

Tutorial 841

Chapter 841 - Keep yourself together

After yet another release of her presence, I find myself re-manifesting inside our shared mental space. Currently, I'm confident that over my year here, a few days have already passed in what feels like a flash. I wonder, would it be odd to say that I'm having fun?

It might be this cockroach's doing, but all my abilities seem to be working pretty well. My traits, my insight into mana wavelengths, passives, stats, and all that. It all feels just like it does outside. Of course, the difference is that I'm not gaining any levels. I can't open my status, and it's difficult to describe, but my improvements feel weird and hard to put a finger on.

Of course, I've been adapting to what Lissandra's been doing, and I'm continuing to improve, but it doesn't feel like I've become any more resilient, improved my reflexes, or anything else like that. It's more that I know that some time in the next second I will be hit by a car speeding in from my left, flung into the air, then run over by a truck, just before a bunch of lions, recently escaped from the zoo, bite into my flesh and drag me across the city, while a plane crashes into my crumbled body, just in time for some old granny on a bicycle to ride over what remains while ringing a bell.

It's exactly what she warned me about regarding this kind of training. My body outside won't have the integrated muscle memory, and my brain won't be able to rewire itself to work efficiently in regard to the training. I'll just gain the knowledge, and that knowledge will allow me to improve faster once I'm outside. Though maybe knowledge isn't the right word. Experience? Well, I was never one to think about these sorts of things too deeply, but it isn't doing anything bad for me, I just have to stop popping like a balloon every time she...

I find myself re-manifesting again, and Lissandra, who still looks like her version from the 2nd floor, looks down at me.

"You don't have to stop, I can keep going," I say.

"Little pup, even a gray lizard can keep going, screaming all the while and repeatedly running itself up against a wall, and yet it means very little. Why aren't you improving?"

"Well, sorry I'm not at the level of some nobl-"

“Enough,” she waves her hand, and her eyes haze as she thinks of something. “I knew what I was getting myself into, so there is no reason I should start getting frustrated now. I need to control myself.”

Looking at her, I can only think that I will scream if she says she wants to punch my face for some mysterious reason. Her eyes narrow as she looks at me, and I can’t help but remember that even the huge house pest that is the Ruler of Diligence wanted to punch me, and he can’t even read human faces. Surely it can’t be that bad.

“I will give you a few minutes to rethink your approach,” she says, standing where she is.

I look at her, and she looks back at me, causing me to scratch my chin and look away.

Then I force a part of me to start rethinking what I’ve been doing. I find it somewhat exciting and partially annoying, after all, most of the time I prefer to simply endure and overpower this kind of attack with my superior mana reserves.

Yes, it can be fun to go for efficiency. Yes, better efficiency means a bigger kaboom, as my Minion would say, and even if my reserves don’t increase, that in the end is like getting more mana. But... that’s not where my talents lie. I don’t think I’ll ever use my mana as efficiently as someone like Weslin, Savant, Tess, or Sophie. And at the same time, I don’t think they’ll ever be able to match the speed with which I can gather and move large amounts of mana.

Once again, I turn my eyes to Lissandra and ask, “You keep saying that current Absolutes are all trash and nothing in comparison to how they used to be, but what do you mean by that, actually?”

“For your own good, I hope you’re dedicating appropriate effort towards your improvements rather than this idle chat, little pup. It is as I have said. Though I was born after the System War, there still were Absolutes and Champions left over from that era. That war culled many of them, and the survivors were those who had faced gods, elves, and dragons in battle and survived.”

She pauses as if reminiscing on some good old time she never experienced firsthand. There might even be a bit of longing.

Would things be different if someone like her had been alive back then? Could a singular being even be able to bring such change?

While I think about that, Lissandra continues to talk, “I’ve heard stories of dozens of Absolutes coming together just to kill a single god. Preparing items and arrays that would have been beyond even something like Beyond’s main array. Items they created that were capable of destroying planets and techniques millions of people worked to develop for the sake of killing a single god. And dozens of those Absolutes perished instantly as they threw themselves against their opponents. All in hope of some reward that, as you can imagine, must have been equal to the danger.”

“Are there many of those Absolutes still alive?”

A small smile, unusual for her, appears on her face. “Most certainly, there are plenty. Warmongers waiting for yet another war, explorers in distant parts of the universe, or broken ones searching for a peaceful end. Some died when I challenged them, even their rewards proving not enough. And many more died challenging Pride. Little pup, when you have the time, give it a bit of thought, ask yourself why so many powerful people seem to want to challenge that man. As for you, be very careful if you ever meet someone who survived the System War and lived until the current era.”

“I will try. But how do they differ otherwise, other than experience and some fancy rewards?”

“Fancy rewards... are you stupid, little pup? There were some that gained things as grand as a sixth passive skill. Just a mere few out of the many who fought, though most of them are long since dead. But it still shows the desperation behind the system. Even if I guess, desperation isn’t quite fitting, as the system bears no such emotions, it just follows its nature to spread and evolve. But it shows how highly it calculated the threat back then to offer such rewards as haven’t been seen since and likely will never be seen again.”

“Did you ever gain such a reward?” I ask her.

“I did not. Ten active skills, five passive skills, three traits. I’m as human as they come. Yet in my hands, even this is enough. Little pup, what do I always say?”

“That I am worse than noble ladies’ pets.”

“Do you want a beating?”

“Not that? Something about my mana control being...”

I blink and find myself remanifested as she released her presence. That then rapidly repeats around a hundred times in a row until I stand there, wobbly on my feet and light-headed.

“Active skills are what’s most important, as is your control over your abilities. What good is having a great many skills, passives, and items if you can’t even get the most out of what you already have? You asked me how Absolutes of my era and of the System War era differ from the current ones.” Lissandra says.

She takes a few steps and, in a gesture that feels extremely natural to her, locks her hands behind her back. She is taller than her younger self, and she wears a near-black suit, too, yet the atmosphere around her is the same.

“A good example to explain it is through techniques and domains. Absolutes and Champions of old were always more combat-oriented, with a greater extent of sensory abilities and domains allowing them to negate the first attack. Back then, whenever you entered the domain of an Absolute, you had to be ready to either fight or for one side to be forced into submission. Nowadays, domains don’t seem to be as common, and techniques are instead oriented toward ease of use rather than lethality. People don’t seem to specialize as much either, and tend to go for the more general builds.”

I check on the part of my mind coming up with a new way to counter her pressure and switch my attention back to her.

As always, I find myself curious about the things she tells me. Even if there isn’t much of use to gain from it, just satisfying my curiosity is enough. The more powerful people I’ve met often seem to get a kick out of sharing this kind of information, or at least those I’ve met did. I wonder if it’s because of how seriously the system takes the passage of knowledge when it comes to the first generations, and disciples, and the like. Maybe people like her are just used to it.

“So techniques nowadays rely on the system more?”

“Obviously,” Lissandra nods. “As pathetic as it is. They rely on traits, passives, and items. They’re just too safe to use, too clean. My pre Champion self would destroy most of the current Absolutes in combat. During the era of the System War and my own, many techniques were developed that were as dangerous to the user as they were to the enemy, and nowadays these... people call them obsolete. How obtuse. But you have been dallying enough, we shall continue.”

I don't even have time to say anything as that presence expands from her in the center and crashes against me and past me like a wave.

For a mere moment, a really short one, I move my mana in an attempt to counter it. I don't do it by force, I long ago learned that doing so was useless. I also don't try to make my own presence sharper to cut through it or make it pass by me. That would be just as bad, and it would surround me anyway. What I’m imagining in my head is my presence behaving like a willow, bending in the wind.

In previous attempts, I experimented with constant shifts in my frequencies and cycling them. I tried to mirror her presence, I tried to reflect it, I tried to pulsate through it, and I tried even more ideas. Some of these I came up with on my own, and others I read in the mana stones Min-Jae stole from the Academy.

Still, even if it seems inefficient, I find myself constantly coming back to the idea of my own presence twisting like a willow in the wind in response.

Is it because of the Fragment of the Nameless Tree imbued in the back of my left hand? I could try to use [Eclipse], [Redistribution], [Weave], or possibly even [Manifestation], but I don't. I don't like to acknowledge it, but I kind of feel like I understand this woman sometimes. I don't think she would want me to do that.

And so now I’m trying to be a willow, bending in the wind while changing and modifying Mana Cycling through all of it. But in the end, I’m still the sort of person who learns the most through experience and brute-forcing it rather than sheer talent. I continue with my attempts while Lissandra flawlessly and consistently creates the perfect copy of the same pressure. Everything about it is exactly the same.

This process reminds me of the second tournament and the training I did throughout. Since it's impossible to die here, I exploit this training just as I did then. There are many other things I would like to do at the same time, but it would annoy her if I didn't give this my best effort and as much attention as I can spare. I have no illusions, she would cut this training short if I didn't.

And so we continue. Hour after hour passes, and after some time, I have a feeling it stretches into days. Not long after, I entirely lose track of the passage of time. None of my subminds wants to count and keep track of it, and there's nothing else I can do to measure it by. Though I wonder, isn't the passage of time unimportant? I just need to focus on this task, and give it my utmost and more besides.

With all my effort, I watch another wave shoot out from her. At this point, I know it better than I know my own face. I have observed it with much more effort than I ever did with my own reflection.

I track the waves and wavelengths, and I release even less mana than I did before. It flickers weakly up to an arm's length around me, while the rest of my mana cycles through my body in a way that feels like a bellows fanning a flame. That flame, which is my presence, bends back as if under a strong wind. I let it flicker until it almost seems like it's about to die off, only for it to blaze firmer as that first small wave washes over me. Many more waves follow, all in the fraction of a second that I can only track by sending my mind into overdrive, and with my presence bending and staying just firm enough not to disappear.

Still, it bursts. It's washed away, and almost reflexively, all my mana blazes to face that presence, only for it to wash away with even less resistance than my prior attempt did.

I once again find myself remanifested. For a bit, I wonder how much of her presence I've already experienced, but just like the passage of time, that question quickly becomes unimportant.

"You have ten minutes to rest and think," Lissandra says, and she disappears from in front of me.

"But I can still continue," I call into the empty air.

Her voice then sounds, though she is not here. "This training and this sort of thought acceleration is a danger to your feeble mind. Don't forget that. Be sure to keep yourself together."

At first, I don't get what she means. Then, I hear a cough from behind me. When I turn around, a mysterious man wearing all black is there. On his head is a black, wide-brimmed wizard hat that entirely covers his face. As he lazily leans against a tree nearby, I notice the sleek wizard staff he's holding.

"Well, if that wasn't a truly terrible use of fluidic mana shell integrity and adaptive waveform interference principles," he says.

In a smooth gesture, he lifts the brim of his hat enough to see his face, my face. Gray and brown eyes, Preeminence Eyes, scars, and all the like.

Chapter 842 - Heart, mind, and body.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Like he's trying to show off, he takes off his hat and combs through his hair, which, unlike mine, is shoulder-length. Much like my usual hair, it is slightly wavy. His eyes then look up at my head.

After Lissandra shaved it, it was bald even after I entered this place, but for the moment, I've been able to manifest a sort of buzz cut length.

Nerdthaniel puts his hat back on. "I'm you, so that means you're essentially talking to yourself. Don't you ever wonder if our [Focus] skill is simply a localized manifestation of our neurodivergent predisposition? In our case, perhaps synthesized from a combination of ADHD and some sort of latent predisposition for schizophrenia. That would provide the perfect architecture for our talent in splitting our minds. If you analyze the data, wouldn't that indicate a high probability that many of the other high-level attendees possess a predisposition for mental illnesses? Within the system, those 'disorders' would seem to be optimal hardware for skill usage. It would explain how Tess got a skill as ridiculous as [Declaration], making her inherently delusional in ways the system tends to reward. Even Vic, with her [Intent] and [Duplication], is only such a great host for them because of her nature. That would mean her personality isn't a defect in this case-"

I lift my hand to stop him from talking, and he does.

"What are you doing here?" I ask again.

He looks away in that cool, smooth, nonchalant way of ours and stares at the sky as if he's searching for something distant.

This place is currently just a quiet, cozy autumn forest during the last days of the season, and as if on cue, the wind blows through his hair and sends a few colorful leaves swirling around him.

"I highly suspect that Lissandra Hawthorne is already releasing more than 50% of her presence. At least according to my calculations, the passage of time is uncertain, and going by the behavior of her mana, I suspect that we've reached her requirement, and she has, on a whim, decided to push for more. I would say it's her version of punching you in the face."

"Our face."

"Your face, I am you," he says.

"You make no sense. But okay, so let's say that is true. Then you're what? A symptom of brain damage?"

"Most certainly. Consider the variables: the environmental thought acceleration here, your continuous overclocking of your cognitive processor. Combined with your constructs, severe mana imbalances, the degradation of your body, and the extreme utilization of parallel mind partitioning. It was inevitable that all this would eventually manifest as externalized personas once pushed past the threshold of mental stability. I would recommend putting a stop to these sorts of activities to prevent further damage to the psyche, but we both know that isn't likely."

"It isn't, I will push further. I knew the risk of coming here and that there might be a danger of losing myself. Though I didn't expect it to manifest through one of my sub-minds showing up in this way." I sit down and watch him curiously. "Well, in the end, it's simple. I'll just have to hold myself together."

As I say that, I wave my hand. When I do that, he disappears as if he were never there, leaving me to my thoughts.

Even when he was manifested, I didn't feel any different. No part of me was missing, it just felt like my mind was spread a bit thinner. Not even for a moment did I stop being me, at least not for the time being. But hey, only a few days have passed so far.

I pass my hand through my buzz cut hair and continue to think about it and the ways I've been using my split minds. Sure, there are some dangers to look out for, they have always existed. And there are dangers to thought acceleration, as I saw with Faora and the tortured parts of herself she'd left in her mind palace. But I'm not like her, and I'm confident I can endure at least this much.

What I find interesting is that I was able to have a conversation with another part of my mind like that. It was like that with Sneakythaniel as well.

Well, I bet plenty of Absolutes are doing the same, probably even some of the Rulers. In this wide universe, it is certain to be a fairly normal and common thing.

I don't know how many hours or days pass, but it's time for another break. Also, I don't know if it was Lissandra or my subconsciousness, but the area around us has changed.

The forest has been replaced by a desert with no dunes, just white sand spread out as far as I can see. There is a circular platform made of reddish stone, inside of which we sit. A platform which is also framed by four trees with green leaves, too vibrant in contrast to the white sand and reddish platform.

Lissandra's steps are confident and smooth as she takes a few paces, taking the opportunity offered by this break to give me another lesson. I still don't know if this is her honestly trying to teach me something, a symptom of boredom, or her attempting to help me keep my mind stable.

"If anyone ever challenges you by using proper etiquette, and you see in their bearing that they are ready to die, pay them the same respect. Kill them if you decide you must. Leave them alive if you wish to do so. After all, anyone who'd complain about your decision after being defeated would only prove themselves even more pathetic than if they'd simply lost."

She stops exactly in the middle of the platform, her movements turning sharp while maintaining a feeling of ceremony without being stuffy. In a way, they feel like the movements of royalty combined with the movements of a duelist.

Lissandra stays there relaxed, standing with both feet next to each other, one hand behind her back, head held high. Her right hand floats in front of her chest, hand open and palm pointed towards where her heart is.

In a smooth and swift gesture, she closes her hand into a fist and swings her arm down to her side, hand slightly angled. "This is the stance used to accept a duel by the knight order I joined when I reached level 100. A silly gesture, yet it has some... honesty to it."

She takes another step and slides into a different stance.

"This one was used by the Champion who wished to become my teacher. He and the country he protected, the people there, had a preference for this stance. It flowed into the release of a powerful single-target attack, with which they quickly won or lost most of their duels. A few days after I met that Champion, he fell in one of the constant battles at the time. I remained there for years, leaving only after the country was annexed by one of its neighbors."

All of her movements relax as she switches to her usual stance. "It doesn't matter what you decide to use. It doesn't even matter if you use any of them at all. After all, none of this is as important as the battle itself, where your acts speak louder than any such gesture. But there are also people who like to attack without any warning and who don't put value on duels. Never grant even a smidgen of respect to such a person. Kill them like the animals they are. Erase them from your memory such that they are forgotten even by the one who kills them."

It seems like she's waiting for an answer, so I simply nod, even as I feel something like this should be obvious.

That seems to satisfy her. "People at your level of power fight differently from a duel between Champions. Furthermore, duels at the level of an Absolute are vastly different from duels between Champions. It's something that you don't need to bother with as you are now, but there are three things you should look for in a duel, as there's a very high chance your opponent will as well if they've been properly trained."

Out of nowhere, a wind blows over the desert, but interestingly, it doesn't disturb even a speck of sand. It all stays where it is, but at the same time, the desert reacts. Almost as if the wind caused all the grains to tilt just the slightest bit differently and show another side that is less bright white. That causes a cascade effect over a huge area, like waves spreading.

"Heart, mind, and body. Your opponent will do their best to pierce through your natural and active barriers to observe the output of your heart or any other such source. Watching for spikes, it grants one a huge advantage, though most experienced opponents learn to mask this and trick you, even if their natural barrier is pierced, and many others can do a lot with very little energy. This is commonly used against amplifiers who might instinctively watch for big spikes. Though your senses are lacking, your eyes give you an advantage in this, but know that they can still be tricked."

She does exactly that, using multiple ways of confusing my eyes in a rapid manner. There is one technique I find very interesting. For a moment she makes it seem like my senses pierced her natural barrier, but it's actually a fake version that perfectly mirrors it and lies over her skin instead, at which point she makes small changes to gain an advantage.

I think there is some spatial component to it as well, as I even start to find myself checking for the correct scale. There should be a difference between feeling it under her skin and over her skin, yet her trickery makes it feel like it's below her skin.

"Mind. Grasping your opponent correctly allows you to plan ahead. Their endurance, any sort of rush of emotion such as fear, and other obvious things to look for. Then there are less obvious ones, ways to estimate their passives and the levels of their skills. When you're experienced enough, and you've pierced through their natural barrier properly, you can even estimate the categories of the skills they carry or even guess the exact variant. I will show you some of these methods. Then, lastly, you have the body. Even if you are someone who doesn't prefer direct combat, you should be able to follow your opponent's movements and know what to expect. This is best done by experiencing it on your skin and having similar capabilities, though they're not necessarily as proficient as your opponent's."

I'm already waiting for what is for sure to come, and she doesn't disappoint.

"Your physical stats are pathetic, saved only by your... decent use of kinetic energy as taught to you by that talented demon you encountered. Your body reinforcement is one of the worst things I've ever seen. I've seen street rats that did better. There are many different techniques I've observed you using for body strengthening, and all of them are beyond pathetic. There are better ways you could use mana-based techniques in combination with kinetic energy. Once again, if you do a decent job here, I will teach you some."

"Deal," I say, and looking at her, I ask, "You said you would be making me endure up to 50% of your presence, didn't you?"

"I did indeed."

"How much have I endured so far?"

"Little pup, don't get distracted by thinking of useless stuff. And get your mind together before we continue."

With that, she is gone, leaving me alone in the middle of the platform.

Well, almost alone.

I almost lack the strength to look at him, but in the end, I decide to do so anyway. Standing there is a man with my face and a similar buzz cut. Other than that, he's wearing a tank top, showing off his big, round shoulders and massive arms. He even stands a head taller than me, with a figure reminding me of Morwag. In one hand over his shoulder, he holds that style of jacket every 90s movie bully used to wear.

With his arms then moving on his hips in a casual stance that still shows his lats and V-shaped back, he faces me with a confident smile. "Fifty percent? That's it? I bet she's lying just to make you feel better. If I were out there, I'd be soaking up 100% of her 'presence' and asking for seconds. You're shaking, little kid, just like Sneaky. It's embarrassing to share a body with you. And that 'deal' you just made? You basically just begged her for scraps. 'Please, Mommy Lissandra, teach me how to stop being trash.' We should be telling her how it's going to be! Blah, blah, blah, 'heart, mind, body.' If she spent half as much time punching as she does posing, we'd be done training already. Does she want to fight, or is she auditioning for a play? Next time she does that heart-palm thing, we should just spit on the floor. See how 'ceremonial' she feels then..."

He disappears before he can say more as I force him away.

Assholethaniel has proven useful at times, and he is the one I made to handle close-range combat, body strengthening, and the like. It was in the era when I was trying to reduce the number of sub minds, so I combined some.

In the end, I still believe him about one thing. I suspect we're already at a point close to 50% of the presence of what she was capable of back on Eladore. Even though it was still weakened, and even though that version wasn't even close to the strength of the Prime Liss who challenged Pride, it's almost enough to make me happy.

But I erase such thoughts. There will be time for such things later.

For now, I will continue to do my best. And then some.

Chapter 843 - The Bottom of the Mountain

It is a weird feeling that I have a difficult time describing. I think my state has been locked while we're in the mental space, so I am stuck at the same energy levels I had when I found myself here. I don't feel refreshed after rest, nor do I find myself getting tired or sleepy.

Instead, there's just this ever-present feeling of... growing thin? Almost as if something's getting close to slipping out. Like when you're starting to bleed out, and you get to feeling lightheaded as your heart palpitates in that weird way and fear threatens to take over.

But this is a great opportunity, and there's so much I'll need to do in the future. It's not just out of necessity, nor is it something being forced on me, there are many things I want to do. I refuse to be swayed by external factors. I continue to find things I enjoy, like my hobbies, interests, and all sorts of things I can have fun doing.

It might be selfish. So what? I'm selfish, and I think everyone should be, at least a little bit.

We also stopped training me to endure 50% of Lissandra's presence. It seems I must have passed, as we continue onto different training, though she grumbles and says I'm still lacking, so at least she doesn't find me so pathetic that she's ready to drop it all.

Lissandra refuses to tell me how much of her presence I actually endured and simply switches to saying that enduring the presence of others is just the basics. After all, how can you even attempt to fight if just feeling your opponent's power causes you to pop like a balloon?

For the next training session, we start working on my mana based body strengthening. There is a limit to how much I can do with my low constitution, but she doesn't trash me on it too much. I think she finds my idea interesting: making my body weak so my stronger active skills can influence changes within it at a faster rate and on a deeper level.

Still, by using kinetic energy to absorb some of the impact and strain, and then using a combination of Lioren's techniques and proper body strengthening methods from Lissandra, I improve quickly.

Even though I prefer mid range attacks, when I get annoyed, I still have a tendency to slip into close quarters combat. I have plenty of experience with that, and thanks to my eyes, I've been able to observe most of the ways people tend to use mana for body reinforcement.

Lissandra's technique, on the other hand, is similar to the Mana Cycling she taught me. It's the sort of thing I suspect many modern Champions or Absolutes would call obsolete, or old-school. Yet, I like the simplicity of it, I like the output, and I like the danger of destroying my body that forces me to keep making improvements. In exchange for harder handling and the danger, I get a higher output than the usual, more "modern" techniques.

I think the one she's teaching me is also being specially tailored for me, taking the tendencies she's observed into consideration. There is not a speck of doubt in my mind that there are still Champions who'd be willing to sell their firstborn just to have a custom technique from this Absolute.

I really want to tell Deva about it. My thoughts stop there as I imagine the face of Sophie's Thylarin disciple, and I chuckle.

That moment of inattention causes my body to break, but I manifest it once again, though it takes a few seconds longer this time as I gather myself back together. It has been getting harder as of late.

Swiftly, I go into overdrive again and circulate mana through my body to strengthen it the ways Lissandra showed me. I boost myself ahead and slam my fist against the stone pillar in front of me. Being as tall as a telephone pole and as wide as my arms spread from fingertip to fingertip, it cracks and breaks.

I watch it slowly slide down and crash into another pillar nearby.

Currently, I'm surrounded by dozens of them growing from a calm pool of water. It seems like I am in the middle of the sea, though the water barely reaches my ankles. Each of these pillars is impossible to destroy in any other way than the body strengthening I'm being taught.

I tried it, and not even my full power lance could put a scratch in them. I wonder if Lissandra is really able to make pillars like this, or if it's just an advantage of training in mental space and-

My body explodes as I lose control of the mana I'm circulating for reinforcement.

As I remanifest myself, Assholethaniel appears for a moment. Tall, wide-shouldered, and muscular, he is the combination of close combat, body strengthening and movement subminds and the part of me usually dealing with this kind of stuff. Meanwhile, Nerdthaniel is the submind taking care of my stored arrays, Preeminence Eyes, and more delicate uses of mana, among some other things.

Before he can say anything, he disappears as I put my mind together.

My hand closes into a fist, and in a burst of movement that does not ripple the water, I reach another pillar. I hit it with all my force, and it cracks and breaks, as does the row of a dozen pillars behind it.

I move ahead, leaving a forest of broken pillars behind me and moving toward thousands more.

Assholethaniel sits near my thermal cube, wearing his school bully jock jacket. There is so much snow around us that it almost forms a wall, leaving only a small cleared space around the cube. It is surprisingly cold, and the blizzard constantly washes over us.

This part of the training is oriented toward using mana alone to endure a harsh environment, in this case, the cold. The thermal cube provides little more than emotional support and a nice light.

Another of my subminds stands nearby, the one that usually takes care of managing my primordial energies. This Nathaniel is a bit taller than me, but he's slimmer. He has white hair, red eyes, and two tiny pointy horns similar to Vega's. Over his shoulders, he wears an imitation of the mantle, the mid-pristine item that the vice guild master placed on me during my coronation as guild master of the Primordial Knights.

Both subminds are unusually quiet, but I'm the same. A lot of my effort is going into not freezing, so I suppose it's no surprise it's manifested in this way.

None of us notice him before he appears, but Sneakythaniel is suddenly there as well. He has a bright smile on his childish face as he takes the tattered red blanket off his shoulders, places it on mine, and puts his hands on his waist in a heroic pose. He disappears the next moment, but the blanket stays around my shoulders.

As if in response, the cold increases.

Both Demonthaniel and Assholethaniel disappear. The blanket around my shoulders becomes more transparent and threatens to vanish, but I grab it and hold it there. Shuddering in the cold, I close my eyes to maintain the required state of the technique I'm using.

Soon after, the thermal cube fades away, leaving me in the dark and the ever present, bone freezing blizzard.

My next training objective is different. The area has changed once again to a single enormous mountain that I must climb using mana reinforced body movements to reach the top.

In this place, I can feel my wounds, which are apparently being emphasized to hinder me more. Sometimes an attack comes out of nowhere, blowing a hole through me to force me to modify the way I've been circulating mana and keep my body strengthened. If the overall stability is breached, I break apart and remanifest at the bottom of the mountain to start over.

There is also a limit on the amount of mana I can use. Though the amount is generous, it's far from my usual reserves. Instead of constantly keeping it active, I have to switch it on and off as needed to leap higher, avoid stone avalanches, or maintain the speed required to run higher and higher.

It's been a long time since I actually saw Lissandra. I only occasionally hear her voice as she explains the training or the techniques she is showing me. It's also been a long time since I last wondered how much of this training I will actually be able to remember.

A few minutes later, my mana control slips. My leap proves to be too short, causing me to miss my mark and begin rolling down the mountain. I flail my hands to bury them into the rock, tearing my skin and fingers as I stop myself. The gravity here is much higher than anything I've felt so far, making it difficult to get up on my feet. I manage to stand only to watch an avalanche of huge boulders rolling toward me, caused by my mistake. It's punishing like that.

I do not give up until the last moment. I try to dodge the stones, move to the side, and leap over them, but they just keep coming. Each one moves at higher and higher speeds, and they're impossible for me to break in this setup.

Once again, I find myself at the bottom of the mountain, turning my head to look toward the summit hidden high in the clouds where a storm rages.

Shrugging my shoulders, I move toward a huge boulder with a flat side sitting nearby. With the tip of my finger, I scratch a short line into it and look to the left at the dozens of similar lines already carved there.

As I start thinking of a new pathway toward the top and try to remember the route, the distances, and other details, Mapthaniel manifests near me. He's as tall as I am but has no Preeminence Eyes. Instead, all of his skin has been covered in drawn arrays like dense, delicate tattoos, and the scars I carry are even more visible on him.

We speak for a while as I plan the route. Once I concentrate further, he disappears, and I head off to climb the mountain.

The slope of the mountain grows almost vertical, and the rain crashes against me. I notice my reserves expanding slightly as Lissandra stops suppressing me as much, but it's not meant to ease my burden. Instead, it's because I now have to constantly maintain a defensive layer of mana on my body to protect myself against droplets of mana filled rain trying to pierce my skin.

The wind and rain press harder against me, causing me to squint. The rock is slippery, it is dark, and flashes of lightning occasionally pierce the air. The rumble that follows sends out disruptive waves that I must defend myself against in turn.

My fingers no longer stab easily into the rock, and the gravity is much higher than it was before. Often, the holds I use break, almost causing me to slide down.

Another gust of wind presses against me, and the rain intensifies. I cannot simply create a single layer and keep it up to defend against the rain, every time I try, the droplets pierce right through. Instead, I must maintain multiple smaller zones, and I'm sure that soon I will be forced to defend against each individual droplet, forcing my brain to keep up with thousands and thousands of calculations at a time.

It is so ridiculous that my face twists itself into a smile.

Reinforcing my body, I pull myself higher and higher until I reach a point where lightning begins striking the area around me. I try to form an orb of mana to serve as a lightning rod, but I'm too slow. The lightning breaks through the defensive layers I've created, hurting me and breaking my hold, causing me to fall.

Instead of flailing my hands or wasting mana, I keep my eyes wide open even as I bounce off the rock. The rain stabs into me as I fall for a few seconds through the darkness. Only when I notice a good hold does my hand shoot forward to grab it, leaving me hanging by one hand.

The intensified gravity pulls me down, causing the muscles in my arm to tear, but I still maintain my grip.

Yet another lightning strike shoots at me just as I throw a modified orb in front of me to redirect it. I can feel the heat and power of the strike as it passes right by me. I swing my free hand to grab the hold as well and begin pulling myself up.

Then, that hold breaks, sending me tumbling down even as I try to stop my fall, but fail.

Once again, I remanifest at the bottom of the mountain. There is no rain here, and it's so incredibly peaceful and quiet.

A bit of my mana glows at the tip of my finger as I draw a line into the flat side of the boulder next to its thousands of siblings, and then I start climbing up once more.

Chapter 844 - Figurines

I pull myself higher, and lightning crashes down from the sky, slamming into my body. A few more follow, and, unlike before, I don't even try to redirect them with an orb. Instead, they crash against a thin layer of mana spread out across my skin. The charge still causes my hair to rise up before it settles back down, damp under the rain.

Some of the raindrops contain mana, and some don't. If I try to block them all, my mana drains before I even get close to the peak. So now, I use a large number of small sections that light up in turn as they fend off the strikes.

I thought it would be more difficult, but this is something I can do even with my current capabilities. I think it is Lissandra's intent to make me use my abilities more efficiently and to push me to realize it.

In a way, it doesn't even feel like training. It's just her throwing me into shitty situations and telling me to deal with it and adapt. Even now, she rarely tells me exactly what I need to do, she just gives me a rough idea and leaves the rest up to me.

Another stone avalanche begins to rain down just as the clouds start to deepen the darkness in the sky, forcing me to rely on mana-based perception more. I know that this avalanche isn't something I'll be able to avoid, as I have tried it many times before. Instead, I change the fluctuation of the mana on my hand and stab it into the mountain, barely managing to drive it into the rock. Most of my remaining mana flickers across my skin as I brace myself to endure the hits, with my face turned toward the falling rocks to at least partially avoid a few strikes before moving higher.

Then, what feels like ten minutes later, the dark clouds around me begin to thin out, and the gravity weakens to the point that I feel extremely light and fast. The lightning stops, and there is no thunder anymore, and no rain to speak of.

Slowly, sunlight pierces the dark clouds, landing around me and making me realize just how cold I've been the entire time. More light passes through, allowing me to see more of the area, and my eyes are pulled toward one place.

What I thought was the summit, what I just managed to climb, is just a small false peak, and a bit further beyond it, I can see another slope beginning. Its surface is reminiscent of the old ruins of a city, covered in vines and fauna that are taking over. The air around it wavers under intense heat, and there are zones that seem like they've been covered in poisonous clouds.

There's probably some metaphor I could quote in this situation, something about there always being a higher mountain to climb, but I just wonder if I fall there, does that mean I'll remanifest at the bottom of this part or of the first mountain.

It's a silly question, as the answer should be obvious, knowing the personality of... of... oh, yes, it is Lissandra I'm training with.

Still, I find myself feeling giddy and addicted to this feeling. I've learned so much about myself, about all the capabilities I have and haven't even been using fully. It is, truly, addicting.

But I can't allow myself to get lost in that feeling. Here, I really like that muscular demon's philosophy of looking down at people who let themselves be controlled by their feelings. He always controls himself, only letting loose when he judges the response to be reasonable.

So I wait for a bit. I bathe in the light and take stock of how much Lissandra's limited my body this time and take a moment to see what I have to work with.

Then, I move to climb again.

The space surrounding me now is a battlefield, the surface of a planet pocked with craters, some of which are city-sized, while others are much smaller. There are giant animals reminiscent of goats, with spikes growing from their backs and burning fur. Resting against a fallen tower nearby, a similarly gigantic figure rests. A massive iron spear pierces a thylarin's chest, skewering his skyscraper-sized body to the ground.

"One of your memories?" I ask the silver haired woman.

Her eyes stay locked on the place for a while longer before she nods, but she doesn't say anything about it and just continues our training.

"You have told me that you don't intend to strengthen your Empyrean Ichor trait beyond the third stage. Putting aside your delusions regarding getting your hands on fourth-stage strengthening, I want to hear what led you to this decision."

"Before I answer, are the fourth and fifth stages really that rare?"

"They are. Four possible strengthenings are something that becomes possible for your traits as you become a Champion, and the fifth is for when you become an Absolute, with the fifth being the limit. Then there are the possible evolutions which tend to reset your stages, forcing you to strengthen your trait again. Furthermore, there's a huge difference in the quality of traits. Some third-stage traits can be stronger than a fifth-stage."

"So, as always, it's not simple."

“Indeed.”

I take my eyes off the huge thylarin’s body and start to speak, “I don’t like the idea of delving too deeply into Emyrean Ichor or the lance. I worry that it will influence my primary class and other options too much.”

“And why is that a concern?”

“They all failed or went into hiding. The most powerful of the Emyreans were akin to demigods, with what was likely much purer blood than I will ever have, and even their own divine hearts, yet it didn’t seem to count for much. You just see skills, hear of them, someone mentions how powerful the Thaumarch was, and that’s it. Even their god is dead. All that remains are fragments, a corpse people like me use.”

“Your way of thinking is very arrogant, little pup. Those you speak of were among the most powerful beings this universe ever birthed. Many would be happy to even reach a fragment of the power they carried.”

“I know.”

“So why?”

My head still feels wobbly as I strain to keep myself together. I feel something akin to a tugging on my mind, threatening to unwind what makes me me. To make me lose myself within it all.

But no matter how thin I spread myself. No matter how many parts of me I see manifested in this space. No matter how many months have passed, how deep this thought acceleration goes, or what Lissandra throws at me. A core that is me blazes in the middle of it all, always gathering all my pieces together again.

The main part of me that makes up my personality and the most important things about me. My focus, my ability to channel, all my effort, and the precious memories and bonds I hold.

"I don't think I could give it my all if I knew it was a road someone else already walked, and that was proven to not be enough. Maybe I could walk that road better, yes, push further than they did, or perhaps I'd have a bit more luck. But I think I'll do better if I do it my way," I say.

There is a dead human wearing beautiful blue armor with his eyes wide open as he stares at the sky. No wounds are visible on his body, and I move my hand over his eyelids to close his eyes.

"I will see how the strengthening changes my Mana Physique, and then I will focus on getting it to evolve and make it even stronger until it's the thing influencing my blood instead of the opposite. Though I'm sure I'll have to make some things up as I go. And what's your plan?"

Her eyes linger on one body in the distance as she answers, "It's the sort of thing I'd rather not share, there are beings that could be listening in."

"Even here?"

"Even here," she confirms.

"Usually you wouldn't let them, or wouldn't care. What you're planning must be truly nasty."

A smile appears on her face as the light dances in her eyes. "Something like that."

This time I have to run. What lies in front of me is a stretch of flat, grassy ground. The sky is blue with not a cloud to be seen, and there is a slight breeze. The gravity is similar to that of the eleventh tutorial floor. There are no trees, no rocks, no buildings, or any obstacles. There isn't even a finish line for me to run toward.

My single objective here is to run as fast as possible. Once I start running, I'm not allowed to drop under a certain level of speed, and that limit continues to increase, forcing me to run faster and faster.

I've probably failed a few thousand times already.

As I stand there, I shake my head to keep myself from blanking out after a long period of remanifestation, as my body seems like it's about to sway and fail. The edge of my vision is hazed over, and there are several of my manifested subminds all around me. They're even talking to me, though it sounds somewhat distant.

When I turn to look at them, they disappear, moving to the edge of my vision, and their voices start sounding in my head, louder and louder. Lissandra also says something that I pick up the meaning of, though I don't hear the exact words.

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come out. So I close my mouth, move my chin a bit, and try to talk again, only for some sort of funny noise to escape instead.

I chuckle and smile. The air is nice, and I take a deep breath just as I feel the breeze pressing against me.

My body begins to lean forward and fall, and I let it happen. My vision clears a little, and mana races through my body. Just when it seems like I'm about to faceplant against the ground, I send another burst through my legs and explode into a run. Immediately, the space around me becomes a blur, and the attacks that were shooting my way before do so again, forcing me to dodge them nimbly while attempting to maintain my speed.

A few hours later. Or maybe it's a few weeks. Possibly centuries? How would I know?

Around me, there are hundreds of figurines, me and them, standing in what looks to be a beautiful meadow full of flowers with trees standing in the distance. Each of these figurines has its own natural barrier, different from all the others, and requires a different method to pierce.

Some of the figurines are made of wood, others are metal or covered in fabric. Some are even a luxurious kind of dark wood, covered in white fabric, like the sort one would see in a high-end dealer of fancy suits. None of the figurines have a face, and all of them are moving. A few steps here and there, a small circle, waving hands, things like that.

My objective is to locate the one that's preparing to attack me. That charge of that attack is purposefully hidden, and every time, it's too powerful to stop. It is at the level of an Absolute, so it is nothing I could disrupt.

But if I hit the figurine a short moment before the attack launches, the attack will be canceled out.

It might be because of boredom, but I have also counted the length of this exercise, though I don't know how much time passed during the other ones. I decided not to count again after this exercise is over. I have a reputation to maintain.

There are 417 figurines. The average number of attacks is currently sitting at 11 per minute. The time between each attack averages 5.45 seconds. The total number of attacks that have caused me to remanifest is 1,568,160. The total seconds that have passed is 8,553,601. The estimated number of flowers in the meadow is about 667,213, and I'm still annoyed by the thought that somehow I haven't counted them all.

It makes for good training, as it allows me, without any danger, an opportunity to observe and react to the charging of an Absolute level attack. Even if it's not currently useful in any real sense.

I think I'll fail this one, as it's just too ridiculous, but I also think I'm okay with it.

10,163,222 seconds later, I succeed.

An unknown amount of time later, a notification jumpscares me.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

Chapter 845 - Overly Diligent

[Selective Adaptation]. That's the name of my new skill. I want to give it a bit more thought, but a small movement on the edge of my vision catches my attention, and I see a few people sitting under a tree, and a huge lizard resting behind them.

Ignoring them, I look up, following the sensation of someone touching my head. Lissandra stands there in her younger form, as if waiting for me to meet her eyes.

Slightly annoyed, I frown and circulate my mana to activate my skill. Following the lingering connection and the structure of the inscriptions drawn above my head, I remanifest back inside my mental space.

At first, there is nothing surrounding me, just that neverending white space. Then slowly, as if hesitating, the training environment I was in before being tossed back outside begins to form.

Three beings appear, the ones Lissandra refers to as street rats of Eladore, though I am confident she has to be exaggerating. There is just no way a street rat would be powerful enough to wipe the floor with a fresh S rank.

These three rats notice my appearance and turn to me, their eyes glinting. They stand as high as my waist and are slimmer than a usual rat, though they have longer legs.

Their natural barriers strengthen as mana circulates through their bodies in a mana-based body strengthening technique. They move at a speed that almost makes it seem like they are teleporting, and bite with the sort of force that I am confident would be enough to damage even Lily.

My body moves, utilizing the same technique and speed. Since my mana reserves are unhindered and fully available, I throw everything I can into my movement.

When one of them bites off my arm, I just chuckle. I kick another one, slam my forehead into the one going for my neck, and grab the tail of the third to spin and throw it away.

Rather than trying to match their movement, I focus on observing mana wavelengths to predict their actions, especially since each of them is faster than I am.

My objective is to defeat all of them, and then move on to the next exercise.

POV Myrra

Savant is no fun, he's too measured and cold, and not in a fun way like the feral one. Weslin is interesting, friendly, and direct, though he's somewhat lacking in intensity. Morwag is fun. I want to fight Morwag, and I can tell he wants to fight me, but neither of us tries anything, as a single pulse of mana from Lady Lissandra stops us.

Like the good lynthari I am, I sit there and look at her as she turns my way. It's already been an hour since she and Nathaniel started, and the entire time she's kept her hand on his head. But unlike him, she seems to be able to perceive what's happening around her.

It's like she would ignite in the sort of flames that would burn the very structure of reality itself if she lost control even for a second.

Morwag passes by me to make his way over to Lissandra, just tapping my shoulder in a way that makes me want to attack him immediately. He isn't even smiling or directly challenging me. So I have to wonder, is he even really a demon? The feral one feels more like a proper demon. What an annoying guy.

My attention switches to Brichant, whom I've been pumping for information most of this time.

"So the 11th floor is a desert? My planet used to have one as well, though you had to be very careful because of the body of the fallen. But at least there weren't any ants!" I tell him.

"I would say it's probably hotter than the desert you were used to."

"That sounds nice! I like heat," I sigh. "Nothing against the Wywy, but this floor is damn boring."

As I say that, of course, the wyvern doesn't even react. It just lazily lies there, its head and eyes turned towards Lissandra and Nathaniel. I think it's waiting for Lissandra to show a moment of weakness so it can kill her.

Then I slam the sword Brichant lent me against the ground. "And why isn't it talking anymore?"

"Maybe it's scared?" Brichant asks.

"It is," Lissandra says. "Centuries ago, it may have been used to slay a wyvern or two, I can still sense the blood upon the metal. It must be wary about what this one will do."

The huge, one winged wyvern doesn't even bother turning or looking at the sword, it just lazily says something in that terrifying language only Lissandra understands.

Without taking her hand off Nathaniel's head, she snorts and doesn't respond. Instead, she talks to me. "The sword houses the majority of its creator's power, but that power remains nearly inaccessible without him. Little kitten, I know you would bother me to no end, so I may as well explain a little. It was an effort to purify the creator's bloodline by sequestering his excess power into an ego weapon, creating a symbiotic resonance between them. Honestly, the mechanics are actually somewhat impressive."

"Thank you, Lady Lissandra!" I call out to her, knowing how much effort it must have taken. She is quite grumbly when something interrupts what she is doing. I quickly poke Brichant. "Go on, praise her too!"

The lumoran just laughs nervously, and after looking at Lissandra, the coward stays quiet. I bet Nathaniel would say something.

"How is he doing, Lady Lissandra?" I ask her.

"Decently."

"Oh, that good?"

"I said decently, little kitten."

"Sure! How much time has passed? Longer than you expected, right?" I can tell I'm smiling now, and that smile widens as she looks at me.

"That amounts to nothing if he breaks his mind."

"Then cut it short. Just tell him you got bored."

"Little kitten, you are being exceedingly annoying today."

I know when it is better not to push, so instead, I talk with Nathaniel's friends a bit more for a while, until it finally seems to end.

Nathaniel opens his eyes for a few seconds before looking up at Lissandra and closing them again.

That woman, who packs such terrifying power in a body that's so small by comparison, opens her mouth but in the end says nothing. I don't know if it is just the play of the light, but for just a moment she seems to smile.

Since then, I don't take my eyes off Nathaniel, off the contours of his face, the scars I can see lining his body, and the one going from his cheek across his neck. He sits there motionlessly, not even twitching.

He hasn't changed at all, has he? Truly, the name I gave him fits him well. I really like that feral effort he can throw himself into with anything.

It's much later when he opens his eyes again, and this time it seems to be truly over, as Lissandra takes her hand from his head and takes a step back.

He stands up, swaying slightly as the way mana moves around him changes and he regains his balance. He looks around, passing his gaze over me and the others, and then looks at Lissandra as if waiting for something.

"I said it is over," she says.

Nathaniel tilts his head as if not understanding, looking at her, still waiting.

Lissandra moves almost uncharacteristically kindly and takes his hand, slowly leading him towards a boulder nearby, where she forces him to sit.

"Take your time," she says to him after that. She then does something to erase the inscriptions from his head before taking a step away to sit nearby.

He watches her curiously, and then his eyes turn to me for a moment. I smile brightly and wave. That causes his eyes to widen, but then he waves back and chuckles. He looks at the fake sky of this floor of the First Dungeon and takes a breath.

Then, his mana begins to move differently. He begins to radiate a lot more of it too, even reaching out toward the ambient mana as well, pulling it inward like a whirlpool. In a small area around him, everything becomes black and white as an even darker black orb forms over his hand. And he watches it with eyes that manage to keep their color.

The sheer intensity of his gaze makes it difficult to take my eyes off him, and after a moment, I even begin to feel a pull on my own mana. At first I resist, but the pull keeps getting stronger and stronger. In waves, all the mana starts getting pulled toward him and that orb, which refuses to so much as expand in size.

Even Lady Lissandra releases a terrifying amount of mana, a portion of which she got from the crown of that dickhead lumoran, Envy, and then throws the black dagger she has carried until now toward it.

Nathaniel continues to gather and shape that mana, forming it into the shape of a black dagger not dissimilar from the previous one. Though that seems to dissatisfy Lady Lissandra as she watches the... somewhat... original shape and look. She pokes it with her finger, making the shape a little more pleasing. The blade stays short and thick, but the guard and handle change a bit to become more elegant.

That continues for hours, to the point where Lissandra has to start helping him, and even the wyvern starts to pay a bit more attention. It even allows some of its own mana to be absorbed.

It's also fun to watch the expressions of the demon, half demon, lumoran, and human as they witness it all.

POV Nathaniel

It feels like yet another exercise, though this one is real.

I have a difficult time getting used to the fact that if something damages me here, I won't just remanifest, which is a bit inconvenient. Even if that just means a higher spike in difficulty.

It is still possible this is another tricky bit of training. Maybe I should really try and... okay, I probably shouldn't. The notifications I'm getting confirm this is real.

[Focus - lvl 80 > Focus - lvl 81]

[Focus - lvl 81 > Focus - lvl 82]

[Focus - lvl 82 > Focus - lvl 83]

Most of what I did was mostly a mental experience, and I now have to teach my body to adapt to it. I'm even now finding ways to improve the ways I've been using my skills. Even during all that training, there were ways I found I could improve them, so now, as I gather all that mana, I do so with that intent in mind.

Mind... I think I spent my last few days in there just gathering myself back together. Or maybe it took a bit longer than that? Well, I did it in the end, and that's all that matters. For now, I don't want to think about it. I want to forget about it for now and muse over it later. It wasn't a great feeling.

I can't seem to stay still. I'm getting used to the downtime, but it still feels unnatural not to be training. To fill the void, I've start gathering black mana for Lissandra, even though I still feel so empty and mentally exhausted.

I feel like I need to have a conversation to distract myself, so I look at Lissandra. "Can you talk about something? Anything." As I say that, I hate how weak my voice sounds.

"Very well, let me tell you about one of my gardener's ideas and how she tried to grow mana-dense fruits. It was an interesting idea, but the taste..." She then begins to talk, and I listen to it.

The longer I continue to gather mana, the more I start to feel like myself. It might have been a bit intentional, but we didn't train anything based on mana channeling, which is what I'm best at. So doing

it now feels like it's all beginning to return to me. When I glance at Myrra, I almost feel like I haven't seen her in years.

Allowing myself to listen, I concentrate further, especially as that ridiculous amount of mana starts flowing from the wyvern as well. If not for Lissandra, I don't think I would have a chance to compress my mana so far or gather so much of it at once, and she's also helping me stabilize it.

But I'm not selling myself short. I know neither Liss nor the one-winged wyvern would be able to do this without me and my access to black mana.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 81 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 82]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 82 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 83]

[Redistribution - lvl 80 > Redistribution - lvl 81]

And I know these notifications are just the start. These are just the most immediate changes to make themselves known after all that training, with more and more coming as I get my body and brain used to the new methods, just as I forced my subconscious to do.

It's ridiculous.

As is the amount of mana compressed in front of me in the shape of a black dagger. Even now, it's difficult to see it as the fragment of a god, a piece of the corpse that appears if you compress hard enough.

I watch as Lissandra grabs that dagger and makes a few final changes before letting her hand rest along her body with it. "That much will suffice," she says, gesturing for Myrra to come closer.

It seems they must have talked about it previously, as the lynthari smiles at her while Lissandra speaks, "The time we spent together has been terrible, little kitten. Your short attention span, your inability to control yourself, and many other flaws that would take too much time to name. Yet, I wish you the best of luck, and may we meet in the future."

To that, Myrra just continues smiling. As a lynthari, she is three or so heads taller than Lissandra, so she gets on her knees so that they stand at a similar height. Even with the difference in size, not for a moment does it make anyone uncertain about who's the more powerful one here.

I watch as Myrra gently takes Lissandra's hand, lifts it up toward her lips, and kisses the back of it. "Thank you, Master Lissandra. Thank you for everything." Myrra says in a tone that sounds almost uncharacteristic of her usually cheery self.

Lissandra moves her hand and puts it on top of Myrra's head to caress it as she says, "Stay diligent, my disciple."

"Yes, Master." Myrra nods eagerly, her fangs showing in a smile.

Then Lissandra turns to me. "What I will be doing is too dangerous for the little kitten. I had hoped to expel her into your group, and it is possible that this will still happen. At worst, she will find herself in some other group from your planet. Some parts of the tutorial are so shoddily made I can't even predict what floor she will find herself on. It could be the 1st, it could be the 13th. I just know that it won't be Beyond."

As she talks, she's pointing with the dagger in the air, drawing black inscriptions there. All the ambient mana that remains in the air gets pulled to her, and she starts to pull even more from a much, much further distance. It rushes in so quickly it feels almost physical, as if everything around her is about to break, but it barely seems to impact the wall she's set up.

"As for you and your baggage over there, I will use the remains of the teleportation I interrupted to send you where you were heading... What do you want?" Her eyes switch to Morwag, who stops standing nearby.

"One day I will challenge you," the demon declares, causing even the wyvern to tilt its head.

Lissandra doesn't laugh at him or put him down. Instead, she answers simply, "Challenge me with the respect such a duel requires, and I will reciprocate."

I don't even talk to her, we said everything we wanted to during my training. I probably talked about things in my weaker moments that I'd feel ashamed of now, but I get the sense she won't tell anyone, so it's somehow okay.

We also talked about Biscuit, and as per our deal, she confirmed she'll check up on him and help if needed. I think it insulted her that I even asked for confirmation, like I was questioning her word.

But as she looks at me, I just nod, and she nods back in quiet understanding.

"Someone overly diligent is trying to interfere with my effort, but I sense no intent to cause you any harm, so I will let it be. Just be aware of it," Lissandra says.

Having finished drawing the inscriptions, she then swings the dagger. All that gathered mana explodes, and a feeling like being tossed aside by the shockwave of an explosion encompasses me.

And as expected, the first thing I see when I look up from the ground is the black mandibles of a huge black ant.

Even though I'm not in my usual mood and my mind feels off, I force myself to say, "I want a six active skills combination tok-" but I don't get to finish as the Ruler of Diligence snaps those mandibles, and I notice Ruby behind him with a difficult to read expression on her face.

Chapter 846 - Blood on the Mandibles

Those sharp, black mandibles close around my neck as Diligence lifts me into the air, and there's no question in my mind that he could cut through my throat as if it were nothing. A part of me wonders if I could survive it. I could probably program a bit of my mana to reach toward my head as it gets severed, with another trigger to activate one of Lily's healing marks. That could work.

Weslin, may the long-dead gods bless him, even rushes closer, slamming his hand into Diligence's side with all his strength, but the resulting burst of void energy goes nowhere. Morwag is moving his binding energy and rearing up to join the fray, hell, even Savant is pulling his Sword of Aeons, and Brichant is preparing to betray his Colony leader.

All of them find themselves unable to move as the Ruler releases the tiniest bit of his true presence. Though this is just an avatar, a projection, a vessel, or a clone, that power is terrifying. A use of telekinesis then takes hold, pinning everyone in place.

“Maybe I should just destroy you this time,” the black ant says to me. “I am at the point where I’m starting to wonder if bearing the backlash for killing an attendee would really be worse than whatever mess you’re going to make in the future.”

The black mandibles move, cutting into my skin slightly and drawing a bit of blood from my neck. In his large compound eyes, I see hundreds of my reflections. Focusing on specific ones, I can clearly see my blank face as well as a few new scars. One near my ear, and another shorter one, sits at the corner of my lips. There are several more scarring the arm I used to craft that ridiculous dagger Lissandra now carries.

All of them refuse to heal, having formed when I started gathering black mana after the training. It’s just another manifestation of the toll my training took on me, along with all that quick skill levelling. And I’m confident there will be more of them. Still, I’m happy I have a bit of hair on my head, thanks to my healing passive and some help from one of Lily’s healing marks.

Unlike the boys, I endure the Ruler’s presence much better, and my hundreds of reflections smile tiredly.

“Dili, look, I’m tired,” I say. “Never in my life have I been so tired as I am now, but I have a feeling that if I close my eyes to rest, my mind will just burst out in all directions and I won’t be able to gather it back together.”

I reach up with one of my hands and touch the drop of blood on my neck, then the mandible. “Honestly, I feel like laughing manically, I feel like crying, and I feel like maybe I should just curl up and die. You know very well I won’t be able to stop you if you decide to kill me, so what’s making you hesitate?” I ask him curiously.

Instead of answering, the Ruler of Diligence just stares back at me.

The tense moment stretches for four more seconds, but I hardly find the energy to care.

And when I'm finally let go, I don't even feel relief. Logically, I decide to keep the wound on my neck and not heal it, even stalling my natural regeneration. Against the rules loving Diligence, it should help me with negotiations as a clear reminder of his lack of control.

This time, Ruby doesn't tease the black ant, and she didn't even try to stop him before. I mostly believe that if I were in true danger, she would interfere, but who knows?

"Explorer Rankings of Beyond reset once every thousand years," the black ant begins to talk in that way he always does, without a mouth, yet with a voice sounding as if it's coming directly from him. "Such a long duration doesn't allow the system to give rewards after the reset, as a high number of attendees would die long before receiving them, but it can do so based on the deepest First Dungeon floor reached. I don't worry about the system taking it into consideration when you get a trait or Primary class, as those subsystems are more difficult to confuse. The problem is that at the end of the tutorial, you can receive additional rewards based on your Beyond performance."

As he stops talking, his words begin to sink in, and I start to understand his worry, and he continues. "People serving as Handlers in Beyond also have an opportunity to enter the First Dungeon, and at the end of their role as they are leaving Beyond, they receive additional rewards based on the performance of their wards, in addition to their own performance in the First Dungeon. There are Absolutes that never managed to reach the floor you currently have in the rankings."

"Won't the Beyond system just consider their performance, recognise what happened, and refrain from giving too good of a reward?" Ruby asks him from behind her table.

"It is possible, but it is also possible that it will take their level and the short amount of time since they awakened to the system into consideration and greatly increase the rewards. You know very well that the Beyond subsystem isn't perfectly connected to the main system, and that because of its structure and the closeness of the First Dungeon, it doesn't share system calculations very well," Diligence answers.

"Look, these rewards won't be an issue until after our tutorials are over, right? Or just as they end. Can't you just say it's not your problem anymore at that point?" I suggest.

As the ant turns to me, it becomes obvious that he cannot or really does not want to. I'm no expert on ant expressions, but this much is clear.

Staring at me, he speaks again. "Then there's the fact that you aided the imitation, and together you made that ridiculous dagger. Another problem is what the imitation has done to that lynthari, and furthermore, there's what she has done to the replica of the Sword of Aeons." Diligence twitches and moves quickly in front of me in a way that turns his chitin legs into a blur.

His mandibles are once again dangerously close, as I hear, "There is the matter of Nyssa Volare, too. Because of you and the others here, she has left the sixth floor, where I thought she would spend the rest of her tutorial without making a mess. If you ever wonder, know that it was Kindness who told her where you and your friends might be."

Confused, I look at Ruby. "What do I have to do with it?"

"She just killed the Dhampir. So Dili is a bit annoyed," the red-haired woman smiles and waves her hand, finally releasing the boys.

"Being in charge of a Beyond cycle is supposed to be a secondary responsibility. There are rules in place to make everything simple and ensure that things run smoothly, and yet this cycle is anything but," Diligence complains, moving away from me again. "The Absolute's imitation cut the lynthari's connection to the tutorial, so she is now being fully treated as an Earth attendee. The system obviously reacted and made it impossible for it to happen again, so the imitation could not do the same for herself, and she is still tied to the tutorial such that she cannot leave. Yet, I have no illusions that she intends to remain in her cage. I haven't fully seen through her and the One Winged's preparations yet, but I'm starting to get an idea, and I'm seriously thinking of arming Wrath and sending him to face them."

Ruby seems intrigued by this. Leaning back in the chair behind her old wooden table, she asks. "Do you think he would be enough?"

"Likely, especially if I were to give him Materia Armor. The problem remains that the 12th floor is spatially locked. Without the Main Defensive Array, it will be difficult to get there, especially without your help, but you, for some incomprehensible reason, refuse to assist, even though you seem to dislike the idea of this imitation of your master walking free."

"What can I say? Women are mysterious creatures. Am I right, boys?"

As she turns to them, Brichant nods quickly with a big smile. Weslin nods only once she meets his eyes, and Savant follows suit. Meanwhile, Morwag smiles at her and doesn't react at all.

Before the demon can become a splat against the floor, I interject. "That's beyond our control as mere attendees, isn't it? I think we should be sent away so you guys can think it over and decide. As for me, I refuse any change to my rewards. I've decided that I will gamble. Either the system will recognize me as a fraud, and I'll receive no rewards for being on the 12th floor in the Explorer Rankings, or I'll hit it big."

"Maybe we should just let them be, Diligence. It's as he said, he'll receive the reward as the tutorial ends, so it's not our problem. Meanwhile, we can start working on a fix, or hell, we can vote on the full integration of the Beyond subsystem into the main system if you really want to," Ruby says.

I hadn't even noticed it until now, but Morwag is already lying face down on the floor with his arms and legs spread wide, seemingly unable to move at all as something heavy presses him down.

"So, where is Myrra? And Zant?" I ask.

I get no answer. Both of the Rulers ignore me, seemingly having a conversation in their own thought accelerated space.

It must be a long one, as nearly two seconds pass before they seem to finish.

Diligence looks my way one more time and apologizes to the others for holding them so rudely and excluding them from the conversation. Then, he leaves us alone with Ruby.

Morwag continues to lie on the ground as she steps away from her table and walks over him, stepping on his back as she goes. Something cracks, but no one says anything. Smiling, she stops in front of Savant, who looks at her with confusion, especially as she now stands holding the Sword of Aeons that should be in his hand.

Looking at the blade of the beautiful sword, a replica of the greatest mana battery in all of Eladore, she flicks the metal with her nail. It lets out a clear, ringing tone. She observes it for a while longer with longing apparent on her face before handing it back to Savant. As if nothing happened, she passes by him and stops in front of me.

For a few moments, I return her gaze until she puts both of her hands on the sides of my face, holding me there to keep our eyes locked.

Ruby leans closer until our noses are almost touching and whispers, "There are many people taking interest in you, they want to take you, place their marks on you, and imprint themselves as a deep memory on your path. But more than anything, it just makes me greedier."

She isn't smiling at all, and her yellow eyes glow with a deep, fierce intensity.

"I didn't take you for the jealous type," I say, with a smile, just as she begins to shake my head.

When she lets go of me and begins to walk back toward her table, stepping on Morwag again as she does, she speaks louder, addressing everyone else as well. "I hate to disappoint you, but it seems that there will be no negotiations today. You can blame Diligence for summoning you here over nothing. Please forgive him, though, he has had a rough time lately with a dragon settling near his territory and a great deal of trouble with the corporations."

Once seated, she waves her hand. I feel a sudden pull on my body as she calls out her goodbyes. "I dislike people who spread information that could identify me as Nathaniel's handler, so keep that in mind, boys. And be careful with our dear, cute Nyssa. She seems to be really fired up, and Kindness gave her the coordinates of the location you're most likely to appear."

In the next moment, we manifest on what I assume is the surface of Beyond. Morwag shouts something about a wench as I look around.

As I remember from my first visit, the place looks unassuming and normal. I can't quite tell what provides the light here; the sun's rays pierce through the clouds and patches of blue sky, making the surrounding area feel ordinary. There is grass, hills, rocks, and even some smaller trees.

The biggest difference is the pull I feel on my mana, currently attempting to drag it beneath my feet and much lower into the First Dungeon. The gravity also feels heavier than when I first arrived, seemingly growing stronger the more mana I leak.

I take a moment to examine this interesting concept, and we rest for a few hours without being interrupted by any monsters, when a burst of kinetic energy finally explodes in the distance. The force is immense enough to make even Morwag shut up, as betrayer of the Colony Brichant, Weslin, and Savant all turn their attention toward it.

The technique is rough, but the power behind it is staggering. Every beat of her heart generates a gargantuan amount of kinetic energy, which she directs like the stream of a jet engine. Her movements are uneven, but each burst carries her a huge distance, perfectly synced with her heartbeat.

She flies high in the air past us and slings around with incredible speed, entirely ignoring the crushing G-force such a turn creates, before crashing into the ground like a meteor. The impact sends up a massive explosion of rock, dirt, and grass.

I hear a soft cough, and Nyssa steps out of the dust cloud, waving her hand to clear the air in front of her.

The state of her clothes puts me on high alert. She isn't wearing a jacket, just a pale blue tank top, and her white pants are rolled up over her knees. She isn't even wearing boots.

"Nyssa," I say, my voice weary yet steady and confident. "I haven't gotten used to all the changes yet. I don't want to kill you by mistake."

Her pale red eyes seem even lighter than before. Her pale skin, white eyelashes, and short, uneven white horns contrast sharply with the black hair she has combed and tied back.

"I don't intend to kill any of you either, but if you continue to look down on me, you will die," Nyssa says.

Her voice is calm, making it clear she has come to challenge all of us at once.

No one has the chance to complain.

The light falling from the sky intensifies, melting the ground as she turns it into her weapon. Then, she charges.

Chapter 847 - Trailing The Boys

Flashback Nyssa Volare

After conversing with the Vice Guild Master of the Primordial Knights, the guild's former leader leaves the Megacity and makes her way to the third floor of the First Dungeon. It is the middle of the day by the time she reaches the Black Tower outpost. From there, she heads out and encounters a small group of people perched on top of a hill. They have an array of devices set up nearby and are observing an area off in the distance.

"What is that?" she asks curiously, coming up behind one of a lumoran scientists after passing the guards unnoticed.

The scientist, buried in his work, doesn't even seem surprised by the new voice and doesn't bother to turn around.

"Amazing, isn't it!" he calls out excitedly. "You must be one of the new interns here, right? Don't laze around! Hand me the mapping glass from the table." Still not turning, he waves his hand toward the table while looking through what appears to be a heavily inscribed telescope.

Nyssa tilts her head curiously but quickly scurries toward the table. Looking it over, she finds the glass, picks it up, and moves back to place it into the waiting hand of the lumoran.

As he grabs it, he fits it onto the front of the telescope and talks excitedly, "So fascinating! The region has begun to exhibit a near absolute mana vacuum, and the dead zone is currently maintaining a steady outward expansion. However, based on my early projections, the tension will eventually reach a critical threshold and undergo a localized collapse. Given the current density, I estimate a total stabilization period of 192 days, assuming no external interference as the expansion rate decelerates."

The telescope blinks out, and he hurriedly takes a mana battery from his pocket and slides it in to replace the emptied one so he can continue his observations. "What I wouldn't pay to know what angered the Ruler of Diligence so much! If left alone, the collapse of this orb will create a massive crater, and the shockwave of this explosion will possibly even reach the Black Tower outpost! I know this isn't even close to the limit of his powers, but in a way, it's calming to see that even the Rulers can be carried away by such petty emotions as anger."

"Won't you destroy it?" Nyssa asks him.

"How would I do something ridiculous like that? That thing eats any mana that gets close. We could probably get the help of the Primordial Knights to test primordial energies against it, but it is rumored their S ranks were around when Diligence created the mana dead zone, so I would rather not."

"I can destroy it if you want," Nyssa says.

At that, the lumoran bursts into a loud laugh. "Oh, how nice it must be to be so naive." Then his voice turns joking. "Okay, so even if you can, please don't. We want to observe it for a while longer."

He turns around to laugh at her further, but no one is standing there, leaving him looking around in confusion. His bewilderment only increases when the actual intern arrives five minutes later.

(Nyssa! I never thought I would not see you again!)

(Hello, Spark. I thought so as well, but it seems like I'm still a demon after all.)

(You are! A beautiful, perfect demon, Nyssa!)

(Thank you, Spark. Can you tell me why there are so many guards following me?)

(Hehe, I told them not to worry and to leave you alone, but they called me naive! They're still a bit nervous after the last time people from your guild came by!)

(I heard from the Vice Guild Master that Mormor played around a bit.)

(Nyssa... I'm not sure if "playing around" fits the description. After the attack, the poor guild disbanded, but not before they paid for all the damage Morwag caused. They were very scared. I think Nathaniel threatened them with a guild war, and they wanted nothing to do with that!)

(Should I apologize for the trouble they caused?)

(You don't have to! The punishment was already given, so at least in this case, there is no reason for you to apologise. Besides, you did nothing wrong.)

(I see. I will be leaving then. Can you tell them to stop pointing their weapons at me? You shouldn't be pointing a weapon at anyone you aren't ready to fight, or die facing.)

(They took out their weapons?! I will teleport them away right now. There! They're gone. Sorry, Nyssa!)

(Thank you, Spark. I will be leaving then.)

(Bye! Tell Nathaniel I said hello!)

In the 1st city of the second floor, Nyssa finds a velnar in a suit bowing deeply before her.

There is desperation obvious in his voice as he cries out, "Please, I thought Sir Nathaniel Gwyn represented the Primordial Knights when I made a deal with him in the name of our company! We kept our promise and took care of Mister Duncan."

"Why are you telling me this?" Nyssa asks.

That only causes the massive velnar to sweat more and bow even deeper. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees an empty plot of land that once belonged to the branch of a certain healing guild, now entirely erased. Even the city's Champion opted not to punish the crazy S ranks of the Primordial Knights, choosing instead to simply send them away. And now, the demon, considered one of the greatest talents in a thousand years, stands there. This is someone who singlehandedly defeated a Champion.

"I apologize!" he shouts again as he makes a quick decision. "I will triple our commitments toward Mister Duncan."

"Triple what?"

"F-five. Five times! Any more than that will ruin us!"

"If you really want to, but you don't have to tell me that. Instead, please just tell me where I can find Duncan."

"Of course I will!"

Duncan stands opposite Nyssa with a young lynthari boy called Lochi at his side. Though he is nervous, he maintains a slight smile to keep up his outgoing, professional expression. Meanwhile, Lochi stares at the pretty demon with eyes wide open. She isn't even that much taller than him.

"So that's what happened," Duncan says after explaining the situation in Lake City.

"All the fish are gone?" Nyssa asks.

"Most of them. But something similar has happened a few times throughout history, so the lake should repopulate. Honestly, people are a bit angry, but Lake City gets a cut from each fish, so they're not complaining too much because of the ridiculous amount of shards they're due to get. However, I'm going to have to reduce the speed at which we've been selling the cores and materials so we don't flood the market and reduce their value. I already hired a few merchants to help with that, and I hope you don't mind me using your guild's name to fend off some of the people trying to shamelessly take a cut. I am nowhere near powerful enough to fend them off on my own."

"It's okay. Nathaniel is the Guild Master now, so it's up to him."

"I see. Thank you." Duncan smiles at her. "And as to your question about what happened, they followed a lynthari Lurker that appeared out of that Leviathan Fish to get the core back. Then, from what I heard, all of the lurkers died, and a bunch of people got their hands on arcane weapons. Later, according to some, the Ruler of Diligence was so angered that he seized all these weapons, along with all the shards people received. Some say Nathaniel and the others fought the Ruler at the center of the first floor, and as punishment, he sent them to the twelfth floor to die. Though I am sure most of that is just people exaggerating."

“The Ruler of Diligence is actually quite nice, at least according to my handler.”

“Oh? Thank you for such firsthand information. I will take your word for it! May I make a shameless request of you, Lady Nyssa?”

“Just Nyssa. And I will listen to it.”

“If possible, please help Nathaniel if you find him in trouble. I owe him a lot, and I know I might not have anything to offer someone like you, but I am willing to give everything I own.”

“I am not sure I can promise that. I’ve returned to fight him and the others after all. But he shouldn’t be in any danger for the moment.”

“You want to kill them?”

“I don’t think I have ever truly wanted to kill someone, not even once in my life.”

As Nyssa heads toward the entrance floor to reach the surface of Beyond, she notices a presence approaching her.

A skillfully teleporting lynthari lurker with two tails cuts the distance to close in on her, and with a final step, it enters her strike zone. Her hand moves to destroy him, but at the last moment, she remembers what the guide, Duncan, told her about the lurker emerging from the belly of the Leviathan Fish and how the boys followed him.

Whether it is out of curiosity or a desire to follow in the tracks of the boys and face the same dangers they did, she decides in that moment to leave it be. She allows her natural barrier to be pierced and permits herself to be teleported over huge distances multiple times in a row until she finds herself in a massive, fleshy cave that looks like it’s inside a gargantuan being.

The lurker rushes away from her, joining many others nearby, but what catches her interest is a black figure with entirely red eyes. Its shape is that of a sickly thin human body with no defining details other than its pure blackness.

The text over its head identifies it as a Dhampir Lord.

Though it has no mouth, the Dhampir speaks. "Ahh, I thought my last death was unfortunate, but this very much compensates for it. Indeed, the Great One has delivered a royal gift to me!"

The surrounding lurkers don't move while the Dhampir laughs maniacally. Nyssa watches him calmly and wordlessly.

Looking at her with hunger in his eyes, the Dhampir speaks, "I still remember the smell of your delicious blood when you entered the first floor for the first time. I smelled it all the way from here! Oh, how much I regretted being unable to get to you before you made your way deeper into the Dungeon!"

In a show of incredible speed, he appears behind her, but Nyssa doesn't flinch even as he looms at her back. Despite his speed, her pale red eyes easily tracked his movement.

"Are you scared of me? Has your fear immobilized you?" the Dhampir asks, moving a stray lock of her black hair to reveal her slim, pale neck.

"I am not scared," Nyssa says, then asks, "You want my blood?"

"Ah, yes, your blood... so vibrant. At once so lethal and yet still so full of life. The blood of the Great One is magnificent, of course, but as he is yet to be revived by my hand, his essence lacks a certain richness of flavor." The Dhampir chuckles, and on the featureless black void of his face, a mouth tears open to reveal two long, gleaming white fangs.

Nyssa thinks for a moment before she turns her head to face him. A tiny, hopeful smile appears on her face. "Take it, then."

With the same incredibly fast movement, the Dhampir buries his fangs in her neck, drinking deeply of her Primordial Blood without wasting so much as a drop. And the albino demon doesn't even try to stop him.

After only a few seconds, the Dhampir stops and takes a step back, the shape of his mouth curving into a full crescent. "It is so much better than I thought. Such power and-" He pauses and takes a deep breath, his red eyes widening and his tongue flickering as he licks his fangs. "Oh yes, it packs a punch-"

He doesn't get to finish as he bends over and projectile vomits for several seconds.

"What, not aga-" He doesn't get to finish the sentence and vomits once again, a long stream that mixes blood with remnants of his breaking body.

Affected by his pain, the closest lurkers twist and collapse as well, spasming on the ground while Nyssa watches him sadly and says, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be ridi-" Another groan of pain and more projectile vomiting follows until he fully collapses and stops moving.

Watching this, Nyssa checks her notifications and waves them away, moving slowly across the cave to kill the lurkers still twitching on the ground. After that, she leaves to continue her trip to the surface.

Taking all the shortcuts she can, using arrays and guild resources to access them, she reaches the portal and moves to the surface of Beyond.

She checks a compass-like item meant to lead her to the coordinates given by her handler and closes it once she finds she's in the right place. No monsters attack her during that time, and it doesn't take long for the people she is waiting for to appear.

Calmly, she takes off her jacket and folds it neatly to place it on a boulder, which she dusts off carefully. She rolls up her pants to reach over her knees and then clumsily jumps on one foot as she takes off her shoes and socks, which she also carefully folds and places near her jacket.

Nyssa moves several steps away, and once she is sure the dust from her launch won't dirty her shoes, she lets her kinetic energy explode and flies toward the five signatures in the distance.

Chapter 848 - The boys vs the weird albino demon

POV Nathaniel

The light Nyssa turned into a weapon now burns all around us, the temperature rising as she further concentrates its heat. Morwag shoots ahead to charge her, followed closely by Weslin and Savant, while Brich stays back to begin setting up his drones and deploying arrays. No one seems to hesitate, they all feel her dangerous presence much more acutely than I do.

Nyssa stops, and the rock in front of her explodes into a spike. She grabs it and pulls it from the ground, shaping it into a sword. Her kinetic output increases even further as she clashes against Morwag, who can't endure the impact for longer than a second. His body is shot forward at high speed, possibly reaching sonic velocity.

Weslin barely avoids colliding with the demon, boosting himself closer to Nyssa right after. His void energy forms gauntlets up to his elbows, and he attacks Nyssa's hold on her mana with the power of the void. The stone sword she holds meets the void gauntlets, but the stone doesn't flicker or crack. Her heart beats, and a massive amount of kinetic energy moves through her body as she circles Weslin at high speed, kicking him and sending him rolling.

Once again, she lifts her stone sword to meet the Sword of Aeons, which is surely now close to or at the mid pristine level, the blade even shining with orange light as Savant surrounds it in his [Dawn]. Yet, the stone sword holds firm, causing Savant's eyes to widen.

A single wing draws itself from his back, swinging to move him away, but Nyssa closes the distance between them instantly. Her hand clutches the stone sword as she attacks, disarming him and making him drop his weapon. And as she does, it becomes obvious to me that some skill sort of is at play here.

As she is about to pick up the Sword of Aeons, my [Empyrean Lance] shoots forth almost faster than I can track. Nyssa doesn't even look my way, using her stone sword to parry and deflect the attack. She almost grabs the Sword of Aeons, but it releases a burst of energy in a huge explosion of orange light before she can. She moves like she's being boosted by a jet engine to dodge the blast.

Savant steps out of that orange light, holding his Sword of Aeons once again, just as Morwag slams into the ground beside Nyssa. The demon binds her to a small area while multiple of Brich's orbs start spinning around her, creating a field that envelops her in a sonic attack of some kind, combined with some sort of mental assault. Multiple links of the Obsidian Spine Chain, the chain weapon Morwag carries, shoot from the ground and coil around the stone sword in Nyssa's hands.

She doesn't even bother to pull the stone sword free, she simply lets go, and the sword crumbles as if it were returning to its state as a simple rock. Meanwhile, the gravity pulling at me increases as I continue to raise my mana.

Even while she fights the others, Nyssa moves her hand through the air as if she were caressing it. The air itself turns into her [Weapon] and starts shooting projectiles at me.

I raise a barrier to block them only when they're moments away from stabbing into my face. I watch them crash, detecting the mana within them and analyzing the way she's using her skill.

As Nyssa takes a battle stance, she almost playfully redirects Morwag's punch. By tripling her speed, she easily matches him, redirecting a few more attacks before slamming her palm against his chest. Though she doesn't wound him, the demon staggers back. Weslin, Savant, and Brich all move to attack her just as I slide into thought acceleration.

Nyssa's face remains calm in the middle of the chaos. She shifts her gaze to look at me with pale red eyes, carrying a sense of calm confidence.

With her bare hand, she cuts through Morwag's bindings. The blood circulating through her veins makes a joke of the mana radiation from Savant's [Dawn]. Timing her movement with the next beat of her heart, she shoots toward me like a rocket.

Mana surges through me as I reinforce my body. Her fist crashes into my open palm, and I absorb all of the kinetic energy. Both the mana and the influx of kinetic energy serve to increase my movement speed as I launch an attack towards the area where I sense her heart beating, as well as throwing that energy back at her.

Nyssa parries it with the back of her hand, even redirecting it so it partially hits Weslin, who barely manages to defend himself with a burst of void. Her heart beats, and she pushes against me again.

I absorb her kinetic energy once more, this time repelling it as a blast around us that she simply cuts through. My barrier and the defensive layer lining my skin are sliced through as if they aren't even there. Using her own hand as a [Weapon], she leaves a cut across my chest.

I watch the wound with a distant, tired coldness. My trait, the strengthening of Empyrean Ichor, is still applying, and a few hours of rest were far from enough. But that's just the reality of the situation. My complaints aren't good for anything in real combat or the difficult situations I keep finding myself in.

Nyssa understands this as well. There's no way she hasn't noticed my state, yet I don't think it's unfair in the least. She isn't complaining about facing the five of us at once, after all.

I move faster than before, spinning around her using the movement of our kinetic energy as Lioren taught me and the body reinforcement I learned from Lissandra. And as I do, I weave both techniques together.

[Weave - lvl 18 > Weave - lvl 19]

[Weave - lvl 19 > Weave - lvl 20]

Taking the kinetic energy I generate, I release it in a punch directed at her head and her brain by extension.

At the same time, she gathers her own and sends it to clash against mine, resulting in an explosion that sends us both reeling backward.

Using the momentum of that blast, Nyssa spins and ducks under Weslin's attack, as well as my lance. As she moves, she touches the ground and pulls another sword from the earth, this one made from simple grass.

She uses it to parry the void gauntlets. Morwag gets close as well and uses the moment to grab her hand, spinning to slam her against the ground, forging what seems to be a binding both of them to move at matching speeds. Scary feeling pulses of his primordial energy wash over her in a powerful unbinding force at the same time in an attempt to damage her. And under its influence, some of Weslin's void in the area starts to break apart.

Even while airborne, Nyssa flings her sword to parry another of my lances. Her eyes narrow as she swings the grass sword, severing the hand Morwag was using to hold her. Freed from his grasp, she lands gracefully and uses a burst of kinetic energy to shoot away, dodging my projectiles once again.

In that single movement, Nyssa reaches Brich, who begins cursing as he pulls out Calvorn to block her strike. The lumoran's speed and strength surge as he activates the many arrays inscribed in his armor, draining his mana batteries and the crystals imbued in his body. In rapid succession, he uses dozens of items all at once, activating each with an incredible speed and ease I still find difficult to grasp.

Weslin reaches them as well, and both face the albino demon while Morwag picks up his severed hand to reattach it. He looks on as the hand simply falls away and refuses to reconnect to his body. Seeing this, he tosses it aside like trash. His Obsidian Spine Chain coils around him, this time manifested from his own blood as he rushes back into the fray.

In a mere second, Weslin and Brich are sent flying, with identical cuts across their chests, deep, bleeding, and resisting all forms of healing. Morwag, meanwhile, endures, matching his speed to Nyssa's with his insane body reinforcement technique.

The binding he made is gone, and any further bindings he tries to create she severs in an instant. When he attempts to bind their life forces together, his body crashes to the ground in agony as he feels the weight of her Primordial Blood. Even wracked with pain, he grabs her leg, giving Savant the opening he needs to release dozens of absorbed attacks, some of which I recognize as my own.

Shockwaves, heat, and debris wash through the area. As the smoke clears, Nyssa stands unwounded, having parried every attack perfectly. Morwag shows only minor damage that is already healing through his natural regeneration.

I lift my hand high into the air, and a short, powerful pulse shakes the battlefield. Both Morwag and Nyssa turn toward me. Multiple air projectiles created by Nyssa crash against me, reflected by the defensive layer across my skin, and I swing my hand down.

The gravity pulling on me increases, nearly breaking my body, but my reinforcement keeps me upright as I release all the mana I've gathered. The condensed mana of the entire area around us, combined with my own, crashes down with the weight of a mountain, concentrated exactly where Nyssa and Morwag stand.

The albino demon slides out of Morwag's grasp and swings her grass sword upward, deflecting the full power of the explosion toward Morwag. His eyes widen just as the earth around him explodes, binding

to his skin to create a dense rock armor as he doubles in size, but the force buries him deep into the ground anyway.

With a propulsion of kinetic energy, Nyssa reaches Brich. He lifts Calvorn to defend himself, but she feints with the grass sword. In another boost that ignores all the immense G-forces pushing against her, she moves around him and disarms him with a simple strike to the wrist. She catches Calvorn out of the air and twists, slamming it against Brich. The impact shatters his armor and sends him flying. Moving even faster than he can fall, she throws Calvorn, and it pierces Brich's chest, pinning him to a tree half a mile away.

Another burst and she disappears, just as I throw another raw mana attack at her previous position that explodes there, creating a crater with smooth, almost mirror-like edges. And I continue to increase my output.

Nyssa reaches Weslin, and they clash in melee combat, with Savant joining in. Through the clouds, light pierces down, melting the ground and blinding my visual senses. She either entirely ignores the void and the orange light or simply parries the attacks with strikes of her own, which seem impossible to disrupt, cancel, or absorb.

Her speed increases until none of them can match her. In a burst of bloody energy, she sends Weslin to the ground with multiple limbs simply missing.

As Savant shoots into the sky to escape her reach, she catches him before he can gain distance, grabbing his feet and pulling him back down. He tanks one of her attacks, and his already massive output increases further as he drains mana from the Sword of Aeons, destroying the area around them. However, she strikes the side of his head, causing him to stumble and fight for consciousness. She breaks his leg with a kick, punches his side and neck, and finishes the assault by turning the air into another sword and stabbing it through his leg as he falls.

Morwag appears behind her again, his arms open to crush her in a big bear hug, but she jumps upward. The top of her head catches him under the chin, nearly knocking him out, before a blast of kinetic energy sends him hurtling toward me. I use another blast to redirect him to the side, where he crashes through the forest.

I boost myself backwards just as she boosts herself toward me. Morwag shakes off the daze and follows as we move to change the battlefield. Without Brich, Weslin, and Savant nearby, Nyssa's kinetic output increases even further, and so does mine.

I use my new skill and force my body to gradually adapt to the strain that high speed movement is causing.

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 6 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 7]

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 7 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 8]

I sense her shifting her mana and applying it to the environment, so I move to the side just as an attack streaks past, cleaving a nearby mountain in half with a clean, jagged cut.

Emerging from a nearby cave, a monster appears. A creature made of rock and flesh. It has no face and no mouth, and it's shaped like a fleshy ball from which rocky legs of varying lengths protrude. Despite its uneven legs, it moves with terrifying speed. With every step, the ground around it melts. A domain expands from the creature, setting the area ablaze, while a sonic attack crashes against us like a constant scream.

[Lithoderm - lvl ???]

I reach it first, absorbing a portion of the heat from its domain to fire a concentrated beam at Nyssa. She deflects it toward Morwag, who is already closing in. Without losing a stride, the demon binds the energy to a nearby tree, redirecting the beam away.

The Lithoderm doubles and then triples in size. With each expansion, the heat intensifies, and more legs sprout from its body. A halo of fire forms over its figure, releasing pulsing waves of flames that crash against us before roaring outward to incinerate everything in their path.

This time, I don't bother to absorb the heat. I let the flames wash over me to test my defensive layer. When they pass through without causing damage, I deploy my Regalia array, growing in size as armor made of mana encases me. I crash into the monster, slamming it against the mountain. The stone begins to melt under the heat it releases, as does some of the mana making up my Regalia.

My senses flare with a warning. Quickly, I pull the Regalia back, shrinking down and boosting to the side just as Nyssa's attack cleaves through the monster, severing a third of its legs. Then, like a human

projectile, Morwag crashes into the beast, binding his body to the ground to amplify his velocity. He slams into it with the force of an incredibly dense, demon shaped meteor, causing the area to shatter and the mountain to collapse entirely.

[You have defeated Lithoderm - lvl 481]

I judge the distance from Weslin and the others to be sufficient and land on a nearby peak while Morwag climbs out of the carcass. His Obsidian Spine Chain bursts from the corpse, now forged from the rock and flesh of the dead Lithoderm. It grows to the thickness of a bus and coils around him in a grotesque display of power.

Meanwhile, Nyssa swings her arm. All the ambient heat is pulled toward her as if the movement had created a massive vacuum. She quickly turns that heat into yet another sword, her [Weapon].

The rock beneath her feet shatters as she digs in, preparing to launch herself at us. I push my mana through my limbs, syncing my breathing with the rhythm of my reinforcement to ensure I don't lag behind her first strike.

I look at the two of them and, after a swift calculation that ultimately ends up decided on a whim, I find myself smiling. I've been trying to take this seriously, but it continues to feel like yet another exercise.

Chapter 849 - Against Nyssa Volare

[Eclipse] explodes across the area before I instantly pull it back, forcing it to linger on the surface of my skin. My mana circulation shifts, and I weave my kinetic and mana based reinforcements together.

An [Empyrean Lance] forms at my side, and I reach out and grab it. It breaks apart under my touch, only to [Weave] back together into the form of a short sword.

[Eclipse - lvl 71 > Eclipse - lvl 72]

[Eclipse - lvl 72 > Eclipse - lvl 73]

[Weave - lvl 20 > Weave - lvl 21]

[Weave - lvl 21 > Weave - lvl 22]

[Manifestation - lvl 47 > Manifestation - lvl 48]

My skills are leveling up rapidly, as if struggling to catch up to my current state. This puts further strain on my mind, as there are simply too many high level skills advancing simultaneously.

But when did I ever care about that?

In a burst of speed, I dash at Nyssa, the force of my takeoff shattering the mountain peak behind me. Projectiles of hardened air slam against my skin. Most break apart since they're somewhat mana based, but her [Weapon] is truly something else, and shallow cuts begin to form on my skin.

My sword clashes against her blade of flames. The impact sends out a pulse of heat that scorches the earth and lashes of mana with gold and white cores that evaporate anything they touch.

I absorb the heat from the molten ground beneath my feet, even as it splashes around like water every time I move, but failing to burn me. Our blades clash again and again in a blurred rhythm. All the while, more projectiles continue to hammer against me and burst open.

The spine chain made of rock and flesh lashes out at us, and Nyssa deflects it toward me, but I release an omnidirectional burst of kinetic energy. Part of the blast pushes the chain back, while Nyssa cuts through the portion heading for her, forcing the links to whistle past her on either side of her. My strengthening intensifies further. I dodge another strike and close the gap, driving my sword toward Nyssa's chest.

For a moment, she seems as though she might not catch up to the speed, but in my state of thought acceleration, I watch her eyes follow the attack. Then her speed increases further, and her free hand hits my wrist in just the right way to disarm me.

[Eclipse], stretched across my skin, starts to expand further, taking in the floating sword made of empyrean mana. And in that short moment, I feed it even more power before it explodes between us.

Nyssa uses the push to boost herself further toward Morwag, and her sword made of fire slams against his chest. Her movements blur as she turns back to me and swings her hand dozens of times in succession, blocking the rain of projectiles crashing down around her.

Morwag attacks her, but she ducks under the strike and still finds the time to almost elegantly use the back of her hand to redirect the [Empyrean Lance] I launch her way. It instead stabs directly into Morwag's shoulder.

Nyssa jumps and runs along the spine chain, moving to attack her, then jumping and reaching me in a massive boost of kinetic energy.

Within my mind, I feel like I'm back inside my mental space. I track the movements of her mana, I reinforce my body, and I match her speed.

Nyssa reaches into the air to turn the mana around me into her [Weapon], but I tear the attempt apart with a ferocity that almost surprises me for a moment. All the mana surrounding us slides into my control instead, even without me needing to reach deep enough to use the fragments of that long dead god.

Something inside me gets annoyed by her attempt, so the mana starts to oscillate over my hand, and I boost myself towards her as I continue to adapt to the strain such speeds are putting on my body.

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 8 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 9]

I catch up to her and slash my hand across her neck, only for her to move the perfect distance away. It is the smallest possible movement to get out of my reach. She pays it back with an attack of her own, hitting me with an open palm in the middle of my chest.

I absorb all the kinetic energy from the blow, but the defensive layer on my skin gets blown apart by her [Weapon], even though I block most of the impact. With my body reinforced, I stagger back, and waves of mana shoot from me, crashing against her to stop her from pursuing the attack.

She stands there like a lighthouse in the middle of a stormy sea, deflecting it all.

[Eclipse] expands now, draining the colors from the area as I force all the mana within under my control and send it crashing against her.

Every time she swings her hand, she splits it apart, deflects it, or parries it. Her heart continues to beat, sending waves of her own kinetic energy pushing against my attacks. The light burns my skin before I absorb the heat and once again increase my output. As per my training, I try to keep the efficiency high, but the longer we fight, the more natural it feels to push harder and ignore it. The last seal on Ignition Heart partially releases as I start to redistribute that heat into mana.

My vessel manifests behind my back, twice my size, and a halo forms over its head. Inside the halo, mana spins and pulls on more and more of the ambient mana.

How did that exercise go? Was it something like this?

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 83 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 84]

All the mana around me moves and swirls. I imagine two sheets of paper, one falling from the top and another from the bottom, as they touch and begin to slide against each other in opposite directions.

The air screams, and a wide, horizontal cut slams into Nyssa and Morwag behind her.

Moving quickly, Nyssa slashes her sword from the ground toward the sky and cuts through the attack once again. Meanwhile, Morwag takes the full force of it. His primordial energy flares as he attempts to unbind it all, but he fails to do so. A deep, horizontal cut now marks his chest, but he binds the wound closed and leaves his natural regeneration to take care of the rest.

In the midst of that, the albino demon reaches him, and his unbinding flares up again as he destroys her flame sword.

Two sheets of paper touch each other once again and slide. With a scream, another cut shoots towards them. So wide that it neatly cleaves a nearby mountain in half with an extreme degree of smoothness before flying toward Morwag, whom Nyssa has moved behind. The muscular demon unbinds as much as he can and stares at me with a smirk.

In my mind, sheets of paper begin to rain from the sky. Multiple layers slide and touch, and in response to my control, my mana moves to mirror exactly what I'm imagining. Multiple cuts shoot through the area, some carve into the ground, others ruin entire forests, and another flies far into the distance with a low rumble.

Morwag stands there, still missing the hand Nyssa cut off. His spine chain has broken and returned to its original form, and two more deep cuts mark his body. He tenses his muscles, the act forcing blood to spray from his wounds, and he tanks a kick from Nyssa. He even binds himself to a specific point in space so his body does not move, choosing instead to endure the full force of the blow.

They exchange multiple blows, as the demon refuses to budge while dodging my attacks. Nyssa swings a sword made of air to deflect another one of my cuts and, as crazy as it sounds, her kinetic output increases. Her heart now beats only once every three seconds. It slows from the calm, resting state of sixty heartbeats per minute she kept for the entire fight down to just twenty. Despite the drop in heart rate, her power increases significantly.

Geysers of blood explode from Morwag as each of her attacks damages his body. She cuts off his other hand, blinds his eye, and, by jumping and grabbing his horn, slams him to the ground before kicking him in the head.

Not missing a beat, she deflects my attack as it destroys the area further and uses another beat of her heart to move toward me. She jumps over my attack, slashes through waves of my mana expanding outward, and reaches me with swords made of rock and air.

The projectiles of dense mana I have been placing high in the sky slam against the ground, and she dances between them in a way that makes it look as though she could avoid falling droplets of water. Her blood burns in her veins as she ignores the mana radiation I've been releasing, which I am sure would kill most beyond attendees by proximity alone.

One of her swords cuts into my side, and I grab her hand, moving my head to slam it into hers.

Nyssa tilts her head slightly, and her pointy horn almost stabs into my eye and instead draws blood from my temple. All the mana gathered around us is pulled in close as my vessel spreads its arms wide. That mana oscillates and resonates, constantly changing frequencies and cutting everything around us. It reduces even particles of dust and blades of grass into increasingly fine slices, entirely erasing the nearby trees.

My body moves faster than hers, and while still holding her hand, I ignore the tearing in my muscles as my skill lags to adapt. I watch her mana output and attack her just to distract her slightly. As her control slips, I push by expanding [Eclipse] and disrupting her use of mana.

At that same moment, my vessel slams its hands together, and the oscillating mana crashes against both of us.

Hardly knowing what happened, I find myself flung back as all my mana pushes outward. My arm is broken and twisted before I circulate thermal energy through it, snapping it back into place.

Nyssa stands in the middle of it all with just a small cut on the back of her hand. Watching me curiously, she lets the blood flow down across her fingers until it drops and begins to gather. The wound starts bleeding more as she pushes her blood out until there is enough to stretch into the shape of a sword.

As she takes a step back and takes a stance, I dip my finger in the blood dripping from my head where she cut me with her horn, and moving it across my forehead, I draw an inscription with it, using it to side deeper into thought acceleration.

Even then, I barely catch her movement as her sword stabs far too close to my chest, right next to my mana heart. The wound around it burns and sizzles, and my Emyrean Ichor reacts like a nest full of hornets.

Nyssa kicks me off her sword, breaking what feels like all of my ribs, just as I teleport away after leaving behind a cube with a golden and white core that explodes with the force of a nuke.

Chapter 850 - Today

[Selective Adaptation] allows me to adapt to one thing at a time. It's an active skill too, so the adaptation isn't permanent, and there's a time limit to it as well. At least for now. As I level up, the process of adaptation itself becomes faster and lasts longer. But currently, it's locked into adapting my body to my movement speed. That's why I can't use it against the bits of Nyssa's blood burning inside my chest.

I allow the shockwave of my explosion to wash over me as I teleport again, just as Nyssa reaches where I once stood.

Before she can follow me, Morwag is on her, boosting his movement by binding his speed to hers. He rushes at her straight through my explosion, and that beautiful lunatic is currently binding part of that explosion to his skin.

I don't even try to comprehend how it works, but it explains why the explosion wasn't bigger. As the demon runs, the energy lingers on his skin, splashing around him with each movement as he keeps losing parts of it. Destruction follows in his wake as he reaches Nyssa and crashes against her.

I, meanwhile, [Focus] on cycling my Empyrean Ichor through my body. It moves much more aggressively, reacting to the bits of Primordial blood burning inside of me. As I generate more mana, the force of gravity pulling on me increases, but that mana gets absorbed by my blood, strengthening it further in combination with my increasingly boosted circulation.

My finger moves back to my forehead. I let a tiny bit of kinetic energy destabilize to cause a small wound on my fingertip as I swiftly draw more inscriptions across my forehead and the sides of my head, eventually tracing over my ears as well.

The world slows down further, to the point I remember Lissandra's warning. I begin to feel even emptier and more tired, but my effort has nothing to do with my feelings. I wouldn't have endured Lissandra's training for so long if my effort was powered by anger or a need to prove something to myself. After all, such feelings die off after a while.

I glance down to watch the two figures move quickly all over the place, destroying mountains. Morwag makes himself a giant as he binds entire forests to himself, throwing unbinding energy all over the place as he attacks Nyssa with his extremely durable body.

Then, I reach for the small bag on the back of my waist and take out a protective case containing a single item: a syringe with a strange liquid sloshing inside, made by an even stranger lynthari.

I think I can take advantage of Nyssa's blood and my ongoing trait strengthening.

Without hesitation, I stab that syringe right into my heart, using the wound Nyssa caused that refuses to heal. Then I press down and send all the liquid made with Leviathan spinal fluid inside.

All sounds disappear. I don't even detect my body reflexively raising a barrier to defend against the projectiles shooting toward me. My blood surges even wilder, and so do the droplets of the Primordial Blood. The veins my Ichor passes through burn, and more of my mana gets absorbed into it and hyper-condensed, fighting against the Primordial Blood.

And my Mana Heart begins to slow down as this happens. The thumps become slower and slower and weaker until it fully stops. Without it beating, the silence becomes even deeper, and that silence stretches for a long few seconds.

Then it begins to beat again. Right from the start, it flutters like the heart of a small animal. I stop counting at the estimation that, if it continues to beat at this speed, it will be 300 heartbeats per minute. Each beat surges mana through my body, but unlike my normal mana, it's been pre-condensed to the point where I'm confident a slight push is all it would take to turn it into black mana. It even clashes against the Empyrean Ichor, further causing it to rage on.

I don't know how long the effect will last, so I move further into the air with my vessel growing, drawing inscriptions that I then begin to [Weave] into the sky. Through them, the mana I've been gathering spreads, pulsating and activating them.

Just in time too, as Nyssa jumps to the top of the highest peak she can find, swinging her hand to rid herself of what must be Morwag's blood on her fingers. She jumps in a pulse of kinetic energy, her heart now beating only when she wills it to. That one pulse entirely destroys the mountain beneath her, sending cracks rippling out across its entirety, and with a rumble, the rocks start rolling down as it breaks apart.

The sky seems to tear apart as I manifest dozens of human-like arms that almost seem to pierce their way into reality from my [Weave], each one the size of individual buildings shining with a dense blue light. The arms continue to extend, longer and longer, moving almost like snakes as they reach towards Nyssa with open palms to grab her.

With a sword made of her Primordial Blood, she swings and deflects them, causing them to continue down to the ground and pierce into the earth, the forests, and the mountains around.

I even get a few kill notifications and a level up, but I only bother to check my skill notifications.

[Weave - lvl 20 > Weave - lvl 21]

[Weave - lvl 21 > Weave - lvl 22]

[Weave - lvl 22 > Weave - lvl 23]

[Weave - lvl 23 > Weave - lvl 24]

[Manifestation - lvl 48 > Manifestation - lvl 49]

[Manifestation - lvl 49 > Manifestation - lvl 50]

Each time Nyssa swings her sword, I feel a burn in my chest as if in reaction to that, and both my wound and the broken ribs remind me of their refusal to heal.

My quickly beating heart seems like it might be about to explode, but instead of using its entire output to fight Nyssa, I spread a large portion throughout my body, supporting it in its fight against the Primordial Blood and my increasingly wild Empyrean Ichor. One of my eyes is closed as I concentrate inward, aiding that process even further and aligning all that mana just the way I want.

I teleport away just as Nyssa reaches me, and leave a vessel behind that grows two more arms and coils them all around Nyssa. The halo over its head spins faster, pulling in everything I've woven in the sky and destabilizing just as a white and golden core starts to blink within.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 56 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 57]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 57 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 58]

Another of my longer distance teleports is stopped by a shockwave from the explosion that spreads a mana disruption wave through the area, and I crash against the ground and roll once before I absorb my

momentum and jump up to start picking up speed. In a powerful, long leap, I jump over the mountain and boost myself to the ground to pick up even more speed.

The speed at which I move causes a strong wind to blow in my face as I continue to run faster and faster, leaping and jumping like a happy kid enjoying a run probably would. Debris rains all around me, and my explosion has collapsed back inward in a strong implosion, and bursts of mana stream through the area, lashing outward and cutting through everything in their path, destroying the space even further and coloring the sky in hues of white, blue, and gold.

Without looking back, I dodge, avoiding the debris raining down around me and even a few projectiles originating from the albino demon hunting me.

[Perception - lvl 77 > Perception - lvl 78]

The amount of mana I'm spending to deal with the mess inside of my body is insane, so I've formed a new vessel behind me to help to deal with it all. But slowly, I start to run out of mana. I don't want to unseal my Ignition Heart again, as I have no mental capacity to deal with primordial energy and redistribute it, and I don't want to use black mana, as I don't want to share and fight with it right now.

So that only leaves me with one option.

My run comes to a stop right in front of Savant, who is, for some reason, almost fully healed, unlike the still bleeding Weslin, and I wonder what this unhealthy patient guy must have absorbed from Nyssa and how much of the asskicking he purposefully endured.

Pushing these thoughts away, I [Weave] my reinforcement and kinetic energy to move at a burst of high speed. Savant begins to react and almost spikes his mana to the point he matches me, but I surprised him. I take the Sword of Aeons out of his hand and boost myself high into the air as Nyssa crashes into the exact spot I stood before, leaping after me.

Using a mark I placed previously, I teleport again before she can stop me, and appear right at the spot where my vessel exploded.

I let mana flood out from the Sword of Aeons, and I release all the locks and seals on it, letting it stream out at full bore, like the entirety of the ocean crashing through a window to fill a room. In these currents, I swim so easily. I bend them to my will, making the mana flow around me and float to the halo spinning over my head, from which I draw in even more and move it through my body.

Both of my eyes are closed now, looking inward as my still-wild heartbeat mixes with the mana I've continued to compress. The whirlpool over my head draws in remains from the explosion and then from further away. It roars audibly with a piercing noise, like a maelstrom pulling in air from miles and miles away. I drown my body in it, and as easily as breathing, I use Mana Cycling, moving it all just the way I want.

I think the most ridiculous part about this is that my body hasn't exploded yet. Just a single slip up, a single mistake, and nothing will remain of me, and an area the size of a small country would be destroyed in the explosion.

But finally, a few droplets of Primordial Blood die off, suffocated not by Empyrean Ichor, but by my mana and my body itself.

A notification dings.

Your trait, Mana Physique, has begun forcefully evolving!

This evolution is being influenced by the ongoing external factors, your performance up until now, and is taking place to more accurately reflect your capabilities and the state of your body.

Mana Physique 2/5 > Mana Vessel 1/3

Mana Vessel - The user's physique evolves into a reinforced container that can hold mana at a density far exceeding physical limitations. The integrated network allows for the compression of massive energy volumes into the user's frame, turning the body into a high-capacity reservoir capable of sustaining immense output and allowing mana to flood through the body with near zero resistance.

This further adds to the strain I'm under, though it fails to dim my excitement as I swiftly read the description.

There are two traits applying, my mind feels like it might just switch off, and then there's that albino demon currently hunting me like I owe her money.

The Sword of Aeons runs out of mana, and with a boost of kinetic energy, I throw it at Nyssa, who's finally caught up to me, and somewhere in Savant's general direction.

Obviously, Nyssa avoids the sword easily.

Somewhere in the distance, I notice Morwag, surfing the huge links of his Obsidian Spine Chain in our direction. Even if he seems back in one piece, I don't think he's healed. I believe he just picked up the severed body parts and bound them back to himself. That maniac must be just as damaged as me, but he just keeps coming. I wonder if, at this point, even Lyraen would be able to damage him, after all people like Nyssa just don't count.

I also notice Savant scraping bits of Nyssa's blood from the ground, and storing them in a vial. This almost makes me chuckle even as Nyssa cuts at my body and destroys my attempts to teleport, so I boost myself away with what feels like the last bits of my energy.

This is when I decide I have had my dose of fun, and it's probably time to dip.

Today, I haven't even forced that goddamn demon to use her third primordial energy.

I use feints for my teleport as I stretch multiple lines, and she fails to find the right one. I teleport away towards where I sense the portal to the Entrance Floor, away from the surface, and this maniac.

Passing through, the world around me spins more than it should, and I almost expect to find myself back with Diligence or Ruby, or back on the 12th Beyond floor. But I just appear back in the Entrance Floor. It is a smaller city with cobbled streets and many fresh Beyonders passing through with eyes wide open at the exciting new area of their tutorial.

Once there, I stumble and lean against a wall, smearing my blood on it before I push myself off and walk through the crowd.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as, to my left, I notice Nyssa walking there as well, with only the people from the crowd between us. I almost hope for her to be reasonable, but then I realize just how silly that is, just as she shoots projectiles of air at me. These projectiles pass right behind or in front of the attendees. Some even ruffle the hair of a few without them noticing.

I let the attacks slam against the defensive layer I've swiftly raised above my skin, modifying it so it ripples and absorbs the impact instead of them detonating and deflecting.

Both of us continue walking in the same direction, while none of the attendees notice a thing. Her projectiles crash against me, and I shoot some near-transparent mana orbs at her that she breaks apart into faint mana particles. We both shoot while avoiding hitting the people between us, sometimes by a hair's breadth.

Nyssa's eyes narrow further as she changes direction and starts heading more in my direction, ready to cut off my path. The weapon that was a sword on the surface of Beyond is now a small dagger she holds hidden in her palm.

In my hand, a small [Empyrean Lance] begins to form before I squeeze and break it, turning that mana into a dagger similar to hers.

Finally, some of the other attendees actually seem to sense something, and a few start looking around in panic, and others look like they are suffocating. Meanwhile, Nyssa and I keep our eyes locked. That gaze doesn't break even as the area behind us explodes and people scream while defending themselves.

It seems that Morwag has arrived as well.