

## Chapter 67: The Disgrace of an Earl

The horizon brightened, bathed in light as millions of wisps appeared. Appearing from nowhere, they fell like flaming snow. Despite the unique spectacle, the phenomenon stirred a terrible feeling in the hearts of the spectators. Recognizing the divine origin of the manifestation, the battle came to a halt.

The two armies had moved apart, as if a truce had been called. Each combatant looked up in solemn silence, disturbed only by a few gusts of wind enveloping the Earl. Without them, one could have heard the short breaths of the tired animals, and noticed the disturbing mutism of the Abominations.

Sphinx watched the scene from a hillside a few hundred meters from the violent theater. With uncertain eyes, she watched the countless wisps descend. Their bluish light reflected off every shiny surface, and Sphinx's mane seized the opportunity to shimmer. The picture was superb.

Yet, despite the beauty of the landscape, Sphinx felt nothing but primal fear. Her instinct told her to leave, to get away from those tiny, trembling lights. They looked so frail but promised great disaster.

Like a snowflake, the first wisp landed near the Earl. It touched the ground and dispersed noiselessly. A second flickering flame struck one of the Earl's Barons - a monkey whom Sphinx found unpolished. The Baron was paralyzed for a moment before blossoming like a fiery rose. Sphinx's eyes widened.

One second, the monkey was a living Baron. A second later, his body was fuel for an infernal pyre. The flame rose to a height of five meters, and the panicked animals scurried away. A great circle surrounded the immolated monkey, growing larger as his cries grew weaker.

Sphinx instinctively stepped back, looking up at the sky. Millions of wisps were falling over a vast area, centered around the Earl. At her level, the wisps were scattered enough to be easily avoidable. As Sphinx pondered whether to leave - should she wait for Priam? - the surrounding aether began to move.

Sphinx focused on the origin of the event: the Earl. Proudly erect, the lion blew, and a gigantic air mass appeared. The aerial wave was colossal, more than capable of uprooting hundreds of trees. Half the sky seemed to move, taking countless wisps with it. It pushed hundreds of thousands of deadly flakes toward the Revenants' camp. Within moments, the air tsunami crashed and destroyed the enemy camp. A second later, thousands of men, women and dozens of Abominations were transformed into flying torches.

The fire was so powerful that Sphinx had to momentarily close her eyes. She was glad she wasn't currently the Earl's enemy. If he could manipulate such horrors... Looking at the furnace, Sphinx began sweating while feeling the heat from several hundred meters away.

Sphinx turned her attention back to the Earl, who was breathing heavily. The battle was won. Yet the Earl's aura was weak... Sphinx squinted for a second before recoiling in horror.

The burning monkey was rising. Nothing remained of it but a glowing skeleton sheltering a devouring flame. The former Baron hurled itself at the Earl in frightened silence. With a kick, the lion swept aside his undead adversary. Or was it an elemental? The monkey took off like a cannonball, crushing several animals in its path, which then burst into flames. A second later, it was back on its feet.

Sphinx squinted as she saw the skeleton moving toward the Earl again. A Baron should have been reduced to ashes by the power of the blow.

***[Identification - Rare]***

*[Simiiformes - Semi Elemental - Tribulation touched] - A former Baron corrupted by a Tribulation. The sacrifice of its life, Potential, and body allows him to temporarily increase its power. Affected by the Curse of Saint Helena, it will transmit this plague to any living being too weak.*

*Transmission threshold: VIT+CONST < 400.*

*Resistances and Afflictions can modify this threshold.*

*St. Helena only has eyes for the Earl.*

The monkey lunged at the lion again; this time, its former master landed a devastating blow with his paw. If the first attack had been a reflex, the Earl was now determined to crush his opponent. Literally. The monkey was pressed to the ground, and Sphinx heard its bones being crushed. When the lion lifted his paw and blew on it, all that remained was black dust.

Sphinx's attention turned away from the Earl. In the background, the Revenants' camp was on the move. Or rather, a horde of flaming skeletons and Abominations were heading for the Earl. Sphinx swallowed hard. Either the wisps could curse beings more potent than the ape, or the Abominations were weak against the Tribulation. Either way, thousands of semi-elementals were advancing.

Worse still, some Abominations were merging, creating gigantic monsters of flame.

Sphinx shivered. Watching the infernal legion gave her a feeling of dread. There was something deeply disturbing about a corpse walking in silence. The animals were as shocked as she was, and none spoke. There was a deathly silence floating on the deforested plain.

The Earl roared, waking up the spectators, and sent wind blades toward the horde. The Earl's majestic silhouette was emerging against the burning horizon. He roared again.

"My loyal subjects, we must fight! Let me be your guardian, your protector. Stay away from these creatures. Stone them, and together we'll win!"

As if hypnotized, the animals howled and began to help their master. Boulders, tree trunks, even corpses, the Earl's subjects, from the simple animal to the mighty Viscount, threw everything they could at the corrupted multitude.

The situation quickly improved, reinforcing the animals' conviction. Between the wind blades and the dozens of projectiles crashing into the lines of Revenants, the elementals were gradually pushed back. A human, even one burning up his potential, could do nothing against a tree trunk hurled by a giant moose.

Despite this, Sphinx knew that the hardest part was yet to come. The infernal Abominations continued to merge...

On the front line, the tired Earl was doing a titanic job. Every corrupted being was destroyed as they approached his army. The few Abominations that had not merged, Barons or Viscounts, were swept away, powerless in the face of the lion's monstrous strength.

"We must flee."

Sphinx turned to Blueberry.

"What? But we're winning!" Sphinx exclaimed.

Blueberry shook his head. "Right now, 'we' mean me, you and Priam. Moreover, look carefully. Every two or three seconds, a wisp sets an animal ablaze. In a few dozen minutes, there won't be anyone left," said Blueberry, pointing to the sky.

Sphinx turned back to the battlefield and watched intently. Suddenly, she saw a flame. Then two. Regularly, animals spontaneously burst into flames. Their neighbors would quickly stone them before resuming the fight, not caring about what happened.

Looking up, Sphinx turned pale. The firmament was full of wisps. Many had been spent converting the Revenants' army, but three-quarters were still quietly falling. It was hopeless.

"The Earl used one of his skills to manipulate his troops. They no longer feel fear," explained the bear.

"... Why?"

"I don't know, but he's planning to sacrifice our army. His army. I guess it has to do with his Tribulation."

Sphinx growled and instinctively created a mental bridge to the Earl. For some unknown reason, she didn't meet his Domain and activated the communication by touching the lion's mind.

*"Earl, order the retreat. Your subjects are dying because of the wisps."*

After a second of silence, an answer came.

*"I know... Of course, I know, but I have no choice. I used a quarter of my aether reserves blowing those wisps at the enemy camp. These flames turn aether into heat. Because of*

*this, my Domain can no longer absorb ambient aether. Every attack I use weakens me and draws on my reserves."*

*"Then run. The wisps will follow you."*

*"You think it's so simple? Look at the floor."*

Sphinx focused her aethereal vision on the ground before widening her eyes in amazement. An immense rune, several hundred meters in diameter, had formed underground. Based on a concept close to fire, the rune's meaning was esoteric for Sphinx. But she knew a cataclysm when she saw one. From time to time, the rune gained in intensity. It was slight but visible.

*"Every wisp that touches the ground strengthens this rune. By allowing my subjects and enemies to be transformed, I reduce its ultimate power."* The Earl said as he crushed an Abomination of Viscount rank.

*"The Concepts are omniscient and confront me with my fears. They're giving me a choice. To be a martyr King, able to protect my people by placing myself as a shield between them and this divine fire. Or survive, sacrificing enemies and allies alike. Sole survivor, reigning over ashes..."*

The lion paused, and Sphinx saw his head droop slightly.

*"I guess I'm afraid of death..."*

Sphinx roared in anger.

*"I thought you were a real Noble. That you wanted to become a King. It's the only thing I liked about you. Coward."*

The lion didn't answer, and his Domain cut the mental bridge. Sphinx wanted to rip his throat out. Blueberry drew her attention with a growl.

"It's dangerous, and we have other things to do. We need to leave and get on with the plan," he urged her.

Sphinx hesitated for a second before turning to the Earl's army. She had one last thing to do. **[Karmic Link], [Communion]**.

"Proud beasts, you have survived the arrival of the Concepts. Your intelligence sharpens with each passing day, and your strength increases. Today dumb animals, who can say what you will be tomorrow? But no one will know if you die."

Sphinx's skills forced the Earl's army to listen. No matter how intelligent they were, every beast present understood the intention behind her words. Sphinx felt the animals' attention weigh on her shoulders.

"Your Earl knows this, but he feels your sacrifice is necessary for his survival. He's not fighting for you, he's fighting for himself. These flakes of death fall only around him. Flee, and you will be spared!"

Sphinx raised her head and turned around. She felt she had done her duty as a superior race. The Earl's geas was now null and void. Those who remained would do so of their own free will.

The last thing she heard was the Earl's defiant roar. The Abominations had finished merging and intended to punish the one who had accepted his Tribulation.

\*

Priam felt the descent of the Tribulation as Goosebumps appeared on his forearms. He took a breath to calm himself. **[Focus]**.

He'd waited long enough, and Anatole had played his part. It was time for the Revenants to withdraw. *Feet first.*

Priam picked up his spear and threw it. **[Spear Throw], [Kinetic Control]**. His new skill enabled Priam to make a fluid movement adapted to his weapon. After all, a spear wasn't thrown like a stone. His skill was now specialized, and Priam felt his muscles tense up elastically and optimally. Boosted by a slight dose of kinetic energy, the weapon went off like a bullet.

Priam winced as he heard the supersonic boom and wasted no time observing his attack's consequences. He had to make the most of his surprise effect. Priam dropped from his stalactite and fell into the void. In the air, he grabbed three grenades from his belt and threw them at the Revenant Generals.

To eliminate as many people as possible, Priam would have had to reverse his actions, but he wanted to be sure of interviewing a survivor.

No sooner had he touched the ground than Priam rushed towards the nearest Abomination. Of the ten Abominations, nine were Barons and only one was a Viscount. Reaching the chimera, Priam was surprised to find that the Abomination was motionless. *Perhaps Anatole's death had deactivated them?*

Teleporting his spear back into his hand, Priam attacked the Abomination without missing a beat. Each one was different, and their protective cage was not in the same place. Their thick bodies prevented Priam from detecting the cages with **[Aether Perception]**. Despite this, Priam struck, his instincts guiding his arm. **[Strike], [Kinetic Control]**.

*Lvl Up: **[Strike]** lvl 20  
STR +1*

***[Strike]** has reached level 20, its maximum level as a common skill. Depending on your background, three upgrades are available.*

*[Great Strike - Rare] - General upgrade. No future upgrade possible. Potential Cost: 5*

*[Heavy Strike - Rare] - Your strikes are capable of destroying Tier 1 materials. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 10*

*[Spear Strike - Rare] - You have exclusively struck with your spear. You specialize and learn more about your weapon. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 15*

His spear penetrated the Abomination's flesh and muscles, barely slowing before destroying the cage protecting its cores. Like a disjointed puppet, the chimera crashed to the ground. Priam quickly validated his notification before continuing his work.

*You have selected the skill [Spear Strike - Rare].*

*POT -15*

*[Spear Strike - Rare] - You specialize in striking. Leaving behind other weapons and projectiles, you become more familiar with your Bound Weapon. Together, you can make your enemies tremble.*

*Your bound spear becomes even more familiar. You feel your link growing stronger. An evolution is in sight.*

*STR +2*

*DEXT +1*

Speeding towards another Abomination, Priam saw it begin to turn. Too slow, it didn't have time to finish its move before Priam came to hand-to-hand combat. He attacked and, once again, his spear found the small bony cage within the huge mass of flesh. Priam frowned. It wasn't luck. Something was whispering in his ear and guiding his hand.

Rushing towards the nearest monster, Priam felt a mental alarm go off. He stopped for only a moment before deciding to straddle the mist. Retreating, he reappeared high up, perched on a stalactite. A moment later, the Abomination exploded.

*Lvl Up: [Battle Flow] lvl 2*

*PERC +1*

*DEXT +2*

Priam understood as he read his notification. His new fighting instinct did have a source. Without it, he would have been seriously injured, as the pollution of the Depths was no small matter to solve.

Further down, his grenades finally exploded, and the System informed Priam.

[First Quest: Soon to be reunited? Updated.](#)

*Revenant General - Talia the reaper is dead.  
Keep up the good work!*

Priam closed the notification and directed his gaze toward the person who had blown up the Abomination. Anatole had not moved and was looking in Priam's direction. An annoyed expression was painted on his face, but there were no scratches on him.

"Well, what have we here?"

Priam didn't reply. He had little to say to this madman and preferred to analyze the situation.  
*How did he block my attack?*

"Um, you're not very talkative, are you? That's fine with me; less bullshit to talk about. I'll get right to it then. Get the hell out of here. If you refuse, I'll order Viracocha's Revenants to massacre the whole dome."

\*

*Status: (Average value for a Homo sapiens male before integration: PHY 10 / MEN 10 / META 0)*

**PHYSICAL:**

*Strength 152 (+4)*

*Constitution 258*

*Agility 164*

*Vitality 284*

*Perception 299 (+2)*

**MENTAL:**

*Vivacity 176*

*Dexterity 196 (+3)*

*Memory 50*

*Willpower 274*

*Charisma 150*

**META:**

*Meta-affinity 141*

*Meta-focus 98*

*Meta-endurance 90*

*Meta-perception 32*

*Meta-chance 114*

*Potential: 1071 (-10)*

*Tier 0*

**[He Who Eludes Death] charge OFF. Reloaded in 6 hours 26 min 46s**

**[Tribulation]: Tribulations are coming.**

**Time: 10 hours 46 minutes 40 seconds.**

