

Chapter 230: Sacrifice to Advance

New high upgrade available for [Aether Manipulation - Rare].

[High Aether Manipulation - Epic] - In your hands, aether changes shape and state. Rune weaver, core forger, and probe hunter, you break your chains, refusing mediocrity. High upgrade potential. Potential Cost: 160

Priam hesitated, his smile vanishing. Despite the phoenix's warnings, he was reluctant to accept anything less than an ideal upgrade for such a fundamental skill.

"Show me," the phoenix demanded, seeing the young man frozen.

"Huh? Oh."

Priam opened his mouth, and an orb the size of an eye emerged. He caught it in his hand and cleared his throat, feeling as if he'd just coughed up a chicken egg.

"Looks like a core," he noted, rereading the upgrade description. *Core forger...*

During the first Reunion, most of the monsters he'd killed had this kind of aether orb inside their bodies. Since returning to Elysium, Priam had seen them less frequently.

"I would be kind enough to call it a core prototype," corrected the phoenix. "A core is made of solidified aether, but it's much more than that. Firstly, all the 'particles' of aether that make up a core are organized in specific patterns. Here, you used brute force to make an abomination." Priam smiled, recalling his classes on crystallographic structures. The bird grasped the crystal. "And most importantly, a core contains runes."

"Like the skill runes on my soul or Esmée's rune that produces light?"

The bird smiled. "Exactly. The System creates these runes in our souls, but it's an advanced technique; it's only natural for a few species, such as the dragons or the unique race native to this universe. The rest had to figure out another way..."

Seeing his mentor leave the explanation hanging, Priam tried to fill in the gaps with his knowledge.

"... The monsters and races populating this universe aren't native. Before this, they didn't have the System and had to store their skills differently. I assume they used cores?"

The phoenix nodded. "Let me use the phoenixes as an example. Our ancestors created solid aether cores and engraved essential skill and Talent runes on them. As a hatchling grew, their core would give them a huge advantage over other races: in addition to having runes refined over generations, they could cast their skills instantly. That's one reason we ended up dominating our universe."

"Impressive." Betting on future generations, the phoenixes had become powerful enough to dominate an entire universe. It confirmed that he should steer clear of this warlike race. "If I

understand correctly, the System's advantage is that the user's runes remain available even if they lose their core or body. The core's advantage is the ability to transfer skills to others?"

"The System encodes the soul with terrifying precision, allowing it to fix an impressive number of skills. This makes the technique superior," the phoenix acknowledged. "Cores rarely contain more than a few powerful skills or Talents. For example, the core my mother passed on to me contained only one ritual."

Priam nodded. The system was superior for finely encoding runes. It was the difference between nanometer-sized transistors made by machines and the first-ever transistor, which measured a centimeter.

"It must've been a powerful ritual."

The flames that made up the phoenix's feathers flared toward the ceiling as the bird laughed. "If you reach the ninety-fifth wave of the Colosseum, you'll see it..."

Priam's hearts raced. "I can't wait."

For a few moments, the past and present geniuses stared at each other before the phoenix offered a warning.

"Be careful, the two techniques aren't exclusive. Nowadays, cores are used to amplify a skill already inscribed in the soul. An epic skill is powerful, but when it resonates with its enlarged rune written in an attuned core... The result can surpass even a Legendary skill."

Which explained why some continued to use cores. It made sense, but Priam's pride pushed him to ask one more question.

"How do monsters create a core? I struggled and think I have quite a few advantages..."

The phoenix lifted one of its wings, counting on its feathers. "Several methods are used: awakening of a bloodline, consuming rare resources, using a System reward, or simply using **[Aether Manipulation - Epic]**."

"During the first Reunion, I encountered boars with this kind of core, and they didn't have access to that sort of thing."

"The System gave humanity a fully equipped Moon and a Tutorial. Why wouldn't monsters be partially tempered to balance the scales?"

Hearing the phoenix's words, Priam's eyes widened. "Tempered?!"

"Oh, you didn't get it? Tempering a body means transforming it so it can host a fulcrum. Most of these are cores."

Priam stood still for a moment before letting out an amused sigh. "I hadn't made the connection," he admitted. The next moment, a smile lit up his face. If the phoenix was right, Heavenly Dragon was about to create a mythical fulcrum of draconic nature while also strengthening his body. *Let's beat those Tribulations!*

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The Necromoon was shining high in the sky as Priam emerged from Log-a-rhythm. The tree's foliage and the giant runes covering Oasis filtered its light, and Priam smiled, finally seeing natural light. After two days of ultra-intensive training, he needed fresh air to make good decisions.

As he stretched, Priam spotted movement above him. Jasmine danced among the branches, darting in all directions, redirecting her body at the last second with an agility Priam envied. Besides being a stealthy assassin, she was quick enough to escape some Tier 3s. *She's nearing Micro II.*

Suddenly, Priam lost sight of her. The next second, he nearly jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder.

A smile spread across his face as he turned to find Jasmine behind him, her cat-like eyes gleaming with amusement. Neither Domain nor **[Ideal Aether Perception]** had detected her.

"Not bad," Priam complimented. "Without our link, I wouldn't have sensed your presence. How'd you do it?"

He could've asked the sub-system implanted in her soul space, but that would've been disrespectful. Jasmine had gradually earned his trust.

"I passed through your shadow. My Concept bypasses your Domain and camouflages my aether. **[Homo Elysian Predation]** dulls your instinct, and here I am!"

Priam nodded. He appreciated Obsession more, despite its flaws, but the second racial Talent of Homo Elysians was terrifying in combat.

"Finished your training?" Jasmine asked.

"Never," Priam laughed. There were always new things to learn and perfect. "I needed to ponder some things. I've unlocked a possible upgrade for **[High Aether Manipulation]** but... I'm hesitant."

"Want to talk it over while we grab a bite?"

Priam's eyes drifted to her hips. How could she be so slim while eating so much? Noticing the sheen of sweat covering her body, he understood. *I'm not the only one training hard.*

"Sure. Want to rinse off first?"

"With your mist? How kind of you to offer," Jasmine smiled.

Priam rolled his eyes, amused. With a thought, he summoned a cloud around Jasmine and condensed its heart to create a swirl of clear water around her body.

As his mist penetrated her clothes to outline her figure, he felt his cheeks flush. Like him, Jasmine dressed with her own Concept! Imitation was flattering, but Priam shared the

sensory feedback of his mist. He had gotten used to muting the sensory input from his Domain when near the girls of Oasis, but his mist revealed everything about Jasmine.

Trying not to think too much about his subordinate's naked body, Priam dried her by retracting his mist along with the sweat it had absorbed. Fire Concept briefly warmed Jasmine, and then he dispersed the cloud that had somewhat protected her modesty.

"That's really handy!" Jasmine exclaimed, now changed. She looked stunning, dressed in a shadow corset and a skirt that reached mid-thigh.

"Talking about my misty shower or your shadow clothes?" Priam raised an eyebrow. The young woman knew exactly what she was doing.

"Both. I'll admit, I was skeptical about the benefits of nudism at first, but yesterday a Tier 2 necro exploded in my face, sending bone shards everywhere." Jasmine smiled at Priam's worried expression. "Don't worry, the outfit Hyshana gave me stopped some of it, and with a Sun pill and some regenerative sap, I'm back on my feet. Anyway, after some tests, I realized my Shadow Heart can give my Concept a certain physicality. My new shadow clothes are tougher, better looking, and provide extra security if my Domain doesn't detect an enemy."

Jasmine punctuated her sentence with a twirl that lifted her skirt and Priam looked away a second too late.

"I'm flattered that you're flirting with me, but you know I've got another woman in mind," he said, reaching the barbecue. "Hey, Blue!"

"Hey," replied the bear with a toothy smile.

"Blueberry told me you turned down her marriage proposal. So, I guess I still have a chance," Jasmine smiled, grabbing a skewer. "Unless you forbid it?"

"I refuse to enter into a marriage of convenience," Priam grimaced, taking a skewer offered by the bear. "You're not my slave, and I'm not in a relationship with Esmée, so you do whatever you want as long as you respect me. But you know I'm not comfortable dating my own subordinate."

"Most people don't mind," laughed Louis, approaching. "Is it snack time already?"

"We're celebrating Priam's return," Jasmine exclaimed, helping herself again. "Well, it's my excuse to eat at least. Is this Bambi meat?"

"Fawn. Venison is the tenderest meat available," said Blueberry, turning the skewers still cooking above the fire. "I understand Jasmine: you're the only young man of her kind around here. If there were a pretty she-bear nearby, we'd make more noise than a horde of undead."

Priam ignored his furry friend's last remark before replying, "I don't want to be a default choice."

Jasmine shook her head. "Blueberry projects his issues onto others. I've known thousands of people in my life, and you're the only one I feel like flirting with. I want you."

The intensity in the young woman's eyes unsettled Priam. She was serious.

"At worst, you could take two females," said Blueberry.

Once the surprise wore off, Priam burst into laughter. "Nope, not my style. I grew up tossed around by my parents' rough divorce. As a teenager, romantic stories shaped my view of love... It may be unrealistic, and it doesn't depend solely on me, but I want my marriage to be happy and exclusive."

"It's not just up to you," Louis agreed. "Even if you find the perfect partner, life often intervenes..." Seeing the others' looks, he shook his head. "I wasn't talking about Mirscella, but my first wife. We met young, and our love was intense. Initially passionate, it transformed over the years into a solid, mature relationship."

"What happened?" Jasmine asked.

"She died of complications giving birth to our first child. At that time, I was at war, and I never got to say goodbye to her..."

"My condolences," offered Priam, echoed by Jasmine and Blueberry.

"It's in the past," Louis smiled before biting into a piece of skewer. "Delicious. Finished your training?"

"Not yet," Priam repeated. "I'm hesitating between accepting a high upgrade or aiming for the ideal one. It bugs me not to have a perfect foundation. When I see the difference between what I can do now and what I could do at the beginning... It could really make a difference."

"Can't you deconstruct the skill later?" Louis asked. "I've been able to do that for some skills. Then you could get a better upgrade. It's not like you're lacking Potential."

Priam grimaced. "[**High Aether Manipulation**] isn't just any skill. The Concepts will deeply modify my soul during the upgrade; canceling it will be expensive. If I reach Tier 1 before changing it—and given what's coming, that's likely—the change in Soul Tier will further transform my soul. Downgrading this skill would cost around twenty thousand Potential points according to the phoenix."

"Holy shit!"

"Damn..."

Louis merely grimaced. "That's pretty prohibitive."

Priam nodded. He knew he could gather that many Potential points, but it meant missing out on other ideal upgrades.

“Osiris and Seth both have **[High Aether Manipulation]**,” Jasmine mentioned after a few seconds. “And they’re really skilled. The prerequisites for **[Ideal Aether Manipulation]** must be serious.”

“Domain II, three evolved meta attributes above a thousand, and advanced aether mastery.”

The revelation created a new silence.

“You don’t stand a chance,” Louis finally declared.

“I’ve been thinking of some ways to—”

“Elysium and its forests sometimes remind me of war,” the old man interrupted. “Winning a tough battle without losing men is impossible, and if a general tries, he’ll only make things worse. Every venture involves sacrifices; it’s up to you to choose which ones...”

Louis’s words brought a memory to the surface of Priam’s mind. When he’d learned chess, he’d quickly beaten his entire family. Years later, teaching the game to his little sister, she’d asked why he was better than her.

“You try not to lose any pieces while I’m not afraid to make sacrifices if it brings me closer to victory,” young Priam had said.

The ability to sacrifice what it took to win... Even his own life. That was the reason why Priam had conquered the Impossible Tutorial.

The young warrior raised a cup of sap toward Louis. “I’ve progressed so much lately that I thought the basic rules didn’t apply to me anymore. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice things to advance... Thanks for reminding me of some truths before the Tribulations do.”

“My pleasure,” the old man smiled, grabbing another cup to toast.

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*You have selected the skill **[High Aether Manipulation - Epic]**.*

POT -160

***[High Aether Manipulation - Epic]** - Precious crystal, ever-changing liquid, elusive gas, aether has many faces. Shaped by Concepts and obeying the Supremacies, reality rests on this fundamental energy. This skill allows you to dive into the heart of the matrix and modify its code.*

Are you ready to reforge Creation?

To build a staircase to the Zenith?

To impose your dream on the world?

META (Affinity) +3

META (Focus) +3

META (Endurance) +3

Perched on the highest branch of Log-a-rhythm, Priam smiled as seven infinite consciousnesses descended upon him.

Dimension, Karma, Energy, Matter, Chaos, Order, and Soul graced him with their presence, and the horizon rose to engulf the world. Only the Necromoon remained, hanging stubbornly in the firmament.

Priam's ego trembled as the seven Concepts revealed to his soul abilities it hadn't yet realized it possessed. Each in turn guided the spark that represented Priam, unveiling new secrets without altering it directly.

To stand a chance of becoming the eighth Concept, every user of the System had to stay clear of the Seven.

When the horizon released the sky, Priam shivered before checking the cooldown of his Tribulations. Not even a second had passed between the arrival and departure of the Grand Concepts. His own system hadn't detected anything, and Priam shook his head. The power of the entities at the top of this universe was beyond comprehension.

"Well?" Jasmine asked.

Rather than explaining, Priam decided to demonstrate his new abilities. He extended his hand, and a rune of light appeared. Formed by his aether, it was the size of a marble and transformed the ambient energy into light. Flexing his new power, Priam concentrated his aether and organized it. The fluid solidified as each particle bonded with its neighbors.

A few moments later, the rune had become crystalline. Priam surrounded it with a protective sphere and attached two wings so thin they were translucent. Inscribing two kinetic runes he had found on Rose's turrets, the young aetherist studied his creation before handing it to Jasmine.

The young woman received the gift as if it were a treasure. In her cupped hands, a winged sphere reminiscent of a Golden Snitch projected light, joyfully flitting through the air. Its glow cast soft shadows on the young woman's face.

"A pretty shining butterfly..."

"For you."

"For me?"

Priam smiled, hearing the tremor in her voice.

"Yeah. It might light up your cabin at night."

Thanks to Log-a-rhythm, Priam had noticed Jasmine often slept near the campfire. At first, he thought she was sensitive to the cold, but then he realized the assassin just liked falling asleep with a bit of light. *I don't think I'm the right person to comfort you at night, but I hope this gift will help...*

“Thank you,” Jasmine murmured, standing cautiously. “I’ll set it up…”

Priam stayed behind, gazing at the sky, proud of himself. With his new skill, he felt capable of wonders with aether. The description had talked about reforging Creation and it had barely exaggerated.

But before changing the world, he could change himself. It was time to temper his body.

Priam’s draconic heart quickened.

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 707

Constitution 1 105

Agility 614

Vitality 1 040

Perception 760

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 552

Dexterity 622

Memory 776

Willpower 1 134

Charisma 661

META:

Meta-affinity 726 (+3)

Meta-focus 396 (+3)

Meta-endurance 594 (+4)

Meta-perception 321

Meta-chance 274

Meta-authority 183

Potential: 13 451 (-157)

Tier 0

Sun points: 681 475 (+549)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 157 days 16 hours 56 minutes 4 seconds.

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

