Being choked unconscious hurt. A lot.

It was difficult to describe with precision, but it was almost like this horrible, crushing pain alongside your neck, followed by an immense internal pressure that made you feel like your head was going to burst into a thousand tiny pieces. Blood was pounding away, throbbing through your veins with every heartbeat, right alongside the jolts of pain it carried with it.

Of course, if one was sloppy about it, it could cause even more pain than that.

The neothelid that was currently entwined all around him, its thick muscular tubular body contracting powerfully from every direction, was no expert on the subject. Instead, it just pressed all around him uniformly.

Inanna could have gotten out of this chokehold with effortless grace. But Lukas was no Inanna. He lacked her grace. He lacked her strength. Her power. Her experience.

And he was about as subtle as a sledgehammer.

But sometimes, a sledgehammer to the head was a sledgehammer to the head.

His eyes squinted, and hot crimson mana flooded through his veins. The power of ether sang along its side, carefully giving shape to the form in his mind. Fire was a good weapon. But a thick, viciously sharp blade of fire?

Even better.

And then the neothelid began to *scream*.

SOULSCAPE	
NAME	**Lukas Aguilar**
Type	**Base Host**
Level	**6**
Experience	**122**
Current Threshold	**1440**
Utilized Soul Capacity	**2829 / 3494**
ESSENCE	
Maximum Lifeforce Output	**2250**
Replenishment Rate	**400 / hour**
LEY LINE NETWORK	

Maximum Mana Output	1925
Synthesis Rate	200 / hour

SKILL ATTRIBUTES		
SKILL	LEVEL	CONSUMED SOUL CAP
Raw Lifeforce Manipulation	1	50
Momentum Manipulation	2	500
Friction Modulation	1	50
Pressure Modulation	1	50
Kinetomancy (FRAGMENTED)	APEX	1279
Fire Creation	1	50
Fire Manipulation	2	500
Temperature Modulation	1	50
Perception Manipulation	1	50
Conjuration	1	50
Disintegration	1	50
Seismic Sensing	1	50
Shatterpoint Intuition	1	50
Psychomancy	1	50

OMPHALOS ATTRIBUTES	
Energy Reservoir Capacity	∞
Current Energy Level	722,401,138 units
OMPHALOS FUNCTIONS	
Scan	Level 2
Analyze	Level 2
Prophylaxis	Level 2
Soul Siphon	NA

Alpha Condition	Level 1
Evocation	Level 1

Lukas stood up from the floor and wiped the dust off his clothes. Solana had been gracious enough to grant him a fresh pair in addition to the one he had been wearing before he left, though the armor had only been a singular copy.

Not that it mattered. If he really wanted some armor, he could create a temporary attire out of air. Metamancy was useful like that. No more would he ever find himself forced into a situation without his pants on.

He shuddered at the memory.

"You have been constantly pitting yourself against stronger and lethal opponents every waking moment, and *that* is what gives you nightmares?"

I don't see you posing naked during our training sessions.

"Do you really believe you can survive that, mortal?"

Lukas was about to call her out on her ego, but thought better of it. Some women had a quality about them, something intangible and indefinable. Emma had it. Solana, as much as he hated to admit it, had it in spades. And Inanna… well, she put them both to shame.

He was always extremely aware of her, and Inanna knew precisely what sort of effect she had on him. Merely standing in front of her inside his mindscape kicked his libido into overdrive. The fact that the new Level-Ups had gotten an increase in lifeforce flooding his system didn't help matters either.

Lifeforce was more than physical strength and agility. It was the spiritual home of all things primal and primitive. It wanted him to be a hunter, to tear something's spine off and see the light leave its eyes. There were times when the lunacy rose to degrees that made it damn near impossible to control.

"If only there was a way to leech psionic skills without hard work."

Lukas rolled his eyes. For all her power and divinity, Inanna was old school, believing in the concept of equivalent exchange between risk and reward. She applauded his decision to choose his battles, but scoffed at *farming* monsters to gain particular skills rather than elevating what he had.

A *leech's mindset*, she called it.

"I have an advantage. Tell me why I shouldn't use it."

"You would forever stay a weakling if not for your ability to leech others."

Something about her words stirred something within him. A desire to be proven right, to make her back off, and *know her place.* He gnashed his teeth, rage and displeasure rising at the callous way she determined his progress as *inconsequential*. Like he was *nothing*. He, who had survived countless eons in which paltry gods and goddesses did their best to instill faith in creatures he'd given birth to, was being treated like a—

"…"

And just like that, that line of thought was gone.

Vanished. As if it had never existed in the first place.

"It seems," Inanna replied, her voice surprisingly thoughtful, **"that perhaps a re-evaluation of your abilities might be in order."**

His lips moved by their own accord. "Bring it on!"

An instant later, the two were in his mindscape, battling it out. A thin stream of lifeforce burst out from behind Lukas, adding a small jolt of acceleration as he minimized the distance between himself and his opponent. His right foot jammed itself into the ground as he twisted his torso, bringing his left leg in a complete sweep against her.

Inanna effortlessly blocked the kick with one arm, grabbing at his toes with another. Lukas allowed himself a single moment to be distracted by the utter feline grace with which she'd outmaneuvered him. Her touch was feather-light, yet strong enough a grip that he couldn't pull his leg back without losing his own balance.

"Uncomfortable, is it not?" the goddess asked, a smile on her face. **"To be victorious, one must first learn how to be comfortable with the state of being uncomfortable."**

Lukas pushed a burst of lifeforce from his leg, but Inanna dropped it right at that moment, but before he could get enough footing, she softly pushed his knee with an open palm. His leg bent to the left, the lifeforce burst driving it further and destroying his coordination. Lukas dropped to the floor like a stringless puppet on his left arm. Pain spiked from the strain, but Neural Suppression dumbed it down to acceptable levels. Inanna casually kicked against his elbow, dropping him further, and rested her heel upon his face.

"Inadequate," She sighed. **"You must come at me with the intent to kill. Anything less will net you no results."**

Lukas hurled a fireball from his right hand, but Inanna twirled around, effortlessly dodging it and bringing her heel straight towards his heart. And it was *fast*. Fast enough to obliterate his heart before he could even begin to conjure a—

Thump!

Perceptual Dilation, or tachypsychia as he called it, came into effect. With it came seismic sense. The former drastically drew out his perception. The latter allowed him to sense the blow's trajectory. There was no time to conjure a shield, or fireball, or any protection metamancy could conjure.

His right arm moved, Shatterpoint Intuition guiding its trajectory. The skill allowed him to direct his attacks with absolute accuracy and lent itself to determining the exact position to move his body to get his task accomplished. The arm was barely able to—

Thump!

—reach his chest as the lethal blow from the heel drew nearer and nearer.

"URGKK!"

The force of the blow bent him in half and sent him flying, limp and broken, across the *floor* before he skidded to a harsh halt. The shock of the blow had dislocated his shoulder and tore his biceps. And this was after his body had already been reinforced to the max with lifeforce.

This is temporary, Lukas told himself amidst the pain. *My real body won't have these wounds.*

"Pathetic!" Inanna rasped. **"At this rate, aeons will pass before you can even *stand* in Ereshkigal's presence. What a worm I have chosen as my Host. Perhaps it was Fate that you fell in this worm-pit, amongst your own kind."**

Lukas pushed himself up. With a well-aimed hit with his palm, he snapped his shoulder into place and prepared himself for another attempt.

During the entire time he had trained with Inanna, the goddess had limited herself to simple combat techniques— grappling, chokes, takedowns, joint locks— nothing that an ordinary person on earth couldn't perform. Lukas had come down upon her with his ever-increasing arsenal of skills, used every single permutation and combination he could think of mid-fight, but had still ended up with his ass kicked.

It was times like this that reminded him that no matter how *human* Inanna looked, she wasn't one.

She was a goddess. Reflection or otherwise.

He settled himself into a fighting stance, one of the few she had taught him.

Inanna smiled, gesturing towards him with a beckoning finger.

"Come."

"With pleasure."

Tachypsychia activated at full throttle, slowing down her movements to his discerning eye. And then, Inanna went even *faster.*

POW!

"Fuck!"

He swerved his fist but found Inanna's foot inches away from connecting with his cheek.

BAM!

"Oww!"

Lukas knew he was fighting Inanna, a literal goddess by her own right. No amount of training, however intense, would be able to get the better of her.

But that wasn't all.

He'd learned something fundamental. After constant exposure to the goddess's thought process and constantly applying his ingrained skills against all the predators that lurked in this crypt, he was beginning to understand crucial aspects about fighting predators. Things he never noticed as a part of civilized society.

Predators always went after the weak. The wounded. The unaware.

The notion went double for solitary predators like the thoggua, or worse, monsters like the neothelid. Solitary predators, more often than not, attacked when they had the element of surprise on their side. Or when they had every single advantage stacked in their favor. Hell, even the larger and more powerful monsters abided by that rule.

Predators never picked a fair fight. Such a notion ran counter to their nature and robbed them of their inherent advantage.

And Inanna? She was very much a predator.

Unknowingly or not, Inanna never let an opportunity slip by when she could instead increase the advantages she held over him. Whether it was showing off her magical abilities, enhancing her supernatural charm, or something as simple as exposing more of her marble-white skin, the goddess always went out of her way to ensure he held nothing short of awe for her very presence.

“Another round?” he asked, readying himself.

The goddess tilted her head to the left. Very slightly.

“Try as you might, you will never be a match for me. My fighting prowess is something I developed from scratch. No pretender, no matter how many skills one might have leached, can reach this level.”

“Give me another chance,” he replied, taking deep breaths, “I’m sure I can make a scratch.”

“Scratching and pawing like vermin,” she taunted, **“You are showing your true nature.”**

“Talk is cheap!” he shot back.

The goddess laughed. **“Very well. Howev—”**

Lukas didn’t wait for her to finish. He flooded key areas of his body with power — his calves, glutes, hip flexors, hamstrings — instantly pushing them to maximum efficiency. His quadriceps worked in conjunction with his hamstrings and pushed even *further*.

In a burst of speed, Lukas vanished, before sharply reappearing in front of the goddess, his fingers clenched into a fire-cloaked fist hurtling towards her face. Inanna sank down, her legs extending outwards like a ballerina doing the splints, grabbed his wrist with her left hand and pushed it upwards—

Just as he unleashed the fire and forced out like a modified flamethrower.

Dammit, Lukas cursed. If only he’d been a fraction of a second faster, the attack would have hit her face and—

The rest of his thoughts evaporated as something terrifying caught his attention. His wrist was still within her grip and she—

Was.

Smiling.

At him.

Oh, fu—

Thummmp!!!

Her left leg shot up, tearing through the air. It met with his lower jaw, shattering half of his teeth, and sending his back in recoil. Her leg moved further upward, while her solid grip upon his wrist yanked him closer, bending him down upon his knees—

Thummmp! Thump!

Shatterpoint Intuition activated. Lukas knew this would make it or break it.

Thumpppp!

The leg came down like the scythe of the grim reaper and hacked right into his pectoral girdle, *obliterating* it. Lukas's eyes widened and a silent scream exuded out of his throat before Neural Suppression stepped in.

His left arm moved closer, using the momentum from her leg's strike into propelling himself forward, his intuition skill guiding the way.

And slammed his open palm against her right knee.

Lukas had once read that an average person was actually three times stronger than what they believed. And yet, most people never used that strength except under absolutely dire circumstances when their mind entered a tunnel-vision. It was this inhibition that kept them from destroying themselves while fighting.

Luckily for him, fighting without inhibitions was precisely what Neural Suppression was all about.

The concept behind Shatterpoint Intuition was to lock on a precise location and guide an attack there with full force. A perfect analogy would be to use a knife to shatter a wall by employing maximum kinetic pressure at a single point.

Either the structure would shatter, or the knife would break.

Add in lifeforce and a timely application of kinetomancy into the mix, and you got an explosive amount of strength.

That was essentially what happened.

Inanna's knee popped like a balloon from the force of his strike, dislocating the ball from its socket as the goddess let out something that, if he didn't know any better, sounded like a muffled whimper.

And then she *looked* at him.

Before he knew it, she had slammed her fist into his stomach.

"GAHHH!"

Air rushed out of his lungs, followed by saliva, stomach acid, and what felt like half of his internal organs.

Several of his ribs snapped right then and there. Neural Suppression was active, but there was only so much you could ignore. In the back of his mind, he genuinely wondered if he had been split in half, as the pain

traversed through his body and emerged out the back. By the time his pain-addled brain had registered what was happening, he was skidding across the floor, hitting, *bouncing*, sliding, like a broken ragdoll.

"KUH!"

Lukas blearily opened his eyes and found himself lying on the floor, right next to the burning campfire. He coughed out some soot that managed to get in his nose but flinched as every single breath sent a jolt of immense pain through him. Despite the fact that they were phantom pains at best and illusions at worst, his mind seemed to have trouble keeping the two apart.

Nothing — neither the monsters he had faced nor Ryu's fast-paced blows — had been remotely close to replicating the agony he'd felt from that single punch thrown by Inanna. It was probably a good thing the training happened in his mindscape.

Yet, despite all that, a maniacal grin burst from his lips. "Did… Did I win?"

"In a manner of speaking," Inanna softly spoke. **"To lose control for something so petty is unworthy of me."**

That, Lukas decided, was the closest he'd come to getting an apology out of her.

"A mountain has no business apologizing to an insect, mortal," the goddess coldly retorted. **"I am merely reflecting upon my own momentary loss of control."**

"No harm done," he cheekily replied. "Frankly, I'm still surprised it worked at all."

"Do you know why it did?" Inanna's voice sounded distant.

"What do you mean? Are you going to tell me you weren't ready or something—"

"How do you defeat an opponent who has proven to be stronger than you, faster than you, and cannot be snuck up on?"

"Trick him. Or bide your time until he underestimates you."

Inanna shook her head. **"I shall rephrase. In a battle between equals, who will win?"**

"Well…" Lukas paused as he thought carefully. "If they're equally skilled, then the one with the greater luck."

"Wrong. It is the one willing to pay the greater price."

"Price?"

"What you did in our fight… I have done something similar myself. In one of my earliest battles, I found myself… outmatched." The word sounded like it was painful to get out. **"My opponent was stronger, faster, and had greater reach. Death was a near certainty."**

Lukas found himself riveted by the tale. It wasn't often that Inanna willingly spoke of her past. "So how did you manage to win?"

"I let his blow cleave through my arm. And in return, I lopped off his head."

"…"

“Men of power… Mages of strength… Countless warriors have fallen for a simple reason. They could not handle the pain. A mere gash stripped them of their rationality, and their self-preservation prevented them from winning the battle at the cost of a wound.” She stared down at him, her gaze as unyielding as a mountain. **“Your strength is limited by your will. If you truly want to become strong, there is a single lesson that you must learn.”**

“Which is?” he asked, the trepidation rising in his heart.

“How to take a blow.” She smiled. **“At least you do not shy away from pain. A praiseworthy attribute for someone who thinks like a leech.”**

Despite the way it ended, that might have been the most sincere praise he’d ever received from her.

Unfortunately he didn’t have time to enjoy it. Instead, he broke out into coughs. He had the oddest feeling that there should’ve been blood, but all that came out was spit. His entire body felt like a living, breathing dichotomy— one that could tell every single body part was in functioning order, yet still feel completely wounded and paralyzed for the foreseeable future.

Phantom pains, he reminded himself. *They’re not real.*

With conscious effort, he closed his eyes and began breathing rhythmically. It hurt the first few times, but as lifeforce circulated through his body, the feeling of intense agony began to slowly dissipate. Neural Suppression was working.

“You should allow your body and mind to rest for a while. Agony so severe leaves a lasting impression on the mind, phantom or otherwise. Once you are healed, you may continue your perverse preoccupation of…” Her lips curled in distaste, **“*farming* monsters for their skills.”**

“You dislike it that much?”

“I abhor it,” she spat, **“but it cannot be helped. Everyone is born with unique strengths and weaknesses. As someone who rose from nothing to a Divine Queen with nothing save my own hard-earned strength and skill, I take offense at seeing such things *stolen* so easily.”**

Lukas was briefly reminded that his unique circumstances had also allowed him to *steal* an APEX-rank skill for himself, simply because he was at the right place at the right time. A skill that by all rights, belonged to a Goddess.

And that was before he had gained access to Soul Siphon.

“However,” Inanna continued, **“I have contemplated the situation further while you were unconscious. You are an anomaly, and it is in your nature to devour foreign species and take its skills for yourself. Ordinarily, these would be inserted in monsters, but you are adding them to your schema to make them your own. A twist, given your unusual powers, but *yours* nonetheless. Leeching or otherwise, it would not have been possible for you to grow as much as you have without diligent training in your gifts. ”**

“Thanks,” Lukas said, dipping his head to no one in particular. “I know my way of gaining skills is unusual, but I won’t use them as a crutch. I’ll hone every single skill I acquire.”

“Make sure you do so,” the goddess said. **“Be it a monster or goddess, it takes time and effort to develop a skill. And starting now, I intend to exact a price every time the chance presents itself,”** she said with a gentle smile.

It was a thing of beauty, really.

So why did he feel like he was about to be mauled by a ravenous lion?