

Chapter 225: The Million Dollar Question

Despite **[Ideal Aether Perception]**, Priam had no clue how his soul connected to the System. However, his connection with Log-a-rhythm was visible through his meta-perception. It wasn't a direct link between him and the tree—like the mental bridge the Necro Envoy had created to telepathically communicate with him, for instance—but more of a resonance between his aether and the tree's.

Like a radio antenna, Log-a-rhythm emitted aether waves synchronized with Priam's energy. His soul caught them, and then the System linked their statuses, allowing him to oversee the tree's growth.

Log-a-rhythm:

Features:

Abundance - Life II
Abundance - Aether I
Protection III
Tribulation Resistance II
Secret Passage I
Land Owner II
Camouflage II
Guardian of the Forest V
Mighty roots I
Necro Purification V
Natural Growth IV
Necro Resistance III
Rot Resistance II

Measurements:

Ceiling Height: 3 meters.
Interior Area: 55 m² (+8, due to Log-a-rhythm's growth)

Status:

Current POT: 5 055
Passive gain: 100 (+250) (+40) POT/day.
(+250 POT/day: bonus - Guardian of the Forest V)
(+40 POT/day: bonus - Natural Growth IV)
(+2 712 POT from miscellaneous plant samples & legacy seed)

Available Themes

Primo (100 000)
Tal Quercus (10 000)
Nature (1 000)
Cocoa (500)

Sequoia (1 000)

Tea (500)

Abundance - Life III (2 500)

Abundance - Aether II (1 000)

Protection IV (5 000)

Tribulation Resistance III (2 500)

Secret Passage II (500) (-500)

Camouflage III (2 000) (-500)

Attraction I (500)

Underground I (300) (-200)

Comfort I (500)

Volume I (500)

Water Control I (500)

Land Owner III (2 000) (-500)

Protective Barrier V (25 000)

Guardian of the Forest VI (24 500) (-300)(-200)

Mighty Roots II (1 000)

Root network - Plant Intelligence I (FREE)

Root network - Plant Control I (FREE)

Necro Purification VI (25 000)

Natural Growth VI (25 000)

Necro Resistance IV (5 000)

Rot Resistance III (2 500)

Time: 48 days since creation

Priam smiled upon seeing his tree's status. His own progression was ridiculously fast, but as a human sponsored by a Patron and willing to risk his life, that was expected. On the other hand, Log-a-rhythm was a plant, and the plant world took its time to flourish compared to the animal kingdom.

Yet, within a few months, the tree had managed to become Oasis's true cornerstone. Its sturdy trunk had shielded Priam upon his arrival in Elysium, and the security of its spatial pocket had allowed him to sleep peacefully.

"I'm going to check on Log-a-rhythm," Priam announced.

"Don't forget to train."

"Speak for yourself. We'll see who kicks whose butt in a month."

"Deal," Kazuki said with a fierce smile.

Nodding toward the hoplite couple, Priam rode his mist to perch on a branch of his tree. While Oasis's defenses concerned all its inhabitants, Log-a-rhythm's growth was a personal affair. His mental, genetic, and aetheric bond with the tree was so intimate that he hesitated to share its secrets with others.

Rereading the status, Priam first selected the two offered features. Plant Intelligence and Plant Control relied on Oasis's root network. Thanks to Guardian of the Forest V and Mighty Roots, the cost of both enhancements decreased by seven hundred Potential points, making them free.

Root network - Plant Intelligence | ACQUIRED

Root network - Plant Control | ACQUIRED

The Seven descended, utilizing Log-a-rhythm's Potential to upgrade it. Closing his eyes, Priam placed a hand on the bark to feel the difference.

Something had changed in the communication between Log-a-rhythm and its subjects. Plant Intelligence made it easier to understand the feedback from different trees. A side effect of the enhancement was that a camouflaged enemy would now have a harder time evading vegetation surveillance.

Satisfied, Priam asked his tree to test Plant Control. Log-a-rhythm's trunk vibrated slightly while a tiny earthquake shook Oasis; every root in the territory had vibrated in unison. The feature allowed control over a tree's growth—be it its trunk, leaves, fruits, or even roots. Due to the lengthy development of plants, they could take hours, even days, to obey. It was a power more utilitarian than offensive.

"I suppose once I'm a top-notch Aetherist, I could create natural runes with this enhancement..." Priam mused. He couldn't help but imagine transforming Oasis, the valley, and even the entire island when Log-a-rhythm would be old and powerful enough. In his dream, each leaf of his tree carried a world, and not even the Necromoon could corrupt it.

His second train of thought eventually brought him back to reality: the work wasn't finished. After scolding himself, Priam refocused, a wry smile on his lips.

Analyzing his tree's status for the best enhancement, he realized Log-a-rhythm would become a monster if given some time. Enhancements were expensive, but each day earned him two hundred and sixty Potential points. Even the priciest enhancement, Primo, could be bought by saving for a year. It was too long for Priam, but extremely fast on a tree's timescale.

Faced with an abundance of options, Priam was struck by decision paralysis before deciding to proceed by elimination. All features in the Sun Shop were ruled out; as a Tier 0, he had no trouble farming Sun Points.

Observing the remaining features, he briefly hesitated to take Tribulation Resistance III to bolster the Tribulation Chamber before reconsidering. He was starting to devise a plan to overcome his Tribulations and knew he wouldn't trigger them in his inner world.

After some thought, Priam settled on two upgrades. What he currently needed was training, and Log-a-rhythm could help with that.

Abundance - Life III ACQUIRED

Abundance - Aether II ACQUIRED

The first feature reinforced the sap's healing power. Useful for nourishing Oasis's population, the liquid could also boost defenders' vitality. Thanks to his resurrection, Priam needed it less than others, but it would allow him to push his body further.

His second choice was as basic as it was obvious. Elysium was the Spearhead World, thanks to its extreme aether density. Its inhabitants were more talented, resources were more precious, and monsters were more dangerous. Increasing the aether rate in Oasis, particularly in Log-a-rhythm's spatial pocket, was a good idea every day of the week.

There were still one thousand five hundred Potential points left, which Priam invested in two more enhancements.

Volume I ACQUIRED

Volume II ACQUIRED

Measurements:

Ceiling Height: 3 meters.

Interior Area: 66 m² (55 m² +20%)

Current POT: 55

The Concepts upgraded Log-a-rhythm's spatial organ, and Priam opened a portal beneath him to check it. He landed in a room about eleven square meters in size, with walls streaked

with luminescent vessels. The crimson-gold sap coursing through it bathed the space in a soft light, illuminating the wooden walls. The glowing dimness reminded him of a forge's ambiance.

Taking a deep breath, Priam filled his lungs with dense, vitality-charged aether. Thanks to Micro, he felt his body revel in the invigorating atmosphere.

"This will be perfect," he smiled, turning his senses to the rest of the spatial pocket. Log-a-rhythm's interior was empty. According to his father, resting in a space isolated from the outside world could be stifling. As an owner, Priam's senses were linked to Log-a-rhythm's, making the tree an extension of himself. Here, he felt good and safe.

Oasis's inhabitants now mainly rested in their own cabins or in barracks for the hoplites. The main room was used only for storing some resources—Priam detected some quality rocks and bones—and a second room served as an emergency infirmary.

"Time to rearrange all this," he murmured, asking Log-a-rhythm to shrink the main room to turn it into a warehouse of about twenty square meters. After that, Priam almost made the infirmary disappear, before changing his mind; the defenders might need it at any moment.

Using the remaining free space, he expanded the new room. When the wood stopped moving, Priam admired the dimensions of his future training room. *Thirty square meters just for me. It would be almost luxurious in a big city.*

The first thing Priam did was to restrict access to everyone except Jasmine and Kazuki. He had nothing to hide, but the consequences could be dire if his father or Rose visited at the wrong moment. He planned to buy and install traps and machines to train and torture his body, and collateral damage wasn't impossible.

Priam had briefly considered training in Concept Archipelago, but the Talent blocked the simplest divinatory probes to dismantle, and if injured, Log-a-rhythm could easily help him. The only issue was he wanted to avail himself of Prince Phoenix's advice, but an open portal constituted an acceptable solution.

As he prepared to open a passage, Priam hesitated, then sighed. Before beginning the training concocted by his add-on, he had one last thing to do. *Force me to stay inside for at least half an hour*, he instructed his add-on. *Trigger Mindbreak3 protocol as soon as you detect any memory modification.*

[Alarm set.]

With Eve, it was better to be safe, and Priam used both trains of thought to prepare for a difficult conversation. His rival deserved death for what she had done to them, but Priam didn't forget that his true enemy was Sumstreh. If his rival had any usefulness, he would use her.

Flexing his Talent, Priam created a circular portal to the Tribulation Chamber. On guard, he crossed, then closed the passage behind him. The hundred-square-meter cube was empty.

Lvl Up: [Revelation Resilience] lvl 24

MEM +3

META (Affinity) +3

META (Authority) +3

"I guess she must have found a way to escape..." As he prepared to open a return portal, his add-on short-circuited the Talent. Priam furrowed his brows, realizing he couldn't open a portal anymore.

What the hell?

[The user issued an order twelve seconds ago: "Force me to stay inside for at least half an hour."]

Priam furrowed his brows as he scrolled through his system log. He had no memory of making such a request, and his memory was flawless. He could simply close his eyes and recall the faint sound of sap pulsating in the vegetal walls, the comforting dimness, the woody, resinous scent of the room, and...

Furrowing his brows, Priam realized that the scent he remembered wasn't from Log-a-rhythm. The difference was subtle, but his absolute sensory memory made no mistakes.

Someone had tampered with his memory. Just as the thought formed, a gentle force made it disappear. Priam furrowed his brows as his parallel thought took over, transferring the fact to his add-on. The next moment, he looked around, confused.

[Memory and thought falsification detected. MindBreak 3 protocol engaged.]

Priam's fiery mantle expanded then exploded into a nova of flames. Pyro and **[Kinetic Control]** combined to sharply raise the temperature. In a second, the heat became high enough to melt gold. The explosion shook the reinforced Chamber. Despite the protections in place, Priam was a Duke, capable of facing some Tier 3s.

The outburst of power caught him off guard. Why was his system attacking?

A second later, his thoughts cleared, and a cry rang out.

Lvl Up : [True Will] lvl 7

WILL +18

CHAR +9

Priam stifled his nascent anger, recalling his flames and turning to Eve. The young woman stood behind him, naked. The situation held nothing erotic as her melted, charred skin barely covered her muscles and bones. If Blueberry had been present, he would surely have made a comment about overcooked meat.

The smell of burnt flesh made him want to vomit, but Priam felt no remorse. Anyone attempting to breach his mind deserved no mercy.

"I'm sure you have the means to breach my defenses, but I advise against trying," he said over his rival's moans. "I'll sense it, and the moment you try to influence my thoughts or memory, I'll kill you."

These were not idle threats: Priam's formidable willpower was currently a double-edged weapon. **[True Will]** was a Legendary skill that provided an impressive number of attributes. With five more level-ups, he would surpass the next Tribulation threshold; a sure way to die.

Eve mumbled something, and Priam furrowed his brows. Most of his adversaries would have had no trouble surviving an explosion, but she was a Tier 0 who didn't seem to have invested much in constitution. Without **[Grand Fire Resistance - Rare]**, the skill he had been forced to buy for her, she might have died. *Big mind, weak body, right? Glass cannons are proud until they get hit in the head by a fireball.*

Sighing, Priam seized the young woman's body with his Domain and opened a passage to Log-a-rhythm. Crossing through a second portal, he arrived in the infirmary and submerged the body in a bath of regenerative sap.

"We need to talk," he said as the liquid began to regenerate his rival.

"Gan'dh..."

Priam furrowed his brows. Eve's vocal cords didn't seem to be functioning, and her eardrums were likely damaged. Waiting for her to heal was out of the question.

Closing his eyes, Priam summoned his add-on. During the battle against the Necro Envoy, the Tier 3 had created a telepathic link between them to communicate. His superhuman perception of aether had observed every aspect of the link, and his system had saved a model.

Using **[Aether Manipulation]**, Priam began to recreate the construct. Capturing the energy filtered by his soul, he materialized it along an aether thread. The fluid could take various forms, but Priam's training had taught him to handle aether's liquid and gaseous states.

One end of the thread connected to his soul space, Priam linked the other end to his Domain. The thread appeared in his sphere of authority, a few centimeters from his rival's head. A fraction of a second later, the construct dissipated, causing its creator to grimace. *There's instability when aether is transported by the Supremacy...*

His Domain might be larger than those of his rivals due to the size of his soul space, but its quality wasn't superior. Priam could perceive the world through it and use his skills within his sphere of authority, but he couldn't stabilize an aether construct. *For now.*

Since he couldn't improve his Domain, Priam formed another aether thread from his soul space and passed it through a spiritual meridian. The thread appeared within his human heart, and Priam guided it out of his chest through a direct pathway. Projecting the thread, he approached Eve until encountering resistance. Her melted skin isolated her.

The Necro Envoy had used her formidable aether mastery to bypass his defenses, but Priam couldn't do the same. Furrowing his brows, he first attempted to increase the thread's

diameter to force it through. In vain. His actual proficiency didn't allow him to exceed a certain section, after which the construct became unstable.

Pondering for a moment, Priam had the idea to braid two threads together to form a kind of chain. One end connected to his soul space, he forced the other end through before making it penetrate Eve's body.

Foreign aether began to travel up the chain, with one cable acting as a vein and the other as an artery, sending and receiving energies between the two rivals. Priam blinked as he realized that Eve's aether was poisoning his body. The pain was diffuse but present.

Uncontrolled energy transfer was dangerous, and Priam quickly recalled the various runes inscribed on the surface of the Necro Envoy's mental bridge. Each sigil had a meaning and function that eluded Priam, but he didn't need to understand them to copy them. The only problem was that her bridge was about one-tenth of a millimeter in diameter. *Mine is almost a hundred times thicker; I'll need to enlarge the runes while maintaining their proportions...*

What would have taken hours for a scientist equipped with a computer was accomplished in less than a second. Assisted by his system, Priam calculated the new dimensions of the sigils he needed and began engraving them on his mental bridge's surface. His runes were about one millimeter in diameter. Without Esmée's exercises, he would never have succeeded. *Thank you, Princess...*

After a few failures, his draconic vivacity allowed him to inscribe the different characters one after the other. However, the hardest part was not to engrave them, but to prevent them from fading away. The construct was as unstable as it was ephemeral.

Priam's attention couldn't be everywhere at once, and as soon as it withdrew, the runes began to dissipate. He had to jump from one to another to fix them. *If this continues, the mental bridge will break!*

Gritting his teeth, Priam mobilized all his mental faculties, **[Focus]**, and even his Potential to hunt down and correct every mistake. Eve's aether was poisoning him, corroding his meridians, but Priam refused to fail. As he continued repairing the runes, he focused on **[Aether Manipulation]**, learning from his errors, increasing his speed, and mastering the fluid. All it took was for the link to function for a fraction of a second for...

POT -22

"What... ? Who?"

For a moment, all the runes aligned and resonated, transforming the aether of both rivals, translating their thoughts.

*You have gained the skill: **[Mind Bridge - Rare]**.*

***[Mind Bridge]** - Your aether resonates with another's. The safeguards you've put in place are remarkably optimized. Generations of geniuses refined it before their heirs fell to the Necromoon.*

Such an intimate link can convey more than just words.

Hearing voices in your head is a good thing: it means you still have a head.

META (Affinity) +2

META (Perception) +1

Acknowledging his success, the System fixed the skill on the second layer of Priam's soul. It diverted his aether, incorporating the runes as soon as the mind bridge was created to stabilize them. His attention could finally relax, and Priam stifled a sigh of relief as he felt his headache recede.

Lvl Up: [Mind Bridge] lvl 2

META (Affinity) +2

META (Perception) +1

Pain gave way to elation as he realized he had succeeded. Exploring the arcana of magic and manipulating the world through his aether was fascinating. Feeling proud, he focused on the knowledge that came to him through skill.

As Priam was given a translation of the runes and a brief explanation of their synergy, his breathing quickened. The skill's origin was alien. Created and optimized by entities from another universe, the ritual was eye-opening.

"Priam?"

"Eve," Priam replied, refocusing.

Lvl Up: [Mind Bridge] lvl 3

META (Affinity) +2

META (Perception) +1

"A mental link?" His rival paused. *"These runes synergize marvelously... I find it hard to believe that Sumstreh could have dominated your soul with your aether proficiency."*

It was the moment of truth. Priam had thought long and hard about the conversation he needed to have with Eve and what he could glean from her. His rival had half-stated that she was only partially controlled by Sumstreh. Either it was a trick from Bastard or the Fallen's weak point. *Only one way to find out.*

"Sumstreh didn't dominate my soul," Priam said, observing the ambient aether. At the slightest attempt at communication, he would kill Eve.

"... *This is the first time my instinct has failed me. Do you have any proof?*"

Opening his interface, Priam selected the last quest he had received.

Quest: Fallen

Once a God, now a Fallen.

Will they who fell by arrogance repeat their mistake?

Kill Sumstreh, the Fragmented Rabbit.

This is a shared quest.

Do you want to share this quest with "Eve"?

Looking at Eve, Priam hesitated for a second before sending her an invitation. His rival's body froze for a moment.

"Oh."

"Yeah. Now, the million-dollar question: why should I keep you alive?"

*

Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 620

Constitution 979

Agility 608

Vitality 916

Perception 760

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 516

Dexterity 622

Memory 652 (+6)

Willpower 1 077 (+26)

Charisma 646 (+15)

META:

Meta-affinity 664 (+11)

Meta-focus 387

Meta-endurance 432

Meta-perception 306 (+4)

Meta-chance 230

Meta-authority 114 (+3)

Potential: 14 150 (-9)

Tier 0

Sun points: 762 364 (+209)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 160 days 10 hours 56 minutes 12 seconds.

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

