

Chapter 249: Plot Twist!

Congratulations, you have survived a week in Elysium!

Reward (choose one):

- *Back in Time: Allows you to return 24 hours in the past, at any time, and with all your earnings. One use only.*
- *5 seconds of Glory: Allows you to summon a hypothetical version of yourself, a year older... For 5 seconds.*
- *Memoir of a Survivor: A survivor's memoir of his quintuple Tribulation.*
- *Lord Five: One, two, three, four, five, five, five... Whatever your attributes, the Tribulation coming will be a quintuple Tribulation.*

Priam's eyes widened. The selection resembled the tailored reward he'd received for earning three Achievements at Tier 0, but updated. His astonished expression caught Esmée's attention.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"I just got a reward for surviving a week in Elysium."

"That's what I call a big lag!" laughed Rose.

"My resurrection interferes with the quest," Priam explained, his voice distracted. "The possibilities..." Even with his draconic vivacity's dual parallel thoughts, he couldn't calculate all the paths available to him. *It changes everything...*

Priam's hands began to tremble.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?" Jasmine's voice was filled with concern. The entire assembly, from the new artisan Bertomne to his father Alain, watched in silence, understanding that something significant was happening.

Looking up at his rivals, friends, and family, Priam smiled.

"Everything will be fine," he promised. "I will do what I do best: I will adapt."

Sphinx, I'm coming.

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The four rivals, accompanied by Louis, entered Concept Archipelago.

"This place feels strange," murmured Esmée as she looked around.

"What do you mean?" Jasmine asked.

"It feels like being inside a divination shield. It's slightly harder to scry someone from here, but the defenses are worth it."

Priam nodded. Concept Archipelago was a Talent recorded in his soul. As such, it was partially protected by **[Revelation Resistance]**.

"Could you scry a Tier 4 without being detected?" he asked.

Esmée raised an eyebrow. "I could do it even from outside. However, it will be easier here," she conceded. "Why?"

"Because I might have a deal for you. Let's talk about it later. Phoenix?"

Nothing happened for a moment, then a sigh was heard.

"I'm not sure shouting my existence from the rooftops is a great idea... But fine."

The artificial sun flared. Leaving a beam of light, the fiery bird appeared before Louis and the rivals. Amused, Priam noted that the former prince was still vain enough to make a grand entrance before strangers.

"I thought you would come to me about your temperance."

Priam shook his head. "I need advice about a quest reward. In short..."

As he explained, the phoenix's flames calmed while his rivals' breathing grew ragged. Despite their self-control and intelligence, the possibilities offered by the reward choice were colossal.

"The System plays favorites," sighed the phoenix after Priam finished. "Unless your rivals' rewards are equally overpowered?"

Jasmine inspected her nails, while Esmée shook her head. The assassin only answered to Priam, and the princess was only a temporary ally.

"The System bound me with Nightmare using a Mythic Talent," revealed Kazuki, seeing that the women wanted to keep their secrets. "It multiplies my attributes and allows me to benefit from the computing power, knowledge, and calm of an AI running on a quantum computer. I had the choice of various types of unions, some more bionic, but I preferred to remain hoplite."

The phoenix nodded. "Thank you for sharing that. You have answered my question: the early advantages of the Champions are as great as their future responsibilities."

The rivals simply nodded. Survival quests were only given to Champions; none of the other immigrants or inhabitants of Elysium received them. Priam suspected that these benefits would have to be repaid one day.

"Back to the main topic," the fiery mentor continued. "Lord Five, a guaranteed quintuple Tribulation, seems the safest option. You still have five months to transform into an absolute monster. You could become one of the most terrifying Tier 0s in Elysium—and thus the Universe—paving a royal road to the Zenith."

"With my phenomenal adaptation and resurrections, the sky's the limit," Priam agreed. He wasn't being arrogant, just realistic. "I could farm Sun Points, temper my body, break records in the Colosseum, and face my Tribulations with five maxed-out ideal Legendary resistances..."

Priam let his sentence hang.

"But you won't do it," the phoenix finished with a sigh. "Why not?"

"Of course, the power to protect my freedom is tempting." Priam clenched his fists. "But when I say that, I think of Sphinx, who sacrificed herself for me. What's the point of becoming powerful if I abandon everything I intend to protect along the way?!"

By the end, he was almost shouting. The frustration had been building over the past few weeks and was finally boiling over. Priam felt ashamed of himself, and now that he had a chance to change things, he wanted it desperately, even if it disrupted his plans.

"The stronger you become, the better your chances of saving her," pointed out the fiery bird.

"While I wait, only the Concepts know what that bastard is doing to her," Priam retorted.

The sound of wings responded before the phoenix sighed. "I find your reasoning foolish."

Silently, Priam held the bird's gaze. He had made his decision.

"However, it's because of this mindset that my original was lost to the Depths. I'm just the hologram of an artificial program; my words carry little weight, but I'm proud of you. Renouncing an easy royal road to uphold your convictions is admirable."

A weight lifted from Priam's chest, the phoenix's words warming his hearts more than he had expected. "You never know, if the System offered me the same rewards twice, it might do it a third time. Lord Five will still be exceptional at Tier 1."

"System moves in mysterious ways... What do you want from me?"

"My primary goal is simple: save Sphinx from Bastard's clutches. For that, I suppose Five Seconds of Glory is the best option, right?"

The phoenix nodded. "Given the word Glory, you can be sure the System will take a hypothetical you who has succeeded in everything over the next year. Sextuple Tribulation, perfect temperance, all his Supremacies at rank II... If you summon him under the right conditions, I give him a good chance of saving Sphinx."

It wasn't the answer Priam expected, and he grimaced.

"Is that all?" Jasmine interjected. "I may not be very objective, but Priam was introduced to the System just over a month ago and he's already a monster. In a year, I can't imagine him not being able to crush a Tier 4 without breaking a sweat."

Esmée shook her head. "Priam is the First, but he isn't a thief. We're talking about getting your friend out of an ancient god's Domain, not just surviving their attacks."

The princess had done her research.

"The empyrean is right," confirmed the phoenix. "You are underestimating the gap between a Tier 3 and a Tier 4. A perfect and older Priam might have the means to survive against this Fallen, but rescuing someone is another matter. Due to the difference in Soul Tiers, your opponent can vaporize Sphinx's soul with a single thought. Don't forget the vivacity gap between you and the Fallen: they will be able to react quickly, even if you trap them."

"I was more tempted by Back in Time anyway," Priam said. "If the rescue fails, we'll have a second chance. Plus, as our Tribulations are chosen when we trigger them, I could get a sneak peek at mine and those of my friends."

Priam felt three pairs of eyes fix on him with rare intensity.

"Is that possible?" Esmée asked the phoenix.

"It is. As Priam said, your Tribulations are chosen when you pass an attribute threshold; they're already pre-programmed. They will only change if you reset the thresholds, like when you upgrade your race."

"I mean, is it allowed?"

"Priam used a reward the first time to help himself." By asking twenty questions to his hypothetical doubles, the young Champion had managed to avoid some traps and obtain his draconic bloodline. "With scrying powers, don't tell me you haven't tried to learn more about your Tribulations."

"I found nothing," the princess admitted.

"Skill issue," Jasmine muttered.

Louis cleared his throat. "In any case, if Priam could hint us about our next Tribulations, it would give us a much better chance of survival. Well, most of us." He grimaced in Kazuki's direction, who nodded.

"My Tribulations start in twenty-seven hours," the hoplite explained, seeing Priam's confusion. "It's too soon for me, but I would like you to help Hyshana and some hoplites."

Priam frowned. "Then we'll hurry. My friend, don't insult me by refusing my help."

During the banquet, he had seen the hoplite warrior drop his stern instructor mask to laugh with his subordinates and wife. Kazuki was a paragon of duty, but he wasn't insensitive to the breath of death on his neck. Priam refused to leave his friend behind, even if it meant accelerating his plans for Sphinx. *I will sacrifice my friends no more!*

The hoplite looked at him for a few seconds before nodding. "Then I will set the example."

"It takes courage to trigger your Tribulations early," added Louis. "Knowing you will likely die but that another you will survive in another timeline won't be enough for everyone."

Jasmine shrugged. "If they're too cowardly to accept Priam's help, they deserve to die."

"That's going a bit far, but what's certain is that I won't force anyone to accept my help," Priam nuanced, turning to his winged mentor. "We're getting off-topic: I wanted your help to know exactly what's possible with Back in Time. *'Allows you to return 24 hours in the past, at any time, and with all your earnings'*... It's not very clear."

The phoenix nodded and began to explain that the System chose its words carefully. Here, the concept of "earning" was subjective and left to the user's discretion. For instance, Priam could leave the atmosphere, gain a Title and a few levels of **[Asphyxia Resistance]**, rewind time, and keep the Title but discard the levels. It was an incredible safety net for someone threatened by a sixth Tribulation.

Better yet, it allowed him to invest in his Merits and rewards to test a build before finalizing it. Thinking about his next power-up, he grinned widely.

"Is there a way to know what I've done?" he asked before deciding on a plan of action. "Like if I talk to the tribes to probe their secrets, for example..."

If he had the chance to meet other ideal prerequisites, Priam wouldn't hesitate.

The phoenix shook its head. "Dimension, one of the Seven Great Concepts, will rewind time for the entirety of the universe and its connected worlds. In Sector Hope, you would be relatively safe, but in Elysium, factions with rifts leading to other universes will experience some adjustments. It happens fairly often—there are even adaptation chambers between universes for that—but if a powerful diviner wanted to find out who triggered Back in Time, they could. Even your girlfriend could, if she knew what to look for. It doesn't concern you as long as you don't attack a too-powerful faction. To answer your question, you are free to exploit your power to scam naive enemies."

"Naive?" Jasmine asked.

"Such rewards are rare, but on a universal scale, they happen frequently," replied the bird, shrugging its wings. "Any self-respecting faction knows not to reveal secrets or make deals too hastily; for example, nothing stops Priam from selling all his possessions for the signature skill of a small clan that will never get paid. Most contracts have clauses to avoid such scams. But a Tier 4 tribe... Nothing stops you from trying."

"And if they refuse, we can always steal from them," grinned the assassin.

"What about the Sun Shop?" Priam asked.

The phoenix shook its head. "Using one reward to get another is impossible. Likewise, if you used Back in Time now to go back a day, you could not select another reward at the next banquet. Incidentally, this kind of reward is the reason why the Auctions always last more than one day. This way, the client can be sure you're not scamming them by buying their secrets and then rewinding time to get a refund."

In summary, the Concepts and the System were outside the time loop and wouldn't allow any abuse. However, Sumstreh was far from powerful enough to suspect any trickery... At least as long as Priam didn't let him read his memories.

"Then we only have one thing left to do: devise a plan."

There was no longer any question of waiting until after the tournament to free Sphinx. Imagining his friend's smile upon being freed, Priam couldn't help but smile himself.

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"I hinted at it before, but I guess it's time to be direct," Priam said, gazing at the forest stretching towards the horizon. "If you help me save Sphinx, I'll help you survive your Tribulation."

Beside him, Esmée also looked towards the forest, seemingly fixated on a point beyond the horizon, hesitant.

"I can't face a Tier 4 without convincing my brother first. My geas—"

Priam turned to the princess. "Esmée... You heard Kazuki, we don't have much time. In two days max, I'll be risking my life against a Fallen to save my friend." Saying these words, he felt a massive weight lift off his shoulders. "It might be madness, it might be stupid, but I'm finally taking action. For the first time in weeks, I don't feel like a coward."

"You're not a coward."

"Neither are you," Priam smiled, sharing the quest to kill the Fallen with her. "I'm sure someone as smart as you can find a way to bend the rules." He began to levitate. "The strongest chains are the ones we put on ourselves. If you want to break free from your family, you should start today."

With these words, Priam left his rival to ponder as he descended towards the clearing. He hoped for a relationship with the princess, but it would be impossible if she weren't ready to break free. He didn't expect her to face a Fallen for his sake, but here she took no real risk and the reward was colossal.

"Hey," he said to Rose as he landed on the rampart. "Working hard?"

"Hey," replied the teenager, inscribing a rune at lightning speed on a stone she then tossed. Upon striking a corrupted, the projectile exploded like a grenade. "I'm trying to farm skill levels to unlock a double Tribulation."

"Are you sure that..."

"Sure. For a craftsman like me, it's not really dangerous. By the way, shouldn't you be gone already?"

The blunt transition reminded Priam of his own attempts to dodge boring conversations with his father. *So this is what growing up feels like? Worrying about others...*

"I'm waiting for Kazuki and Jasmine."

The hoplite was explaining to his troops the opportunity presented by Priam while the assassin was scouring the Auctions for a way to erase her scent. The phoenix had warned him about the supernatural perception of Tier 4s with animal bloodlines.

The two Earthlings chatted for a few minutes before being joined by their two rivals.

"Sorry for the wait," said Kazuki, holding a spear whose blade seemed made of glowing embers. "I'm ready."

"Ready!" Jasmine wore a tight black suit that highlighted her curves and winked as she caught Priam's gaze. A tattoo covered part of her arm.

"That's so cool, are those runes?!" Rose asked.

"A runic tattoo," Jasmine confirmed, flexing her biceps. "This beauty costs more than a night with a high-class escort, but it can absorb my scent and diminish my presence. Perfect for robbing tribes. For Sphinx, of course," she added, seeing Priam's look.

The Lord of Oasis pursed his lips. He didn't really want to use a time loop to rob his allies, but Sphinx's safety came first.

"I'll focus mainly on Eleha's tribe?" the assassin ventured.

"Yeah, fuck Eleha!" Rose exclaimed.

Kazuki and Priam cracked a smile before leaping towards the tribal camp.

Sumstreh's looming shadow was drawing significantly closer, but Priam's hearts felt light. For the first time in a long while, he was proactive.

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 726

Constitution 1 179

Agility 897

Vitality 1 130

Perception 767

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 595

Dexterity 658

Memory 859

Willpower 1 168

Charisma 692

META:

Meta-affinity 825

Meta-focus 415

Meta-endurance 708

Meta-perception 346

Meta-chance 274

Meta-authority 225

Potential: 14 137

Tier 0

Sun points: 1 482 803 (+191)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 153 days 3 hours 50 minutes 50 seconds.

Next thresholds: 12 attributes > 600 / 6 attributes > 900 / 1 attribute > 1 200