

Chapter 67: Edge

“Are there others?”

“Two more.”

The writhing mass of bodies before them reminded Riza of factory farming. Animals huddled so close together they have no room to move, diseases spreading like wildfire. Force-fed to be fat, a lack of care to the animals health or needs.

Part of Riza felt like she should be enraged, disgusted, at these conditions—part of her did shrink back from the sight—but a logical, callous part of her brain acknowledged the benefits of this situation.

The issues of factory farming were practically non-existent; all the demons needed were bodies, and she suspected any diseases barely mattered once the parasites took hold. Modifying their organs to be not only compatible with fog, but to rely and thrive on it surely killed any bacteria or viruses already in the body.

It was cold and cruel but efficient.

“And how long do they take to... breed?” Riza looked away from the pit to Harold.

“One month. Another month until the new ones can be bred.”

Riza nodded her head, turning to look at the farming, breeding demons or whatever they'd call them.

“How do you get more farms? Is all you need these demons?” She gestured at them.

“Yes. Demons and the monsters.” Harold answered.

Okay okay. Not much at all. That's good. Easy to expand.

Growth is non-linear. Population can double with each generation. Rather than making these into demons, we need to focus on expansion. More farms. More monsters. More breeders.

“Do other nests have farms as well?”

“Yes.”

Short and to the point. I like him.

“Do demons travel between nests a lot?”

“Sometimes.”

“How does that work? Who give the orders.”

“We communicate through the eye demons. Nests can request additional demons.”

“What situation would make you need additional demons?” Riza asked.
Maybe this has something to do with Hotton? Surrounding nests were empty while the one in Hotton had five times its regular number?

“Lost too many demons in an attack. Need more power for a potential attack.”

“Why not just close the nest off, seal up the ground, when there’s not enough demons?”

“No need. Safer with the fog deterring than flat ground.”

I suppose that makes sense. You can dig through the ground but no one will willingly jump into the fog.

“Can you ask nests to send demons or monsters here?”

“Need to provide reason for it.”

That option’s off the table. I don’t want things to trace back here. Need to maintain the illusion of normality.

“Do you know where other nests are? Ones nearby?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know every nest location?”

“No.”

A pattern was emerging between Harold and Dave. Neither knew more than they were supposed to. Demons had a lack of natural curiosity, it seemed.

“Nests are connected through underground tunnels, right? They’re all connected?”

“Yes.”

Riza’s brain was running hot, a plan concocting in her mind.

“I can permanently destroy the demon nest,” Riza had said via an [Inform].

She was a bit away from the village, wandering between the trees, keeping her focus on the conversation.

A conversation that didn't seem to be happening. Riza waited for a few minutes, anxiously hoping it would work.

The recipient of her message was Andreyra, Head Steward of the nearby village. [Inform] was one-way, unlike [Message]. Not receiving a reply suggested Andreyra lacked the ability to reply but after what Adewyn had said, Riza suspected Andreyra had the [Inform] skill.

So, if the skill wasn't the issue, why wasn't she responding?

Was Riza just being too impatient? She was far too familiar with texting someone and then waiting hours, potentially days, for a reply. Just thinking about it brought up bitter memories of her parents.

Shaking that worry around, she thought about being more reasonable. What were the limits of the skill?

Range certainly wasn't an issue. At level 10, [Inform] had a 20 kilometre range, definitely far enough. Andreyra also had the skill far longer than Riza did, so it should be a comparable level. Even without boons or additional skills, the distance to the village was only a fraction of 10 kilometres.

Then it hit; Adewyn probably had no idea who sent that message.

Riza barked out a short laugh at the realisation. It must've been quite the shock. She quickly followed up with another [Inform], stating who she was and when they met. As far as Riza was aware, you needed to have physically met the person to use any of the telepathy skills.

“I remember you. I have to say, I am not entirely sure how to interpret your first message.” Andreyra's reply came back, her crisp and proper.

“I have an offer. I can permanently destroy the demon nest in...” Riza trailed off, a bit embarrassed at realising she still didn't know the name of the village. “Your village. You're still there, right?” A tint of worry to her tone.

The reply took about two minutes to come back. Unlike conventional speech, where you hear the words as they're being said, [Message] and [Inform] sent the entirety of the message all at once but only after the skill cut off.

This meant there was a necessary one minute delay between the end of the message and the message being sent, a one minute silence how the skill determined the end of a message.

“I do still reside in Kratten, yes. You say you can destroy the nest but how, exactly? And what would you be getting out of this deal? How do you benefit?” Her tone was serious, her experience evident.

Her confidence slightly flustered Riza as she rehearsed the information she wanted to give and get.

“I can’t tell you my methods. All I can say is that Adewyn can vouch for me,” Riza said, taking a gamble. “And destroying the nest, protecting the villagers, is reward enough.”

The silence stretches between replies were agonising. As soon as the skill cut out, Riza was left with nothing but her thoughts. Did she say the right thing? Was there something she missed? Did she slip up and say something she shouldn’t have?

This reply was taking longer than usual. Riza was pacing with frantic energy.

“Adewyn can vouch for you? You’re talking about a serious topic. I need something more reliable than ‘Adewyn can vouch for me’. How can I trust you?”

She hasn’t confirmed what I’ve said. Is Adewyn out of range to ask her? She may not even be in the province.

“You can’t. But don’t you want to protect the village? “

“Let’s say I believe you, that you can actually destroy this nest. Why tell me? You say the destruction is its own reward, and require nothing from me. Why inform me of this?”

“I need to know how the Dominion will react. Will you leave Kratten once it’s done?”

Another long stretch of silence.

“That very much depends on how it’s done. If others see what you’re doing, they’re going to try to stop you unless I step in. And then, of course, I will need to explain who or what you are, and destroying a nest is practically unprecedented. The Dominion would certainly want to know how a nest under

my purview was destroyed and if I don't have any answers... Well, that certainly doesn't look good for me.

"So, I need to know how you would hypothetically go about this."

Her message carried a force to it, imploring Riza to respond.

"No one would see me. You wouldn't even notice what I'm doing until it's already destroyed. The only difference would be no more demons coming out of it."

"That has its own complications. No one would see you and no one would require a preemptive explanation from me but a nest mysteriously stopping with demon attacks? If I had no explanation for it, I'm afraid the Dominion would only wait so long for an answer before sending in more people to examine the situation."

Damn. It's never that easy.

"I can make sure the nest continues to function. Demons will still attack, but they're weaker with no greater demons. No one would notice a change."

Seconds ticked by, then the minute that would dictate the message had been sent. Then another minute, and another minute.

Riza's pacing wasn't enough to contain her bundled up energy and anxiety; she burst into a run.

Strength coursed through her muscles, explosive power rocketing her across the forest floor. Enhanced and improved, it felt like she was flying, the mental clarity granted from [Meditate] making focusing on her foot placements, the optimal way of moving, a breeze.

The village quickly faded into the background, trees rushing past as she danced and dodged around the obstacles.

The exercise got her heart pumping, endorphins flooding her system. A vague recognition for her surroundings directed where to go. Soon enough, she slid to a sudden stop in front of a half-buried, black stone tower.

We meet again.

Andreya still hadn't responded, and Riza was desperately putting her worries out of her mind. Still, it had only been five minutes.

Curiosity roused action, prompting Riza to step foot through the window, dropping down onto the familiar, circular stairwell.

How far she had come since she was last here.

Practically running down the stairs, the same wall of fog greeted her once more.

Riza drew to a halt, inches away from the miasma of pure essence. Extending a finger, she couldn't help but smile as the finger tipped dipped into the fog.

For a second, there was nothing, then the next, a whirring of sudden wind as all the fog and air in her immediate vicinity spiralled into her hand in an instant, a sudden vacuum forming and air rushing in to fill the space.

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

Store and release air inside of you

Cost: 10 es

Targeted gas: ALL

Proportion of gas: 100%

Final Capacity: 18.68

Final Radius: 1.65 m

She had abundant time to work on this new interface for her [Intrinsic Tank] skill. There was no initiative on the system here; all it was doing was calculations, which were pretty easy.

Default [Intrinsic Tank] had a radius of 20 metres after the [Lone Wolf] bonus. This resulted in a volume greater than the capacity of the skill so to achieve a vacuum, where all the air inside the radius of the skill is absorbed, the radius has to decrease to the point where the volume matches the capacity.

The issue here is that [Range Compression] meant as the radius decreased, the capacity would increase so the radius should also increase which would decrease the capacity and so on. Eventually, it converges upon an ideal number.

So, Riza got the system to run the calculation for a few iterations to find the optimal radius for a true vacuum at whatever essence cost and this was the result.

It wasn't that large a volume—only a tenth the visibility of that granted by [Touched by Essence]--but with another arm held behind her, she expelled all that fog as she took a step forwards.

In, out, in, out. She repeatedly used the skill, walking in a bubble of fog-less air that was progressively pushed further and further down the stairwell.

Eventually, the stone bricks crumbled and gave way to rocky, natural, earthen walls just like the ones that constituted the nest.

In fact, as Riza closed her eyes and focused on her other senses, she got the faint feeling of demons a little way away.

And one right nearby.

She was in the nest.

Was...was that it? She turned back to the stairs behind her, obscured in fog. *Just another entrance underground?*

Whatever this tower was, it was lost to the time. It looked like the stairs continued even further downwards, but rubble and rocks blocked the path.

If her curiosity was strong enough, she could always get Daven to clear it out. See what's there.

It wasn't total silence down here; a whistling of wind could be heard, bouncing off the walls with a resonant echo.

The demon nearby wasn't a regular demon. It was large and stationary, but not a bastion of strength. In a way, it reminded her of the eye demons, and she quickly realised why.

As she walked up to it, she sucked in a portion of fog again granting her a split second glance at the creature.

It was large, filling the entirety of a tunnel that was big enough for greater demons to smoothly traverse. Numerous holes and tubes extruded from its body and it was these that caused her sight to last for less than a second; an immense exhaust of fog blasted out from the holes, filling in the gap Riza had just created, blinding her once more.

She shivered slightly, the lasting impression of the demon one of slight disgust. It was like a molten mass of flesh, poked full of holes.

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

Store and release air inside of you

Cost: 350 es

Targeted gas: ALL

Proportion of gas: 100%

Final Capacity: 557.08

Final Radius: 5.10 m

Her whole section of tunnel blinked clear of fog, allowing Riza to stare at the demon in its entirety.

Stretched taut, bits of its skin felt like it was pulled and pinned to the stone walls.

Small, weak, useless legs lay limp at its base, flabs of flesh hiding them.

Its body shifted as if it was breathing, part of it expanding as if taking in a breath while the other deflated, like a gentle but irregular gust was blowing from behind it.

The whistling of wind was louder here.

In a split-second, Riza caught an idea and decided to execute it.

Gears clunked into place perfectly, her mind dancing through the motions swiftly and with practised ease.

Dropping [Meditate], she expelled the entirety of her [Intrinsic Tank] behind her as she grasped the fog within her hand, [Manipulate Air] stretching across the iris of the tunnel, solidifying it and sealing her off from the rest of the nest.

Then, in front, she watched the demon grow even larger before a sudden and powerful expulsion of fog blasted her, her clothes billowing from the force.

As the miasma threatened to fill her surroundings, she activated [Intrinsic Tank] three times in a row, the feeling of manipulating essence as easy and intuitive as breathing.

Intrinsic Tank		Excess Capacity		115 m ³
Gas	Ratio	Density (kg/m ³)	Volume (m ³)	Mass (kg)

Nitrogen	0.71	1.25	395.16	493.95
Oxygen	0.18	1.43	98.79	141.27
Pure Essence	0.11	22.84	63.05	1440.06

Riza didn't bother doing anything with the next exhalation of air, bathing her in fog once more. Instead, she was focused on the results she had just picked up.

Her intrigue was around the proportion of air which would be fog. This demon seemed similar to the greater demons that generated fog within themselves so Riza was curious if the mixture would be pure fog or not.

'Or not' turned out to be the answer. The demon expelled oxygen and nitrogen at the same ratio as regular air, which explained why Riza had no problem breathing

Fog turned out to be about 10% of the air. Some more testing needed to be done at different places inside the nest to see if the proportions differed. Maybe the farm would have a lower concentration to aid adaptation to the poisonous environment?

"Sorry for the delay; there was a situation that needed handling. If you can truly stop the demons from attacking Kratten, then I believe it's worth the risk. If you can ensure that no one sees you, I can handle the inquiries from the Dominion."

Riza almost lost her balance at the sudden message, clutching the wall to keep herself upright.

The matter had drifted from her mind until now, and she spent a few seconds trying to remember what was said.

"It will be finished before you know."

*

"I-I really miss my stats," Daven said, hunched over, leaning on his knees, as he was catching his breath.

Riza stood up straight, barely taller than him, as she looked out from the lip of the caldera.

It was a straight march from the village all the way over to here, and Daven was really struggling, even with his above-average physique.

“You’ll get your power back eventually,” She reassured him.

From here, they could see Renald’s farm, his fields of cattle, the river that ran alongside and right up to Kratten, and Kratten itself.

It was... nostalgic, standing up here. Taking in this view.

With a groan, Daven shot up, stretching out his back as well.

“Do you need some stamina?”

“I-I’d appreciate... it,” He answered in between huffs.

Riza answered his request, watching his stamina raise in her entity manager until full.

While both Daven and Sanders had [Heal], it was just the base version currently. Everyone who needed essence already had good essence regeneration, so the stamina conference was the only valuable aspect of that skill and it was such an underutilised resource that Riza alone was sufficient to fulfil the stamina demand.

“So... this was the beginning?” He asked, sounding a lot less tired. He had gestured to the vista before them. “That’s the village where you met Lefie?”

A nod.

“How did you even end up here?” He asked, turning around to look at the caldera behind him.

The trees bore the damage of winter; bare branches as far as the eye can see. It was a stark contrast to the sea of orange Riza remembered, and a far sadder sight as well.

The towers, strange amalgamations of black stone and modern metal, stood tall amongst the barren trees. Whereas before, they were mysterious sights of unknown origin, Riza recognised the handiwork of modernity.

The same civilisation that had constructed the bunker was here as well. It looked like they had renovated the towers, suggesting the structures were even older than the bunker. Very odd, but not something to focus on for the moment.

“I don’t know. I just woke up here.”

“Normally, I’d suggest that you spent far too much time drinking but I doubt that was the case here.”

Riza shrugged apathetically. *Not like thinking about it will get me closer to some answers.*

*

Making sure to avoid Renald’s farm, Riza and Daven made their way towards the village of Kratten. With brand new clothes, and much shorter hair, Riza hoped no one would recognise her from a distance.

They crept up close to the village and it seemed to be in a similar state to the last time Riza was here. The outermost houses were still destroyed and uninhabitable and she could still feel the demon denizens below. They were quiet, only a few moving about even near the surface.

While it seemed to not be any worse off, it didn’t look like it was any better.

Skirting around the perimeter, the pair of them looked for some place quiet, and far away from the river so the ground wouldn’t be soaked through and soft.

Finding a nice spot clear of grass, so their random digging wouldn’t look out of place, Daven knelt down on the ground, running his hand along the dirt.

Whatever faint feeling of demons Riza felt were quickly overwhelmed by the sudden and powerful feeling pulling her focus to Daven.

She could see wisps of brown, earthy tendrils of essence seep from his fingertips, pushing apart the ground and gradually shift and mould it to his desired shape.

Before, only the dirt Daven was physically touching beneath his hands were affected but now, these tendrils affect earth an inch or two away.

He’s getting better at this.

And thus, they dug.

*

“So you *can’t* navigate above ground?”

“No.”

Urgh! Riza held her head in her hands, full of frustration. She had spent the past however long it was teaching the demon the language just for this? Daven had even gone off to the village, since he was an unfamiliar face, to procure some clothing to hide the humanoid demon.

“Shouldn’t you have thought of this earlier?” He added very helpfully.

“Yes, Daven. I should’ve thought to ask if Harold could navigate above ground instead of inside the tunnels but I didn’t,” Riza answered, utterly unable to mask her annoyance at the situation.

“Why can’t we just go into the tunnels, then?” He asked, sounding sincere.

“Discretion. If we end up in the tunnels, we either kill the demons we encounter or get her-” Riza pointed at the humanoid demon, one who very clearly used to be female-”to tell them to stand down. Either way risks letting the demons know about our presence.”

“I see.”

What do I do now? Call it off and head back with just one nest worth of farms and demons? Just one humanoid as well?

We can’t go into the tunnels. Too much risk. I need Daven and Sanders to be level 25 before taking risks.

Fuck. Do I-just... She didn’t have any good ideas and looking at Tiffany wasn’t helping.

“Do you have the faintest idea where the other nests are?” She asked the demon, voice dripping with desperation.

“Yes.” Riza audibly gasped in excitement.

“Where?” She rushed out instantly.

The demon raised its arm, pointing towards the east.

“One.” Its arm shifted a few degrees counter-clockwise. “Two.” The next was a large swing of its arm past north and a little west. “Three.”

Three more nests. One and two are away from Kratten while three is on the other side of it.

“We know the direction, now. You can... er, do the thing. Search for demons,” Daven said, prompting Riza to turn to look at him.

“You can do it as well.”

“I’m not as good as you,” He replied, shaking his head softly.

“You can still do it,” Riza said, as if talking to herself. She turned away, looking outwards towards the west.

“We’ll split up,” She began. “Head towards site Two. Walk a bit but then take a break and see if you can feel anything. If you do, tell me and I’ll send a few critters over there as a marker. Understand?”

“So I just gotta stand there and *feel* for demons?”

“Your spirit’s higher than mine. If you get the faintest feeling, tell me, okay?”

He nodded in understanding, looking at Riza one last time before starting on his trek.

Rather than getting started right away herself, she decided to send Lefie a message telling the girl they’d be taking slightly longer than she thought. Hopefully, no more than a day.

“Alright you. Let’s go find some demons.”

*

Darkness, as far as the eye could see. A bright spot of light floated just by her side. It was sharp, intense, and as Riza focused on it, the light softened, coalescing more and more into a recognisable, humanoid shape.

It was smaller than Harold, but thicker and with a torso that was unmistakably feminine. With her eyes closed, Riza wasn’t imaging what Tiffany looked like—bundled up in so many clothes you could barely see her unnaturally pale skin—but, rather, she was focusing on the flow of essence inside the demon.

Whatever this sense was, it was improving. As Riza’s spirit increased, so did the range, and even Daven and Sanders and Lefie could all feel where other demons were.

But none as good as her. A mass of demons was just a blob, and they had a terrible sense of distance.

The first time she did this, Riza had Tiffany run away until Riza could no longer sense her. Her sense of distance deteriorated but it seemed to be a range around 300 metres.

Critters had followed the demon so that when she opened her eyes, Riza could have a visual representation for how far she needed to walk.

By walking past Tiffany for another 300 metres, she could maximise the area she covered.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as easily done as it seemed. The fields were relatively flat near Kratten, taken up by roving cattle or crops but further and further out, rolling hills began to emerge, the grass being broken up by outcroppings of stone and even some trees reached out, tendrils of forest from the caldera.

Daven was somewhere far away. They checked in periodically, making sure they were in range of each other's [Inform]. If they didn't hear a response, they'd head towards each other's general direction until they did.

Even then, a few critters were following Daven just in case.

There were no demons here but that didn't mean Riza felt nothing. There was a general sensation that was hard to describe. As if the world was a boat drifting along a gentle wave.

Undulating and rolling over itself, a push and pull to nature. There was something here, something she could feel, whatever it was.

But she couldn't focus on it for the moment. Opening her eyes, and taking a great big breath of air, she stood up, stretching out her limbs.

Kratten was in the distance, looking surprisingly small.

You don't realise how high up it is until you're up here. Hope Daven's not struggling with this.

*

Three. Two. One. Riza counted down on her fingers, the only light in this tiny tunnel that of a small, burning stick Tiffany was very reluctantly holding.

Daven nodded, ripping open a hole in the rocky ceiling above them. Before fog could pour in, Riza was already handling it, sucking it all in and climbing through like an athlete.

Splitting the room in two, [Manipulate Air] isolated the humanoid demon in a fogless area.

Before it could even react, [Leech], compressed to only a couple metres, killed it in a handful of seconds.

“Drop the torch and both of you come up,” Riza called down quickly.

The wall smoothed out into a slope as Daven and the demon clambered up quickly, getting work.

Warbled, distorted orders were shouted, the demons held at bay slinking off, suddenly lacking all hostility. Daven shored up the walls just in case, sealing the group off in the room as Riza dropped to her knees before the corpse.

Checking her essence, there was no way she could use [Raise Dead].
[Reanimate] it is.

*

“Is this... really... necessary?” Daven shouted, his voice carrying along the winds. All of them were struggling, him and the four demons, to climb up this hill.

The elevation grew sharper and sharper, reminding Riza a bit of rural Wales, until, finally, they crested the peak.

Before them was a sea of majestic white, unspoilt by sunlight or shadows. A pure white canvas of fog.

Daven grunted the last few steps, hunching over as he caught his breath. He didn't see it for a few seconds until he stood up, taking a step back at the sight.

“It's... woah,” He said, voice full of awe.

“How... how is this possibly. There's...” He turned around, looking towards the caldera and beyond. “There's mountains but...” His pointing returned to the fog before him.

“This is your world. This is where you live. A flying *island*.”

“An *island*? I don't-I don't understand.”

“Beyond those mountains, this hill. Beyond the land, there's just... fog,” Riza explained.

The sun was setting, daylight short in the winter months, but the twilight had no effect on the sight before them. It defied understanding. An expanse of pure magic.

Daven was speechless, unable to muster up any more questions or quips.

There was an ethereal beauty to it. *This must be what it feels like, standing at the top of Everest.*

I'm on top of the world. She chuckled lightly, looking down. Not that the direction matter where she was looking.

Could I...?

Riza called forth a bird, one without a parasite. There was no reason to sink into its sight. She sent it flying straight into the fog before them.

Poof. Vanished without a trace.