

The Walker Of Voids

Chapter 71: Autumn Training [2] - Beast Fighting

The torture Felix called training continued for 3 more hours, and despite knowing the training was coming to an end, Lloyd felt like there was no end in sight.

"Felix. I think that is enough for today, don't you think?" Hime asked while winking at Lloyd, who could not help but simply smile towards her with genuine gratitude written all over his face. Of course, with the blindfold still being over his

Lloyd's body was covered in cracks, yet at that point, everyone on the team knew about Lloyd's weird anatomy. They had seen it before when he was fighting against the monster, so they would not have been surprised to see it again after his training with Felix, where everyone had assumed that Lloyd would have gotten his ass beaten by him due to their past encounters.

With a sneer, Felix turned around and went straight to his tent without saying another word.

"So, are you going to train me now?" Lloyd asked while trying to get up, yet the instant he moved from where he lay, he felt an excruciating jolt of pain shot through his body, forcing him to drop to the ground and grit his teeth.

"Oh... Looks like he did quite a number on you." Hime chuckled while crouching to Lloyd's level and taking his blindfold off, and with the grace of a mother caring for her child, she swooped out a potion from within her spacial storage and began to pour it into a spoon before putting it into Lloyd's mouth.

"Oh god, that tastes horrible." Lloyd cried out after gulping the liquid down.

"Stop complaining. Drink this and you'll feel better." Hime explained and put another spoonful of the potion into Lloyd's mouth before he could find the time to complain.

This continued for a few minutes, and whenever someone from the group left their tents, they would chuckle before going on to do whatever they were thinking of doing before leaving.

While Lloyd felt a little embarrassed by the situation, he quickly accepted it since he had no other choice.

After a few minutes, however, he began to feel more energized, while the cracks all over his body began to heal while the pain subsided slowly, allowing Lloyd to finally think straight.

"Thanks. I owe you one." Lloyd smiled while getting up from where he sat.

"Don't thank me just yet." She smiled before also standing up and turning around.

"You're going to teach me beast fighting, correct?" Lloyd asked while recalling what she had said when she had been announcing all the training he would do.

Now that Lloyd felt energized again, he felt as if he could do anything, and now that Hime was before him, ready to teach him her race's basic martial art, he was more than willing to learn.

"Us beast-kin are slightly different from you humans. We might seem the same structurally, but if you were to dissect the body of a beast-kin, depending on what kind of beast-kin you dissect, the difference in our bodies would be like night and day." She explained while Lloyd simply stayed in the same place, waiting for her to finish.

"While I don't know much about the fishfolk, the reptilians, or the birdfolk, I know just enough to tell you that every one of us is different in our own ways.

Birdfolk have lighter bones, reptilians are cold-blooded creatures who usually have scales and long tongues, fishfolk have gills, and we mammals have a higher bone density than most, warm blood, fur, or hair, and a higher muscle density than the rest of those.

However, even within every category of beast-kin, some of us have different heritages, but we're not here to talk about that.

Today, I will teach you the basic martial arts used by most, if not all, mammalfolk." Hime explained while Lloyd simply nodded, trying to absorb most of the information he had just been given.

"Most humans have horrible flexibility, and while half of that isn't your fault, I've seen humans who have been capable of training themselves so they could be as flexible as some of us mammalfolk."

"Wait, aren't humans also beastkin... Or at least mammalfolk? We're basically just upgraded monkeys." Lloyd questioned.

"Well, that would have been the case, but the unified council said that humans, elves, and dwarves all have common ancestors," Hime explained, yet this time Lloyd couldn't

help but feel as if there was a hint of loathing in her voice, yet instead of being a nosy bastard, he stayed quiet and continued to listen.

Hime's explanation continued for a while, and by the end of it, she had given Lloyd a few exercises to increase the flexibility of his joints. Of course, Lloyd didn't have joints, nor did he know how his body even worked without the existence of his muscles or bones, but instead of questioning everything about his body, he simply excepted to do the exercises as told.

After completing the set of exercises he knew he would be doing every day until he left the dungeon, Lloyd jumped back a few meters and got into a fighting position.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Uhm... Getting ready for the training?" Lloyd tilted his head.

"I'm teaching a martial art, not beating it into you. Well, that part comes later anyway, so you don't have to worry about it for now." Hime smiled, yet for some reason, Lloyd could not help but feel even more unsettled by her words.

"Basic beast fighting martial arts is what you humans describe as 'brutish,' but it gets the job done. It is quick and swift in doing what it needs to do, and it balances attack and defense quite nicely." She explained before smiling.

"Now, while I could fight one of the beasts outside this dome, its probably better if I give you a first-hand experience on how deadly it can me." her smile grew slightly, yet instead of the psychotic smile that Veronica usually had on whenever she was around Lloyd, this one felt like the smile of a mother.

Calming and soothing, yet for some reason, it felt like it was purely being used to set Lloyd up to gain a sense of security around her.

"I thought you said you wouldn't beat it into me."

"I won't be. Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

'That's what he said.' Lloyd inwardly sighed before getting into a battle stance and covering his hands in shadows.

[Shadow Claw]

Hime raised a brow at this since it was the first time she had seen him use it, yet before she could think about it anymore, the sound of the wind being parted entered her ears before a figure shrouded in shadows appeared in front of her with their claws extended towards her face.

With a smirk now on her face, Hime twisted her waist while leaning back, completely avoiding Lloyd's attack.

However, instead of jumping away like most would have in such a vulnerable position, a strange glint shone within her eyes as her arm swung at lightning speed, slamming into Lloyd's stomach and shooting him across the field of grass.

BOOM

Having taken advantage of the split second where Lloyd had become vulnerable after shooting out an attack, Hime's victory in that exchange had become inevitable, yet in a split second, before her fist had connected with his stomach, Lloyd had used all the brain power available to move the shadows covering his body onto the area she had attacked.

"I thought... you said... you weren't going to hit me too hard." Lloyd grunted while sliding down the barrier around their camp.

"Oops. Just attack me again, I swear I won't fight back this time." She rubbed the back of her head with a slightly embarrassed expression that only served to piss off Lloyd even more.

However, since she was the one training him, he sucked it up and shot towards her again despite the small amounts of pain coursing through his body, most likely due to the cracks that were spreading from his abdomen.

Swoosh

Attacking again, this time Lloyd analyzed his every move alongside Hime's and after watching her step to the side without much effort, he quickly shifted his step before switching position and attacking straight towards her face with his left hand rather than his right.

And just like he had expected, she leaned back quite far, allowing her to avoid his attack once again.

Lloyd wasn't stupid, of course. From what he had seen, read, and learned over the past years about beast fighting, he felt as if beast fighting wasn't the right kind of fighting for him, and therefore wanted to show that through his fight with Hime rather than have her train him for a long time just for him to not use it.

While Hime was quite brief about the mammal beast fighting style, it was not like it was the first time Lloyd had seen it. Countless beast-kin compete in tournaments with other

allied races in the universe, and it was inevitable that someone would analyze their martial arts.

Of course, one would need something like the third eye of wisdom to analyze some of the more advanced techniques of the third commandment and above, but everything below that was self-explanatory.

The mammal's beast-fighting techniques relied upon the person's instincts to a certain extent. It allowed the user of the techniques to go on fighting for much longer than they usually would when injured while also being a martial art that encourages sacrificing limbs and being wounded to achieve an end result.

In a way, the technique almost makes them into berserkers despite not having the ability to grow stronger the more angry or injured they are. However, everyone who analyzed the techniques gave credit where credit is due...

The martial art did its purpose, and it was more than effective in doing so if someone didn't mind losing a limb or two.

Yet, Lloyd, despite not wanting to lose limbs or be injured during battles in the first place, his problem of not bleeding had a lot more dire consequences.

Crackle

Dispersing the shadows over his left hand, Lloyd revealed his hand that was covered in flames.

'I'm at an angle that makes it close to impossible for her to kick me before the attack lands, and from how she's bent herself back like that, I'm assuming that it would be difficult to move out of the way.' Lloyd thought before releasing the flames he had stored under his [Shadow Claw].

BOOM

Her entire upper half had been completely covered in flames flickering between orange and blue, but before Lloyd could celebrate, he saw something yellow flicker below the flames and-

Swoosh

Without skipping a beat, Hime's head suddenly shot out of the flames before it swooshed past his hand and suddenly appeared before his face.

'Sh*t'

Before Lloyd knew it, Hime's glowing amber-yellow eyes had reached too close for comfort before the back of his head slammed into the ground.

He could see the ground beginning to crack while a clear crater appeared before a shockwave shot out of where they both stood, sending a gust of wind in all directions and making most of the group leave their tents to watch the exchange if they hadn't been doing that already.

The hit felt like it had rattled his brain in ways he could not imagine, but after gritting his teeth and digging his nails into his palms, Lloyd barely avoided losing consciousness.

"Whoops. I think I went too far." Hime spoke with panic in her voice.

"He's probably blacked out now that you hit him so hard. Give him a potion or two, and he'll wake up in a few hours." Roderick sighed, yet before he could walk up to Lloyd's unmoving body, he felt something...

They all did.

"Oooo! Killing intent!" Veronica clapped with excitement before munching down on her handful of popcorn.

Bang

Swoosh

At a speed that none of them had seen Lloyd produce, a hand covered in shadows shot out of the ground and aimed straight for Hime's neck, yet before he could reach her, she had avoided it by a hair's breadth.

'He scratched me?' Hime thought while touching her wound, and despite there being no blood, she knew that the attack had hit her, yet that was the least of her worries.

The shadows quickly disappeared before Lloyd's flaming hand replaced them.

'That trick again?' Hime thought and chose to take the attack head-on the same way she had done before. The flames were too weak to heat anything beyond the surface of her skin, so why should she care?

BOOM

However, this time, the flames shot out with double the power, and the explosive power alone would have been capable of shooting most first commandments across a football

field. However, before Hime, that flame explosion was no more than a gust of warm air, and that's all it was supposed to be.

Swoosh

Using the momentum of the explosion, Lloyd, carried it through his leg, allowing him to shoot off the ground before spinning and landing a flaming foot shrouded in shadows into her cheek at Mach 2.

"I have to say..." Hime's voice echoed throughout the camp, yet unlike the usual stone-cold voice she had, or the motherly one she would portray in front of certain people, this one was different, in a way that sent a chill down the spine of most.

Seeing that his kick had only moved her head a few inches, Lloyd grit his teeth and retracted his killing intent before trying his best to move as far away as possible without being caught by her, yet it was far too late for that.

'I should have known that the killing intent trick wouldn't work. She's a soldier, not some kid who's green behind their ears.' Lloyd thought while pulling his foot away, but he quickly knew that it was impossible.

Hime's iron-clad grip held onto Lloyd's ankle tightly, making it hard for him to even move an inch, yet before he could find the beast's course of action since using flames would be a waste of mana, he felt himself being risen into the air.

'Oh sh*t, she going to throw me to the ground.' Lloyd began to panic, but before he knew it, his vision stretched and blurred as his body descended at speeds it shouldn't.

[Shadow Movement]

However, instead of slamming into the ground and losing consciousness, Lloyd sank into his shadow.

Swoosh

Appearing behind her, Lloyd slashed his katana toward Hime, yet in what felt like the blink of an eye, his blade was caught between her upper and lower teeth, and despite the seemingly weak grip it would have had if it was anyone else, Lloyd could not budge the blade even an inch despite trying his best.

Suddenly, Lloyd felt a cold hand on his face, and just as his eyes caught the bronze-tinged hand over the right side of his face, he quickly found himself being slammed into the dirt with half his face being embedded in it.

"I know what you were doing, so this should teach you a lesson, right?" Hime smiled while crouching down to Lloyd's level.

"The mammalfolk's fighting style isn't about getting hurt when you fight. It is about not having to use your brain for every single move you do. It is about letting your instincts take over while keeping enough of an emotional balance that allows you to keep your sanity..."

"It's about being able to make rational decisions without planning every single possibility in your head, and that's one of the many skills you lack." Hime explained before playfully flicking Lloyd's face as he slowly lost consciousness.

Chapter 72: Autumn Training [3] - Part Of You

Lloyd had awoken a few hours later, yet even though he felt like sh*t, Hime did not spare him a second glance before taking him back to the field and beginning his training again, this time without beating the absolute crap out of him.

She continued to tell him the advantages that mammalfolk have over humans, such as muscle and bone density, as well as better vision depending on the species, and better instincts.

The goal of her training was to teach Lloyd how to fight like a monster without truly becoming one. The power to balance his animalistic instincts with his humane mind, allows him to strategize and use certain techniques without having to truly think about it.

It reminded Lloyd of a form character in a still ongoing anime from the 1990s where a man would shout a lot and change the color of his hair a lot. All in all, what Hime described was a more animalistic version of ultra instinct, but if he told her that, he felt it would have ended well for him.

After Hime's long and tiring session, Lloyd was given a few minutes to rest while slowly being nursed by Hime the same way she had nursed him after he took the beating from Felix.

After Hime left, Rex seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, literally flickering into existence right in front of Lloyd, yet even though most would have been surprised by his sudden appearance, Lloyd had a feeling that he was going to do something like that.

"Yo..." Lloyd waved before taking a few steps back since they were way too close to one another.

"Oh... Yo..." Rex replied, feeling a little awkward at the fact that his intimidation tactic didn't work.

"..."

"..."

"Anyway, I'm going to train your body, teach you how to unleash and control your spiritual aura, while also teaching you a few human martial arts." Rex announced before putting both his fists on his side in a martial arts pose that Lloyd had seen in both anime and real life.

"Spiritual aura? Surprisingly, I've literally never heard of it."

"Well, let me explain. Auras are split into two categories. Mana auras and spiritual aura."

"Okay..."

"While mana aura is the visual manifestation of your mana pool and affinity, spiritual auras are the visual representation of your soul and your will."

"What about killing intent then?" Lloyd asked.

"Killing intent and bloodlust are both parts of someone's spiritual aura. It is the reason why killing intent strengthens as someone ages, improves mentally and spiritually, and even when someone goes through either mental or physical trauma.

That is why those who go through more battles are more likely to have a power aura and presence. It is also why some 4th commandments can drop an entire legion to their knees with their killing intent alone, while other 4th commandments can barely intimidate someone of a lower commandment without using their mana aura."

"Okay, but I still don't understand why you are trying to teach me about spiritual aura. Most people don't know about it, but they are fine. It's more of a natural thing, right?" Lloyd asked with narrowed eyes.

"I'm not teaching you about spiritual aura for the sake of it; I am teaching you about it so you can control it." Rex smiled while Lloyd simply shrugged.

Despite Lloyd's initial suspicion, his 6 hours of training with Rex felt like 2 as, for once, since having come to this hell hole, he actually began enjoying what he was doing.

Lloyd had always been fascinated by martial arts since both of his parents had been martial arts masters yet, for reasons he could not understand, had always refused to teach him anything other than his father's sword style.

This meant that he would have had to read about martial arts from the internet, and since he's never truly had a master to train him, this was one of the first times in his life where he actually enjoyed being taught by someone rather than learning everything all by himself.

Rex, seeing that Lloyd had an affinity for some of the martial arts he knew, chose to start by teaching them to him rather than going straight into the deep stuff.

Martial arts include Tactical Taekwondo, Celestial Kung Fu, Baguazhang, and Boxing.

While the first half of those were simply martial arts that had been adapted to the use of mana and the exceeding capabilities of the human body after their awakening, the second half was martial arts that had very little change over the years.

Of course, the changes to the human body made it nearly impossible for martial arts to remain the same, but despite such a large change in the anatomy of those who use martial arts, the basics remained completely the same.

While on the one hand, boxing was and has always been one of the key core martial arts when competing in mixed martial arts battles, Baguazhang was one of the martial arts that actually improved in strength after mana awakened onto the human race.

Due to the use of palms rather than fists and knuckles, it quickly became one of the key martial arts for defense, while also exceeding in the attack section, especially when the user of the martial artist knows how to control their mana and has a talent with their elemental affinity since the combination of the two can create powerful techniques.

"Alright. You know the basics for now. You don't really have time to practice it, but I am certain that you'll get the hang of it by tomorrow." Rex smiled and gave Lloyd a big thumbs-up.

"I still don't understand why Hime didn't just split up the training regiment into days rather than hours." Lloyd sighed before collapsing onto the ground. Rex had chosen to finish 30 minutes early to allow Lloyd to breathe without worrying about being punched in the gut.

"What do you mean?" Rex asked with a tilt of his head.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to make it day-to-day rather than into 6 hours segments? There are 7 of you guys. It could have easily been split into the days of the week without forcing all of you to train me every single day. Also, I would have longer breaks.

Therefore I would also have longer to think about your teachings and practice in the days between without having to run into our moving time..."

"Now that you say it like that... It does seem kind of stupid." Rex scratched his head while chuckling awkwardly.

"Oh well." Lloyd shrugged before closing his eyes and entering a state of meditation in what felt like an instant.

Fire elemental particles began slowly entering his body before moving through it as if a set channel was in place that gradually led towards the orange rune. Every single particle gave it strength and power, making it a little stronger every time Lloyd cultivated it.

"What is he doing?" A feminine voice entered Rex's ears. Turning around, Rex looked into pair of brown eyes hiding behind large round spectacles before a soft smile appeared on his face.

"Hey, Tina. What's up?" Rex smiled.

"Oh... U-Uhm. I felt a weird type of cultivation, but I guess its only him." She stuttered.

"Oh, really?" Rex stared at Lloyd for a bit before looking back at Tina.

They continued to chat idly, and despite Tina's natural awkwardness, it did not take more than a few minutes for her to calm herself down and speak in a way that resembled a normal human being.

30 minutes passed in the blink of an eye; before Lloyd knew it, he was softly kicked awake by Hime before being swiftly taken away to the other side of the camp, where he found himself standing before Lachlan.

Lachlan was wearing a black trenchcoat just like the rest of them, but just like Hime and Roderic, he was also wearing his military uniform under it, which proudly showed his badges.

After looking him up and down, Lloyd had an inkling that Lachlan didn't like him. Everything from the crossed arms that indicated that he was closed off from Lloyd to the frown on his face that explained how he was feeling, everything about Lachlan told Lloyd that he didn't like him, even more so than Felix.

'Makes sense, I guess. I literally demoted him; now that he is training me on his own, he is probably gonna use me like a punching bag.' Lloyd sighed before accepting the situation at hand.

"Make sure to have fun you too." Hime smiled and flickered away just as fast as she had come.

"Let's get this over with shall we." Lloyd spoke with a deadpan expression while getting into a fighting position, yet Lachlan raised his hand to stop him.

"I know you think I hate you, and even though I don't like you, I won't beat you up over it. Me stepping down was a unanimous decision, and I am more than willing to accept that." Lachlan explained before crossing his arms again.

"Oh... Thanks." Lloyd tilted his head a little, but despite hearing Lachlan out, he wasn't one to trust someone with a frown on his face so easily.

"Hime wants me to teach you about your shadow affinity, but I'm going to do a little more than that." Lachlan began to stride towards Lloyd. His strides were short and silent, something that gave them an extra danger to them that made Lloyd feel on edge.

"First, what are shadows." Lachlan asked.

"The absence of light?" Lloyd replied, a little confused by the simple question, yet Lachlan shook his head.

"Wrong. Darkness is the absence of light."

"Aren't they the same thing?" Lloyd raised a brow.

"Then why is your ability not called darkness control. Better yet, why can't you control darkness? But for some reason, you can enter and control your own shadow."

"Actually, my powers are stronger in the dark. I am stronger in the dark, and my shadow abilities are given a speed boost." Lloyd replied with a sneer in his voice.

"Correct, but now where in that entire explanation did you mention that you could control darkness in any shape or form. You can control your shadow, and your shadow just gets a little bigger when you are in darkness." Lachlan explained while raising a finger.

'He actually makes a pretty good point... I don't really remember reading about this though.' Lloyd inwardly thought but stayed quiet so Lachlan could complete his explanation.

"The shadow element is a branch of the darkness element. Well, it's one of the many branches of the darkness element. You have things such as soul manipulation, sorcery, and many more branches, shadows being one of them.

Most branches break down into even more departments, like soul manipulation, which breaks down into possession, necromancy, and even soul devouring." Lachlan

explained before stopping 3 meters away from Lloyd, who had completely relaxed at this point, or at least that's how it seemed on the surface.

While Lloyd knew that he did not have the ability to run away from a second commandment if he truly wanted to attack him, Lloyd still took a few precautions that would help him in his escape, or at least to the point where he might be capable of calling out for help.

"Shadows aren't just the absence of light.

They are living beings. They are the part of you that you shun away."

Chapter 73: Autumn Training [4] - Puppeteer

"That sounds extremely dumb..." Lloyd retorted

"Who's the darkness expert here? Me or you." Lachlan sneered.

"Well, before hearing that weird-ass explanation of yours, I would have most definitely said you, but now I am kind of worried that your mind might have snapped long before this dungeon raid." Lloyd looked at Lachlan with a stare that was filled with nothing but pure pity.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Kind of hard not to." Lloyd sighed before walking forward and placing his hand on Lachlan's shoulder.

"Don't worry buddy, we're going to get through this. I have hope." Lloyd smiled while giving Lachlan a thumbs up.

Lachlan, on the other hand, could not help but imagine what would happen if he were to punch Lloyd with all his strength, but before he could lose his temper, he took in a deep breath before nudging Lloyd's hand away.

"Tell me, if all there was to shadows happened to be that they are simply the absence of light, wouldn't you have better control over it?"

"..."

"While I myself am not a shadow user, I know many of those in my family who are shadow users, and therefore I know how to train you so I would like you to trust me on this."

Despite Lloyd's initial suspicions, Lachlan seemed mostly genuine. Of course, he wasn't there out of his own free will, but he seemed sincere about teaching Lloyd the ways of the shadows.

"Okay..." Lloyd replied before extending his hand that Lachlan quickly shook.

Lloyd found himself spending the next two hours sitting on the floor, cross-legged in the lotus position as he breathed in and out while listening to Lachlan's voice as it instructed him on how to communicate with his own shadow.

According to Lachlan, the more Lloyd understands the shadow element, the stronger the connection with his shadows will become.

"To understand the shadow element, you must first break down its properties. Anyone can understand words, but to truly comprehend an element, you have to have the ability to visualize the element and everything that makes it special."

"Now, break down the shadow element and explain how it works." Lachlan asked while circling the sitting Lloyd.

"The shadow element is slow. It's also mostly defensive for some reason. It becomes quite thick and murky when it comes into its physical form, and it is also quite slow when its not moving through dark areas."

"Why does it become faster when it enters dark areas?" Lachlan asked.

"I don't know?"

"Think about it. Shadows are living extensions of darkness... What happens when you drop a droplet of dirty water into a glass full of clean water..."

"..."

"I'm not going to give you the answer since doing so will lower your comprehension of the element." Lachlan states, making Lloyd furrow his brows.

"Well, now that he says it like that, it kind of makes sense. I think? Void walkers are known for their affinity with the void, which is also why I felt so at home when I went through those portals. I can compare void walkers to turtles. They can live on the surface, but it is much more comfortable in the water..."

But I feel like this whole shadow thing isn't the same. From what I know, the Void Walker adapted to living and surviving in the void to the point where it changed their entire anatomy to where they could even manipulate it.

Of course, that is just the main scientific theory as to why Void Walkers had become who they are, but if it is true, the shadows having their own wills is the complete opposite of void walkers.' Lloyd widened his eyes slightly as a light bulb went off in his head.

'Shadows are literally born out of darkness rather than being an effect of prolonged exposure and eventual evolutionary developments. Shadows are products of us, living creatures, and therefore when it enters darkness again, it becomes one with it, as if it's almost infesting it. Of course, it will be fast when it's in itself.

All it lacks is the willpower and mana capacity to swallow entire chunks of darkness whole, becoming one with it while infesting it simultaneously.' Lloyd thought before opening his eyes, turning towards Lachlan, and explaining everything without skipping a beat.

Lachlan's eyes widened at the fact that Lloyd not only understood it in less than 10 minutes but had also found a way to imagine it himself, therefore increasing his comprehension of the element.

"Let's stick to that part of the the shadow element rather than going into other parts. Or, at least for now." Lachlan instructed.

Hours passed like this. Lloyd would meditate, both cultivating the shadow elemental particles around him while also trying to form a link with his own shadow, yet by the last hour of the training, he had felt like he had gotten nowhere.

"Its fine. You would have to be a complete monster to grasp everything I taught you today in less than a day. It will take a few weeks for you to even get the smallest semblance of a connection with your shadow, so don't sweat it too much." Lachlan waved off Lloyd's disappointment, but he did not finish there.

"Also, I need you to spar with me using your shadow abilities only. For the next hour, I'm going to give you a few tips and tricks wherever I can." Lachlan explained while Lloyd paled.

"Don't worry, I won't be beating the crap out of you the same way Hime and Felix did." Lachlan sighed while rubbing the bridge of his nose.

The next hour went exactly how Lachlan had explained. Lloyd activated his shadow abilities and attacked Lachlan with everything he had, yet the difference between both

their commandments was so large that Lachlan didn't even have to use a single one of his abilities.

However, rather than a one-sided beating, Lachlan would mostly only defend, and whenever he did attack, he would land a soft blow onto Lloyd's body, making sure that the attack wouldn't hurt, but instead, it would tell Lloyd that there are places in his body that he isn't protecting properly.

Not only that, but Lachlan would stop Lloyd every few minutes to give him tips on controlling his shadows more efficiently.

"Try to move your shadow around rather than equally dispensing it around your body," Lachlan advised.

"I've tried that before. It doesn't work as well as you imagine." Lloyd retorted while cocking his fist back and shooting it towards Lachlan's chest, yet right before it could make it, Lachlan blocked it by putting his arms in an x shape over his chest.

"I'm assuming you gave up after trying only once." Lachlan sneered

"Shut up." Lloyd spat while spinning and throwing a kick at Lachlan's head, yet before it could reach him, Lachlan raised his arm and blocked it without moving an inch from where he stood.

Or so he thought.

The moment Lloyd's foot could contact with Lachlan's arm, Lloyd shifted his weight and kicked down.

Boom

Hitting the ground with a powerful kick, Lloyd kicked up a cloud of dust around Lachlan and him, making it much harder for Lachlan to see.

Lloyd, on the other hand, had an easy time moving around completely unnoticed.

He didn't need to breathe, nor did his footsteps make any noise.

Using [Presence Concealment], it was nearly impossible for him to be sensed, yet somehow, when Lloyd had gotten within a certain radius, he could feel Lachlan's eyes lock onto him.

When Lloyd realized he was being watched, he had already been too late.

Whoosh

Lachlan had already kicked off the ground, shooting straight toward Lloyd, yet Lloyd had already managed to evade the attack.

"Good reflexes." Lachlan commented while glaring at Lloyd.

"Thanks." Lloyd replied while panting slightly.

"Now, let's try this again." Lachlan said while stepping back and readying himself.

The next hour went by in the same way, but this time it was Lloyd dodging and evading every single one of Lachlan's attacks rather than it being the other way around. Lloyd assumed that this was Lachlan's way of teaching him how to use his shadows to evade attacks, and from the basic pattern that Lachlan was using, Lloyd was certain that it was just the start.

Lachlan's attacks increased in speed and power over time, making it harder and harder to avoid the attacks, yet at that point, Lloyd had gotten into the rhythm of dodging, allowing him to barely dodge by the skin of his teeth.

However, unbeknownst to both of them, a deeper change occurred. One that they were both completely blind to, yet it was already beginning to change the flow of that fight.

Slowly, without any of them realizing it, the shape of the shadow that shrouded Lloyd's body began to change.

Suddenly, without any real reason for it, Lloyd's punches had become more powerful and precise, while his dodges were becoming cold and almost calculating, as if Lloyd's body was purposefully waiting for the last second to dodge and put the enemy at a state of false security.

Lloyd's knuckles were harder, and his strength was multiplied.

The shadows would flicker as if they could see the attacks coming from a mile away, and they would vibrate in every time Lloyd would land a hit, yet somehow, none of them could see it.

"You're getting better." Lachlan stated with a tinge of surprise in his voice.

"You're getting worse." Lloyd laughed before transforming his hand into a shadowy claw and plunging it towards Lachlan with everything he had.

Yet, no matter how much Lloyd improved in such a short period of time, there was still one key difference between Lloyd and Lachlan...

Their commandment.

Lloyd's eyes widened for a moment as his claws froze right in front of Lachlan's chest, yet it all made sense when he took the chance to look at the object in Lachlan's hand.

A cross-like wooden object with strings attached to every wing. That's what Lachlan was holding in his hand, and there was only one class that Lloyd knew that used such a weapon...

"Son of a b*tch... You were a puppeteer this entire time!?"

Chapter 74: Autumn Training [5] - Veronica

Feeling the strings that locked him in place, Lloyd could not help but gnash his teeth with a hint of anger.

He should have known. Everything pointed towards Lachlan being someone who fights at a range, yet since he didn't have a bow, gun, or staff, and he wasn't a mage, it must have meant that his class had to do something with summoning or getting something else to fight for him.

He was also very good at dodging, and his coordination and ability to manipulate his opponents' movements to push them into a corner made it obvious that he did not partake in hand-to-hand combat, and instead was more of a support class than anything else.

"Surprised?" Lachlan asked with a grin.

"I should have seen this coming." Lloyd simply replied before relaxing his body, retracting his shadow, and sighing while rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Not really. I know that you probably suspected that I probably didn't fight at close quarters much, but there are many classes in which the user doesn't need to fight in hand-to-hand combat. I could have been necromancer for all you knew, so don't beat yourself up about it." Lachlan explains before letting Lloyd go, who quickly collapses onto the ground out of exhaustion.

After letting Lloyd rest for around 7 minutes, Lachlan stood up again, followed by Lloyd, who groggily stood up from where he sat while looking at Lachlan like he had stolen his favorite sword.

Lloyd was exhausted beyond belief, and the exhaustion was written on his face in the form of lines that formed a frown on his face. He was a void walker, he didn't get eye bags or wrinkles, or at least that's what he thought for the time being since that theory made the most sense.

"Overview... Your control over your shadow has increased at a good rate. You must have a pretty high star-talent to be doing this well despite it being your first time having proper training." Lachlan smiled, and Lloyd copied him despite inwardly praying that Lachlan would not find out about his star talent after they left the dungeon.

'Now that I think about it, I'm kind of screwed when we leave this dungeon. They all know about my [Flame Control], and I've shown many more abilities in this dungeon than I would usually have done outside.

However, I'm pretty sure if things keep going at this rate, I might even have to use abilities like [Shadow Clone] to keep up with these guys... Maybe that's why Hime made the training regiment so air-tight? To pressure me into getting as strong as the rest of them?' Lloyd inwardly thought before throwing the thought to the back of his mind and looking up to stare into Lachlan's eyes.

"You'll make a good warrior." Lachlan gave a thumbs up, and Lloyd thanked him for his training.

"Are you guys done?" Veronica's voice entered both their ears, and while Lachlan simply smiled at her and spoke with a tint of pink dyeing his cheeks, Lloyd felt a shiver down his spine when he heard her voice.

He didn't know why this was the case, but for some reason, no matter the situation, Veronica had always seemed a little off, to the point that it was almost creepy.

Maybe it was a her creepy smile, or maybe it was her pair of soul-piercing eyes that made even his soul cower in fear.

He knew she was the most powerful one in the group, yet none of the others gave the same aura as her.

On the other hand, it felt like all the men on the team had a crush on her. She might have been pretty, but instead of feeling the need to make her like him the same way Roderick seemed to act around her, Lloyd wanted her to stay as far away as possible from him.

"You can go now. It's my turn." Veronica waved Lachlan goodbye before turning back to Lloyd with a warm and genuine smile on her face."

"What are you going to teach me..." Lloyd asked with a tinge of wariness in his voice.

"Oh, don't silly." Her smile widened.

"I'm not going to teach you-" Suddenly, she disappeared from where she stood and appeared right in front of Lloyd in an instant.

Her blood-red vampiric eyes stared right into his violet ones, and before he could even think about backing away, he felt a powerful knee slam into his stomach, sending him back a few meters before forcing him to roll in a violent and brutal way.

"I'm going to train you!"

"Bitch..." Lloyd muttered as he slammed his hands into the ground before flipping out of the roll and landing gracefully.

However, right before his feet could touch the ground, he felt wind brush past him before a surge of mana formed behind him. A surge so powerful that he could see the mana particles in the air become visible and move towards it, simultaneously activating all of Lloyd's danger senses.

With his hair standing up and goosebumps shooting through his skin, Lloyd spun on his heel, barely avoiding the attack by the skin of his teeth, yet instead of stopping there, he went a little further.

Grabbing Veronica's wrist, Lloyd turned just in time to throw her slightly off balance, yet before she could react to the sudden pull on her wrist, something came toward her face at lightning speed, zooming through the air and appearing right in front of her face in what felt like a blink of an eye.

[Tactical Taekwando - Windbreaker kick]

Smack!

Lloyd's kick smacked Veronica right across the face before landing it on the ground; however, by using the same momentum Lloyd spun on his toes and threw a round-house kick toward her face again.

"That was pretty good. I was almost shocked haha." Veronica laughed while catching the foot and disappearing from where she stood.

'Shit...'

Appearing right in front of Lloyd, Veronica's face had come uncomfortably close to his as she slowly cocked her fist back.

Mana surged out of the air once again while the torrents of wind circled around her fist.

Seeing no other way out of his situation, Lloyd also cocked back his fist before shrouding his entire right side with flames and his shadow.

BOOM

It took less than a second for Lloyd to feel the ground again, yet instead of brutally rolling like before, he had simply slammed into it, creating a crater as cracks slowly moved out from it.

"Are you okay?" Veronica asked with a warm smile on her face.

"F*ck you... Bitch" Lloyd sneered.

"Such hurtful words. Do you know how many people would have paid their life's fortunes to have an hour with me?" Veronica asked with a humph.

"Do your sentences always have to be so misleading?" Lloyd sneered

"What do you mean?" She chuckled before kicking Lloyd.

"Anyway, I just wanted to see how weak you were. No hard feeling, right?" She asked, yet all she received was a middle finger from Lloyd.

"After watching all of your battles, I think there are a few things that I need to train you in. First off, you have an anger problem that you need to fix. A warrior must be able to control his emotions and not lose his mind to rage whenever something doesn't go his way." She explained with a raised index finger.

"Secondly, your killing intent is pretty weak, so I'm going to have to force you to increase it a little." Her grin widened slightly while Lloyd's pained expression turned into a confused one.

'Was she temporarily blind or did she not see my aura, ever?' Lloyd thought to himself.

"I know what you're thinking, but your aura was not the same as killing intent. I'm sure Rex already explained to you the difference between a magical aura and a spiritual one, so I won't have to explain it myself.

All I'm going to say is that the aura of yours that you used earlier was just a branch of your spiritual aura capable of amplifying the power and intensity behind things such as your will, your killing intent, and even your bloodlust if you are capable of entering such a state without losing your mind." She explained.

"And finally, your pain tolerance is disgustingly low. It felt like I was looking at someone who had just awoken a few months ago and had never been truly hit before." She chuckled, making Lloyd slightly unhappy at the fact she was laughing at his dismay.

"Alright then, get up and let's begin your training then."

Chapter 75: Autumn Training [6] - Tina

Lloyd had never felt so much pain in his entire life.

Or so he would have said, yet for some reason, the training he was currently going through felt slightly lame, or at least mediocre.

With Veronica's hand hovering over his general area, Lloyd felt waves of pain shoot through his body and put him in one of the worst pain he had ever felt in his life.

Yet, unlike Veronica's expectations of him reaching a snapping point where she would be forced to stop, she found that Lloyd was dealing with it much better than she had expected.

On the other hand, Lloyd hated every bit of it, yet at the back of his mind, a voice constantly told him that at least it wasn't as bad as using [Void Channel].

Yet, it was painful, and yes, Lloyd was writhing on the ground in pain while screaming like a little girl, but it wasn't nearly as bad as [Void Channel] that seared his skin and branded it with an unbearable pain closely followed by the fear of death and horribly deep desperation that slowly crawled through his body at that moment.

Veronica's logic was that she could kill three birds with one stone by using the same method to tackle all three of Lloyd's problems.

She could increase his pain tolerance by making him feel a lot of pain. She could tackle the anger problem by training Lloyd to not be enraged and to keep a calm mind whenever he feels pain, and finally, she can increase the power of Lloyd's killing intent by making him feel unbearable pain for prolonged periods.

While Lloyd hadn't really felt the difference after leaving his latest Void walk, his killing intent skyrocketed in power due to the pain and trauma he had gone through. He didn't feel the difference simply because of his [Monarch's aura].

His aura had always been powerful, but when it's so much higher than everything else he has, it becomes harder to feel the difference. Of course, the other reason was that he had recently been hanging around many strong people lately, making his killing intent and aura obsolete in front of their much higher commandments, experience, and wills.

Veronica's 'training' carried on for several hours, and by the end of it, Lloyd found himself sprawled on the ground, panting and gasping for air as the pain continued to radiate throughout his body even after Veronica had stopped.

"Are you okay?" Veronica asked, this time sounding genuinely worried for Lloyd, yet in Lloyd's pain-filled mind, her voice sounded almost mocking.

"I've never wanted to punch someone in the face more than I do right now." Lloyd muttered to himself, his body spasming every now and then as if a jolt of electricity was moving through it.

"That's not a nice thing to say." Veronica pouted.

"F*ck... You!" Lloyd roared with tears welling up in his eyes.

"Its okay... Don't cry little baby." She mocked while holding him close to her chest, something that was no longer uncomfortable or even painful since she had taken off her armor and had simply worn the black garment underneath it.

Before Lloyd could resist any further, he felt his head land upon a soft surface. As if it was laying upon the softest clouds in the universe, his eyelids became extremely heavy before darkness swiftly overtook his vision, and he fell into a deep slumber before he knew what was happening.

"Good thing I stopped 3 hours early. I'm sure he'll need the sleep." She muttered to herself while staring at the black-haired boy who lay on her lap. One of her hands slowly stroked his head while the other hand moved his hair away from his face, giving her a good look at him.

The temptation to try and suck some of his blood almost overtook her for an instant, but she was able to shake her head and calm herself down down.

'Blood harassment is not a joke!' she inwardly shouted at herself. She knew that there was a chance that Lloyd didn't have blood, but that didn't stop higher vampires like her

from sucking on a person's mana instead, something that was actually more efficient than consuming mana-rich blood since the conversion rate was not the same.

"You awake?" Veronica asked as Lloyd slowly opened his eyes.

"Yeah... Thanks-..." Lloyd thanked with a smile, yet when he saw the position he was in as well as Veronica's dreadful red eyes, his sentence stopped mid-way while his mood simultaneously worsened.

"Nevermind." Lloyd sighed before getting his head off her pillow-like lap

How long till my next session?" Lloyd asked with exhaustion in his voice.

"About 2 minutes I believe?" She answered, yet from the fact that she was scratching her cheek as she said so, Lloyd had a feeling that she didn't really know.

"Alright. Goodbye." Lloyd waved and began walking away.

"Aren't you going to thank me?!" Veronica harrumphed.

"No." Lloyd raised his middle finger before descending into his shadow and speeding away.

Since it was still nighttime and on the brink of dawn, Lloyd's shadow was moving faster than ever, allowing him to reach Tina's tent in a matter of a few seconds.

"Tina? Are you ready?" Lloyd asked.

"Oh yeah, c-come in!" She stuttered, making Lloyd raise a brow as he entered.

"If she is nervous about even talking to me, how the hell is she supposed to train me?" Lloyd asked himself before shrugging and entering the tent.

"H-Hey... Uhm... Sit down please." Tina, she pointed towards a pillow on the ground.

"This place looks nothing like I imagined it to be." Lloyd remarked while looking around her dimensional tent.

"Y-You were imagining my tent?" She stuttered with a tinge of pink dyeing her face.

"It sounds weird if you say it like that..." Lloyd chuckled.

"I-It does?"

"..."

"..."

Not wanting to increase the awkwardness between the two of them, Lloyd continued to look around for a moment, allowing himself to take in everything around him.

While Lloyd's tent was a standard tent for living, Tina's tent didn't feel that way in the least.

With a simple glance around, one could spot several cauldrons sitting over flames, creating a weird yet almost pleasant aroma.

Several tables with test tubes and flasks could be seen around the room, and while Lloyd expected it to be extremely messy due to her having the presence of a mad scientist, it was much cleaner than he thought it would be.

While books were left open on her tables, they were neatly aligned with everything else on the table, making it feel a lot less cluttered than it would have usually been if they weren't aligned so perfectly.

On the other hand, her study desk at the back of the tent, right next to her tiny bed, was filled with a mountain of books all stacked upon one another.

'I have no idea why, but I expected her to be a weeb.' Lloyd thought to himself before looking back at Tina, who had reached the skin color beet red. Lloyd could almost imagine smoke coming out of her ears, an image that made him chuckle slightly, which only made Tina become redder.

'I can't believe a let a guy into my room so easily.' She thought to herself.

"So, are you a human?" Lloyd asked while trying to change the subject.

"Y-Yeah, what about you?"

"As human as they come." Lloyd smiled while lying through his teeth.

"Enough chit-chat now; let's get to business, shall we."

Chapter 76: Autumn Training [7] - Comprehension of Flame Control

"No, stupid! Don't just create flames; manipulate them! That's what your ability is called right? Flame manipulation, not combustion creation."

"Well, actually, it's called [Flame control], not flame-" Lloyd argued.

"Shut up and actually do something. No time to blabber." Tina shouted with her fists resting on her hips.

"Yes master." Lloyd replied with an imaginary tear going down his face.

Never in a million years would he have thought that someone's personality could change so much in a few hours, which was a little ironic since the same thing could be seen about him whenever he puts his mask on.

At first, Tina had been mostly shy, finding it hard to form proper sentences without stuttering once or twice throughout it. Yet, within the same hour, she had transformed from a babbling idiot to a professor when she saw Lloyd showing interest in magic.

"Flame control. I see. Your mana pool is not the problem right now, but your comprehension of the element and your ability to control your mana is. Let's not forget that your flame control ability should only be something you gain after reaching the first commandment." Tine explained while reading about the ability in one of the books she had grabbed from her work desk.

"Comprehend? Well, I already understand how flames work." Lloyd argued with a raise of a brow,

"Well, you might understand it, but it doesn't mean you've comprehended it." She explained while Lloyd took a trip down dejavu as he remembered Lachlan telling him the same thing.

"Okay. So I have to break it down and think about how it works. Break it down and understand every component at play. First, we need air to create flames. Flames thrive on oxygen and usually release carbon dioxide, but since I'm not using carbon products to fuel the flame, it won't be creating CO_2 , but instead, it will be creating syngas?

Wait, no, I'm not creating plasma; I'm creating flames, with my main fuel being mana. But what would the waste product of mana be? Oxygen + mana doesn't really mean

anything. Mana isn't an element in the periodic table..." Lloyd began thinking long and hard about how it worked.

They both stayed like that for about 40 minutes as Lloyd continued to mutter to himself.

On the other hand, Tina had a soft smile on her lips, portraying her gratitude for finally finding someone who found magic as interesting as she did.

Of course, many people found magic as interesting as she did, but for some reason, she felt a sense of comradeship with Lloyd. A sense of comradeship that was much stronger than any comradeship she felt toward anyone else on the team.

"I think I understand it..." Lloyd muttered with a beaming smile on his face that almost made him forget the torture had gone through less than 4 hours ago.

"I've never really taken any time in the past to think about this the way I am now, and I'm not sure if it was because I hadn't awakened or the fact that I didn't think I would be getting the fire element, but it's all starting to make sense now," Lloyd exclaimed to Tina, who told him to carry on.

"Okay, while we have lots of elements on the periodic table, the ones we are taught in high school are simply the ones that have physical properties. H₂O, for example, is something we drink. It is a liquid that becomes a solid when cooled, and a gas when heated. Same thing with oxygen, but you can only really cool it to make it a liquid without bonding it to something else.

Anyway, I've been thinking of flames created by mana as the same as flames created through combustion and burning carbon fuel, but it isn't.

These flames are closer to plasma than they are to actual flames, because the fuel isn't just mana; it's mana fused with fire particles to create it.

Elemental particles aren't like the elements in the periodic table. They are almost like radiation, a bit like mana but in a more physical and elemental sense.

Each particle acts like an unstable proton or neutron, acting more like electromagnetic waves and radioactive particles rather than atoms or atomic bonds.

They bounce off the oxygen, creating a spark that is fueled by the mana to create a flame, and when it does create a flame, the waste element of the flame isn't CO₂, but it's quite literally just water." Lloyd explained with the utmost enthusiasm, yet Tina's eyes widened at his last words.

"What do you mean water?" She asked, yet from the look in her eyes, Lloyd knew she already knew the answer.

"The elemental fire particle quite literally destroys the electrons, protons, and neutrons on the oxygen, setting it back several elements, to the point where it literally just becomes hydrogen.

However, while it could have stopped at carbon and allowed the oxygen to bond with it, it goes even further and almost completely destroys the atom to the point where the oxygen is forced to bond with the hydrogen to create water vapor, and the elemental water particle in its place.

The oxygen is successfully bonded with, and the fire particle has a waste element," Lloyd thoroughly explained, with Tina nodding throughout the entire explanation...

With the Sutter in her voice having seemingly disappeared, Tina opened her mouth and spoke-

"Honestly, that was one of the best and most well-crafted theories I've heard, especially since you had very little knowledge of this before today..."

"I mean, for all you know, I could have learned it all from a book before meeting you." Lloyd shrugged, yet he could not help but feel slightly proud of his intelligence.

"It is a good theory though. Your logic states that everything needs an opposite; therefore, the flames are balanced out by the water. It works out on paper..."

Yet the reason I know you haven't researched this before isn't that I trust your word for it... It's because you're wrong."

Chapter 77: Autumn Training [8] - Friendship

"It's not to say that everything you said was wrong, it's just that parts of it were wrong, therefore, you got the wrong answer to the question." Tina explained.

"What's the right answer?" Lloyd asked with a raise of the brow.

"Well, I can't tell you that can I. It's much better to figure it out yourself since it will improve your comprehension skills.

Think of it like cultivation. Unless you figure out how to create your own cultivation method by reaching the second commandment, you'll always be behind someone else since you're using their cultivation technique, not yours.

Of course, you can always just add and subtract from your current cultivation technique, but what's the fun in that?" She asked with a weird yet genuine smile.

'Huh... Well, my mina cultivation tactic so far had been to kill things with certain abilities. It sure as hell seems to increase the power of my affinity, and it increased my cultivation too so that's a nice bonus.' Lloyd thought to himself before nodding at whatever Tina was saying

This discussion about elements and cultivation went on for quite a while, yet at no point did Lloyd find himself bored by the information that was being slowly pooled into his mind.

However, other than all the information that Tina was shoving into his mind, there were two things that caught Lloyd's attention.

One, Tina was slowly but very obviously becoming more and more comfortable around Lloyd, and while that would have been considered a great strength, Lloyd also felt her slowly but surely becoming more and more assertive as time went on.

Secondly-

"Hey, by the way, why do you still use books?" Lloyd asked while pointing at her study desk.

"Well, books are nicer to read from, and I kind of have to use a book to activate certain spells. Unlike you guys, I don't have abilities to do that for myself. I have to write it all down in my books, create the necessary circles or runes, and create the spell itself."

"One of my abilities is called Flame Control. Isn't that basically the same thing?" Lloyd asked.

"Believe it or not, I have only one ability and one passive ability." Tina smiled, yet Lloyd could feel a hint of sadness behind it, as if she was wearing a mask with cracks in it.

"Really?"

"Yeah. My passive is called Mana Ocean; it gives me a shit ton of mana. However, even though I'm in the second commandment, I only have one active ability, and it's called Arcanum. In the mana guide, it's considered a 2-star ability mainly used in enchanting items." Tina chuckled, yet Lloyd knew it was to her own dismay.

"So you're an arcane mage?" Lloyd tried to speak in a more cheery tone, yet due to his naturally slightly dull, sarcastic tone, it felt a lot less sincere than he hoped it would be.

"Nope! I'm a Runemaster."

"..."

"..." Tina smiled sadly before continuing-

"I understand if you would want to stay away from me now. When we get out of this place, I won't really be much help to you or your future. I-I'm an enchanter doing the job of a mage." She chuckled as she took out a bottle of beer from her dimensional storage and began to chug it down.

"..." Lloyd tried to argue, yet she was having none of it.

"Y-You don't have to spare my feelings. Most of the kids in military school evaded me like the plague for not being a runesmith, and ever since I broke through to the second commandment, my parents had lost hope for me to become anything like them. So, I-I don't really mind it anymore. I-I'm used to it now, so I might as well drink-"

"Shut up..." Lloyd spoke, yet his tone was more assertive than before and even a little colder, making Tina close her eyes before chuckling, realizing that his fear had come true.

Ever since she had awakened, everyone had avoided her. Her friends went to other academies, and those who went to the military academy didn't want anything to do with her.

Yes, she had Rex, but he treated everyone equally, no matter who they were. Roderick, Lachlan, and Hime treated her professionally, like any other person higher than her in the military would have, while Felix was just an ass to everyone, so why would it be any different for her?

Her siblings exceeded her parent's every expectation, while she was left behind to be the family's forgotten child. The shame of the Albert family, or at least that's what her parents and most of her siblings called her.

Of course, she had her older sister. She loved to Tina with all her heart. She protected her from her own family, and she exceeded everyone's expectations of her just so she could protect her little sister...

'So why, god... Why did you have to-?'

"You are the most diligent and intelligent person I know, and I've literally only truly got to know you for the last 3 hours." Lloyd cut her train of thought off, making her eyes slowly widen in surprise as something she wouldn't have expected to hear from someone as talented as Lloyd in a million years

"W-What are you-"

"You are quite literally the hardest worker I know, and it shows!"

"N-No, I'm not! Stop! I said I don't care. Stop sparing my-"

"Your siblings might have exceeded your parent's every expectation, but their accomplishments are so small compared to yours. You exceeded fate itself. You exceeded the expectations of everyone who doubted you, and you flipped off fate herself.

They told you that you couldn't be a mage, yet you went out there, stood up for yourself, and became a mage anyway. Is that not amazing?!" Lloyd banged his fist onto the table while leaning over it to look directly into Tina's watering eyes.

"You are amazing. You are fantastic. You very well might change the future as we know it." Lloyd's voice was filled with amazement, yet the excitement in his voice was what caught Tina's attention.

'He's... He's excited for me?' She asked herself as the tears overflowed into two drops, slowly trailing down her face.

"You can be the foundation of something huge! You can create a precedent that lives on for thousands of years.

You can be a symbol that shows people, that no matter their class or talent, they can achieve anything they want." Lloyd had already walked around the table and was now holding Tina's quivering shoulder, yet before he could move away and berate himself for going too far, he felt himself being pulled into a weak yet passionate embrace.

"Thank you..." Her voice was muffled since she spoke into his shirt, yet Lloyd smiled and pattered her back awkwardly.

"I just said what I saw... You were already amazing, you just needed to know it."

The 5th hour of Lloyd and Tina's session had come, and after being forced to vow on his parent's life to never tell anyone about how Tina had wept in front of him, they both returned to training.

At a certain point, Lloyd had begun calling Tina 'Master' instead of her name, and while he couldn't really pinpoint the exact point that had happened, he could pinpoint the moment when Tina's comfortability had reached a level where she felt comfortable verbally abusing Lloyd whenever he did something wrong.

"No, stupid! Don't just create flames; manipulate them! That's what your ability is called right? Flame manipulation, not combustion creation."

"Well, actually, it's called [Flame control], not flame-" Lloyd argued.

"Shut up and actually do something. No time to blabber." Tina shouted with her fists resting on her hips.

"Yes master." Lloyd replied with an imaginary tear going down his face.

"How are you two holding up?" A masculine voice entered both their ears, causing them to turn around and see Roderick and Hime standing next to each other.

While Roderick wore his signature smile and half-almost closed eyes, Hime, on the other hand, was looking at Tina like human seeing abilities for the first time.

"Y-Yeah... I'm just trying to teach this dumbass how to materialize fire, yet it seems like everyone has limits, his being creative ones." She rolled her eyes.

"Come on, its his first time." Roderick argued, yet all he received was a small 'hmp' from Tina as she walked away from him while dragging Lloyd with her by the ear.

"Do you want to swap?" Roderick raised his voice and asked.

"Nope! I still have an hour!" Tina replied.

"Well, we're about to leave for the day. I think it would be more efficient if you gave him to me for now so he can have a longer rest later." Roderick argued, making Tina stop for a moment before glancing down at Lloyd, who was looking at her pleadingly.

"Ugh. I guess you can have him." She sneered and let go of Lloyd's ear.

"I'm going to pack my things and come right back." Lloyd stated while rubbing his ear.

"Sure. You have three minutes."

"Thanks." Lloyd thanked before sinking into his shadow and speeding toward his tent.

The sun was already up, but in a way, it could still be considered to be dawn or half an hour away from not being dawn anymore, but who's counting?

The training between Roderick and Lloyd wasn't very eventful. Roderick most focused on situation tactics and questions that relate to those rather than acting the scenarios and learning how to act from there.

While Lloyd appreciated the break from getting beaten up, he knew that the current method was ineffective in teaching Lloyd anything, yet he went along with it for the 6 hours they were on the road for.

"Hey Roderick, I have a question..." Lloyd stated while scratching the back of his neck with a tinge of pink dyeing his cheeks.

"Shoot." Roderick finger-gunned Lloyd while simultaneously grabbing the attention of everyone.

"Your eyes are always half closed. What's up with that? Do you have tiny eyes or something cuz I can barely see your irises? Or is it some kind of technique to always rest your eyes?" Lloyd asked with a chuckle in his voice.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Guys?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"I'm just asking why it looks like his eyes are always closed. It's a safety concern you know! It feel like you would be bad at things that require full vision and attention... Like driving maybe?"

"..."

"..."

Why's everyone looking at me like that?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Tina? Hime?"

"..."

The whole group had halted as an air of silence befell them.

Everyone single one of them had an expression on their faces, and while some of them seemed perplexed beyond belief, others, like Felix and Hime, looked at Lloyd with intrigued expressions.

"I'm east-Asian..." Roderick responded.

"..."

"..."

"Fuck..."

And just like that, the group went several hours without speaking to one another as one of them felt like a racist, two others tried to figure out if east-Asia was a country or not, and the rest too stupefied by Lloyd's comment that they remained speechless for the entire trip.

[Check Comments for context.]

Chapter 78: 1 Week Later [1]

Swoosh

Swoosh

Swoosh

The sounds of pebbled ripping through the air as the blindfolded Lloyd dodged them with grace echoed throughout the forest.

While Lloyd was in no way close to Felix's reaction time, over a week's worth of sessions, he began to get the hang of it as every his sense of touch, hearing, and smell improved drastically, allowing Lloyd to dodge Felix's lightning fast attacks by the skin of his teeth.

"I have to say, you've really improved over the last week." Felix complimented, yet before Lloyd could thank him for the compliment, a disdainful smile appeared on Felix's face as he hurled another pebble toward Lloyd, this one being much faster than the others.

However, unlike the pained scream followed by Lloyd falling onto his ass that Felix expected to see, he saw something else.

A shadow slowly covered Lloyd's hand before catching the speeding pebble with the same hand a letting out a soft chuckle.

"You really thought I would fall for that one again?" Lloyd chuckled, yet when he heard the sound of the wind being split by a speeding person, he instantly became guarded again, not that it helped.

Trying to block Felix's attack, Lloyd paused for a moment and picked up on every single little movement, sound, and even smell in the air. Felix always wore the stinkiest of perfumes, so Lloyd expected to at least smell it coming.

Everything told Lloyd that Felix would be to his right, yet when Lloyd tried to strike in that direction, he felt something hit the back of his knee before a painful uppercut sent him into the air.

"Again?!" Lloyd grunted.

"You gotta concentrate you dumbass."

"I am!" Lloyd complained.

"Ugh. We have no idea how long it will take to find the dungeon boss, so since the time ranges from 2 days or more, I think teaching you mana sense would be the correct decision..." Felix explained with his hand to his chin while Lloyd slowly took his blindfold off.

"Are you sure? You kept insisting that I should train my basic senses before doing anything else." Lloyd raised a brow.

"Well, we are pretty time sensitive now that Hime thinks that we are close to the boss of this dungeon, so I might as well take you to the next level." Felix shrugged before tapping on his wristwatch and taking out a white blindfold.

"I already have one." Lloyd tried to argue, yet when he felt like Felix was about to scold him, he stopped saying anything and just took the blindfold without any complaints.

"Wearing it will close off all your senses, including hearing. The goal of this exercise is to teach you how to sense mana." Felix explained.

"I already know how to sense mana though..." Lloyd argued.

"If you could sense mana, you would have realized that Veronica has been staring at you with her optical ability for a while... To be honest, even I'm kind of creeped out." Felix shuddered while pointing at her.

"Ugh..." Lloyd's face scrunched up in cringe while goosebumps traveled up and down his spine.

"Anyway, wear that blindfold, and I'm going to throw mana-infused pebbles at you. Is that understood?"

"..."

"What?"

"I'm assuming you're blocking out all my senses to improve the only sense I have left, that being my mana sense. However, if you're blocking out all my senses, wouldn't I not be able to feel the pebbles when they hit me?" Lloyd asked.

"Well, the feeling suppressed, but you'll definitely know when something hits you." Felix explained before forcing the blindfold onto Lloyd and beginning his training.

The hours flew past as Lloyd quickly finished his training with Felix before going on to train with Hime for another 6 hours.

Her training mostly remained the same ever since the first week. The only difference now was that Lloyd would lose consciousness less, and she would take him out to the forest for the last 2 hours of each session to train him on killing actual monsters rather than spar with her.

Over the week, Lloyd had slowly learned how to let his instincts take over. Of course, bad habits die hard, so the overplanning problem continued, but Lloyd understood why it was better for him to rely on his instincts instead of calculating every single one of the

opponent's moves, since a single miscalculation could complete his plan, especially when fighting with thing unpredictable creatures like the monsters of the forest.

However, beast fighting also showed promise in fighting against intelligent beings since it was unpredictable and hard to fight against.

Movements without flow or patterns would drive anyone crazy, and that's an advantage Lloyd wouldn't mind having over other people in the future.

Hime's session ended with Lloyd killing several monsters; however, unlike how the monster's energies usually pooled into him and increased his power, now it simply healed his wounds, rejuvenated his stamina, and refilled his mana while also increasing his mana pool by a small margin.

"I need you to focus your shadow upon one singular point in your body." A blue-haired man commanded.

"I'm trying my best..." Lloyd grunted while trying his best to focus on his arm, yet the most he could do was reduce it to 70% of one side of his body. This means that the shadow covered his entire arm, past his shoulder, and trickled into tendrils reaching his spinal cord and down to his pelvis.

However, after a previous failed attempt, Lloyd had learned not to completely take away from all his limbs.

Imagine a bodybuilder who doesn't take care of his bottom half trying to deadlift the same amount of weight he bench-presses. That is the equivalent of putting all his shadow into one side of his body, as not only does it have a chance to harden anything touching the enhanced limbs, but it also makes it hard for the rest of his body to support whatever he is doing.

The body works in unison, so taking away that unison leaves you with a single limb, being forced to do the work that is usually done by the entire body.

Anyway, Lachlan's training consisted of comprehension, shadow control, and sparring, each of them being split equally into 2-hour segments. It was consistent, and even a little therapeutic since Lloyd always knew what he would do in Lachlan's training session.

The same could be said about Rex's training session, which remained consistent throughout. Rex would teach Lloyd as much as he could about martial arts for the first 4 hours of the session, before meditating in a way that slowly but surely taught Lloyd to control his spiritual aura, such as his presence and his killing intent, as well as his passive ability [Monarch's Aura].

The main reason Rex was teaching Lloyd about aura control was not only to train Lloyd in the ability to concentrate his aura on a single person, thing, or monster, but Rex found it to be a really good thing for someone at the same level as Lloyd to know since it would drastically improve his will, concentration, and even talent in the future.

While Lloyd's ability to control his aura was still at a level where he could barely restrict the area to 270 degrees, aura control is an ability that has infinite potential.

According to Rex, there have even been awakeners who have reached such a mastery that they could literally create an entire reality marble out of their spiritual aura alone.

Veronica's training, on the other hand, was both consistent and inconsistent. The only consistency was pain, yet that only created a scenario where Lloyd lived in fear every day, worrying about what kind of sick torture method Veronica would bring out this time.

While at first, she had chosen to go the traditional route of simply throwing pain into his body, she began to get a little creative over time, finding newer and newer ways to inflict damage and pain upon Lloyd.

It took quite the mental burden on Lloyd's mind, but instead of complaining about every little thing he found wrong, he found comfort in cursing at Veronica for several minutes before he slept.

However, despite all this torture, the most confusing part of it all was the fact that she would always take the last hour of the session to nurse Lloyd back to health by feeding him, taking him to his bed, caressing his hair, and slowly allowing him to fall into a slumber.

To end the week off, she had chosen to disguise her new method of torture with the veil of a lesson on sword fighting.

'Wow... Did she always look that good.' Lloyd inwardly asked himself while checking out her new black and red outfit.

She wore a long black one-piece dress with patterns of red all over it.

The dress did her justice, showing off her hourglass figure and complimenting her pale skin.

Her slender arms and waist made her look almost fragile, while the warm smile on her face would have made anyone fall for her despite its clear contrast with her icy-cold skin.

However, in contrast to her fragile-looking body and the innocent look on her face, her dainty slender arms held an enormous sword just a little shorter than her in size, and half her size in width.

"Ooo. Have you finally fallen for me." She asked with a loving yet slightly mocking tone.

"Shut up, bitch." Lloyd sneered before shooting toward her with everything he had.

"Did you know that the average peak first commandment can barely destroy a town with their strongest attack?" Veronica commented while gracefully parrying Lloyd's attack with her magnificently large, almost brutish sword.

"I already know that." Lloyd sneered while swinging his katana at her head.

"When I was at the peak of the first commandment, I could very easily destroy a city, a medium-sized city, if I wanted to..." Veronica spoke, yet her voice seemed almost deadly serious, something Lloyd had never seen from her ever since his first encounter with her, where she showed off her cold and distant personality.

However, despite his being slightly taken off guard due to the change in tone, he did not stop attacking her with his blade.

"Bragging much?" Lloyd chuckled mockingly, yet her facial expression did not change one bit.

"Me and you..." She spoke after disappearing from where she stood and appearing right behind Lloyd before whispering into his ear.

Lloyd's eyes widened as he tried to turn around, yet the iron-clad grip on his shoulder, paired with the blood-red eyes that stared into his soul, Lloyd found himself frozen in place with his whole body not daring to move an inch as it knew it was under the gaze of an apex predator.

"We are different from these humans... From these mortals... Don't you think?" She whispered as her hot breath trickled into his ear, sending the most nerve-wracking and horrible sensation down his back.

If he had sweat glands, he would have found himself standing in a cold sweat, yet there was nothing to indicate his stress in that situation.

Fear gripped his heart, and the words he was about to say were stuck in his throat.

"Look how much they have to work to mimic a fraction of our talent." Veronica placed her hand upon Lloyd's shirt, yet the cold sensation traveled right through.

His blade shuddered ever-so-slightly while his eyes shook in primal fear.

He was a Void Walker... A celestial race with every single one of their kind capable of shaking the entire universe on their own through talent, power, and an unbreakable will that was the cause of the war in the first place.

1 versus billions upon billions of soldiers, each and every one of them willing to sacrifice their lives for what they believed to be the greater good.

Lloyd's race was supposed to symbolize fear... So how could he... He, a void walker, be scared of a mere vampire?

"We can be so much more." Her icy cold hands gripped around Lloyd's neck, yet instead of thinking of how he felt like he was about to die, or the fact that Veronica was acting horribly creepy, a voice at the back of his mind also spoke...

'She's right...'

'...'

'Why waste so much time on the humans when they hate us?'

'Shut up.'

'The woman of our dreams is asking us to run away with her...'

'...'

Lloyd felt his face being turned towards Veronica's, causing both of them to be merely an inch away from each other, but that's what she wanted.

A teasing smile stretched across her lips, and before Lloyd could even move, no matter what his intentions were, her grip over him tightened before she flipped away with the grace of a ballerina.

"Just kidding..." She smiled teasingly. On the other hand, Lloyd had an enraged expression on his face for the remaining time of the session.

Yet, despite the session ending with Lloyd laying half-dead with his head on Veronica's lap as he was slowly being nursed back to health, one question ran through his mind the entire time.

'What the hell... Was that voice...'

Chapter 79: 1 Week Later [2]

"You're doing worse than you did yesterday. Is something on your mind?" Tina asked as she stared at the fiery orange chain wrapped around her.

However, despite its complex creation and the artistic detail put into making Lloyd's flames take the form of dense chains, it was far too weak for Lloyd to do anything but trick his opponents into thinking that he had a method to entrap them.

"No... Its fine." Lloyd spoke through gritted teeth as he tried his best to keep the chains in their form without losing concentration since doing so would mean that they would dissipate into thin air.

"Maybe we have to do a little bit of comprehension training? That usually increased someone control over their element." Tina began to speak to herself, but after thinking for a moment, an idea entered her mind.

With twinkling eyes, she tensed her body and destroyed the chains that Lloyd was trying so hard to maintain, yet before Lloyd could even start complaining, Tina spoke first.

"How much do you know about arcane magic!?" Tina asked with the most exciting voice Lloyd had ever heard. It was almost adorable how she had perked up like an excited child.

"Uhm... Not much, I guess? I've seen a few people use it before, but I've never used it myself.

"Do you at least know how mana works?" Tina asked with a slightly disappointed expression.

"Well, of course, I do. I know how arcane magic works too, but since I don't have a class or ability based on arcane magic, I can't really use it, can I?" Lloyd raised a brow.

"That's where you're wrong, and let me explain.

Arcane magic is like any other magic, but it has what we arcane mages call a a neutral property. It can become a beat of energy if we concentrate it on a single area, or it becomes a blanket or bubble that covers us whenever we want to block an attack or contain one, depending on the situation.

Arcane magic is the most malleable form of magic, and despite only arcane mages and artificers using it, if you break it down, it is literally just mana. Every awakened has mana, so why can't you use it?" Tina asked, and once Lloyd processed the question, he could not help but raise a brow.

"We can use things like mana sense and release a magical aura, both of which rely on pure mana. So why shouldn't we be able to use arcane magic? It's clearly not like an element where some people simply don't have an affinity for some of them." Lloyd asked himself.

"Exactly! It's just that having the ability for it makes it a lot easier to control it and, at the same time, makes the spells we use much less mana consuming." Tina smiled widely.

"You've been calling your abilities spells all this time. I thought that it was just another word for ability, but now I'm a little confused." Lloyd scratched the back of his head.

"Think of spells as the magic version of martial arts techniques. They are ways that you use your abilities to make sub-abilities. Of course, these can vary; for example, you have several shadow abilities that could be considered spells.

All you would need to do is find a way to combine them when you reach the first commandment and make them into something simple like shadow control." Tina explained before continuing.

"Having only arcane magic is both a blessing and a curse. I am one of the most malleable mages. I sometimes call myself a 'Jack of all trades, master of none.'

I can manipulate the elemental particles to create a spell from any element that is abundant in the area I am in, but it also makes it so that I'm not specialized in any of them, nor can I use them if the element isn't abundant in the area.

Lastly, my elemental manipulation only extends to basic elements, so I can't use darkness, light, and all their other sub-elements. I can go on and on, but just think of it as me only being capable of using the main elements like water, lightning, air, fire, and earth." Tina explained while Lloyd tried his best to absorb the information dumb that she had just laid on him.

Tina and Lloyd continued speaking for a few more hours about the theories of mana. For the final two hours of the session, Tina chose that the best course of action would be to teach him since teaching and training someone to manipulate pure mana is almost the same as teaching them to manipulate all the elements despite most elements having one key feature that made each and every one of them different.

Water is cool, smooth, and calm, while fire is brash and quick, representing its user's rage.

Wind represents a human's constantly changing emotions, while earth represents a powerful and sturdy mind. Each element represents the person's state of mind, which

means that as a person becomes stronger over time, they are more likely to represent the characteristics of his element...

This is why only one question lingered at the back of Lloyd's mind at the end of their conversation...

'Is that why most void walkers go insane? Is it the curse of becoming too strong?'

"Hey! I need you to listen here or all of this will be for nothing." Tina shouted while snapping her fingers in front of Lloyd's face.

2 hours passed in the blink of an eye as Tina tried her best to teach Lloyd how to manipulate pure mana, yet with so many things lingering at the back of Lloyd's mind, it became nearly impossible for him to concentrate.

"Well, I guess that's the end of our session." Tina sighed as she created a fireball in the palm of her hand and incinerated one of the monsters that remained outside even after the sun had risen.

"Should I start then?" Roderick asked after having appeared out of nowhere.

The group had split up into three different groups. The front group was a few meters in front of both Lloyd and whoever was teaching him at the time, and the back group stayed a few meters behind the middle group.

This method was mainly used to accommodate Tina since she didn't feel comfortable speaking around anyone except Rex and Lloyd and since Roderick didn't want to make her feel weird about it.

"Y-Y-Yeah..." Tine stuttered before jumping to the back group where Rex was.

"So... You two have been really hitting it off." Roderick tapped Lloyd's shoulder with his fist while giving him a grin that most men could understand with a single glance.

"No."

"Oh, come on! She's cute. She's a little older than you, but age doesn't matter after age 20 since most people over the second commandment stay that way until their early hundreds." Roderick shrugged, yet Lloyd still shook his head, yet he had a weirdly warm smile on his face.

"Tina is nice, and she's cute. She had the enthusiasm of a hundred scientists combined, and she is one of the hardest workers I know." Lloyd spoke, making Roderick widen his eyes.

While Roderick knew that there might be a chance that Lloyd might have liked Tina, this was the first time in the 350+ hours of knowing him that Lloyd had truly complimented so much in such a short span of time.

"Soooo... You like her?" Roderick gave Lloyd the same grin while poking his elbow into Lloyd's side.

"No, and even if I did, I wouldn't go for it." Lloyd sighed.

"Why not?!"

"A girlfriend is a commitment I am not willing to have right now. I am 16. I have my entire academic life ahead of me, and I need to focus. Otherwise, everyone else will surpass me..." Lloyd shrugged.

'Doubt it...' Roderick inwardly thought before sighing a beginning his lesson.

Their lesson felt much longer than it usually did. While Roderick didn't mind teaching Lloyd since it was a way to pass the time, Lloyd, on the other hand, had too many things on his mind to truly take in anything that Roderick was saying, and they both knew that.

"Do you want to take a break? Your mind seems a little cluttered right now." Roderick commented with a hint of worry in his voice.

Of course, Roderick still thought that there was a possibility that Lloyd was a Void Walker, yet until that suspicion is proved to be correct, which he hoped would never happen, he wouldn't act upon it in any way, shape, or form.

To Roderick, Lloyd was just as human as everyone else, and that opinion only strengthened over time as Roderick watched Lloyd work day and night to improve himself and be of worth to the team. How could he not respect Lloyd after seeing that?

"It's nothing... I'm just a little exhausted." Lloyd sighed.

"Don't worry about it. Even I'm tired, so I can only imagine how you feel." Roderick sighed and patted Lloyd's back, yet before he could continue-

"Incoming!" a voice cut through everyone's conversations, causing both the front and back groups to merge into the center, blocking Lloyd from all sides.

Clang

A silent gust of wind smashed into Lloyd's face before the sound of two metallic objects clashing entered his ears.

Looking forward, Lloyd saw a talon pushing against Veronica's blade before it was forced away as a gust of wind hit both of the creature's wings.

With her open palm outstretched, Veronica's eyes glowed with a fierce crimson before three words left her mouth.

"Blood Control - Cripple"

The sound of soft flesh tearing from the inside squelched into Lloyd's ear as a shiver went down his spine.

He could see and hear the creature's blood bubble and boil before the pressure from within caused them to explode, and within the blink of an eye, the creature was falling to the ground with blood leaking from its orifices.

Thud

"Well... That was brutal." Lloyd chuckled, yet the creatures were clearly not done.

Dozens of piercing blue eyes stared from within the shadows of the forests, and while the rest might not have known how many there were from only glancing at the shadows of the trees, Lloyd saw right through them and widened his eyes.

"There are a few second commandments. I've never seen or even heard of this monster species, so we don't know what makes the special." Roderick informed.

"Nope... We've seen it before; you just didn't pay attention to it." Lloyd retorted while tapping on his watch and opening a hologram with two drawings of the owl-like creature on it.

The creature was quite large, yet Lloyd knew it could be larger since the size clearly varied from adult to adult to adult within the species.

"The first one we met was around the size of a cow. On the other hand, this one was a little larger, yet for some reason, it was weaker than the last one I saw." Lloyd informed while quickly scanning the page he had created on the creature.

"Its fast and almost completely silent. Its feathers might seem white, but they can become close to transparent. From what we've seen, they use their talons as their main weapon, but that could change if we fight a few more." Lloyd continued.

"Thanks for the info." Hime thanked before releasing a spiritual aura that Lloyd didn't recognize.

While the color of the aura represented a many things, the color itself was a play on the mind. It didn't really exist, yet because anything with a soul could sense it, the body is tricked into thinking of it as something normal eyes could see.

"Orange?" Lloyd muttered.

"The warrior's aura, Battle Intent. You can think of it as a way to show someone's fighting spirit without having to spell it out for them. It can also be used as a weapon, but that's a lesson for another day." Rex patted Lloyd's shoulder.

As Hime's battle intent spread throughout the forest before her, all the owls retaliated, sending out their own killing intents to clash with Hime's aura and push it back.

"Now!" Hime shouted, causing everyone except Lloyd to act on her command.

"I guess we're really doing this, huh..." Lloyd sighed as he slowly sank into his shadow with his eyes flickering violet with an excitement he felt like he hadn't truly felt in a very long time.

The excitement of a real battle.

Chapter 80: Never Truly You [1] - Reflection

[Thank you IWannaHugKobeni for your generous gift]

BOOM

Clang

Swoosh

The sound of battle entered echoed throughout the forest, yet none of them entered the shadows in which Lloyd moved in.

From within his shadow, Lloyd analyzed every one of the monsters and tried to find those closest to him in strength, yet after a swift scan of his surroundings, he quickly realized that these owls were much stronger than he had thought they were.

Most of them ranged from mid-stage first commandment to the initial stages of the Topaz seal's second commandment. However, one of them had a much more powerful presence.

'Mid topaz seal?' Lloyd asked himself before quickly shaking his head. That creature was not his problem; if it somehow did become his problem, he was as good as dead.

According to Lloyd's knowledge of commandments, the second commandment was split into five stages, each represented by a seal named after different gems, while the 6th seal is considered the bridge between the second and third commandments.

2nd Commandment:

- Topaz Seal
- Amethyst Seal
- Ruby Seal
- Emerald Seal
- Diamond Seal

- Half step - Pink Diamond Seal

The power difference between the first and second seals was like the difference between the initial to half-step stages of the first commandment. After every seal, the difference doubles from the last, making it harder and harder to advance as an individual closes in on the third commandment.

Leaving his shadow right behind one of the owls, Lloyd took out his sword and dug it into the weakest and most unsuspecting owl, instantly killing it as the sword pierced right through the creature's heart, yet before he could relax, he felt a gust of wind hit him before pain radiated from his back as another owl swooshed past him and attacked him with its talons.

Energy surges into Lloyd's body, but since he knows that it wouldn't do anything but heal wounds or replenish his mana, he controlled the energy to the best of his ability and moved the portion he didn't need to to his arms. He didn't know how it would have helped, but in a way, he expected it to work the same way shadow enhancement did.

However...

"Huh?"

Suddenly, excruciating pain shot through his arms, causing him to drop his sword before letting out a muffled scream of pain that alerted some of the nearby owls, indicated by the twitch of their antlers that came out of their head.

Several piercing blue eyes stared at Lloyd from a distance, yet before they could do anything, they felt a powerful shiver go through their feathers, and they were not the only ones who felt it.

Hime's hair stood on its ends, telling her that something dangerous was coming. As if her beast instincts themselves were trying to warn her of incoming dangers.

On the other hand, Felix felt something fluctuate through his spiritual senses, making him look in that direction just to see a powerful yet eerie mana source expanding in strength.

For a moment, every battle had stopped in its wake, sending a wave of silence through the forest that not even the tiniest of insects dared to disturb.

With violently glowing eyes that seemed to create a trail of violet whenever Lloyd moved his head, he looked down at his arms which had web-like cracks traveling through every inch of his skin.

Purple energy escaped from cracks in his arm, and before he knew it, his skin flakes began to fall off like leaves in the autumn.

Whenever a flake of skin fell off, Lloyd would see into an abyss that was the anatomy beyond his first layer of skin.

Lloyd knew that he had no organs or blood, but until this point, he had never seen what was beyond the surface of his skin, yet now that he could see it, there was only one word to describe how he felt.

Terrified.

An abyss... A seemingly infinite void. That was what he saw. It was completely black, yet in a way, the abyss felt alive, and the hole left on his body felt full.

There was a saying in the past that Lloyd had seen...

"if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

'Look left.' The voice in Lloyd's head whispered, yet instead of listening to the voice, something else happened.

As if Lloyd had used [Shadow Movement], he felt himself sinking into something, and in the same instant, his vision became black, and everything began to fade...

Everything became nothing, before everything turned into a single thing.

Everything faded, yet all the atoms, all the light, all the blood, and all the corpses seemed to break down and merge to create a thing that stood in the distance.

It was voiceless, or so Lloyd thought.

It had a powerful presence, yet it felt more like a trick of the mind.

The thing simply stood there for what felt like hours, yet when the thing began moving, Lloyd couldn't help but long for the moments when it hadn't been moving.

Every one of its steps were silent, yet they created a ripple through the abyss that made the very void below it reach out and grip the creature's feet.

Despite trying his best to move, the moment Lloyd looked into where the creature's eyes were supposed to be, he quickly found himself frozen, incapable of moving an inch despite his efforts.

It was as if the very abyss within his had stopped working, freezing in place as a way to preserve its host's life the same way a human's body might drop in temperature and freeze in place whenever an apex creature looks at it.

This was not a battle where fight or flight was an option. This was an encounter where Lloyd could only hope to god that the creature walking toward him would simply walk around him, forget his existence, or just swat him to the side.

A few minutes seemed to pass, and despite the creature's long strides, it was pretty slow. Yet, no matter how slow it was, Lloyd could not move an inch.

His fear was slowly building.

His breathing was becoming faster.

The silence of his none existent heart made everything sound weird.

He felt vulnerable, and he felt afraid.

So you would think that when the creature finally stopped around 15 meters before him, Lloyd's panic would subside, correct?

"Since when..." The creature spoke, its voice sounding closer to a metallic screech than to an actual voice, yet somehow, despite everything seemingly making it impossible for Lloyd to understand it, Lloyd understood every single word that came out of its mouth.

Its mouth?

What mouth?

The creature didn't have a mouth. It had two hollow holes for the eyes and a small bump representing its nose.

Its face was completely smooth, yet in a way, it looked very familiar.

"Since when have we been..."

The familiarity of looking at yourself in a mirror for the first time in your life... That's what it felt like.

A creature created out of literal shadows, slowly morphing to look more human. Slowly morphing to look more and more like the void walker before it.

"So disappointing?"

A reflection of Lloyd... After all, one could argue that the thing in the mirror is never truly you.