

## Chapter 82: Vision

“That’s the best you could do?” The man said, not even moving from the attack. “You’re weak. Pathetic. Not even worth my attention.”

To punctuate the end of his sentence, the man stepped off Riza but then immediately kicked her in the side, cracking multiple ribs and piercing her lung as she flew through the air, hitting the ground hard and rag-dolling like a corpse.

She bounced and rolled another few metres, kicking up a trench before she finally came to a stop, barely conscious.

[Heal] solved that issue, the remnants of the pain still fresh in her head.

The man was back on her in an instant, crossing that distance like it was just a hop, skip, and jump away.

With a gauntleted hand, his fingers reached around her throat and dug in an uncomfortable amount as he lifted her limp body off the ground.

“You really are quite remarkable, able to survive all of this. Most people would either be dead or too strong to truly feel the pain that I’m inflicting, but not you.

“You’re worse than that. You hide your soul in pests, prolonging your life while still letting you feel every ounce of pain and suffering I’m inflicting upon you. And I can thank you for that. This wouldn’t be nearly as fun if you were smarter.”

Air whipped by Riza for less than a second, her whole body breaking instantly as a shower of rubble rose and then fell back onto her, a mini-crater made by the slamming of her back into the ground.

She could feel her skull break and compress, popping back out as her brain instantly reformed and her health ticked up the slightest amount by the consumption of a parasite.

Her whole body felt numb to the pain by this point. She spat out blood at her lungs instantly inflated, her ribs bending back into place.

“How long will it take to truly kill you, I wonder.” She couldn’t even see him, his hand blocking her sight.

Her body was practically as light as a feather to him. Riza felt herself being lifted up and then slammed back down, another life lost.

Is this it? Is this how I die? An attempted chuckle turned into a gurgle of blood. It's completely out of my hands. Literally.

Her whole body reverberated with the ground as she was crushed into it once more, her bones breaking like twigs.

The man was talking, probably mocking her, but she heard none of it.

Memories of her past flashed before her eyes. The image of her parents, so stern and strict, was the most prominent.

As soon as she was born, she was a second-class child, forever following in her sister's footsteps. The schools she went to, same as her sister. What she studied, the same as her sister. No choice, no agency.

They had her whole life planned out for her, even setting her up exclusively with 'nice boys' with stable jobs and good connections.

Some part of her felt ridiculous as these thoughts floated through her head as she was quite literally being pulverised over and over again.

And then, it stopped. The gauntlet rose from her face as the blurry world showed itself to her, the man standing before her.

She didn't even know his name.

Groaning out a breath, the man looked almost surprised she was still alive.

"Wow. You really must've tortured a lot of souls to have this many dying to keep you alive."

He nudged her with his foot, searing hot pain coursing through her even with the gentlest thing he's done yet.

Blood surrounded Riza's mouth, covering her face. Her eyes were glazed over, not focusing on anything, even him.

For a moment, the man seemed to falter. He crouched down, bringing himself closer to Riza.

"The depths you went to is truly quite remarkable. All of this," He gestured out towards the forest, towards the mountain. "You caused all of this. Remember that."

Riza's arm rose weakly, barely a few inches off the ground, before flopping back down.

“What are you without your ‘prized weapon’? Just a sack of meat that doesn’t die.” He poked her head, like she was a child. “You’re a leech. Haven’t you ever thought about how ironic it is that you rely on such a fitting skill?”

“Think of all the people you have killed. Hotton? That demon wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for you.

“Do you remember the quarry? All the people who were there? Dead. Slaughtered by the demons who were angered so much by what you did there.

“You’re... acquaintances,” He gestured at the forest again.

“And then, all the demons. All the animals. Everything you’ve killed, siphoning their strength for your own. Was it worth it? When this is how it ends?”

“I’ll do you a favour. I’ll make it so it can never happen again. So you can never be a leech again.”

An overwhelming sense of dread settled with his last sentence.

The man reached with both hands towards her head, the ends of his fingers sharpened to a point. The tips dug into the sides of Riza’s face, her cheeks, as his forms cut a line down across her brows, pressing harder and harder as the pain slowly elevated.

Her vision was eclipsed by his form as she began to press down into her eye sockets, digging in unrelentingly.

And, just like that, it was gone. The man, the crater, the forest. Reality wrapped in on itself, replaced by the drab, brown colours of rocky walls and earthen floors.

A sudden wave of vertigo overtook her as she went from lying on her back to kneeling in an instant. She groaned as she withstood the sensation.

She saw, huddled in an underground, earthen cavern, Daven and Lefie before her.

Her brain was barely keeping up, unable to process just what had happened. One moment, she was out there, fighting. The next, she was in here, feeling surprisingly good. All that pain was gone.

“They’re back. It’s worked!” Lefie cheered. Riza immediately felt the arms around her releasing, only now realising she was being restrained.

Meren stepped into view, crouching down and helping Riza steady herself.

“How are you feeling?” She asked, concerned. Her entire expression shouted sincerity.

“I... Where are we?” Riza spat out, unthinking.

“We’re... underground. In your room,” Meren answered, although sounding a bit unsure herself.

“My... room?” Her brain refused to function, repeating what was just said instead to bide time.

Lefie hopped towards her, falling to her knees and grabbing Riza’s hands.

“Your room. We healed you! You have your eyes back,” She smiled.

“...Eyes?”

Lefie nodded eagerly, her joy so infectious it was beginning to affect Riza.

But [Meditate] dealt with that. Joy was a confusing, confounding emotion right now.

“I...I-“ Riza began but was quickly interrupted by Meren.

“Lefie, something’s not right.”

“What?” The girl looked at Meren, then back at Riza. “But you’re fine, right? You’re okay?” Her tone was insistent.

Words failed her. Riza’s mouth was dry.

“She’s clearly not. We didn’t test the skill enough. Something’s clearly happened; it did something unexpected to Riza.”

Her brain latched onto the word like a fish hook.

“Skill?” Her mind was on autopilot, ignoring all the neurons trying to move her body or understand the situation and instead, opening up the psyche skill tree as she looked for a discombobulating skill.

“Come on. Let’s sit you down,” Meren said gently, holding Riza by her forearms and slowly guiding her towards the uncomfortable block of earth, covered with a blanket.

Once sat down, Lefie quickly joined her side while Meren stood in front of her. Daven was watching all of this but hadn’t yet gotten involved.

“This, fuck, I think I’ve seen this before,” Meren groaned, rubbing her head.

“You have?”

“Sometimes, after a storm, some people are just out of it. Takes them a little while to get their bearings.”

Meren knelt down so she was at eye-level with Riza. Her grip slid down from the forearms to her hands.

“What is the last thing that you remember.?” She squeezed lightly.

“It was-I was...outside. The-the forest was burnt down. I was fighting... someone. He-he hurt me,” Riza visibly shuddered at the memory. “Then-then it was gone. I was here.”

“The man, was he fully covered in armour? You couldn’t even see his skin?” Riza nodded.

Meren sighed deeply.

“Daven. What does the description of [Senescence] say?” She asked without looking at him.

“Er... ‘Alter the age of something by one minute per second’,” He answered.

Meren scrunched up her face and closed her eyes, grimacing at the answer.

“What’s going on? What does [Senescence] have to do with anything?” Riza asked, failing to follow anything that was happening.

Another sigh by Meren. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes and stared at Riza.

“The man that hurt you, that was weeks ago. He blinded you. He...he tore out your eyeballs. [Heal] or whatever other skill you have didn’t bring them back. We tried [Rejuvenate] but that didn’t work so our last resort was using [Senescence] on you.

“We’ve been waiting for hours while Sanders got to work. The skill brought your body back to a younger form, when you still had your eyes. I suppose, it did the same thing with your memories as well.”

Tentatively, Riza’s hand slipped out of Meren’s grasp as she brought it up to her face. Her finger hovered a centimetre over her eye. She closed her eye, feeling the bulbous shape of the organ under the eyelid.

*I'm okay.* The sensation of touch, of pressure, of ever so minor pain, lent some level of clarity to her mind.

She was starting to catch up, [Meditate] no doubt doing a bunch of the heavy lifting.

*Weeks ago. That-that wasn't teleportation. That's a gap in my memory. Like... like sleep. Time passed just like that.*

*I-I can deal with that. That's dealable.*

"Time has passed." Riza said without emotion.

"Yes." Meren nodded.

"That... that man. What happened to him?"

Meren looked at Lefie slightly before answering.

"We don't really know. You didn't tell us much about the fight. You scared him away, somehow. But he's still alive. Andreya says he's probably in Trotton, if he's still in the province."

"Andreya?" Her mind latched onto that familiar name, completely unexpected.

"Yes, Andreya. And Adewyn, too. They're both here." Another deep sigh from Meren. "There's a lot of catching up to do."

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The room that Riza apparently had isolated herself within repeatedly had been redecorated. There were slates, chalk, engravings, all tossed on a table that Daven had quickly pulled up for her.

Tiffany, Sanders, Daven, and Riza were all in there, working away.

Riza couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't think, without trying this first. The lost time, lost memories, ate away at her brain, and she couldn't do anything without doing something about it first.

Sanders and Daven were her assistants in the experiments. [Rejuvenate]. From what Meren had said, [Senescence] was used to turn back the clock on her body up to the point just before she lost her eyes.

The fact that that actually happened sickened Riza somewhat but she pushed past it. No need dwelling on the past. Or future. It was a bit weird to Riza right now.

The important thing was what memories actually were. Sanders seemed to think they were a part of the soul but that was nonsense. Memories were real—tangible, in a way.

Neurons fired in a pattern that encoded memories. Resetting the age of Riza's brain meant resetting her memories but if she could restore her brain and only her brain to the oldest version, everything about it, including her memories, would return.

In theory. Who knew how the magic actually worked but [Heal] had a basis in reality. It interacted with her body on a scientific level so, [Rejuvenate] should do as well.

The only difficult part was parsing this all for Sanders, who actually had the skill.

Tiffany was their test subject. They needed someone who could communicate with them, wasn't strong enough to be a pain to replace if shit hit the fan, and wasn't important enough that shit would hit the fan if they did need to replace her. That left Tiffany.

Daven would use [Senescence] on her and Sanders would use [Rejuvenate] on her brain and only her brain to see if they could affect her memory.

As a side note that Riza really wanted to get into but couldn't right now, [Rejuvenate] could indeed restore lost limbs. The party had tested both skills extensively before using them on Riza, so it was a bit strange it failed to restore her eyes. Maybe it was too long after the incident? Riza shelved those thoughts for later.

For now, she was testing Tiffany's memory. Daven was using [Senescence] to return her brain to a minute ago and she had completely forgotten about what they were testing her on.

It was fascinating, and also annoyingly significant. [Senescence] could also alter the age of something *in the future*. It could make something older. When used to make something younger, it clearly reverted that thing to a previous state. The past was cemented and there was no avoiding it.

But what happened when you used it to age something? If, for example, back before the fight, Daven had used it on Riza, would she be a day older and suddenly lose her eyes?

The question was a philosophical one about free will and determinism. If you aged a baby through its entire life, would it lose limbs, become ill, get tattoos? Since reverting time meant going back through the time already played out rather than generically deaging the cells of the baby, conversely, that would imply aging an entity would shift them to a specific point in the future, where they've already made actions that hadn't happened yet, rather than just generically aging up the body.

It was exhausting, and also kind of scary. The more Riza thought about the skill, the more tantamount to time travel it seemed.

She had even tested it with her journal. Ripping out a piece of paper, she placed it on the table and planned, in the future, to write a message on it. She was definitely going to do regardless of the outcome of the next few minutes.

Then, she got Daven to age the paper up by two minutes. No message appeared.

She wrote a message anyway. Black ink on paper. Daven then deaged it two minutes.

The message vanished.

Now it got interesting. Daven aged it back up two minutes.

Riza predicted one of two outcomes. Either, the paper generically aged up just like it did earlier, or it returned to the point in time where it had a message on it.

The paper was blank.

Both Daven and Sanders had no idea what was going on, and Riza didn't even begin trying to explain to them, but she was stunned. And fascinated.

*So, not time travel. Not really. The past is the past and has already been determined. The skill can return something to a previous state it was in, but the future has yet to be determined, so the skill can't return the object to a state it is in in the future.*

*It just generically ages up the cells and molecules of whatever is affected by the skill.*

Relief washed over Riza. Of all the things she had to deal with in this world, she was so happy time travel wasn't one of them.



But that also meant the skill was useless if she wanted to use it to restore her brain to a point in time where she had all the missing memories.

So, back to [Rejuvenate].

The first tests failed to bear fruit. Whenever Tiffany had her mind erased, [Rejuvenate] didn't bring the memories back.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't work for Riza. When they were testing [Rejuvenate] back when Riza was blind, Sanders even went as far as gouging out a demon's eyes himself.

[Rejuvenate] successfully replaced them.

Riza even had them repeat the experiment with her, but adjusting just one thing to test a hypothesis of hers.

A month was excessive but a matter of days should hopefully be good enough.

They brought in another demon and gouged its eyes out once more. However, this time, Daven aged it up, emulating the passage of time Riza herself had experienced.

[Rejuvenate] still worked, even though the cells were days older and the eye sockets had already started to scab over.

Either, [Rejuvenate] interacted with the real passage of time differently or something else unique in Riza's situation was at play.

And, annoyingly, Riza had no idea what was different but it hadn't actually happened to her. She had no idea what she did in a scenario that never occurred but also did.

All of these distractions and experimentations certainly extended the time but Riza didn't care. It was all valuable information.

They called it a day not long later. Most of the morning had already been devoted towards restoring Riza, and they were all, except for her, pretty tired.

The next day, Andreyra was brought into the research as well. Apparently, she had a decent knowledge of life skills because of her position as a Head Steward.

Did Riza not regret bringing her in sooner.

Her explanation of skills reminded Riza of Sanders, in a way. A lot of it was contingent on souls existing and how they worked. There was an obvious lack of scientific rigour there but Riza did her best to ignore that.

[Rejuvenate], when reduced to what it could do, could generate an extra limb on a person. If a person has only one arm, it gives them one, bringing them up to two. Therefore, it begs the question, what's stopping someone from using [Rejuvenate] to bring two arms up to three?

The answer, apparently, was the soul, although Riza was a little doubtful, especially after her testing with [Senescence]. Secretly, she believed it was more likely the two worked similarly in some way, restoring the body to an older, immutable point in time.

Nevertheless, Riza did her best to listen.

The soul had a shape and a sense of self. If a soul's sense of self included two arms, but the body only had one, then [Rejuvenate] would cure the discrepancy between soul and body by restoring the lost limb.

But souls change over time. If enough time had passed that the person could get used to living with just one arm, then the soul's sense of self would change accordingly as well. At that point, the soul has only one arm, and so the body and soul are in agreement and [Rejuvenate] does nothing outside the health restoration.

None of that contradicted what Riza understood, although she would need further experiments to scientifically understand what the soul actually was.

[Heal] was weaker. It had no interaction with the soul, so Andreyia claimed, and solely interacted with the body. It scabbed over wounds, replenished blood, and restored health. It could fix broken bones but couldn't restore that which is no longer a part of the body.

The time required for the soul's sense of self to change to match the body was all about how large of a change it was. If someone lost a tooth, it wouldn't take very long at all. An arm, however, was a matter of days, weeks, or months.

There were, of course, various factors affecting this. If immediate first aid was given, it was known to reduce the time needed for adjustment.

[Heal] was just a far more extreme example. If someone lost a limb, and then immediately used [Heal], the skin would already start to scab over, the body adjusting to its new situation.

Where adjustment may have normally taken months, it would now take days or even hours, depending on the strength of the skill.

[Senescence] had gotten Riza thinking and now [Heal] had too. [Rejuvenate] was magical, no doubt. Restoring lost limbs from nothing but your own flesh? That regeneration was rare, even on Earth, and totally out of the realm of humans.

But [Heal]? It was like it sped up time. Riza couldn't get the idea out of her head.

After hearing Andreyka talk about this, there seemed to be a consensus around what had happened when Riza first lost her eyes. [Heal]. It helped to dull pain and even just hearing about it made Riza shiver. There was no way she would've endured all that without using the skill.

But the past was the past was the past.

The important question was, could [Rejuvenate] restore Riza's memory?

Andreyka didn't know. Her knowledge barely extended past those skills, and even she wasn't totally sure how they worked. It wasn't like she actually had the skills, after all.

"No more testing," Riza said, hopping down from the table. "Let's just do it. Sanders, use [Rejuvenate]."

He had plenty of experience with the skill to know how to target it. And, with all the murder and destruction he had done and witnessed, he certainly knew what the brain was.

As he approached, a chill ran up Riza's spine. The air felt frigid and cold.

*Let's just hope it works.*

He placed both hands on Riza's hand and looked slightly above her, pressing down slightly until his eyes lit up with a flash.

Riza felt the pull of essence, saw the green tendrils reach into her head.

Time seemed to freeze as sensations and feelings popped into her mind.

At first, it was the crater, the forest, the man. Riza could *feel* his gauntleted hands digging into her eye socket, clawing around behind her eyeball.

Even in a memory, the pain was bright and intense. She felt her muscle give out, all energy draining from her body as a silent scream left her mouth.

The memory, the pain, the vision consumed her, and then it was gone.

Next was the flashes of essence, the borrowing of a critter's senses as she watched Sanders, hunched over a lifeless Lefie.

The remnant pain burned hot within her.

Discussions with Lefie, isolation training as essence revelations revealed themselves to Riza. The expedition to the bunker. What they found there.

It all came flooding back to her. The lost time. The anger. The motivation. Her grand plan.

The swirling energy in her mind finally exploded in passion as she fell to the ground, enervated.

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The restoration and her eyes and returning of her memories was nothing more but a blip on the path of Riza. She quickly worked past it, flourishing better than ever.

All the pieces were falling into place, and she was even making progress on her own skills! The knowledge that came from being blind and reliant upon other senses hadn't disappeared when her sight returned; Riza's connection with essence was still growing.

She continued to hole herself away in her isolation chamber, just practising with skills. Namely, [Manipulate Air]. Alas, after a week or two or periodic practice, she hadn't yet been able to master it, but that didn't mean there were no breakthroughs.

For a while, now, whenever Riza would meditate, she'd feel the essence of the world around her, constantly flowing and revolving like the planet was breathing. Essence did not exist in a stationary state, apparently.

All the practice and meditation and mastering of skills had trained her senses to the point where this inhalation-exhalation of essence became sharper and more focused around her. She could narrow it down, isolate the feeling, and follow it. She could even begin to smell it—like a sea breeze.

She trained and trained and trained, learning to differentiate the different flavours of air essence. Fog was heavy and wet and bright to the sight. It was

abundant and when she turned sensitive to essence, it was the easiest thing to see.

Closing Riza's eyes was all that was required for her to get an immediate sense of her surroundings, by looking at the fog and the absence of it. The table stood out; a void in an ocean. The walls blocked her senses, anything behind a mild static.

Moving her hand through the air was like cutting through water. The fog flowed and was pushed by her limb, and she could trace its movements through the fog alone.

It was limited but it was something.

In addition to this training, she finally had access to all of her skills again and the first thing she did was bring her parasites back up to a comfortable level.

Everything was coming together.

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Within the cold confines of the war room, Andreyra and Riza were hashing out the finer points of the plan. The first few steps needed to be meticulous and impenetrable.

The goal was Rensenfeld. Toila was a mountainous region, perfect for defending. The mountains on two sides and the edge of the island on another meant only one direction of attack from potential enemies above ground; the south, where Droya was.

It was also the safest location in the Empire where demons were concerned. They tended to avoid cities, given their concentration of fighters, and Toila hardly existed beyond Rensenfeld and its satellite villages. When compared with its neighbours, there was hardly a demon presence at all.

They were going to take Rensenfeld.

The Dominion and Chosen stationed there were the weakest of the weak. They were no threat, especially now that they had Adewyn on their team.

Which meant the only obstacle was the Enforcer. Diviners were watching the forest for every moment which meant, as soon as Riza stepped foot onto the surface again, the nearest Enforcer would be rushing towards them. Death.

He'd likely be there within a day or two. If all went according to plan, Jupy would take him down with a single, powerful [Lightning Bolt]. That would hopefully draw out the other two Enforcers, leaving Rensenfeld unguarded.

They'd need control of the political authority of the city, which meant talking to the Lord. It should be easy enough to either convince or kill him and then, Rensenfeld would be theirs.

Hopefully, with as few deaths as possible.

The last thing they needed to do all this was bodies. More demons. After Jupy kills Death, the Empire would learn of his capabilities and the next Enforcer would likely not die to the same tactics.

Hence, the bunker. For being in Moya, the same province they were in, it was amusingly far closer to Rensenfeld than Trotton or the nest.

So, another migration was in order. The whole nest, no exceptions. They'd migrate over towards the land under Rensenfeld which would become their permanent nest from there on.

After that, another invasion of the bunker, for more bodies. Increasing level caps was a secondary concern; they'd have humanoid demons soon enough.

They were finally leaving this place behind.

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Moving a whole nest was no small affair, and Riza even had to recruit some helpers for it. Gas Tank was back alive, sucking up fog like you'd never believe. Both him and Riza were making sure all tunnels were totally immersed within the substance so no demon went hungry.

Sanders had a far more annoying job, meanwhile. Demons subsisted on fog but the demon critters were still animals, not demons. Normally, the farmer demons would take them in and satiate their hunger and thirst but they couldn't quite do that this time, with the constant moving. So, it was left to Sanders, and occasionally Daven or Riza, to use [Heal] to keep them alive.

And there were a *lot* of them. Sanders certainly had his work cut out for him.

At the front of the caravan were Harold and Daven, diligently digging the tunnel further forward.

Adewyn and Andreyra were usually above ground, partly because neither could survive in the fog and partly to help with navigation. They had travelled

these lands the most and knew roughly what direction to head in. They carried a critter so Riza could keep eyes on them.

Progress was slow going, and many breaks had to be made. The littlest of the critters were slowing them down massively and Riza frequently fought about just killing them and being done with it but held back. They were in no rush.

Sleep was uncomfortable but the best Riza had had in days. She felt hardly any stress from this exodus.

Whenever they got within the vicinity of a town, Adewyn and Andreyra would head back underground and proceed onwards with Daven in isolated tunnels so as to not infect them with the fog. There would be no chance they'd be recognised.

Once they closed in on the quarry, they had to be extremely cautious. Even with taking a wide berth, there was no avoiding the massive tunnels left by the worm. After the tenth one, it was more than just annoying.

This was where their leg of the journey slowed to a crawl. Riza would be up front, focusing on her senses to see if there were any demons nearby. Nothing.

Redirecting the tunnels was a massive pain. They'd need to organise and communicate with Daven and Harold was a far worse tunneller than him—he had limited essence and terrible regeneration, which meant frequent breaks.

Days passed, and then weeks, as they crawled along, surpassing the outer bounds of the quarry and finally passing into Toila.

The quarry existed on the border of all three provinces. The mountain range it connected to was Toila's but it sat within Moya and was only a day's journey or two out from Droya.

Once they were a comfortable distance out and the danger seemed to have vanished, Adewyn and Andreyra returned above ground and progress sped back up drastically.

With all this digging, Daven was actually starting to get better at underground navigation. [Earth Sense] was getting plenty of practice and he began to predict the direction they needed to go in, Andreyra confirming it when [Message]ing her directions downwards.

It seemed that the geological development of the mountain range had an effect on the stone that constituted it, differentiating it from the otherwise hilly terrain.

Toila was the smallest of the three regions and before long, the pair above had to return below once more.

And for the first time, Riza was happy about that fact.

Rensenfeld was built partially into the mountain, just like Trotton was, which meant navigation was just fine below ground as long as they followed the mountain.

No tunnels, no nests, no demons. Their journey within this new land was fraught with nothing but safety and peace. It was almost conspicuously empty, Riza thought.

They quickly passed underneath the villages and then arrived at the unmissable city.

They were here.

A nest was quickly established. The basics were put into place; a fogless level at the top for the humans and then breeding pits for critters.

Daven worked overtime, doing most of the work, and by the time the day ended, he was exhausted. He collapsed before he even left the lower level, needing to be dragged up with the rest by a strong-willed Meren.

They weren't exactly below Rensenfeld; more off to the side and within the mountain itself. This left plenty of distance to avoid random discoveries as well as plenty of space for expansion.

Now, the first leg of their journey was done. Time for the second.