

Chapter 202: The Downsides of Being a Superstar

"My brother proposes an alliance between our two civilizations," Esmée said, avoiding Priam's gaze.

The response left him puzzled.

"An alliance?"

"A marriage," clarified Esmée. "Between you and me."

Stupefied, Priam remained silent for a moment before bursting into laughter. His laughter lasted a few seconds before he managed to compose himself. Wiping away a tear, he took a deep breath to calm himself.

"I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to be insulting. It's... I always thought it would be me proposing to my wife, not the other way around."

Esmée shook her head, a faint smile playing on her lips. Priam's laughter seemed to have dispelled her uneasiness.

"I take no offense," smiled Esmée. "It's just as strange for me because in my culture, it's the man who addresses the father or brother to ask for marriage. The woman doesn't have a say."

"Especially when it's a political marriage?" replied Priam. Esmée nodded. "I would have thought your brother would make this proposition himself. Was he busy with other matters, or is he simply afraid of me?"

"He had nothing urgent," replied Esmée with a concealed smile. "To most of our rivals, you are a mysterious and powerful man."

Not sure if Arnold or Dishnu see me as powerful. Priam shuddered at the thought of the Var Elegis. They had been silent for a while, but Priam knew they would make themselves known again. *Who knows, maybe they'll end up killing Sumstreh while searching for a new Achievement...*

Esmée took another sip of fresh sap, and Priam understood that she was awaiting his response.

"I would like to start by saying that I am flattered that such a beautiful and talented woman is proposing marriage to me... Even if you don't have a choice," grimaced Priam. "I realize your brother doesn't care, but I do: what do you think about all of this?"

"What do I think?" asked Esmée, looking surprised. "I never really had an opinion on my marriage. Without the Tutorial, I would already be engaged to the heir of one of the noble Houses of the Empire."

"For once, the Concepts intervention was welcome." As Priam uttered these words, he wondered how much of the Tutorial's timing was a coincidence. After all, one of the Seven was the master of time. "However, things have changed. It's a significant decision, especially with our long lifespans."

Esmée gave him a complicated look. "A geas prevents me from living the life I want."

"A kill switch?" guessed Priam.

"Not just that," replied Esmée vaguely. She seemed reluctant to talk about it, and Priam could understand. For him, who wished for nothing more than freedom, a geas was a terrifying prospect.

"I admire your courage, and I know you'll find a way to break free from it." Priam meant it. Esmée was his rival, after all.

After a brief pause, a genuine smile appeared on the princess' face. "Thank you. Regarding this marriage, I'm not sure what to think. The idea of being someone's slave disgusts me, but I don't think it would be the case between us."

"To love a flower is to also love her thorns. My wife will be my equal," vowed Priam.

"I would like to be my husband's equal."

"I don't see why that wouldn't be the case. This new Universe is vast, and many will want to marry you."

"But not you?" asked Esmée.

Priam looked up at the branches of Log-a-rhythm above them. The green and crimson leaves created beautiful plays of light. The brightness reminded him of twilight. The beginning and the end of a period.

"My parents divorced when I was nine years old." His Charisma attribute warned Priam of the emotions of people close to him. Sensing Esmée's incomprehension, he clarified. "It means their marriage ended. Does that not happen among the Emphyreans?"

"I'm not sure about the rest of the population, but nobles kill their wives when they tire of them."

The casual horror of Esmée's words made Priam sigh. Just when he thought he despised a civilization, it managed to sink even lower.

"You went to great lengths for me to despise your brother when all you had to do was tell me the truth... Anyway, their divorce shook me. I didn't hold it against them—I wanted them to be happy—but it has followed me all my life in my romantic relationships. I've always been afraid of getting attached just to realize it wouldn't work."

Esmée remained silent. Charisma confirmed to Priam that his words resonated differently in the young woman's heart. *For me, it's love, for her it's... Trust?* It wasn't the time to analyze his rival, and Priam continued.

"My ex was very much in love with me. I felt a bit guilty for not feeling the same way about her. She was perfect, and I didn't love her. What was wrong with me?"

Priam locked eyes with Esmée. "At the end of the Tutorial, I understood. Victoire's soul and mine didn't resonate, and there was nothing we could do about it. Love cannot be commanded. Now, I hope to find someone who understands me. Someone with whom I wouldn't have to wear a mask. Someone for whom I would want to surpass myself. Someone with whom I could build something obvious, enduring, and true."

"... Marriage is important to you," understood Esmée. "It's not just a political alliance."

"For me, authentic relationships are vital," confirmed Priam. "I've worn masks all my life, and I refuse to continue. Being free means being able to be who I truly am with my friends and with the one who will share my life. I will never sacrifice that on the altar of power."

"That's noble," smiled Esmée. "Thank you for explaining that to me."

"I wanted you to know why I refuse your brother's proposal. You're an incredible woman, but I won't marry you under these conditions. We both deserve better."

Esmée's breathing quickened, and her eyes sparkled. "I'll convey your refusal to my brother," she smiled. Priam returned her smile.

A few moonbeams slipped through the leaves and caressed the princess's face. Priam found himself wanting to caress it too. *Maybe it's time to move on from Victoire...*

"You mentioned your ex in the past tense. Is she dead?" asked Esmée.

Turning his head, Priam nodded.

"If you want to resurrect her, one of the rewards from the Colosseum allows it," said the princess.

Priam shook his head. "I don't want to resurrect her. I'm the one who killed her."

"Oh."

There wasn't much to add. Silence settled before Priam sighed. "This marriage... What's in it for your brother?"

The question was direct, but Priam knew Esmée would answer, if only to ruin Aydan's plans.

"It was my father's idea. With the geas, he would retain authority over me. Controlling an immortal Ace interests him."

Priam raised an eyebrow when Esmée mentioned his particular talent. *Is it a warning? If she knows, then Aydan does too...*

"Why does he think I care about my wife's fate?" asked Priam. "I doubt he feels the same."

"He doesn't, but you're not alike," replied Esmée. Priam nodded, thinking that he was currently orchestrating the downfall of an ancient god to save Sphinx. Esmée continued, "On Proxima, the Empire is facing humanity. Father had to learn about you and your customs. If I wasn't enough, he would have counted on our potential children to control you."

"The bastard is cunning," acknowledged Priam. He felt anger rising in him as he imagined the hypothetical situation. "But if he had tried something like that, I—"

A cascade of notifications interrupted him.

*Lvl Up: [Divination Resistance] lvl 20,...,40
META (AFFI) +63*

What the..?

Official Message from moderator Gaëmporishtt:

An exceptional and temporary ban (256 hours) has just been lifted on the level-up of your skill [Divination Resistance].

Cause: Complaint from a Tier 7 Elysian King regarding the opacity of your status. Suspected involvement of a High Tier alien or an apocryphal soul effect.

Verdict: A personal investigation by the administrator of Sector Hope, Thaal the Immortal Gambler, revealed no trace of corruption.

Sanction: None.

Note: As the System is not a tool of repression, your experience has only been delayed through temporary manipulation. We apologize for the inconvenience.

Meta-Affinity exceeds 500 points. First milestone reached. Congratulations!

Priam trembled as he felt the ambient aether converge towards him. The fluid began to accompany each of his breaths, as if influenced by his body and soul.

The influx of aether increased his regeneration, and Priam smiled. He conjured an aether rubik's cube in the palm of his hand and manipulated it with disconcerting ease. The effect of meta affinity was finally becoming apparent. *Aether regeneration plus precise manipulation.*

New notifications caught his attention.

[Divination Resistance] has reached level 20, a bonus is available. Choose one of these three options:

[Status obstacle] - Makes revealing your status more complicated. POT -30

[Scry shield] - Makes revealing your actions more complicated. POT -30

[Position jammer] - Makes your location harder to determine. POT -30

After a brief hesitation, Priam chose the second option. His unique abilities were already concealed, and his position was irrelevant as long as he had family. He could flee, but his loved ones or Log-a-rhythm couldn't.

[Scry shield] - Makes revealing your actions more complicated. **ACQUIRED**
POT -30

[Divination Resistance] has reached level 40, its maximum level as a rare skill.
Prerequisites met:

- Otherworlders attempted to read your record.
- Over a billion people attempted to read your record.
- Tier 8s failed to read your full record.
- Some System Moderators failed to access your full record.
- Homo Elysian Obsession.
- You falsified a divine mark.

Ideal Upgrade unlocked :

[Revelation Resilience - Epic] - Many have tried to read your status and reveal your actions. Few have succeeded. Potential Cost: 320

Hell yes!

You have selected the skill **[Revelation Resilience - Epic]**.
POT -320

[Revelation Resilience - Epic] - For such a young user, your records are dense and of interest to many individuals. This skill should allow you to keep some secrets. Attempting to access your Akashic signature is now a nightmare. Your trails are deep but form a maze for those trying to follow them. You're a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.
MEM +3
META (AFFI) +3
META (AUTH) +3

Achievement - Legendary: As a Tier 0, you have unlocked five ideal upgrades.
Miracle collector, you continue to push the boundaries of possibility.

Message for Humanity:

Priam Azura unlocks a fifth Ideal Upgrade.

Message for Wandering Islands blocked by user.

The Seven Concepts congratulate you.

Potential + 5000. 500 000 Sun points. Revelation Token - Ideal Prerequisites (Epic).

Now I understand better, thought Priam as he read his notification. The absence of recent level-ups in **[Divination Resistance]** had seemed strange to him. The entire Sector Hope and the Wandering Islands must have wondered who this new Ace was. As a result, an astronomical number of people had used skills to learn more about him.

Lvl Up: [Revelation Resilience] lvl 2

MEM +3

META (AFFI) +3

META (AUTH) +3

Priam almost burst out laughing. *So that's what it means to be famous.*

Apparently, some High Tiers had failed to obtain all his information. Priam theorized that it was partially due to **[He Who Eludes Death]** but primarily to **[Tribulation Hunter]**. Administrator Thaal had modified the skill during his previous Tribulations. Thus, even System moderators could not access his true status. A feat for a Tier 0 like Priam.

The System rewarded exploits even when the user didn't deserve them. With a thin smile, Priam mentally thanked the administrator who watched over him. Thaal certainly had a plan concerning him—as everyone seemed to—but Priam had acquired a fifth ideal skill thanks to him. A skill particularly useful for the upcoming battles, but also for Heavenly Dragon.

The temperance method required an epic resistance per Gate, seven in total, plus a legendary resistance for the fulcrum. Priam had achieved more this goal. *Assistant, give me an update on my temperance method.*

[About Heavenly Dragon:

After reorganizing your meridians using [Aether Perception] and [Aether Manipulation] comes their anchoring.

Heavenly Dragon possesses seven gates and a fulcrum, each requiring a resistance, a treasure, and temperance.

Nine epic resistances detected:

Tribulation Hunter (Unique).

Fire Champion Physique (Ideal).

Sun Steel Body (Ideal).

Revelation Resilience (Idéal).

Space Resistance.

Consequence Resistance.

Depths Resistance.

Necromoon Resistance.

Aura Resistance.

One legendary resistance detected:

True Will.

It is advised to improve other resistances to epic and legendary ranks to have the choice of temperance method. This method modifies your body's affinity and shapes its future. It is advised to maximize your resistance level-ups and obtain ideal draconic trophies to access perfect temperance.]

"Congratulations," said Esmée.

"Thank you," replied Priam, raising an eyebrow. "And here I thought I had managed to prevent the spread of my Achievement in Elysium."

Priam had refused to publish his Achievement in the Wandering Islands to keep a low profile. Moreover, his new resistance was both epic and ideal. All that hadn't prevented the princess from detecting his Achievement.

"**[Spoiler]** is an ideal and legendary skill supported by a powerful Concept and specialized Talents. Even the Tier 4 defenses you mentioned at the beginning of the conversation won't stop me for long," smiled Esmée.

In Priam's mind, the importance of his rival skyrocketed. She had just informed him, albeit indirectly, that she had already begun to scry Sumstreh. *She too is a monster. In a different way than Arnold or Dishnu, but she's terrifying in her own right.*

Her ability to gather information synergized with her probability manipulation skills. Esmée only needed to push in the right place to trigger a terrifying chain reaction.

"I am delighted to hear that," said Priam. "By the way, their code name is Bastard."

"It is indeed wise not to speak their name so close to them. Why Bastard?"

"Because they're a bastard," Priam simply replied. Esmée didn't need to know that they held Sphinx prisoner. Despite the sympathy he felt for the princess, they were not yet allies. She had to first convince Aydan to help Priam take down the Fallen.

Lvl Up: [Revelation Resilience] lvl 3

MEM +3

META (AFFI) +3

META (AUTH) +3

"I would have liked to chat more, but I fear this new Achievement will not go unnoticed. Before we part, let me take you to the Auctions," Priam proposed as he stood up.

The deal they had made was that the princess could use the Auctions for her own purposes for a week before Priam sent her to the Moon. In return, she would hatch his Moon Wyrms in a mutant form.

"With pleasure," smiled Esmée, rising as well. The table and two chairs were reabsorbed by Log-a-rhythm without leaving a trace in the clearing.

Reaching her side, Priam gallantly offered her his arm. "In my country, there was a time when noble ladies would take the arm of a cavalier to walk together. It was an opportunity to socialize and a gesture of courtesy. Would you do me the honor?"

Esmée looped her arm through Priam's. "I'd like to learn more about the ladies of your world," she smiled.

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 557

Constitution 860

Agility 552

Vitality 840

Perception 714

MENTAL:

Vivacity 505

Dexterity 587

Memory 426 (+13)

Willpower 1 028

Charisma 631

META:

Meta-affinity 520 (+90)

Meta-focus 350

Meta-endurance 354

Meta-perception 221

Meta-chance 230

Meta-authority 42 (+9)

Potential: 9 969 (+4 701)

Tier 0

Sun points: 502 856 (+500 963)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

[Tribulation]: Three Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 164 days 18 hours 49 minutes 7 seconds.

Next thresholds: 6 attributes > 600 / 3 attributes > 900