plan C will be figuring out a way to get [Leech] to work without sight. The holy grail of damage, with the likelihood of me managing to accomplish that.

Let's work on plan B.

Riza checked her parasites and was pleasantly surprised to see she still had the majority left.

Wow. This is a lot better than when I fought Death. I suppose this demon can only deal damage in large, infrequent chunks rather than constantly with lightning. We can work with that.

Now, if only I had a way to block the attacks to begin with...

It suddenly clicked in Riza's head, remembering the two times she fought Death and what she had done both times. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

She looked around at all the fog surrounding her.

I could use this.

[Intrinsic Tank] (10/10)+ - Learned

Store and release air inside of you

Cost: 5250 es

Targeted gas: PURE ESSENCE

Proportion of gas: 100%

Final Capacity: 24,114.52 m³

Final Radius: 17.92 m

Intrinsic Tank		Excess Capacity		515.38 m ³
Gas	Ratio	Density (kg/m ³)	Volume (m ³)	Mass (kg)
Nitrogen	0.00	1.25	395.16	493.95
Oxygen	0.00	1.43	98.79	141.27
Pure Essence	0.99	22.84	24,526.67	560,189.14

Fog was compressible and she hadn't reached a limit yet. With all that mass packed into a box just large enough to fit her, that eclipsed the density of even osmium.

Previously, she was able to block Death's spear with the same technique, and able to defend herself from Jupy's powerful [Lightning Bolt]. She was now so much stronger; it would surely be enough to defend herself from the demon.

And then a unique idea hit her—a plan D, of sorts. In theory, if she could block attacks from the demon, that meant the demon wasn't strong enough to penetrate the super dense fog. Likewise, if instead of cantering the fog on her, she instead placed it around, for example, the demon's leg, would that not trap the demon's leg and thus prevent it from moving?

Riza didn't know for certain, but the potential upside was so high she needed to try it.

The only problem was reacting fast enough to actually trap the demon. Ordinarily, that'd be a problem but, somehow, she had managed to

manipulate the fog faster than she could even react in the past, so maybe there was a chance.

Filled with confidence, Riza's steps got quicker and more accurate, transitioning from ginger tapping to a full-on sprint as her usage of [Intrinsic Tank] and [Manipulate Air] became sleeker and smoother, the two skills working in utmost tandem together.

Her strides became bounds and she was practically leaping over rivers of fog, landing on an immediately conjured solid platform only to jump swiftly after.

She was going to kill this thing.

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The demon was just standing there, staring. Their objective was to kill Riza, and she was notoriously hard to kill. Sure, they had thrown her off the island, but who's to say whether that was enough?

So, standing on top of a hill, staring outwards at the ocean of miasma before them, they waited for any sign that their target wasn't dead.

Before they knew what was happening, a sudden force collided with its shoulder, pushing them forwards as ice-cold pain emanated from the wound. Frost instantly began to form and they could feel their joints locking up until they shook off the slowing effect from the obvious ice skill.

They turned around on the spot, watching the spear that had just struck them flying back through the air a significant distance, only to be caught by a Skaldian running from the direction of Rensenfeld. The demon could feel that one's strength—insignificant—and besides it was another Skaldian, somehow even weaker, but with a touch of ice to its presence. The ground was covered in ice around it.

It appeared that the battle was not over.

Taking a few steps towards the pair, the demon observed their responses. The spear-wielder did not falter in its sprint, but the icy one hesitated a little.

In an instant, the demon's mind formed a plan of action and executed it. The grassy hills surrounding them were immediately pummelled by its footsteps, the isolated trees falling over by the concussive shockwaves as grass and dirt were ripped out and sent flying.

The demon was upon the icy Skaldian and grabbed for its neck. So narrow, so fleshy, so weak. A small flex of the hand and it was crushed, just like that. The Skaldian hung limply from the demon's grasp, dropping to the ground as it released the fleshy bag of meat.

Its partner immediately struck, thrusting at empty space as the demon stepped to the side to avoid the attack.

But, somehow, the attack still struck, piercing the demon in the side and dealing irrelevant damage.

The ice was another factor. They could feel the crystals rapidly forming around the point of incision, freezing their muscles quickly.

Batting the remaining Skaldian away like it was nothing but a nuisance, it went flying. The demon scratched at the ice crystals, dislodging them from their side with ease.

They turned around, suddenly sensing another presence.

Leaping through the air, the demon watched as a Skaldian sailed towards them, wielding a large greatsword in both arms.

The demon waited, analysing the creature, seeing the trajectory of the attack. There was no aspect associated with the creature, nothing they would need to fear.

But still, the demon jumped out of the way, the Skaldian crashing into the ground and sending massive cracks through the earth like an earthquake, disrupting the solid ground as it was smashed into separate pieces.

The shockwaves unsettled the demon just for a moment, rushing in as the Skaldian recovered and batting her away as well.

So far, so weak.

The test was not over, for a third—and what the demon hoped was final—annoyance was running towards them from the direction of the city. This time, it had no weapon, like the icy one, but neither did an aspect taint its presence in the world.

Not that it mattered much; the demon would finish off all of these pests and then return to confirming the death of its quarry.

A clock chimed, a second having begun.

Tensing its leg muscles, the demon shot off from the ground, trailing a path of bare, upturned earth in its wake. It was before the Skaldian in an instant.

Except, this Skaldian was unlike the rest, including its target. It didn't remain frozen in time, unable to react. It was... turning.

The demon's fist swung around for a punch, cutting through the viscous air and connecting with the fragile Skaldian's head.

But their fist met only air as, to the demon's amazement, wisps of hair tickled its hand as the Skaldian was suddenly a stride shorter than earlier, having bent their knees to dodge the attack.

Taken off-guard, the demon didn't react in time before the Skaldian's fist slammed into their stomach, pushing them back a few strides as a clock chimed again.

The demon skidded to a stop, fog pouring from its pores as it analysed what had just happened.

It felt... fine. The punch hadn't actually hurt it in any way, but the distance it managed to put between the pair of them was meaningful.

The demon flexed its muscles and stretched its arms. The expelled fog froze in mid-air before being sucked back into its body, its energy levels rising.

This Skaldian didn't wait; it lunged forwards and swung a wild punch towards the demon.

A disappointingly slow punch. Two of their four hands reached up to grab the fist and the arm, the demon's arm flexing from the stress of the grab.

The arm bent and whipped backwards, the demon pulling the Skaldian towards it as one hand shot for the stomach—failing to penetrate deeper than its claws—while the other grabbed its neck.

Only, at the last microsecond, their hand narrowly sailed past the Skaldian's head, their opponent taking the opportunity to land another punch on the demon's torso.

Their skin rippled from the impact, feet sliding backwards along the dirt as their claw was ripped from the Skaldian's stomach, the hands grabbing the fist forced open.

This fight wasn't going to be quite as simple as they thought.

The demon attempted, numerous times, to grab a hold of the Skaldian to throw them into the miasmatic sea, each and every time, the Skaldian narrowly dodged out of the way.

It was gleaming with sweat and the demon could tell exhaustion was seeping into their opponent. It had held up well but its demise was inevitable.

The tide of the battle began to turn as blow after blow began to land on the Skaldian, knocking it back little by little. It grew slower and wearier and then, the demon had it!

Their hands shot out and finally, all four had grabbed a hold of its enemy, restraining her in place.

The demon turned to throw, spinning on the spot and all four hands launching the annoying Skaldian overhead and into the abyss before them.

Only for a spear to come flying through the air, not for the demon, but for the Skaldian, piercing it through its fleshy stomach and altering its trajectory completely.

The weapon rolled and shattered beneath the weight of the Skaldian as they tumbled on the grassy hill, having saved its target from certain death.

It appeared that the battle was not over.

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Bursting out of the foggy barrier, Riza's arms whirled as she fell for a metre or two before gracefully landing on an instantly-conjured platform beneath her feet.

To her back was the endless ocean of fog she had just left. Below her, more fog, for it seemed to curve towards the ocean the higher the fog went, rather than towards the island.

And in front of her, down below, she saw the demon, fighting with a few ant-like figures on the ground.

It's distracted. Excellent.

Hop-hopping from one platform to the other, she began her descent.

The destruction of the battlefield was immense and wide-reaching. It seemed that, with every move the demon took, the earth turned over in response. To be able to move at such speeds necessitated incredible force being exerted.

As she descended, Riza began being able to make out just who exactly the demon was fighting. The erratically flying spear belonged to Meren, apparently keeping her distance. Even so, the spear never missed its mark.

Then, there was Adewyn, charging up swings that affected things further away than the reach of the sword should allow. Visible shockwaves of dust and dirt echoed outwards from her attacks.

And then, there was Tanniya. Somehow, Riza had no idea, she was fighting the thing one-on-one. But she was losing.

Before Riza could even notice what was happening, Tanniya was clutched in the demon's hands and then thrown through the air just like she was.

Except, instead of freefalling into the fog, Meren's extraordinarily accurate spear stabbed straight through the woman, saving her from inevitable death.

It was at this moment Riza finally within her desired range, and used [Leech].

[Leech] (10/10)+ -Learned

Drain 559020 points of health from a living entity

600m range

Cost: 1050 es/sec

The skill *clicked* in her mind and straight away, the demon stopped moving, eating a slash from Adewyn's greatsword like it was nothing.

A second passed, and then another, the demon as stationary as a statue.

And then, it moved. She had only a second or two to react in time as she watched the demon approach her like a stop motion film.

Riza's elevation was no problem. A suddenly-appearing crater right beneath her told the story of how much power the demon could exert with a single jump, and it was now right in front of her. Its arms whipped round, grasping for her again.

Not expecting this, all that Riza could do was drop [Manipulate Air], beginning her fall as her head slid under the demon's hands by a mere centimetre.

The demon, too, began to fall.

Seconds passed in contradictory peace and fear. The air rushed by Riza as she oriented herself, arm and legs tucked in as she made herself as streamlined as possible.

She couldn't take the time to appreciate the beauty of the world so high up.

She was caught off-guard once, but not the next time. Above her, the demon was following, but she was slowly gaining distance. It appeared to not understand how to alter its velocity during free fall.

Closing her eyes a second before impact, she used as strong a [Heal] as she could muster, anticipating the incredible pain. She rapidly twisted herself about, prepared to land on her back and with arms and legs splayed out for maximum energy distribution.

[Heal+] -Learned

Restore 7980 health, 84 stamina, 84 essence to a living entity

Cost: 210 es/sec

All her bones popped out of place, her chest compressing like no chest should ever compress. Stars twinkled in Riza's vision as her brain bounced around in her skull, a searing red headache accompanying it.

And then, it was gone, the combination of [Parasite] and [Heal] limiting her overwhelming nausea to just a second at most.

Without wasting any time, she got to her feet and watched the asteroid that was the demon come flying down after her.

It, too, twisted itself around in the air, preparing for a far more graceful landing than Riza, but she was ready.

Her mind was blaring with intensity, the sheer strength of the creature leaving a lasting presence in her head. She stared at it with cold intensity and, a second before impact, released [Intrinsic Tank].

A sudden puff of fog filled the small crater, the demon crash landing a moment later. The fog immediately converged at the demon's location, compressing and compacting in a flash as Riza pulled taut the strings of essence, holding the fog in place.

A hemispherical prison of pure whiteness was left in the crater, and Riza waited a precious few seconds, fearing for the thing to suddenly stand back up, pushing past the superdense fog she had created.

It never did.

As the seconds ticked by, Riza let out her breath. Her hands were shaky from nerves, and her legs gave out from under her.

Deep breaths. It's trapped now. I can relax a little. She sunk into [Meditate], calming down her emotions.

"Is it over? Have you killed it?" Tanniya asked, the first to arrive. She hopped over the precipice of the crater, sliding down the sloped side as she hopped over towards Riza.

"No, not yet," She replied, in between deep, oxygen-filled breaths.

"So... it's in there, somewhere?" She pointed towards the white yoke and Riza just nodded.

Meren and Adewyn quickly joined them as well, and it was only now that Riza could see just how beaten up they were.

Their armour was near-useless in the fight apparently, all dented and clunky. It was clear the pair of them had thrown away pieces that were now too warped and out of shape to be usable.

They were all bleeding and battered and Meren was obviously nursing a painful arm. Riza gestured for them all to gather around her as she used [Heal] to patch them up as best she could.

"What's next? How do we kill the bastard?" Meren asked, looking between Riza and Adewyn.

"Don't look at me. Clearly, what I'd try doesn't work," Adewyn shrugged.

"It's pretty one-note," Riza groaned as she got up. "It's fast and strong but can't do anything else. As long as it can't move, we should be safe."

Somewhere, beneath all that concentrated fog, Riza could faintly sense the demon, its signal muffled by the pure essence interfering with it. As far as she could tell, it was completely stationary.

"First the worm and now this? What's next," Meren wondered to herself, and Riza didn't want to think of the possibilities.

All they'd need to do is send a demon that can control fog like I can and then it's all over.

She approached the fog and touched it, feeling its unnatural hardness. It was impossibly smooth, like she was touching an alien egg.

"You should all get some distance. I don't know how dangerous this is going to be," Riza said, very gently pushing away finger-sized portions of fog as she began to excavate the trapped demon.

"Are we going to party up first? So we can share the level cap increase?" Tanniya asked eagerly, and Riza shook her head.

"Can't risk it. I'm strong enough to trap it and hopefully kill it *because* I'm not in a party. [Lone Wolf]. Sorry."

Tanniya went to say something else but Adewyn touched her shoulder, pulling her back.

The trio quickly left the boulder as Riza poked and prodded, digging her way into the egg.

All she needed was just one inch of skin... there! It was hard to spot, the demon being the same shade as the fog, but she was sure that was it.

Taking a step back, she focused on that spot, the demon still unable to move as only a fraction of its shoulder blade was visible.

Full power [Leech]. Let's see how long this will take.

[Leech] (10/10)+ -Learned

Drain 1111572 points of health from a living entity

2m range

Cost: 1050 es/sec

There was something strange about skills, and the effects they had on their surroundings. Riza's one other experience with it was with Jupy, and his powerful [Lightning Bolt] arcing through the sky, tainting the world with its essence.

As the first second passed, and then the next, [Leech] dealing millions of damage to the demon who was only receiving a fraction of it, the world began to change before Riza's very eyes.

The ground she was standing on—compacted soil and dirt from the demon's leap into the air—began to vibrate and churn as roots snaked through the earth. Tiny leaves poked up out of the ground and blades of grass reached towards the sky.

And, even further away, beyond the circumference of the crater, where the earth was still and grass remained in place, tall stems with budding flower heads surged upwards, the grass growing longer and thicker.

The seconds passed and Riza could feel the ground shift beneath her, mossy dirt interspersed with blades of grass as tall as her ankle, now. Vines reached out from between rocks, climbing over the sloped sides of the hole. Flower buds opened up into vibrant, saturated petals, the scent of greenery filling her nose.

An innumerable number of flowers shot up, accompanied by bushes and even what appeared to be the beginnings of trees, tiny saplings absorbing the bountiful life essence radiating off from the skill.

The demon was still not dead.

Upturned earth sowed itself. The grass was greener and more varied. The unnatural crater accumulated so much plant life it was like it had been undisturbed for months, or potentially years.

Some of the earliest plants grew brown and grey, bending over weakly as they began to wilt.

Desaturated flower heads fell from their stems, the fibrous plant material too weak to keep them alive.

Dead and rotting foliage began to collect on the floor around Riza as she watched the vegetation grow up and die around her like a time lapse.

It was eerie, like the fabric of time was accelerating all around her.

But death was not the end. From the fertile bodies of dead plants grew new ones, peeking up from the layers of old vegetation were new plants, new bushes, and even newer trees, sprouting up just like before.

The green turned to brown turned to green once more, and Riza was so amazed by what was happening around her that it took her a second to realise that [Leech] had ended and a blue box was floating in her vision.

[Level Cap] increased to 66

