

## Chapter 75 - Anima

My eyes fluttered open, and the usual post-Rest Function confusion set in, manifesting as blurry vision and a bout of vertigo. I weathered the storm for a second or two until my body got itself under control again.

Immediately, I recognized one important change from before: There was no longer any pain.

Gingerly, yet excitedly, I felt the back of my neck and found... nothing. The wound had healed completely, and it didn't feel like there was even a scar left behind where the grooves had been burnt into my flesh.

"Haaa..." I let out an involuntary, relieved sigh. A part of me had very much believed that the damage I had done to myself was going to be permanent, at least to some degree.

*'Next time, you're taking the damn deck; no more raw-dogging Cyberspace, Sera,'* I told myself, making a mental note to try my best not to repeat this performance.

That's exactly what decks were for, after all: To offload the majority of computational requirements from your own brain and cerebral link to secondary hardware.

Specifically, the heat.

You could still run into a burnout situation with a deck since a certain percentage of the heat, as well as the overflow that the deck couldn't handle, would still get transferred over to your own link. But even that overflow heat would have only been a fraction of what I had ended up handling just yesterday.

Throwing aside those thoughts for now, I prepared myself for the day ahead. I had my usual workout routine, followed by a day of work at Mr. Shori's, and then another dojo session with Miss K.

To say I was excited for this day would be an understatement.

Not only would I get some more [[Anima Razor](#)] training in, but my last trip to the dojo, despite its rather abrupt and painful ending, had proven exceptionally worthwhile. And, last but definitely not least, I was going to see Kenzie again!

Mission "Find a friend" was still very much a high priority, after all. Having someone as smart and capable as Kenzie on my side would be an absolute game changer for me.

"I could even take her with me on safe Tasks, if she's interested..." I muttered with a hesitant smile as I threw on my workout shirt.

The hard part was making sure I didn't run into another "Aki" situation and also ensuring Kenzie actually *wanted* to be friends in the first place. I was very much aware that I was pinning a lot of hopes on our singular encounter so far, but it had felt like there was some definite chemistry going on between the two of us.

Making friends in real life had unfortunately always been a bit of a troublesome endeavour for me in my past life. It was just so much easier to become friends over a few rounds of League or Valorant than it was trying to impress someone face-to-face with my awkward self.

Shaking my head to clear out those troublesome thoughts, I moved into the living room to get started on my usual morning routine...

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[System]: *100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Anima Attribute.*

[System]: *Anima Attribute has reached 1.*

[System]: *200xp gained for [Anima Razor].*

[System]: *[Anima Razor] has reached level 1.*

My hands were already cramping up from the past hour of training, but I had finally managed to get my first rank and level ups for the strange, enigmatic Attribute and Skills that Mr. Shori had helped me unlock recently.

Feeling the knowledge download for the Anima Attribute start, I felt a well of excitement rush through my body. I was finally going to get some rudimentary answers about what this Attribute even was.

The instant it hit, however, all excitement got immediately snuffed out as I stumbled and crashed onto the floor in the back of the stall.

A bout of vertigo so strong that it felt like I was being forcibly ripped into Cyberspace from a standing position threw me to the ground in a whimpering mess.

Vivid sprites of colour popped in and out of existence before my eyes, making my vision either blurry or too busy trying to focus on each individual sprite to see. Small, round, and colourful, they darted around me like ethereal fairies, each one a different hue.

My blood began to feel like it was heating up, a strange warmth spreading from my core to my extremities.

As the assault continued, I started to see the walls around me waver, as though they were made of liquid rather than solid matter. The floor beneath me seemed to pulse in rhythm with my heartbeat, a steady thump-thump that resonated through my entire body.

It was as if the very fabric of reality was bending and shifting around me, an eldritch, otherworldly sensation that left me reeling.

Suddenly, I felt a weight pressing down on my chest, making it hard to breathe.

It was like an invisible hand was squeezing my lungs, and I gasped for air, my vision darkening at the edges. Through the haze of pain and confusion, I realised that these were all mere examples of Anima in action.

It was *mana*; a fundamental force that permeated all things in this world.

Each colour of the sprites corresponded to a different general concept, acting as the basic building blocks of any Anima-related Skill or Ability.

As the download continued, I finally began to understand the importance of these strange sprites. They weren't just random bursts of colour but representations of the various aspects of Anima itself.

Red sprites embodied raw energy, while blue ones signified information and states. Green sprites were linked to growth and life, while orange ones dealt with matter. Finally, yellow sprites were even more abstract, representing the very concepts of reality that surrounded me.

Each colour held a piece of the greater puzzle, and together, they formed the whole picture of what Anima was and how it could be harnessed.

The pain and disorientation started to ebb away, leaving me with a newfound, albeit rudimentary, understanding of this mysterious Attribute.

I had no idea what to do with it quite yet, but I knew I had taken a crucial first step. Before I could fully recover or internalise this, however, I got hit with the second knowledge download, this time for the [[Anima Razor](#)] Skill.

Luckily, the previous Attribute knowledge download had laid a lot of the groundwork for this one. It didn't hit quite as hard as it likely would have without the fundamentals of Anima being forcibly jammed into my head just moments prior.

This time, I was slightly better prepared for the onslaught of information.

The knowledge download brought with it an intricate understanding of how to channel the coloured sprites in a specific fashion to create an edge of compressed, oscillating air corresponding to the bladed weapon I was holding.

The muscle memory that accompanied the knowledge was equally as intense, however.

I felt my hands and arms twitching and contracting in painful ways as they learned the precise movements required to both channel and wield a blade with the enhanced power of Anima.

To channel the sprites, I needed a very specific mindset, a blend of focus and intuition that allowed me to entice the sprites to work with me. I learned to visualise the sprites as well, directing their flow from the environment into the weapon itself.

A lot of red sprites, embodying raw energy, swirled around the blade within my mind, infusing it with a glowing, fiery aura. When I focused on them, I could feel the heat building in my hand, ready to be unleashed with a single swing.

On the other hand, the orange and blue sprites, which coalesced the surrounding air into a pressurised, rapidly oscillating blade, flowed surprisingly smoothly and calmly, wrapping around the blade like a cool mist.

Channelling all three of them together, however, was exceedingly taxing on both the human psyche and motor functions as I had already picked up on from Mr. Shori's initial presentation.

The knowledge download simply confirmed it once again and explained a bit about why.

I finally understood the reason as to why Mr. Shori had taught me to hold the knives in such an exceedingly strange, almost alien fashion.

It was an attempt to essentially "draw" three different signs to entice the necessary sprites to follow my command at the same time—almost like attempting to write three different letters with the same stroke, except my fingers were part of the canvas and brush simultaneously.

The Skill also came with additional knowledge about using all types of bladed weaponry, complete with its own set of instincts and techniques.

I learned the importance of balance and stance for different weapons, how to read an opponent's movements, and how to exploit their weaknesses. Whether it was a knife, a sword, a makeshift blade, or a giant two-hander, the principles remained the same—precision, power, control, and timing.

I gained an instinctive understanding of moving not just my arm and hands to swing, but of channelling the energy of my entire body into each swing and stab.

I learned that bladed weapons didn't simply cut because they were sharp but also because the combined kinetic forces of my entire body's muscles shifting, tensing, and releasing added the necessary power to cut deep.

It was a veritable fountain of information that wormed its way into my head, but I could already tell that it wasn't even scratching the tip of the iceberg. This was just the very first level of the Skill, so a lot of the techniques and muscle memory was rudimentary at best; yet it already promised to up my game in terms of using knives or swords exponentially.

By the time the download finally finished, I was left a complete mess on the slightly sticky floor of Mr. Shori's stall.

My mind and every muscle in my body felt like they were literally on fire although strangely numbed down in the pain department, thankfully.

As my eyes finally regained some semblance of focus and the ringing in my ears, which I hadn't even realised was there, started to ebb away, I heard Mr. Shori's very concerned voice filter through.

"{...Ela?! Talk to me!}"

A groan escaped me as I tried to speak, and I cleared my throat half a dozen times before I finally managed to form words. “{I... I’m okay... I think.}”

I tried to get a good look at Mr. Shori, to gauge how much time had passed and what he might have witnessed, but I was distracted by the few coloured sprites that kept popping in and out of existence around his face. There weren’t nearly as many as before, during the actual download, but they were frequent enough to be thoroughly distracting.

“{There’s... these strange colours, Mr. Shori. They just suddenly appeared,}” I said, fishing for any signs of recognition on his face.

I had absolutely no idea what part of this whole Anima thing was considered “normal” in this world, so I was completely in the dark about what could be “System-only” or not.

My best bet was to figure this out sooner rather than later, even if it meant potentially revealing some stuff about myself to Mr. Shori that I’d rather keep on the down-low.

His brows creased as he looked down at me. The way he was positioned, I realised he was holding me in his arms like someone would an injured dog or child.

“{Colours...? Describe them,}” he ordered, almost forcefully—a stark departure from the usually jovial Mr. Shori I knew.

I couldn’t help but tense up at his tone, worried I might have done something foolish by admitting I was seeing colours. But then again, if I had simply hit my head on the way down, seeing colours wasn’t necessarily out of the question.

So I had a bit of wiggle room to try and eke out an explanation if Mr. Shori had one.

“{They’re like... dots? Tiny, round sprites of colours. Red, blue, green, yellow, and orange that keep appearing in my line of sight and then disappearing,}” I explained with a raspy voice. I didn’t even need to try and act; I really was a complete mess.

I added a quick, concerned, “{Am... Am I having a stroke...?!}” for good measure, just in case I needed to backtrack and seeing all these strange sprites wasn’t actually normal for people who used Anima to any degree.

I felt his rough, wrinkled hands carefully probe the back of my head and around it, searching for any signs of serious injuries before he levelled his eyes with mine once more.

“{I don’t think so... My Sensei told me once that if I properly learned and resonated with Anima, I would come to find the world a lot more “colourful”. I think this might be what they were referring to. I can’t see any colours, but I am also old. I have not learned and practised as much as I should have when I was young, so I never got to the point of real resonance...}”

His words sounded almost melancholic, like a regret hidden deep inside the kind man’s heart.

“{I’m surprised you have gotten to this stage already; many practitioners never reach the level of resonance required to directly see and interface with Anima. It’s only been a few hours of training for you...}” His words trailed off, Mr. Shori sinking into deep thought.

I felt supremely awkward, as I was still clutched in his arms like an injured puppy, but I also did not feel like interrupting this moment for him.

It seemed to be profoundly personal, in a way.

I waited for a whole minute before I started wriggling and trying to get out of his grasp, which seemed to jolt him back to the here and now.

{“Ah! Right,”} he said as he unhandled me and helped me stand back up. {“You are sure you are alright, Ela? No pain? I couldn’t find any injuries on your head, but if you’re feeling unwell, let me know. I know a couple of professionals in the area.”}

Feeling slightly overwhelmed with the amount of kindness and concern levelled at me, I quickly assured Mr. Shori that everything was fine. I still felt slightly out of it and the coloured sprites kept popping in and out of existence, but I didn’t feel like I was necessarily lying.

I *did* feel a lot better than the moment the downloads had stopped.

*‘What is wrong with this stupid System?’* I couldn’t help but think to myself with a bit of anger. *‘Why are some of these downloads so utterly debilitating? What if I was in the middle of something important, or I had fallen on one of the knives in the kitchen? There’s gotta be a way to make sure these downloads stop just randomly knocking me the fuck out...’*

I made a note in my cerebral interface to look through the System “App” settings later to see if there was a way to change the behaviour of the downloads; I didn’t have the time to do it right now.

The next few minutes were spent reassuring an overly concerned Mr. Shori that I was, in fact, not dying and definitely okay. The number of coloured sprites around us continued to decrease until I only saw one or two every minute, instead of dozens at a time.

Mr. Shori explained more about what he had learned from his teacher back when he had been a student learning the [[Anima Razor](#)] technique, although much of it was coated in a strange, almost mystic lens.

His teacher had told him that Anima was akin to the building blocks of life—similar to physics and chemistry—that affected the world and everything in it in similar ways. The coloured sprites I was seeing were supposedly some form of “free” energy, not yet bound to a particular thing and harnessed to change things.

I understood it as essentially a mixture of magic and alchemy, in fantasy terms.

The sprites were free sources of mana, while changing things required specific “recipes” to get the desired effect.

You couldn't just throw a bunch of blue sprites into a knife and hope for the best; it would likely result in the knife's materials changing their state, either vaporising, melting, or turning to plasma, given enough red sprites to support the state change's energy requirements.

Ultimately, Mr. Shori accepted that I was indeed fine, and he hypothesised that I was one of the "gifted," as his teacher had called certain practitioners of Anima, who could rapidly reach the first stage of resonance with the world around them.

I didn't correct him by saying that I was cheating, using the System to bridge that strange, esoteric gap between the mundane and Anima. However, hearing that there were apparently other people out there who could see, interface, and use Anima to similar or even more intricate degrees was an important piece of information.

We spent another hour talking about all things Anima, with Mr. Shori divulging a lot of the knowledge he had gleaned over the years from his teacher.

Eventually though, I had to head out to get changed into my dojo outfit.

Miss K's martial arts training was coming up, and I didn't dare be late for it.

On my way back to the apartment, I quickly checked out the System Notifications for the rest of the morning, to make sure I wasn't missing anything important.

[System]: *200xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *0xp gained for [Stealth] Skill. Edge Attribute requirements not met to increase Level.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

[System]: *200xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. Tech Attribute requirements not met to increase Level.*

[System]: *400xp gained for Tech Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Ego Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

Nodding to myself in satisfaction, I realised that quite a few of my Skills were ready or nearly ready to Level-Up to important milestones.

Both [Cooking] and [Acrobatics] were about to reach level 3, unlocking their corresponding Perk Points, while [Stealth], [Athletics], [Negotiation], and the Edge and Tech Attributes were just about ready to hit their next levels as well.

All of these together would seriously improve my already bustling toolset.

It was wild to think that mere weeks ago, I had been unable to even stand on my own two feet; compared to now, where I was making strides in so many different areas and skill sets.

I still wasn't quite sure if my current approach was the right one, as it felt a bit scattershot, but I was on track with my goals for the Operator meeting later in the week.

That was all I really cared about at the moment.

There was simply too much to do and not enough time to do it all, so I had to focus on one major goal at a time while keeping up with as much side content as I could.

It was like juggling an open-world RPG with a time limit on the main quest. I wanted to hit as many side-quests and goals as possible while still making sure I got enough main questline content done to avoid falling behind on the deadline.

*'This is why I always fucking hated time limits on quests...'*

Putting those thoughts aside for now, I quickly made my way back home from the restricted elevator and changed into my dojo clothing. It had been repaired since my last visit, and I was certain it would end up getting shredded once again today if I knew anything about Miss K's way of tutoring and Kenzie's penchant to use her claws extensively.

With those thoughts in the back of my mind, I made my way to the 45th floor...

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On my way to the Arkion Dojo, I couldn't help but get distracted by the colourful sprites I saw everywhere.

It wasn't as jarring or obvious as Cyberspace had been, but the Anima sprites were absolutely everywhere; just not in great numbers.

I saw some green ones on top of a pile of trash, a few blue ones simply floating in mid-air as I exited the elevator, and quite a few pockets of orange ones near the different shops and apartments, specifically near the primary pillars and foundations.

It was a thoroughly odd experience, like I had just gotten my first pair of glasses and realised the world didn't have to be blurry. Like the realisation that leaves were not actually just splodges of colour but individual pieces of a greater whole that I could perceive.

The main issue with this new sense was that I didn't really know what to *do* with all of the information.

The knowledge downloads for the Attribute and the Skill had hinted at other uses for the sprites, but without the proper signs, runes, letters, or whatever one might want to call them, there was no chance I could actually do anything with them.

At least they were pretty to look at, so I had that going for me as a consolation.

Stepping up to the Arkion Dojo's entrance, I was immediately ushered in by Miss K's voice crackling over the intercom.

The second I entered the giant backroom—the gymnasium with the coloured sections where Kenzie and I had spent the last session beating each other up—I froze dead in my tracks.

The entire room was positively *suffused* with sprites, primarily of the green variety.

It wasn't just a little bit more than what I had seen on the other floors; it was like a veritable torrent of them. The thick clusters of sprites were so dense that I had a hard time seeing the opposite side of the room, like swarms of arrows blotting out the sun.

"What the..." I muttered, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

Taking a closer look, I realised that the concentration of sprites differed based on the coloured zones of the dojo. The blue zones—the ones we were confined to according to Miss K's rules—had the least amount of sprites.

But the density of sprites scaled up drastically with each subsequent colour zone.

It seemed like an invisible force field kept them inside the actual "battle" area. Even the sprites drifting towards the edges simply stopped and turned around once they reached the boundary of the area.

*'Is this why we're not supposed to go to any of the other colored segments...? There'd be too many... sprites?'* I thought, trying to combine this new information with Miss K's insistence on never stepping foot into an area we weren't assigned to.

"...ra?"

My eyes snapped to the voice that jolted me from my thoughts, and I found Miss K standing right next to me, looking at me with a mixture of intrigue and worry.

"Sera? You good?" she asked, repeating herself for what seemed like the third or fourth time.

I swallowed hard, struggling to get a bead on Miss K. Thousands of sprites actively swirled around her with such vigour and speed that it almost looked like they were at war with one another. It was a whirlwind of colour that completely hid Miss K from my sight.

I did my best to put on a smile and replied, "Absolutely! The dojo just always impresses me with its size. Can't say I've seen any—"

Strong fingers gripped my cheeks, cutting me off mid-sentence.

Miss K pulled me closer, her brown-yellow eyes seeming to stare right into my soul. A toothy grin split her face as she found whatever she had been looking for in my eyes.

"You see them," she said, her voice leaving no room for doubt, before she muttered to herself, "I knew you were an odd one, but I didn't expect you to be *this* strange. Not at all..."

Without warning, she started briskly walking to her office, pulling me along by the face with one hand, her grip unyielding like an industrial vice.

It seemed that Mr. Shori wasn't the only one in my circle of influence who knew something about Anima...