

Chapter 206: You're Almost as Good as Your Girlfriend When She Was a Kid

As his add-on scoured the Sun Shop for the best Concept to integrate into his inner world, Priam contemplated the different choices available.

Sun Shop:

Fragment:

Fire Fragment (5 000 points) - A standard-sized chunk of Fire Concept.

Fire Array A (50 000 points) - An array made up of Fire Fragments, filtering the ambient aether to spawn more Fire Fragments.

Fire Array B (50 000 points) - An array made up of Fire Fragments, filtering the ambient aether to establish an environment teeming with Fire Concept.

Fire Array C (50 000 points) - An array made up of Fire Fragments, filtering the ambient aether to create an environment devoid of Fire Concept.

Fire Baptism (250 000 points) - A soul-baptism amplifying affinity for the Fire Concept. Affinity increase ranging from 1% to 10%. One baptism per Concept.

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Mist Fragment (10 000 points) - A standard-sized chunk of Mist Concept.

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Tranquility Fragment (10 000 points) - A standard-sized chunk of Tranquility Concept.

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Concentration Fragment (10 000 points) - A standard-sized chunk of Concentration Concept.

"No Tier 2 or higher Concepts," Priam noted.

"The System won't give you a chance to turn apocryphal," explained the phoenix.

"Well, I wouldn't mind snagging a Time fragment." Slowing down time in Concepts Archipelago would have been a formidable ability.

"Dream on. Have you made your choice?"

"I'm debating between support Concepts," Priam replied, eyeing his System's feedback.

"Logic, concentration, abstraction, etc."

The phoenix arched a fiery brow, a peculiar sight for a bird. "Why did you select only Tier 1 Concepts?"

The question caught Priam off guard. "Because they pack more punch?"

"Concepts Archipelago is a Gold Talent. It'll find it easier to wield a Tier 0 Concept than a Tier 1," the phoenix informed. "What you need isn't a high Concept but a fitting one."

Priam pondered for a moment before exclaiming, "Puzzle!"

The phoenix nodded. "That's what I would go for personally. The exercises and brain-teasers designed to boost your aether manipulation are puzzles, be they mental or physical."

Pleased with his choice, Priam purchased a Puzzle fragment. A solid figure materialized above his hand, its numerous edges separating a multitude of faces. As he looked at it, a headache began to creep in. Visually, the solid seemed to exist in more than three dimensions, stretching across aberrant axes. **[Kinetic Control]** assured him the fragment was static, yet its impossible geometry gave the illusion of movement, challenging Priam's understanding.

Lvl Up: [Geometry] lvl 12,13

VIVA +2

MEM +4

"You might wanna stash that away," advised the phoenix, seeing Priam's pupils dilate. "Only a Sage with Unity can start to grasp what a Concept fragment truly is."

Priam blinked, and the fragment's geometry shifted. Turning his gaze away, he focused on his inner world to dispel his headache.

"I thought Unity was the ultimate stage to understand a Concept?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"As a Fire Champion, do you think you understand every facet of fire? How each individual thinks of it, dreams of it, and feels it? Unity is being able to understand a Concept as well as you understand yourself. Do you understand how your body, mind, and soul work? Being one with a Concept is just the first step."

Priam's lips formed an annoyed grimace. Despite his recent discoveries, he had only a superficial knowledge of his body. *And I'm barely getting to know myself after stripping off all my masks.*

The phoenix continued, "Unity is both the final stage and the first. It's hard to quantify progress beyond that."

Priam knew he should focus on his training, but the subject intrigued him. "So, would a fifth stage be absolute understanding?"

"Zenith is theoretically possible but practically inconceivable. Remember your first Unity. Your emotions and those of the Concept blur. A primal anger roars within you: is it yours or the Fire's? A Concept influences you as much as you influence it. Think of it like gravity: you pull the planet towards you, and it pulls you with the same force—action and reaction."

The scientific analogy resonated with Priam.

"Yet, just as my influence on the planet is negligible, I influence the Fire little because it's more massive than me."

"Exactly. But the analogy breaks down when enough people have reached Unity with a Concept. Fire is a popular Concept that you share with countless users. Collectively, you shape the Concept."

"Some people more than others?" guessed Priam.

"Of course. Advancing your Concept to the next Tier, becoming a Champion in that new Concept, deepening your understanding, or possessing a more potent soul are ways to gain shares. Approaching the Zenith means having such strong influence that you theoretically have a tangible impact on the Concept and those who've reached Unity with it."

"Is it possible to achieve?"

The phoenix fell silent for a moment before sighing. "To tell you the truth, the Zenith is hardly conceivable, even for the Tier 6 I was. I believe Pyro belonged entirely to my ancestor, but how can I be sure? All I know is that some Tier 8s are convinced it's possible."

Priam remained pensive for a moment. The phoenix's explanation had monumental implications for his future. Bonding with a Concept meant being influenced by it and by the sum of individuals who had reached Unity. Conversely, a powerful individual could influence billions if they were linked to the same Concept.

The primary emotion of Fire is anger... That explains my natural affinity, but it won't help me control myself. At least it's balanced by the Mist Concept.

Choosing a Concept compatible with his goals was thus of paramount importance. A bolt of fire fell from the sun, making Priam jump.

"Focus," said the phoenix, ignoring Priam's glare. "Toss the fragment into your world's fulcrum and activate it."

Priam hurled the Puzzle fragment, and gravity caught it. The solid sank into the pool at the heart of Concepts Archipelago. Priam focused on his Talent.

*[Concepts Archipelago - Gold(Growth)] - A world now lies within you. Its initial parameters of gravity, space and time allow for life. Its aether structure is exceptional, capable of using any concept fragment to grow and evolve.
You have the perfect seed. It's up to you to transform it into Yggdrasil.*

Following Priam's mental command, the spirit water effortlessly dissolved the fragment. A mass of aether dispersed into the water. With **[Ideal Aether Perception]**, Priam observed what was happening. The aether bore a silvery hue, indicating a Puzzle affinity.

Lvl Up: [Ideal Aether Perception] lvl 3

META (AFFI) +3

META (PERC) +6

Priam felt Concepts Archipelago activate and inquire about his intentions. Should he infuse his entire world or just a portion of it? Priam opted for a spot beneath the towering maple planted a few meters away. Meditating beneath a tree seemed like a solid idea.

The air around the chosen area froze as a wave of aether descended. Priam then honed in on the aspect of the Concept that intrigued him. He didn't want to enchant the blades of grass beneath the tree to create a maze for insects. Nor did he desire to craft a formation concentrating or expelling the Concept. What he sought was a zone capable of enhancing his puzzle-solving prowess.

With an almost audible click, the Talent surged, manipulating the aether of the Puzzle fragment into a ritualistic form. This ritual was infinitely more intricate than any Priam had concocted in the past. The formation crafted by Concepts Archipelago seemed to span multiple dimensions, with the aether animating it imbued with Puzzle affinity.

Lvl Up: [Ideal Aether Perception] lvl 4
META (AFFI) +3
META (PERC) +6

The ritual crystallized before anchoring itself into the very fabric of the internal world. A notification confirmed Priam's success.

Concepts Archipelago:
New enchantment detected.

Puzzle(T0 - Area Effect) - Within a four-cubic-meter volume, all the following qualities are boosted by 8% when the subject attempts to solve or create a puzzle, brainteaser, or similar exercise.

Qualities: Understanding, visualization, logic, reasoning, organization, concentration, memory, patience, perseverance, creativity, inspiration.

"That's mighty specific, but I reckon it's just what the doctor ordered," grinned Priam. "Even if eight percent's a tad on the low side, it's better than nothing."

The phoenix grinned. "So why not enhance the ritual with another fragment?"

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Puzzle(T0 - Area Effect) - Within a four-cubic-meter volume, all the following qualities are boosted by 300% when the subject attempts to solve or create a puzzle, brainteaser, or similar exercise.

Sun points: 129,056 (-190,000)

"I ain't ever gonna be rich..."

Priam wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry as he watched his stash of Sun points diminish once more. His human side enjoyed converting money into power, but his draconic heart clenched at the sight of his reserves dwindling.

The phoenix grumbled, circling the maple tree and inspecting the enchantment zone. "You realize your meditation conditions are better than mine were?"

With a thin smile on his lips, Priam was pretty impressed with the result. Seated cross-legged, back against the magical maple he'd transplanted with Kazuki, all he had to do was think of a problem for his mental abilities to overclock holistically. In a state of perpetual epiphany, Priam felt prepared to tackle any challenge thrown his way.

The effect was akin to tapping into his Potential doubled with an amplification of his quick-wittedness. Yet, unlike the first threshold of the attribute, he had no need to expend energy to activate it. Moreover, in addition to his reflexes, the ritual enhanced his inspiration and creativity. It was difficult to quantify such qualities, but Priam felt as though his mind was freed from all unnecessary thoughts, ready to revolutionize the world.

His attributes didn't amplify these qualities, but the Concepts and the enchantment could... with limitations. Priam, for example, found it easier to solve a Rubik's Cube than a maze or a riddle. These Tier 1 Concepts shared the same roots as Puzzle but were nonetheless distinct. So, the amplification was diminished, but Priam could change that by purchasing Riddle or Maze fragments.

"Sphinx will love this," grinned Priam.

"You'll show her once you've saved her. For now, focus on Esmée's exercises."

Priam nodded before recalling the princess's words.

"All the exercises devised by the Empire's nobility aim to increase our proficiency in raw aether manipulation. This was particularly important before the System because we didn't have Skills. The only structured magic at our disposal was lengthy rituals."

"Not handy in an ambush."

"Exactly. The wealthiest nobles possessed enchantments—rituals inscribed on equipment or tattoos, ready to be used—but it lacked versatility. If an enemy knew your tricks, they could easily counter you."

"So, raw aether manipulation comes into play?"

Esmée had had a playful smile. *"Indeed. Instead of spending hours engraving rituals on conductive materials, raw aether manipulation allows for summoning runes on the fly or creating minimalist rituals instantly. Due to time constraints and suboptimal conditions, it's inevitably less powerful than a full-fledged ritual but much more adaptable. Plus, it's an excellent way to train to create powerful rituals."*

Reflecting on Esmée's words once more, Priam wondered if the princess regularly used rituals instead of her skills.

"Phoenix?"

"Yes?"

"What's the difference between a ritual and a skill?"

It wasn't the first time Priam pondered this fundamental question. He thought he had a good idea of the answer but wanted confirmation from an expert.

"A skill is a ritual simultaneously inscribed in your soul, spirit, and body by the System. Guardian of the Forest is a ritual you entrusted to Log-a-rhythm, but if its soul resonates with it, it'll become a skill."

Seated amidst an enchantment multiplying his brainpower when he tried to solve problems, Priam had a revelation. The phoenix's words were like the last piece of a puzzle finally falling into place. A model capable of explaining aether, skills, and rituals was beginning to take shape.

"I think I understand... My meta attributes allow me to create runes to manipulate aether naturally, without skills." That's why evolving them was a prerequisite for the ideal upgrade. "[**Aether Manipulation**] is just a System skill that facilitates raw aether manipulation."

"And everything else," the phoenix added. "Boosting your aether proficiency will enable you to better understand and utilize your other skills. Elevated to the Zenith, [**Aether Manipulation**] will allow you to perfectly manipulate aether, granting you total omnipotence."

Heavenly Dragon now seemed almost secondary. Determined to increase his mastery of aether, Priam attempted the first exercise suggested by Esmée.

"It's a child's exercise, but very useful. Here's a rune that creates a source of white light."

A white glowing orb had appeared in the palm of Esmée's hand. Through his Domain and [**Ideal Aether Perception**], Priam had observed a simple spherical rune encompassing the light source.

"Increasing the flow of aether within the inner part of the rune boosts the light intensity. So, you can shrink the rune's size while maintaining the same light by increasing the aether flowing inside. Enlarging the rune or providing more aether to the outer part of the rune increases the orb's size."

Under Priam's gaze, Esmée had then reduced the rune's size without altering the volume or brightness of the orb. The rune had quickly shrank to a few hundredths of a millimeter, barely perceptible. Esmée had confided that this was her limit before the arrival of the System. In a final demonstration, she had begun juggling with five different orbs, to Priam's applause.

With a smile on his lips, Priam refocused on the present and closed his eyes. He didn't need to reach out to create a cloud with his aether; his Domain could manifest the fluid anywhere within his sphere of authority.

Instead of using the aether flowing in his meridians and veins thanks to **[Bloodless]**, Priam chose the energy bathing his soul space. With a thought, he seized it and connected it to his Domain. The primordial fluid surged forth before him with force.

Without hurrying, Priam reduced the flow from a river to a trickle. **[Aether Manipulation]** kicked in, mastering the fluid, shaping it into an orb. Patiently, Priam altered its shape to approximate Esmée's three-dimensional rune. Excess aether was absorbed by his body and his Domain.

It was a peculiar exercise because while the fluid obeyed Priam, it had no inherent form and sought to occupy all available space. At the slightest oversight, the rune structure would expand, spread out, and disperse like a gas or a liquid. Taming aether into a perfect shape and locking it in place was no simple matter. Moreover, Priam's meta attributes, which allowed him to perceive and dominate aether, were a recent gift. He had much to learn, and he needed to learn quickly.

Nevertheless, Priam had confidence in himself and his abilities. Domain and **[Ideal Aether Perception]** granted him an all-knowing understanding of the shape of the aether he manipulated. With his sharp memory and the Puzzle enchantment, Priam effortlessly visualized the three-dimensional structure in his mind, sculpting it to mimic Esmée's rune. His agility and natural talent helped him learn from his mistakes and avoid repeating them. Lastly, his dexterity seemed to play a crucial role, creating useful reflexes and automatism.

With the help of his meta attributes and **[Aether Manipulation]**, Priam swiftly gained confidence and skill. Less than a minute into the exercise, the form in front of him started to resemble the one he aimed to achieve.

Suddenly, something clicked. As if reality awaited this moment, Priam's rough draft of the rune transformed the aether into light. A glowing globe manifested a meter in front of him. The orb looked more like a moon than a perfect sphere, and the projected light wasn't uniform, but Priam grinned.

Without a skill, without potential, solely by the force of his will, he had just conjured a light orb. *I'm a fucking wizard!*

Far from resembling Esmée's creation, the globe flickered. Gazing at the sorry excuse for a sphere, Priam calmed himself, then grimaced. He could do better than that. Shutting his eyes once more, Priam refocused, determined to create a flawless rune.

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The absence of wind and speech rendered Concepts Archipelago silent. Only Priam's breathing disrupted the stillness. Hovering a few meters from the young Homo Elysian, the hologram of a phoenix observed its pupil.

A perfect sphere with a one-meter radius cast a soft light on the surroundings. After several hours of training, the rune now measured the size of a human eye. Its light had long

stabilized, and Priam continued to vary the flow and size of the sigil while keeping the volume of the luminous sphere constant.

Perhaps it was nothing for a phoenix, but the Prince's legacy knew the truth. Priam had never really honed his ability to manipulate aether before. In just a few hours, he had reached the level of a Tier 0 native of the universe, without tapping into his potential or overclocking his vivacity. In a few days, Priam would be considered a prodigy.

In a month, he would mock the so-called Aces who populated Sector Hope.

Even though it didn't need to breathe, the Conceptual Intelligence animating the hologram felt a weight lift from its chest. Achieving a high upgrade of **[Aether Manipulation]** without evolving his meta attributes was almost impossible, even for an Ace with several years ahead of them. The phoenix knew that its student could not take a suboptimal path and had been concerned. There were no shortcuts: Priam had to become a genius of manipulation to upgrade his skill.

And for once, Priam couldn't die to overcome his difficulties. *What a ridiculous sentence.*

Lux, the rune invoked by Priam, decreased in size once more, reaching half a centimeter. Instead of seeing his progress hindered, Priam's mastery continued to increase limitlessly. Despite its knowledge, the phoenix was baffled. *This kid is a monster. Could it be **[Homo Elysian Obsession]**?*

"I think I can reach one millimeter by the end of the day," Priam rejoiced.

Priam could be proud of his progress, but the phoenix wouldn't allow him to rest on his laurels. Arrogance was the poison of the powerful.

"Not bad. Almost as good as your girlfriend when she was a kid without the System," the phoenix taunted.

Priam closed his eyes and refocused, ashamed. The phoenix nodded, satisfied. If it had to be honest, the phoenix had to admit that the princess's talent was incomprehensible, but it had long understood that every rival selected by the System was a monster. *And if I have a say, Priam will become a monster among monsters. Oh, how I'd love to see Mother's face if he manages to defeat my Colosseum ghost.*

An hour later, the size of the rune reached one millimeter, and the phoenix nodded.

"I think we can kick it up a notch."

"Meaning?" murmured Priam, his eyes closed.

"You have tons of Potential points; it's time to use them. They're useless for acquiring Supremacies, but not for finding inspiration and accelerating your training."

"Alright. Anything else?"

"You need to evolve one of your attributes. It's time you understand why even the System respects the dragons."

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 557

Constitution 860

Agility 552

Vitality 840

Perception 714

MENTAL:

Vivacity 511 (+2)

Dexterity 587

Memory 447 (+6)

Willpower 1 028

Charisma 631

META:

Meta-affinity 531 (+7)

Meta-focus 350

Meta-endurance 354

Meta-perception 235 (+14)

Meta-chance 230

Meta-authority 51

Potential: 9 989 (+10)

Tier 0

Sun points: 131 260 (-187 632)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

[Tribulation]: Three Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 164 days 11 hours 40 minutes 28 seconds.

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