

## Chapter 200: Will You Marry Me?

"I'd say I've read thousands of books, not tens of thousands. I wish I had, but school got in the way," chuckled Priam.

"How was it?" Esmée asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"School?" Priam shrugged. "It was nice, but I realized it too late. Spent fifteen years thinking it was a chore. I was quite the restless kid; sitting still for hours bored me."

Esmée smiled fondly. "Twenty years later, the restless kid scares away monsters."

Priam burst out laughing. "Yeah. Fortunately, books calmed me down."

"Why did you change your mind about school?"

"University and odd jobs taught me how fortunate I was to get free education in high school."

"I used to think my life was horrible too," said Esmée. "It wasn't until I talked to Myuri that I realized how lucky I had been..."

Priam glanced up at Log-a-rhythm, where Myuri hid. Aydan's former sex slave remained silent in his presence for now, but he hoped that would change over time.

"Do princesses go to school?" Priam asked, changing the subject.

"My sisters and I had tutors. I enjoyed the lessons, but the teachers refused to answer most of my questions. So, I turned to books," smiled Esmée. "I spent most of my time in the library, where I could be left alone."

"School bullies avoid libraries. What kind of books did you read?"

"Everything. The library was connected to a platform that housed all the books in the Empire. I would switch genres periodically: historical texts, philosophical essays, mythological tales, newspapers... I was quite dismayed when I realized I couldn't read everything the Empire published!"

"I feel you. Do you have a favorite genre?"

Esmée nodded. "Novels. I realized I wasn't alone in having stories swirling in my head. In those books, I could travel, leave the Palace, meet people, and experience positive emotions. Most importantly, I saw how men interacted with their equals and..."

She trailed off, but Priam understood. Esmée had identified with free characters and desired that freedom.

"You realized you weren't inferior to men," Priam finished.

Esmée looked at him, surprised, before shaking her head. "I know we're not from the same civilization, but I find it strange that you don't look down on me for my gender."

"To look down on someone is to underestimate them. I won't make that mistake," winked Priam.

Esmée let out an adorable laugh. "Too bad."

At that moment, Blueberry arrived, carrying two wooden planks. Seven opened shells filled with chilled foam were arranged on each. "Six sorbets, each prepared from a different berry. The last shell is filled with salted caramel to enhance the flavors."

"Whoa... You've outdone yourself!" exclaimed Priam.

"It cost me three hundred twelve Sun points," declared Blueberry.

"That's generous of you then." Seeing the bear's grimace, Priam burst out laughing. "I'm kidding, I'll reimburse you."

Satisfied, the bear left the rivals with their dishes.

"Bon appétit," said Priam in French. Seeing his rival's perplexed look, he added, "It means 'enjoy your meal.'"

"You too," replied Esmée before grabbing a shell.

For a few minutes, silence was only interrupted by the sound of eating.

"That was exquisite," declared Esmée as she finished her shells.

"Hmm," replied Priam, grabbing his mug to rinse his mouth of the sweet taste. He blinked as he realized it was empty.

"Someone finished my drink," he grumbled.

"I think I know the culprit," smiled Esmée.

"That's a sign we've been talking for a while," replied Priam, returning her smile. "I had a great time, but we haven't talked business yet."

Esmée nodded, pushing aside the empty shell plate. She adopted a professional demeanor, and her warm smile vanished. *Such a pity.*

"Let's get straight to the point. What does Aydan want?" Priam asked.

"My brother would like access to the Auctions."

Priam almost rolled his eyes. He hadn't used the Auctions yet, but Esmée already knew he had that option. *I'll have to ask the Guardian of Secrets how to block confidential information.*

"Haven't you found a trade channel?" Priam asked. Accessing the Auctions required a building, a merchant, and a channel to transport items. Priam had access to the Secret Channel thanks to the Guardian of Secrets, but there must be other possibilities.

Esmée shook her head. "I'm afraid these channels are quite rare. Obtaining them with a Merit of Nobility Title is possible, but my brother is reluctant to spend four points on that."

"I understand," said Priam. He himself lamented his low number of Merit points. "I'm not opposed to the idea, but there are conditions."

"That's natural. May I know them?"

"The first: in addition to the ten percent commission from the Secret Channel and the fifteen percent from our Merchant, Oasis will take ten percent."

Esmée pursed her lips. "That makes a total of thirty-five percent."

"You're good at mental arithmetic."

Esmée raised an eyebrow in a way that Priam found charming.

"The Necromoon is our common enemy. It's in your interest that we have the weapons to confront their ilk."

"How can we be sure these weapons will only be used against the corrupted?" Priam objected. "In any case, maintaining and improving our defenses to ensure peaceful trade is my responsibility. As a royal, your brother may not be accustomed to paying taxes, but I'm afraid I have to stand firm on this."

A one-third tax was high, but Aydan's options were limited. It was unlikely that other rivals would have access to the Auctions. Only the tribes remained, but their commission would certainly be higher than Priam's.

The percentage was reasonable, and both rivals knew it.

"My brother will be disappointed, but I accept," announced Esmée. She had objected only on principle. "What's the second condition?"

"I would like your help to unlock a probability manipulation resistance."

Priam had tried to use his Potential to unlock this resistance, but the System had demanded nearly three thousand Potential points—a prohibitive cost. Priam's primary goal was to spend his Potential on acquiring the high upgrade of **[Aether Manipulation]**. Spending such an amount of aether to counter a possible attack from Esmée was too costly for now.

Esmée leaned forward, fixing her gaze on Priam's face. After about ten seconds, the young man coughed. "Do I have sorbet on my chin?"

The question made his rival smile and revealed a dimple. "No."

"No to what?"

"To both questions."

"I had to try," replied Priam. He had asked without shame, aware that Esmée would likely refuse. He didn't intend to explain the details of his abilities either. "In that case, I'll need your help to tilt the odds in my favor in a future battle."

"Against whom?"

"A Tier 4."

Esmée furrowed her brows.

"The tribes haven't survived this long for nothing. If they find out I've been involved in the downfall of a Chief or a Shaman, I'll be dead."

Priam noted that she hadn't declared herself unable to manipulate Tier 4s. That gave him hope.

"I don't plan on attacking the tribes," he reassured her. "My target is a local beast. The vanguard will consist of Tier 3s or 4s, and our role will simply be to support them."

Hesitant, Esmée began to play with a lock of her hair. Priam decided to drive the point home. "If all goes well, the System will reward us."

"... We'll need to define the exact terms of my help and get my brother's authorization," replied Esmée.

"Will he oppose it?"

"Well, he prefers me to remain weak..."

Priam felt his hearts quicken with anger. He wanted to stack the odds in his favor to ensure Sumstreh's defeat. That Esmée's brother could ruin that made him furious.

However, something bothered him. According to his system, this wasn't the first time Esmée had tried to turn him against her brother. She had altered his words during their first conversation to create artificial tension.

"You want me to kill your brother."

Esmée shook her head. "I can't let you say that. If you try, I'll have to stop you."

The princess's words were straight, but her eyes said something else. Priam's recent experience with Sumstreh's divine mark gave him a clue. *She's forced to protect him. If I kill him, I should inform her afterward rather than before.*

But was it in his best interest?

Priam liked Esmée. The young woman was his age, stunning, intelligent, talented, and capable. She had a natural charm that attracted him.

However, she was a stranger, and Priam was a pragmatic man. His goal was to save Sphinx, not Esmée. If Aydan had a more interesting proposition than Esmée's...

"Forget what I said then. Anyway, actions speak louder than words," said Priam. His statement was intentionally open to interpretation. "I kindly ask you to convey my offer to your brother. This could be the beginning of a fruitful collaboration..."

If Esmée wanted his help, she would convince her brother.

Esmée nodded. "I'll return with an answer soon. Were those your conditions?"

Priam nodded. "Yes. Did you have anything else to tell me?"

"I have a personal offer and... a proposal from my brother."

Intrigued, Priam focused on his rival.

"I would like to be able to use the Auctions freely for a week. At the end of this week, I want you to open a passage to your Moon using [Hearthstone]. In exchange, I promise to hatch your Moon Wyrms into a mutant form within a month. This will increase its power and potential by a Noble Tier."

Priam thought of the reward he had obtained from the last event. The Moon Wyrms egg waited in Concepts Archipelago, and he didn't have time to care for it properly.

As for Esmée's requests, they cost him nothing. It was possible that his rival would steal some rare resources on the Moon, but only the Colosseum rewards truly interested Priam. His path was different from Esmée's, and he doubted she would steal unique rewards from him. He didn't plan to return to Béchar until after obtaining the Heavenly Dragon to go as far as possible in the Waves.

"I accept. Let's sign a contract on our Potential," declared Priam.

It took a few minutes for the two rivals to agree on the terms and swear with the System as a witness. Once satisfied, they exchanged a smile.

"A win-win deal as I like them. It reminds me that I owe you a racial upgrade."

Esmée had entrusted him with Myuri to obtain the genetic code of the Royal Emphyreans.

"Is it possible just before my trip to the Moon?" asked Esmée.

"No problem. We only have your brother's proposal left, I believe?"

Upon hearing the question, Esmée hesitated. "I..."

Priam raised an eyebrow. She seemed strangely timid all of a sudden. His senses picked up on an increase in the young woman's heart rate, and he braced himself to react. Had the prince ordered an attack?

"Is there an issue?"

"None. My brother proposes an alliance between our two civilizations," Esmée said, avoiding Priam's gaze.

The response left him puzzled.

"An alliance?"

"A marriage," clarified Esmée. "Between you and me."

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***Tutorial - Horizon Beach, Arcachon Bay, France.***

*Tutorial - Selected difficulty level:  
**Impossible.***

Before Priam's eyes, the holographic interface, visible only to him, flickered to life.

***System Initialization...  
The Seven welcome you to their Tutorial!***

***Choose a specialization.  
Fighter. Non-combatant.***

"... Fighter."

Better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.

***Main Quest: To Infinity and Beyond.  
Cross one of the hundred portals scattered across Earth.  
Rewards: Access to the Seven Concepts Universe, ???.  
Difficulty: Impossible.  
Time remaining: 7 days.***

***Description:***

*In an alternate reality, the arrival of the Seven has upheaved the world order.  
Earth is changing as fauna and flora adapt to the Concepts.*

*Humanity faced a choice.*

*Every human who chose a Free or Easy Tutorial disappeared.  
The rest were corrupted by the [Redacted].*

*Only those who chose an Impossible Tutorial survived.*

*This reality will disappear in a week.*

*This Tutorial is sponsored by [Redacted].  
Survive for a day to receive a reward.*

Time was freed, and the sun vanished behind the horizon. Priam read and reread the system message. Information was concealed within those words, and Priam didn't like what he understood. *I have seven days. In this alternate reality, most of humanity is dead. Surviving a day is impressive enough to warrant a reward. Fuck.*

His girlfriend squeezed his hand, pulling him back to reality.

"Do you think this is a prank?" asked Victoire.

Priam banished the HUD with a thought and surveyed the surroundings. From atop his dune, he had a panoramic view of the beach for kilometers. The first thing that struck him was the disappearance of hundreds of vacationers. Their friends had also vanished. A glance confirmed that footprints in the sand abruptly halted. *Not a prank.*

As far as his eyes could see, only about twenty individuals remained. All writhed in agony, seized by unspeakable suffering.

"I'm not sure these are actors," replied Priam, pointing to a man in his forties. Driven mad by pain, the man shoveled handfuls of sand into his mouth as he crawled toward the waves.

Further away, a teenager trembled. In a particularly violent spasm, he stumbled over a basket and fell headfirst onto a driftwood trunk. The trunk, brought by the waves, hadn't yet eroded its branch stubs. Victoire gasped in horror as she saw a piece of wood pierce the boy's neck.

Blood gushed from the mortal wound. Horrified, Priam recoiled. A hundred meters away, the black blood dripped onto the sand. With night falling, the scene became even more terrifying due to the lack of light.

Suddenly, the trunk trembled, then lifted, propelled by the adolescent rising to his feet. Priam widened his eyes, retreating once more. The inhuman movements animating the boy sent shivers down his spine.

A form passed by them. Swearing, Priam lunged to grab Victoire's hand.

"What are you doing?!" he hissed.

"We need to help him!" she cried.

Priam's heart raced with fear.

"Don't shout!"

Victoire shot him a puzzled look.

"He's injured and terrified," she whispered. "Go alert the rescue center."

"What are you talking about—"

Priam stopped and took a quick breath. It wasn't the time to argue.

"It's too late for him, you know that."

At least, it was too late for a human.

Victoire gritted her teeth, refusing to acknowledge reality. "Let me go!"

A howl made them turn around. The sand-eating man was running toward the teenager. Priam and Victoire watched him tackle the boy before violently biting his neck. "Oh my god..."

"Shit. We're in danger, Vic!"

Victoire's eyes were red from tears, but Priam held her gaze. He knew she would come to her senses. His girlfriend was as altruistic as she was intelligent.

"It's just us two now, Vic."

A tear rolled down Victoire's cheek, and Priam pulled her into an embrace.

"... I'll follow you," she murmured. Behind her, other howlers were rushing to the feast.

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Priam's family owned a house behind the dunes. The village, located at the end of a peninsula, was wedged between the ocean and a colossal basin. The two lovers had returned through the dunes, then crossed three gardens and two roads before reaching the house. On their way, they encountered no living soul. Only the chilling howl of a dog and the sound of smoking cars disturbed the quiet village. The drivers who drove them had vanished, not the kinetic energy of their vehicles.

Opening the glass door of his house, Priam ushered Victoire inside before locking it behind them. She drew the curtains while her boyfriend quickly searched each room. A minute later, they sat down in the living room.



Priam's eyes stared into space, a sad smile adorning his face. Few other people would be able to comprehend the young man's thoughts, but Victoire had been in love with him for a long time.

"The house is empty..."

Priam was only here for vacation, but his father lived permanently in the house he had built with his own hands. Yet nothing moved in the house as night fell. Alain must have chosen one of the first two difficulties. He had thus escaped the corruption mentioned by the System.

The image of the impaled youth appeared before Victoire's eyes and she shuddered.

"Alain's probably kicking back just fine," Victoire reassured Priam as he reached for his phone. "We're in some kind of parallel universe. If he opted for Free or Easy mode, he's probably soaking up rays on a beach somewhere."

"No signal," Priam stated, a sad smile playing on his lips. "A parallel universe... You're not buying into this, are you?"

"Do you?"

"I believe that an entity capable of teleporting humans, freezing electromagnetic waves, and improving my body can pull off a lot of stuff."

Priam's tone put Victoire on edge.

"What kind of improvement are you talking about?"

"I gained a skill just by rushing here. **[Stealth]**. It bumped up my agility by a point, and... I feel more nimble," he said, leaning forward. With legs straight, he reached down to touch his toes with his palms. Victoire's eyes widened. She could do that, but Priam had never managed it.

Deciding to follow Priam's lead, Victoire leaned forward to touch her toes.

*You have gained the skill: **[Gymnastics]**.*

***[Gymnastics]** - You're practicing in order to stretch and warm up your body. Get ready for splits and backflips.*

*The word "gymnastics" comes from the Greek word γυμνός, meaning "naked." That might explain why many System users boost this skill level when procreating.*

*AGI +1*

Deciding to put her newfound agility to the test, Victoire launched into a quick warm-up. She was used to regular training and knew her body well. After a minute, she stopped.

"My muscles are more supple and quicker. My joints are more flexible. It's mind-blowing!" She looked up at Priam. "But how?"

"No clue," Priam replied, shrugging. "Part of me is convinced I'm dreaming."

"And the other part?"

"It's wondering what the limits of this System are..."

The contrast between Priam's priorities and their situation made Victoire smile. With humanity's disappearance, monsters, the possibility of death... Priam was leaving all that behind and moving forward, eager to explore these new possibilities. He had been waiting for something like this his whole life.

"You're elated."

Priam looked at her before shaking his head. "I—"

"Don't lie to me, my love. I'm not accusing you. I'm even happy for you. You've always wanted more than life handed you. I thought I could provide that for you, but... You needed magic."

Priam stared at her for a few seconds before dropping his mask. A smile spread across his face. "I'm worried about my dad and sister, but you're right, I find all this fascinating. And you, Vic, you okay?"

The apocalypse was here, billions of people had been erased, and Victoire had just witnessed a teenager bleed out. And worse.

Yet Priam's gaze reassured her. Far from being scared, he was confident. It was one of the qualities she loved about him. When he decided to do something, Priam gave it his all.

And she had never seen him fail when it mattered.

"I'm scared, but I have faith in us..." Her voice cracked. A tear rolled down her cheek.

A moment later, Priam's arms enveloped her. His sea scent reassured Victoire. "We'll make it. We'll find that portal."

"... And then?"

"Then, we'll repopulate the world."

Victoire let out a small laugh. "Fool," she smiled, wiping away her tears. Laughing had done her good.

"Priam?"

"Yes, Sunshine?"

"We're highly likely to die."

It was more of a statement than a question, and Priam remained silent.

"But there's also the chance to survive and discover a new world, right?"

Priam's embrace tightened. "Yes, Vic."

A question rose within her. Victoire tried to push it away. As long as she didn't voice it, as long as she was uncertain, anything was possible.

"In this new world, do you think..."

Victoire's voice faltered, and she stepped back to look into the eyes of the man she loved. Priam's dark gaze shone with emotions. Sadness, excitement, warmth, tenderness, and...  
*Love? Could you love me back in this new world?*

"Vic?"

Victoire suppressed her tears and feelings. It wasn't the time. She didn't want to pressure him. She didn't want a pity response. Summoning all her strength, the young woman forced a smile.

"I'll tell you if we survive."

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*Status:*

*PHYSICAL:*

*Strength 557*

*Constitution 860*

*Agility 552*

*Vitality 840*

*Perception 714*

*MENTAL:*

*Vivacity 505*

*Dexterity 587*

*Memory 413*

*Willpower 1 028*

*Charisma 631*

*META:*

*Meta-affinity 430*

*Meta-focus 350*

*Meta-endurance 354*

*Meta-perception 221*

*Meta-chance 230*

*Meta-authority 33*

*Potential: 5 268*

*Tier 0*

Sun points: 1 893 (+1 649)

**[He Who Eludes Death]** charge: PRIMED.

**[Tribulation]: Three Tribulations pending.**

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 164 days 18 hours 54 minutes 28 seconds.

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