

Chapter 103: Insights

The world shifted to his will. Within this small cave, never escaped his sight.

Stamping his foot on the ground, activating [Earth Sense] in an instant, his mind opened up. Suggestions were taken from Riza, his incessant practise and skill moulding them to use.

The uneven surface of the ground showed itself to him. A thin layer of dust was barely detectable on top, with stationary absences left by his footsteps.

Not a second later, thick, stone walls two strides away extruded from the ground suddenly, curving inwards to create a bubble of protection around him. Above, the stone wall immediately buckled and crumbled in on itself as a cracked sphere of stone crashed through.

Daven frowned, the protective dome subsequently crumbling simultaneously as he got rid of it.

Too weak, he thought. His mind flashed back to the destruction the city had experienced from the Demon Lord, and the recount Riza gave of the fight. As he currently stood, there was no way he would win a fight against the Demon Lord, and he was quite confident even a worm demon was too strong for him.

Which meant he had to get stronger, without additional skills or stats. Walking over towards the wall, he picked up a large chunk of solid metal. It was steel. Daven smiled fondly, remembering the evening where he and Meren had appropriated a blacksmith to make it.

So far, she was the only one he had told about his training to shape not just earth but metal as well. Once he could actually do something with that, then he'd tell Riza.

It wasn't too large a chunk—it had a hefty weight but nothing his years of labour couldn't help him lift—but it was the best that he had.

Placing it on the ground in front of him, closer to the centre of the training room he had caved out, he placed both hands on the metal lump and began moulding it flat, like kneading dough.

Metal was... difficult, compared to earth. Vague memories jumped out at him when he first got the [Earth Shape] skill, how he had to cut out steps little by little with his bare hands. Comparing that to the literal minute it took to make this room showed just how far he had come.

How far he came with earth, however. An issue with metal was the need to use [Earth Sense] in conjunction with [Earth Shape], otherwise, the skill simply didn't consider metal to be 'earth'. Straight away, that hindered his attempts to have metal synergise with [Rocky Carapace] or [Earth Glide].

But that wasn't all. There was something about metal that made it harder to shape, to bend to his will. Probably the same reason why it was so good for weapons, and why the Ancients built everything out of it.

Give it time, he always thought whenever he was beginning to feel annoyed at the slow progress. Practice was everything.

Having finished flattening the metal piece out, he then split it into eight thick, equal pillars and picked them up one-by-one, stabbing them into the ground immediately around him. They couldn't be too far away lest [Earth Shape] wouldn't work on them—another limitation.

Crouching down a little, he closed his eyes and entered a mental replica of the room, mapped out with all its bumps and ridges by a pulsating [Earth Sense].

Expanding [Earth Shape] to encompass both the ground beneath his feet and the rocky ceiling above, he repeated the drill.

Instantly, the ceiling corroded as a boulder peeled away. Simultaneously, earth shot up from around the metal bars, attaching to them as they bent at the top, connecting at a rounded point as all light drained from around him, the earthen walls ceiling him in.

The crash resounded not a moment too soon, the walls around him vibrating with energy but holding. A hint of light peeked through above, the boulder having cracked open a hole as Daven felt tiny bits of rubble fall on him.

But he was okay. Looking up, he could see the exposed metal bars were bent but still holding, even as the earthy flesh between had crumbled from the impact.

It took a moment to take it all down. Daven smiled as he did. It wasn't much, and nowhere close to being applicable in combat, but it was a successful test.

Give it time.

Clearing everything up, his mind exhausted after the exercise, his head perked up as a periodic [Earth Sense] he was training himself to keep on alerted him to an incoming presence.

It seemed... confused. Steps were awkward and wandering, as if not knowing where to go. Definitely not an animal, Daven concluded, and definitely not Meren, since she knew where this place was—a little, private place just for himself.

But he could do better. Drawing upon information Riza had told him, he focused on harder, drawing out those pesky *numbers* she had loved so much. The strides, the disturbance of dust, they told a story. Short gaps between footfalls, indicative of a shortness of stature. Even the wisps of dirt and dust in the air told a story, although he wasn't yet talented enough to read them.

With a tentative conclusion in mind, he wanted to impress her.

"Hello, Riza," He said loudly, his voice echoing down the corridor to the room.

The figure staggered for a second before quickening its pace, rounding the corner as Daven saw a confused-looking Riza appear.

"That was..." She began, cutting herself off as she went to think. With the things that came out of her mouth, Daven could scarcely wonder what was left unsaid.

"I've been practising with [Earth Sense], like you suggested," He shrugged as she walked closer.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Your strides were too short to be anyone other than you or Lefie, and I took a guess that it was you," He answered concisely.

"Smart. I feel bad whenever I ask her to come down here."

"Just look at the views she's missing out on," Daven said, gesturing to the dull, brown, repetitive walls of stone all around them.

Riza smiled briefly but quickly got back on track, explaining that she had wanted to ask him some questions about his death and current life.

Anticipating this was going to be a long and heavy talk, two chairs quickie formed from the ground as Daven sat down, lounging back as he ruminated over it.

It was not as obvious a question as it might've seemed, and Daven was not as dumb as people might've once thought; all this magic and experiences had taught him a thing or two about the world.

About what Riza could do.

She held his life in her hands but there was not one iota of worry Daven had about saying the wrong thing. He knew who this woman was and he knew there was nothing ulterior about her question. She just wanted the answer.

But it wasn't her that made him digest the question thoroughly; it was himself. He hadn't known it at the time, at his rebirth, but ever since then, and after talking it over with Meren, it was evident to him that there was an unspoken mental component to [Raise Dead], and he wasn't talking about Riza's ability to command total obedience over actions.

Something compelled him to like her, to agree with her. When he woke up, he had confused this with happiness, gratitude. He was alive and it was all thanks to her. She asked him to leave his home and his friends to join her in fighting demons, and he agreed.

That wasn't like him; he wasn't a hero. With Meren, it made sense why she had agreed to that. There was always something larger than life about her, like she was meant for more. She pushed through so much to get where she was that it didn't surprise Daven for a second that she was willing to go further.

He wasn't like that, but yet, here he was, just the same.

So, when he thought about his feelings surrounding his death and subsequent life, they were good. He was happy and grateful Riza had chosen him to get a second chance. He was grateful that he was so much stronger than he used to be, that they've actually cleared an entire province of demons and are slowly improving the city with a clinic and whatever else Riza had come up with. He was a part of that.

But how much of that was what he truly felt, and how much was it the skill talking? Were those emotions genuine? Was he even the same Daven if they weren't?

Sanders didn't have much to say on the matter, which was the case for a lot of things with the guy. Whether he was the same wasn't an important question to him. He was here, alive, not dead. He had a purpose. That was good enough for him.

So, once Riza was getting anxious over his silence, Daven finally spoke.

"I don't trust whether I'm happy or not. [Raise Dead], it... it fucks with my head. I look at you and I see a leader, someone to trust, someone to obey. It's a compulsion at times, whenever you order me to do something. I *feel* content, happy, but how much of that is actually me feeling that?" Daven said.

"Sanders didn't seem too happy," Riza commented, her tone neutral.

"That wasn't why he... did what he did. When you brought him back and told us we were going to kill demons, he would've been happy about that, even without the skill getting involved. He liked having a purpose in his life, and he liked when that purpose was helping people. Eventually, I guess, he stopped believing that whatever we were doing was worth it," Daven said with a regretful tone, hand idly carving grooves into the arm of the chair.

"Andreya had warned me about it. She mentioned that resurrections did things to people's minds. Made them irrational."

"The souls of the dead," Daven interjected, remembering many conversations he had had. "Daven said they talked to him," He vaguely shrugged.

"I've used [Raise Dead], [False Life], [Resuscitate], and even [Resurrection] but nothing has happened to me! Why Sanders?"

He had thought about this discrepancy himself before, and only one answer made sense to him.

"Do you believe in souls?"

"Huh? I have to. It's literally how [Raise Dead] works," Riza answered, sounding a little confused.

"I don't think that's true. When you had me and Sanders learn how to use [Heal] to cure thirst and hunger, that's when I began thinking about it. The way you use [Heal], and the way you tried teaching Sanders how to use [Resuscitate], it made me realise that your magic is soulless.

"When I got [Heal], it told me how to use the skill. It seemed basic at first but once you start thinking about it, it was talking about the soul. All of it. There's no other way to interpret that skill. But when you talked about [Heal], you talked about the body, and energy, about stuff you extract from food and water. There was no connection to the soul there."

Daven could see Riza thinking about what he was going to say next, about what he had drawn from her explaining [Resuscitate]. The same, non-soul mechanics of focusing on the brain, the heart, the muscles.

“Is it really that different?”

“Without the system’s instructions, I don’t think you could be able to teach life magic to anyone,” Daven said, the statement sounding far more like an insult than it actually was.

“That’s... very interesting. That changes some things. And that’s why you think-”

“Sanders changed the first time he used [Resuscitate] overnight. He was somehow quieter, more contemplative, and the way he spoke about you was different. More distant. I think that was the first time he spoke to a soul directly. You’re like how he was before he changed.”

Daven expected Riza to take a second or two to take that in but instead, she replied instantly, speaking quickly.

“Doesn’t that make you wonder if souls even exist? How can I raise someone from the dead without dragging their soul back into their body? If the soul doesn’t exist...” It was clear Riza decided to keep the end of that thought to herself as Daven just shrugged.

“Magic is strange,” Was all he said, and he believed it. Outside of earth skills, he didn’t dare think about how anything else worked.

“Well, after *that* tangent, don’t you feel anything about the fact that I can just order you to do something and you have to do it?” Riza said, getting back on track.

Daven shook his head.

“Not really. A lot of the time, it’s stuff I’m fine with doing and even if it’s not, I know you can probably come up with a reason to convince me,” He explained.

“But still, I’m taking away your free will. Does it not feel *wrong* that you had no final choice in the matter?” The tone in Riza’s voice certainly made it clear that she seemed to think that was the case.

“Wrong? I guess it is, but it never feels that way. Maybe that’s [Raise Dead] making me more receptive to the idea, or maybe I just trust you enough that it doesn’t feel any different to any other decision I make. Or maybe a combination of the two,” Daven said, not being entirely honest. “I’m sorry that I can’t be more helpful.”

“No, no. It’s fine. You were very helpful.” Riza gave him a small smile.
“Thanks.”

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Sounds of construction work echoed loudly down the street. The buildings, stomped into the ground by the aftermath of the Demon Lord’s footsteps, were already being repaired and rebuilt as Riza had wanted.

A small group consisting of Riza, Lefie, Meren, and the Demon Lord animated through [Reanimate] but kept anonymous via a large, sweeping cloak, passed groups of builders hammering timber framing together, cobbling perfectly carved stones, and laying bundles of thatch on roof frames.

Construction was lively, with a lot of work to be done, even days after they had started. Truthfully, Riza had no idea how long it was going to take, and mentally reprioritized her plans to make money.

As busy as the streets were, however, the closer they got to the central black tower, there was an abrupt emptiness of people, demarcated by a line of critters sitting along the ground and hovering occasionally in the air. The rowdy street turned lifeless as the group stepped into the zone Riza had locked off once she learnt what was there.

In the middle of the road, a mere street over from the tower, the stone road was upturned, with large chunks embedded in the half-destroyed buildings lining the street. Dirt littered the ground profusely as a hole deep into the earth presented itself.

Without a doubt, this was how the Demon Lord ascended to the surface, looking like it punched its way to freedom.

Riza shivered slightly at the gross display of strength, remembering the fight.

How is the world even still existing with the power a single individual can wield?

Walking right up to the precipice, a pebble dislodged from beneath Riza’s foot and tumbled down the hole, bouncing off the walls but never reaching a bottom. Looking straight down, she could see the unnatural glow of fog at the bottom, affected by neither the light or darkness.

“That’s a long way down,” Lefie commented nervously, keeping a strong grip on Riza for safety.

“How are we getting down?” Meren asked.

Disentangling herself as Lefie stepped away, Riza didn't so much as flinch in painful anticipation as she took one step over the edge and dropped.

Her mind, subsumed in the soothing embrace of [Meditate], remained calm throughout the fall, counting the seconds that passed as the wind flew by her until her bones groaned as her knees buckled and she slammed her head hard into the ground upon landing, body folding ungracefully from the impact.

Still alive, she thought, picking herself up and wiping off the dirt as she checked her health and rubbed her forehead. *Not even that much health is gone.*

Hearing a rumbling in the distance, Riza acted cautiously, activating [Manipulate Air] as she pushed all the fog away from her to form a thick wall in what she now knew to be the only tunnel connecting to this access shaft.

Down in the depths, she felt her senses expand as she zeroed in on each signal of demon life she could feel. It was positively crawling with beast demons, as well as numerous greater and even humanoid demons, Riza could tell.

It was cold and dark and as she looked up, far down as well. Far, far down, much below the level where she had set up her own nest.

That explains how it remained hidden from us.

Now, to get the rest of the party down. Meren could just jump but Lefie and the Demon Lord couldn't so Riza had to try something new.

[Manipulate Air] (10/10) -Learned

Maximise Mastery: OFF

Manifold Mastery: 3

Seeker Mastery: OFF

Adjusted Range: 10 m

Alteration Mastery: OFF

Final Volume: **660 m³**

Final Cost: **30 es/sec**

Vertical ascension was still slow and even as fit as Riza now was, she still hated stairs.

Fog seeping out of her hands as she activated [Intrinsic Tank], [Manipulate Air] instantly took over, swiping up all the fog as it rapidly formed into a ladder formation, held in place by essence. She thickened it up a little to take her weight but not more than necessary.

Placing one foot on the bottom rung, she started to climb without hesitation, trusting in her skills.

Her mind focused on the interplay between the two skills, absorbing the fog below her and repositioning it above as a five-metre-long ladder climbed with her.

Much better than stairs.

Getting to the top was fast, hopping off the ladder back onto the surface in front of the rest of her party.

“What’s down there? What did you see?” Lefie asked excitedly.

“Just fog, but there’s a ton of demons further in. Even humanoid demons.”

“And it was below us this entire time...” Meren said, almost top herself. “How are we getting down?” She quickly gathered herself.

“It’s safe for you to jump. As for the other time, I’ll take care of it.”

Meren nodded, looked over the edge, looked back at Riza, and hopped in, falling the same great distance to the bottom, where the fog had already reformed to cover up her landing.

“It’s ridiculous that you can both do that,” Lefie commented, a hint of nerves to her voice.

“Come here,” Riza said, wrapping her arms around the slightly trembling Lefie as she stepped the both of them onto a suddenly-appearing foggy platform over the hole.

A ladder quickly formed by the side and Riza commanded the Demon Lord to start climbing down with that, while the pair of them descended slowly through careful steps.

Riza was focusing hard on managing it all in her head but, somehow, she managed to do just fine, gently lowering everyone to the bottom of the pit successfully.

Although everyone Riza had taken with her could see in the fog just fine, she could not. [Manipulate Air] activated, clearing the way forward as they began to walk into the nest of the Demon Lord itself.

Even as far down as they were, the tunnel sloped even further downwards, and the rumbling was getting closer. Riza could sense huge crowds of beast demons without even focusing on it.

It was a veritable infestation down here.

As they walked, Riza stared at the walls around them, their cylindrical nature, and an odd feeling of déjà vu appeared.

And then she realised why, as the fogless bubble around them gradually revealed metal, embedded in the stone. Without realising it, the ground beneath her feet had transitioned into a relatively smooth and straight flooring, as if carved out via machinery.

Just a few more steps, and all was revealed as the giant, open, metallic door came into view.

Another bunker. So that's where it had made its home.

"There's more of these?" Meren asked once she realised the similarity between this and the one she had seen at the quarry.

"I'm not surprised. There's probably plenty all over the Empire," Riza said.

And, now that I think about it, that one was crawling with demons as well. Could it have been...? No, I would've been killed if that was the case. They were also willing to abandon that one which doesn't seem to be the case here.

Looking sideways, Riza could see another pathway heading away from them, shrouded in fog.

Another entrance? Perhaps.

"Let's head inside."

Unsurprisingly, the bunker was crowded with demons but, thankfully, they appeared to obey the Demon Lord the group had taken with them, calming them down and making them docile in the presence of the party.

The opening to the bunker appeared to be a large door of some kind and had clearly been open by brute force. The rest of the interior, however, didn't face the same battery, mostly being intact.

It had been so long since she had last entered a bunker that it felt quite odd, the juxtaposition of the medieval world above and the contemporary world below.

One question Riza had been asking, but didn't have any answers to, was where were the generators for all the electricity above? Electric lights, trams, giant moving platforms—it all had to be powered by something somewhere. Maybe it was coming from the bunker?

As much as Riza wanted to explore every nook and cranny of the place, now was not the time. She pulled out a journal and got to quickly and roughly sketching a map of the place.

If there was a room, they popped into it to record it but never stayed longer than necessary to loosely ascertain its function. Mess halls, offices, bed rooms, all got noted down.

Amongst the more interesting rooms was a hydroponics room that Riza couldn't help but explore just a little bit more. She collected up some notes to be translated, hoping it would help with her farming endeavours.

Unfortunately, even with the reanimated corpse of the Demon Lord with them, its memories weren't there so it couldn't act as a guide. Room after room they searched methodically, recording it all down as they scouted the entirety of the bunker

As they ventured deeper into the bunker, the air grew colder and damper, the familiar metal walls giving way to something unexpected. They entered a room that defied the very notion of an Ancient bunker; shiny, pure-black stones stretched floor to ceiling, forming the base of the massive black tower above. It loomed over them.

The tower facilitated some Ancient design as well, with a heavy, secure-looking metal door locking it away—or, it would've if it wasn't bent beyond form. This entrance was encased in an observation room, glass windows looking in, all usually locked behind another door that was currently lying flat on the floor. Even the sealed room failed to stop [Manipulate Air] and [Intrinsic Tank] from eliminating the fog within the room.

Around it, tables and cabinets were scattered throughout the room they were in. Overflowing with books, papers, and various strange devices, it was like a treasure trove of relics and antiques waiting to be explored.

Riza's curiosity got the better of her, and she couldn't resist the pull of the dark void ahead. As she stepped into the observation room, she was struck by its emptiness; no desks, no tables, no relics. Just an open space demarcating the boundary between the bunker and the tower itself.

But as she took the final few steps forward, finally entering the tower, a sudden pressure bore down on her, causing a sharp pain behind her eyes. Riza stumbled, a hand flying to her head in agony as another clutched at the walls. Her sense for demons flared with discomfort and pain, overwhelmed.

The building had a presence, and it did not want her there.

Breathing heavily, Riza sank into [Meditate], attempting to calm her biological processes.

Slowly, but surely, her heart stopped racing and her headache began to sooth out into just a dull, background thudding.

That's... so weird, She thought, rubbing her eyes.

"You're good in there?" Meren's voice asked loudly once Riza began standing properly.

"Yeah. Don't come in. It does something to you," Riza responded, taking another step or two further inside.

Once the fog was cleared out, the only illumination in the tower were electric lamps hanging from the walls. Wires traced back to the bunker, clearly put up by Ancients and they were still working, just like the rest of the lights in the bunker.

The lights are working but not fans clearing out the fog.

The ground floor of the tower was empty. It was large and wide and, looking up, appeared to taper somewhat. In the centre was a spiral staircase, leading both up and down.

Going down.

Descending into the bowels of the tower, Riza's footsteps echoed through the stairwell. The lamps lining the walls cast a flickering glow, illuminating the dusty steps as she descended further into the depths.

Despite the layers of grime, it was clear that the area had seen recent activity. The dust was disturbed, swept away from the areas where people frequently walked. And as Riza descended deeper, the fog never ceased.

Step by step, she descended into the abyss, the walls stretching endlessly before her. Each staircase seemed identical to the last, causing Riza to lose focus as she made her way down. But finally, after what felt like hours, the stairs came to an abrupt halt.

This was it; the bottom of the tower.

Standing before the opening in the wall on the very bottom level, Riza felt a chill run down her spine. The fog seemed to cling to her skin like a living thing, and she could feel a presence in the air that made her skin crawl.

As she looked outwards, her eyes strained to penetrate the thick mist, but it was no use. The tower was shrouded in an impenetrable veil, and she was alone in the darkness.

Unlike the other towers she had explored, there was no whistling wind or creaking wood. The tower was eerily silent, as though the very air held its breath in anticipation.

Suddenly, the fog swirled towards her, and Riza felt a surge of fear grip her heart. She wished she could turn away, but something compelled her to keep looking.

That's when she saw them. Hundreds of eyes, pulsating with an otherworldly light, stared back at her from the darkness. White flesh surrounded her on all sides, and she could feel the weight of their gaze upon her.

The eyes watched her every move, probing her mind with an insatiable curiosity. She could feel each beat of her heart being observed, each thought dissected and examined, each emotion scrutinised and analysed.

Riza felt exposed, vulnerable, as though she was standing naked before the gaze of some cosmic entity. Her body was frozen in place, trapped in a grotesque dance of stimuli and terror.

Riza stood frozen before the largest eye demon she had ever encountered. Its unblinking gaze bore down upon her, unfeeling and devoid of any hint of humanity. Her muscles were pulled taut, every fibre of her being paralyzed

with fear. Summoning all the fog she had gathered in her [Intrinsic Tank], she unleashed it all, coating the room in pure, blinding white.

As the demon released its hold on her, Riza collapsed to the ground, her knees giving out from the stress. But even as she lay there, free from the demon's grasp, its immense presence lingered at the back of her mind, an ominous presence she knew was just beyond her sight. It was everywhere and nowhere all at once, an eldritch horror that she never wanted to face again.

Only now, as her thoughts slowly returned, did Riza become aware of the other occupant of the room. In the centre of the cavern stood a throne, half stone and half pulsating with disgusting white flesh. Tendrils originated from it, reaching out towards the walls and ceiling like the vines of a jungle. This was the throne room, the heart of the nest where the Demon Lord resided.

If the eye demons in the nests could only communicate with other, nearby nests, then one this massive must've been able to communicate across the entire Empire.

That meant the demons knew for certain Riza was there, that she had usurped the Demon Lord.

She couldn't let them get any more information.

As Riza stumbled towards the wall, her outstretched hand groped blindly through the thick, gelatinous fluid that filled the chamber. Suddenly, her fingers sank into something cold and slippery, and a shiver of revulsion ran down her spine. With mounting horror, she realised that she was touching an eye, its unblinking gaze fixed on her from beyond the fog..

Cringing in disgust, Riza recoiled from the wall, but the liquid clung to her like a living thing, oozing between her toes and clinging to her skin like a second layer.

She shook her hand violently, the goop thankfully flung off as she dried her fingers on her clothes.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath as she prepared herself for what she had to do.

[Leech] (10/10)+ -Learned

Maximise Mastery: 7

Manifold Mastery: 3

Seeker Mastery: 5

Targets: 1

Adjusted Range: 1 m

Alteration Mastery: OFF

Final Damage: **1,112,496 hp/sec**

Final Cost: **1050 es/sec**

Eyes still closed, she used [Intrinsic Tank] to absorb all the fog immediately around her.

Next, she opened her eyes but for an instant, finger on the metaphorical trigger of [Leech].

She was enraptured immediately, her mind gripped tight by the confines of the fear holding her heart.

But it wasn't enough. [Leech] went off, a sudden surge of life essence filling the room as the white flesh shrivelled and the eyes popped out of their shrinking sockets

[Level up]

You have gained 20 stat points and 1 skill point

It was dead, and a weight dropped from her shoulders at that.

Not wanting the body to waste away before she discovered what to do with it, Riza used [Reanimate] on it to keep it in some state of life, making sure to not look at it as she did so.

Looking back the way she had come, the fog disappeared as the staircase made itself known to her once more.

Now, what other secrets do you hold?