Chapter 195: Shopping Spree

"Everything okay?"

Priam opened his eyes and gazed at the sun dominating his world. The lonely star was standing out against a black firmament.

"I'm good," he replied, rising to his feet. Using Micro, Priam marveled at his veins glowing with aether. His second meridian network would undoubtedly assist in enhancing **[Kinetic Control]** and **[Erosion Resistance]**. But before that, he wanted to finish his shopping spree.

"**[Aether Perception]** has reached level forty," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"The System offering you the weakest upgrade, I presume?" The phoenix chuckled at Priam's disappointed expression. "You've neglected a crucial skill. It not only amplifies meta-perception effects but also enhances your instinct. It's one of the few skills that can elevate your talent."

"... You think I should upgrade it with **[Ace]**'s Merit." said Priam.

The phoenix shrugged. "**[Aether Perception]** will stay with you for life. If that's not a good enough pitch, here's another: this skill will help you understand the world and your powers. Maxed out, it could theoretically allow you to assimilate a Concept or Mastery you encounter for the first time, analyze **[He Who Eludes Death]**, or decipher the System."

Priam's eyes sparkled. A month had passed since the start of the Tutorial, and he had changed in many ways. The student he once was would never have thought of opening his heart to unlock a Title. However, some traits of his character remained the same. As an adult, Priam had pursued a scientific path out of curiosity about how the world worked.

The universe had expanded, and so had his curiosity.

"I admit I neglected the skill," Priam acknowledged, sitting in the grass of his world. "But it was due to a lack of time. I aspire to travel and understand this world and its magic, so your arguments hit the mark. But what about **[Aether Manipulation]** or **[Tribulation Hunter]**?"

Priam thought he could access ideal upgrades for the rest of his skills. Using the Merit on them would be a waste, and Priam hated waste.

The phoenix nodded. "Excellent choice. **[Tribulation Hunter]** is a unique skill, created from **[He Who Eludes Death]**, allowing you to navigate your tribulations while recovering fragments of Concepts, right?"

"That's right. I increased my affinity with the Mist Concept by almost twenty percent by recovering Jasmine's Tribulation affinity."

"Combined with your adaptation and resurrection, the possibilities are..." The phoenix shook its head. "Unfortunately, it's a unique skill created from an alien power. I doubt the System can upgrade it, but you can try. Don't validate; just check if it works."

There was no point in theorycrafting a future build if the skill couldn't be selected.

[Ace - Legendary] - Tier 0: Ideal Candidate: Select one of your common, rare, or epic skills and get an ideal upgrade. ACQUIRED.

[Ace - Legendary] - Tier 1: Sensible Candidate: Select one of your Concepts and increase your natural affinity.

7 Unused Merit Points.

Select a skill.

[Tribulation Hunter - Unique - Epic].

Errors:
- *Unique skill.*
- *Alien skill.*

Select another skill.

"It returns an error," Priam replied. He was disappointed but not surprised.

"I suspected as much. **[Aether Perception]** would also be a good choice, but I think you have a better chance of reaching a high upgrade with **[Aether Manipulation]**."

"You think I won't achieve a high upgrade with **[Aether Perception]**? Or even an ideal upgrade with Aether Manipulation?"

"Not a snowball's chance in hell."

Priam frowned. "I don't want to be arrogant, but I've overcome many challenges so far. It might take a while, but by buying aether puzzles from the Sun Shop, your help, thousands of Potential points and—"

"My mother is Tier 7, and despite all her efforts, I failed to get the ideal manipulation upgrade," the legendary bird interrupted. "Nor did anyone in my clan. I trained for almost a decade, consumed treasures to increase my meta-perception, studied the memories of some Aces who unlocked the ideal upgrade with a Merit, and meditated in front of marvelous aether constructions. All in vain." As it spoke those words, the phoenix seemed nostalgic. "I'm pretty sure I wasn't far from a breakthrough, but we'll never know."

"Why didn't you wait longer?"

"Because I wanted to get Ace's mythical upgrade at Tier 1."

There was a time limit after which these Titles could no longer be obtained. For the mythical rank of Ace, it was ten years from...

"Ten years from when?"

"The countdown starts when your first attribute surpasses a hundred or when your soul turns ten," the phoenix explained. "In any case, you don't have the time or opportunities to unlock both ideal upgrades. Maybe there are methods in older Sectors or Elysium, but you'll never get your hands on it."

"Damn..." Priam had some assets, like the Colosseum rewards or the Sun Shop, but it wouldn't be enough. "I hate the idea of not reaching perfection," he sighed.

"I understand, but you'll have to get used to it. It's the lesson I learned after failing myself..." The phoenix's gaze wandered for a moment. "This universe is almost infinite, and there are monsters who are a thousand times more talented than you. You'll fail often, but who cares? I didn't choose you because you were the most talented."

"I'll be the last one standing," Priam said with a slight smile.

"Exactly. Even the greatest geniuses will only have one or two extra chances. You have as many as you want, so focus on your strengths rather than your weaknesses."

The advice was excellent. Part of Priam hesitated to give up the possibility of a perfect build, but he knew his time was limited. He couldn't spend a decade at Tier 0.

"My forte is survival, not understanding. That's a flaw **[Aether Perception]** can fix. Okay, you've convinced me. But why perception over manipulation?"

"From my experience, it's better to have an ideal perception and high manipulation than the other way around. What good is a divine skill if you can't see what you're doing?"

"Make sense."

"Of course. Plus, you're right: with the Sun Shop, my help, tons of Potential, and the instinct provided by the ideal upgrade of **[Aether Perception]**, you have a chance to get the high upgrade of **[Aether Manipulation]**."

Priam nodded and validated the Merit.

[Aether Perception - Rare] has reached level 40, its maximum level as a rare skill.

Ideal Upgrade unlocked:
[Ideal Aether Perception - Epic] - The Ace plunges into the ocean of aether. You might drown, or you might learn. Ideal upgrade potential. Potential Cost: Free.

You have received the skill [Ideal Aether Perception - Epic].

[Ideal Aether Perception - Epic] - *Your soul morphs to open up to aether. Both primordial energy and fundamental particle, it is the source of everything, and you begin to understand it. Too many live without knowing what the world is made of or understanding the laws that govern them.*
The arcane reveals itself gradually, abysses of potential and ranges of possibilities. Vertigo seizes you at the immensity of Creation.
This skill is a flutter of wings. It's up to you to transform it into a tornado.
META (AFFI) +3
META (PERC) +6

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Inside his soul space, shielded by his Domain and Concepts, Priam's soul enveloped itself in a radiant cocoon before imploding.

Seven primordial consciousnesses descended. One of them safeguarded Priam's consciousness and ego. Another locally halted time, dividing this untamed river.

Bending reality, each entity contributed to the transformation of his soul, careful to give without taking, stoking the Homo Elysian adaptation to lead him on a divine path. Beneath the cocoon of light, soul fragments morphed in shape, color, and aura.

An impossible geometric object began to tremble in the heart of Priam's shattered soul. The paused time prevented **[He Who Eludes Death]** from counting. Four of the Seven allied to stabilize and soothe it. The rules were strict, and they had no intention of violating them today.

Once the improvements were complete, time resumed its course. As the Concepts withdrew, the cocoon of light cracked before dissipating into a shower of aether.

Its metamorphosis complete, the new soul reconnected with its Concepts and Supremacies. Micro assisted Priam in re-entering his body, and he drifted into slumber.

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"Finally awake. How are you feeling?"

"Like a visually impaired guy putting on glasses for the first time," Priam whispered, eyes closed.

The world hadn't changed, but Priam had. His Domain now saw what had always been there, eluding him. And by seeing, he finally understood.

Priam loved to unlock Concepts and increase his attributes. He relished seeing his progression, feeling it in his powerful muscles and solid bones. There was something magnificent about flying, hurling fireballs, or riding his mist.

Yet, the clarity brought by **[Aether Perception]** provided a new kind of ecstasy. Priam was like an ignoramus having the rhythm of seasons and Earth's place in the Universe explained to him. His enhanced perception revealed the world's wonders, whispering the secrets of creation into his ears. Ingenious intuitions emerged, and the world transformed into a puzzle whose pieces naturally aligned to form a meaningful picture.

Priam's misty eyes moistened before tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I was blind..."

The phoenix remained silent. Minutes later, Priam wiped his eyes and stood up. "It was the right decision."

"I think so, too. Look at the mist," advised the phoenix.

A light mist covered the ground, playing with the flora and Priam's every breath. Feeling the world through Domain, ideas flooded his mind, and connections sparked in his synapses. Watching the high humidity transform into dew on a leaf, a new facet of his Concept revealed itself to Priam.

As he made deductions, passionate about his discovery, his system unlocked Ace's second Merit, selecting his Mist Concept.

[Ace - Legendary] - Tier 1: Sensible Candidate: Choose one of your Concepts and enhance your natural affinity. ACQUIRED.

[Ace - Legendary] - Tier 2: Talented Candidate: Choose one of your Talents from the list and evolve it.
List: Aether Citizen, Eidetic Memory, Promesse, Chimera, Spectral Familiary.

6 Unused Merit Points.

<p style="text-align:center;">*Title won!*</p>

[Mist Sage - Silver] - *Your natural affinity for the Mist Concept (T1) has reached 100%. Your soul is now perfectly compatible with this Concept. Mist is your companion, your parent, and your child. Your soul accepts and nurtures it.*
Affinity, Harmony, Symphony, and Unity: the Sage's path leads to the Zenith.
Mist erases details, blurs tracks and absorbs waves. Origin of mysteries, those who lose themselves in its meanders cannot escape without paying your tax.
META (END) +20%

Note: [Mist Earl]'s Merits are merged with [Mist Sage]'s Tree. Incorporation of the Bronze and Silver Merits and spiritual fusion of the Gold Merit.

For the second time in minutes, Priam's soul evolved. Infused by his affinity, aether spontaneously formed new spiritual connections, allowing his consciousness to resonate with the Mist Domain.

Priam's thoughts and reasoning accelerated as new facets of the mist unveiled themselves. Like a friend, the Concept enveloped Priam, body and soul. Bathed in opaque fog, none of his senses, not even his Supremacies, could distinguish the mist from him.

Priam's presence dissipated, merging with the fog as never before. Both everywhere and nowhere, Priam opened his eyes to a fantastical world. For a few seconds, his breakthrough superimposed his internal world with a misty domain.

A few moments later, as the phenomenon magically dissipated, Priam smiled.

"Symphony."

This single word conveyed everything. "You're close to Unity," noted his advisor.

"The System integrated the Merit into my soul, allowing me to ride and merge with mist," explained Priam with a big smile. "I know it's artificial, but my new affinity has reconciled me with the mist."

"What's the characteristic of Symphony?"

Priam opened his notifications.

[Mist - Concept] - You have touched on a Tier 1 Concept.
Elusive, Omnipresent, Indefinite.

Affinity - Your connection allows you to capture certain truths about Mist and manipulate it.

*Harmony - The source of aether is infinite. Allows you to use **[Moon Mist]** while expanding ten times less energy.*

Symphony - Your mist is both present and absent. It's up to you to decide who can feel it.

"I can project mist and choose who can see it," Priam summarized. "Useful for infiltrating certain places or trapping an enemy in hostile territory."

"It has excellent synergy with Pyro," replied the phoenix. "You know what to work on."

"I don't?"

The phoenix blinked once before sighing. "My bad, I forgot your lack of familiarity with the Concepts." Priam smiled, noting the absence of condescension in the bird's voice. He had proven himself, earning the phoenix's respect.

"The four stages of a Concept are crucial. Affinity means you have mastered a Concept enough to use it. At some point, your soul harmonizes with it, unlocking a new ability. When Harmony is complete, a Symphony is born, unlocking another ability and, more importantly, the capacity to create an orchestra."

Priam's eyes gleamed. "An orchestra of Concepts? You mean using them together?"

"A symphony is more than the sum of two instruments. Each Concept you push to Symphony can use the Harmony and Symphony abilities of the others."

"Could I create a sea of fire around an enemy before materializing it?" Priam asked, smiling.

"Or avoid friendly fire."

Priam nodded as his system searched for techniques. This new synergy was intriguing, but he could only use it with simple flames—he hadn't unlocked Symphony with Pyro yet.

"I'll continue then," Priam smiled, activating his new Merit.

[Ace - Legendary] - Tier 2: Talented Candidate: Choose one of your Talents from the list and evolve it.
List: Aether Citizen, Eidetic Memory, Promesse, Chimera, Spectral Familiary...

7 Unused Merit Points.

Warning: activating this Merit will modify your soul, breaking the weakened seal set by your god, Sumstreh.
Would you like to proceed?

"...Fuck."

"Problem?"

Priam examined his soul and grimaced. It had enlarged when its structure had been altered under the influence of the Seven. The threads constituting Sumstreh's mark were now taut to the limit.

"Bastard's seal is close to breaking. This idiot can't even create something solid." Priam had a strong urge to destroy the Fallen's mark, but he still needed to play a double game.

"Talents are inscribed in the soul," the phoenix grimaced. "Give it a few days to stabilize before using your Merits."

"Too bad, it puts an end to my power-ups. By the way, I also have an attribute to improve thanks to my draconic bloodline…"

The phoenix's eyes sparkled. "You should improve it as soon as you can. Unfortunately, I can't say more. Just know that phoenixes evolve their Vitality when their bloodline becomes pure enough."

Priam nodded. He didn't plan to enhance his Vitality, but it was interesting to know that dragons weren't the only race capable of improving their attributes.

"All right. For now, I'll work on **[Aether Manipulation]** and temper my body. Any advice?"

The phoenix nodded. "You'll have to use manipulation exercises and solve puzzles. The Sun Shop should provide useful brain teasers."

Priam grimaced. "I've seen some for four hundred thousand Sun points. Maybe I can start with your exercises?"

"I can't reveal those of my clan. Give me a few days to create some, will you?"

Priam furrowed his brow. Time was precious, and he wanted to start tempering as soon as possible. He was too poor for the better puzzles. Even if he farmed corrupted beings, he wasn't a Duke or Prince and couldn't buy the best items.

Suddenly, an idea struck him.

"Maybe I don't have to pay for it myself."

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Exiting Concepts Archipelago, Priam surveyed his surroundings. Thanks to the efforts of the hoplites, humans, and Log-a-rhythm, Oasis was taking shape. Blueberry cooked while Myuri, Rose, and Alain enchanted the rampart. Further away, the hoplites annihilated hordes of corrupted, farming Sun points and honing their skills.

Priam smiled at the sight of a turret taking down several corrupted. As the Lord of the area, he levied a tax on every kill made by defensive structures.

His smile vanished when he saw Louis meditating on a branch, motionless. Aether trembled around him, signaling the old man's attempt to unlock a Concept. *Good luck.*

Assured that everyone was in good shape, Priam dashed toward the forest.

Fifteen minutes later, mist stirred on top of a hill. A naked young man with misty eyes and fiery hair emerged. Looking back, Priam spotted Oasis two kilometers away—neither too close nor too far.

Climbing to the top of a tree in a single bound, he cupped his hands in a horn shape in front of his mouth. Gathering all the air from his lungs, Priam shouted at the top of his voice.

"ÈVEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

[Kinetic Control] manipulated the air pressure, increasing the amplitude of the sound wave and isolating his eardrums. The howl spread through the valley, shaking the air, trees, and millions of corrupted.

In the ensuing silence, Priam felt his stomach knotting. He feared another confrontation with Sumstreh, but thinking about Sphinx restored his courage. To save his friend, he needed power. Tempering his body required **[Aether Manipulation]**, and the skill demanded puzzles too expensive for a Tier 0.

But not for a Tier 4.

It was time for Sumstreh to invest in his champion.

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Status:

PHYSICAL:
Strength 557
Constitution 860
Agility 552
Vitality 840
Perception 714

MENTAL:
Vivacity 505
Dexterity 587
Memory 385
Willpower 998
Charisma 615

META:
Meta-affinity 426 (+3)
Meta-focus 350
Meta-endurance 354 (+55)
Meta-perception 214 (+7)
Meta-chance 230
Meta-authority 33

Potential: 5 259 (+3)
Tier 0

Sun points: 61 342 (+4 589)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

*[Tribulation]: **Three Tribulations pending.***
Future Tribulations delayed until:
Time: 164 days 21 hours 53 minutes 48 seconds.

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