

Chapter 75: The Hero, the Madman and the Legend

"You're faster than expected," sighed Anatole. Seeing Priam's gaze, he added. "Why are you looking at me like that? I've created chimeras by fusing humans. I'm ready to make sacrifices too."

Priam floated to the ground and raised his spear. Knowing Anatole, a trap could happen at any moment. The giant spider lowered its head slightly so that Anatole and Priam could exchange a glance.

"... Why?" Priam didn't know what else to say. That a man could willingly merge with a creature of horror seemed impossible to him.

"Because it's the only way to control these spiders. They listen to their progenitor - and now to me."

"All this to turn the Jubokko into an Abomination?"

Anatole shrugged. "When the tree will perish, I'll be rewarded by the System commensurate with my efforts." Priam was stunned for a moment. The conversation seemed outlandish to him. Anatole had tried to take control of his body only a few hours ago. Now he was talking as if nothing had happened. *Why am I talking to this lunatic?*

"I find you very calm, knowing I'm here to kill you."

"You can try. My body is currently fused with an Earl. This spider is weaker in attack than the lion and less resistant than the redwood. But it's still an Earl."

Anatole must have succeeded in replacing or dominating the Earl's mind. Priam observed his opponent. The Revenant could be bluffing, of course, but his instincts told him that Anatole was more of a chess player than a poker player. Why bluff when you could weave a dozen backup plans?

"The more I get to know you, the more similarities I find between you and spiders," commented Priam.

The sentence drew a smile from his enemy. "Yet, I'm arachnophobic. But you have to fight your weaknesses."

"I'm not sure you're fighting all your weaknesses. For example, I've heard you wish to resurrect your wife and daughter?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the atmosphere froze. The light dimmed, and the mushrooms closed. The distant sound of battle faded. Anatole was in complete control of his domain. Perhaps even his Domain. *Maybe I should have attacked without wasting time...* Part of Priam's brain pondered his possible attacks and escapes.

After about ten seconds, Anatole loosened his teeth. "How?"

Priam looked at him as if his opponent were an idiot. "You think I'm going to answer that?"

"... Your bait worked. I'll hear what you have to say. Think carefully about your words."

Silence filled the room as the workers withdrew. In the distance, the high-pitched cries of spiders could be heard. The ground shook occasionally when the Jubokko tried to hide its root.

Priam didn't know what to say. His clones had given him Anatole's weakness, which must have been complicated to find. It had undoubtedly taken thousands of hypothetical interactions between Anatole and Priam for the secret to be revealed. But if there was just one chance - even in a billion - that Anatole could explain his weakness, then one of his clones could learn it.

I could ask for the perfect phrase to keep the conversation going...

He had eight questions left, three of them before his tribulations. It wasn't much, and he didn't want to waste one now. His doubles had given him all the cards. All he had to do was play them well. Priam had not forgotten his primary objective: to survive his Tribulations. Secondly, he also wanted to save as many people as possible, succeed in his quests and kill Anatole. All three objectives were linked...

The silence dragged on until Priam raised his head.

"I have the means to resurrect Rose as a human without side effects. I swear it on my Potential."

Priam's heart missed a beat as a horrible sensation rose inside him. Like the tide, it invaded his body before receding, leaving him breathless and amputated of part of his Potential.

POT -50.

His oath was accepted by his Potential. After all, he was telling the truth. The System had offered him an excellent quest reward.

[First Quest: Soon to be reunited?](#)
[Eliminate as many Revenants as possible.](#)
[Next reward: Depending on your participation.](#)

[Bonus: Kill Anatole Aely'Samael, the Grand Master of the Cultists.](#)
[Reward: You can choose one soul to resurrect.](#)

For a moment, Priam wondered if everything had been planned. His instincts told him no. The Concepts gave young civilizations a great deal of freedom, certainly in the hope of a miracle.

Anatole widened his eyes. "I... How?"

"Let's be honest, yeah? What's your interest in destroying the Jubokko?"

Of course, being in command of a Viscount-rank spider army and having an Earl to protect his base was positive for Anatole. However, the man hadn't done all this to accumulate some little power. Above all, he wanted to resurrect his family.

The Grand Master of the Revenants remained silent for several seconds. The news seemed to have disturbed him greatly.

"I want to use the Jubokko to kill Safamu - the Lion Earl - that spider and then kill the sequoia. Killing three Earls would create enough of a feat for the Concepts to give me a personalized reward. I... I'd like to resurrect Rose." Anatole's voice was so soft as he spoke his daughter's name that Priam surprised himself with compassion. The man was a monster, but his love seemed genuine.

Priam took some time to ponder the revelation. On his third Achievement, the Concepts had interceded to modify his reward and increase his chances of survival. So, Anatole might have been telling the truth: certain feats made it possible to formulate a wish. *But would that be enough?*

"You're not sure it'll work," Priam realized. Faced with Anatole's silence, Priam continued. "Even if killing those three Earls would allow you to resurrect your wife or daughter, there's little chance you'd succeed. After all, everyone is against you. I'm not easily killed and... My Tribulations are about to begin."

Priam had a plan that required Anatole's cooperation, and he intended to be honest. You couldn't teach an old dog new tricks, so Priam had no intention of lying to his enemy. Truth was his weapon.

"I have several Tribulations coming at once, and they will destroy the plans of most of the factions that gather here."

Anatole raised an eyebrow. "So I'm talking to a dead man."

"That's what we'll see. But even without that, the most powerful human fighters are coming and intend to reap some benefits. The chances of you killing those three Earls on your own are... slim."

"You think I don't know that?!"

Priam raised his weapon when he heard Anatole's angry exclamation. The man lost his temper when his family was at stake.

"I have no choice! I've accumulated two Achievements using the Revenants, but nothing is good enough for the System," Anatole caught his breath before sighing. "The more time

passes, the more powerful fools will become by finding treasure or selling their souls to super factions. If I want to impress the Concepts, it's now or never!"

Thanks to the urn, Anatole had met an early opportunity, but he knew that other humans would soon meet others. Humanity was a competitive species, and staying ahead would be harder and harder. The only way was to make the most of his winnings and reinvest them.

"Then I'll make you a deal. You help me and I'll resurrect your daughter in exchange. Rose will enjoy life once again." Priam felt dirty using a little girl's life to achieve his ends. Anatole's appearance suggested a man in his forties. His daughter must have been barely in her teens.

"How can you be so sure it will work?"

"Well, I swore on my Potential and..."

Anatole cut him off.

"It means you think it will work. Not that it will work."

"It's a quest reward. Kill Anatole Aely'Samael, the Grand Master of the Cultists. Reward: You can choose one soul to resurrect'," read Priam.

Anatole looked him straight in the eye, and Priam tightened his grip on Promesse. After several intense seconds, the man smiled.

"Good."

"What?"

"Good. What do you want in return?" smiled Anatole.

"... Are you sure?" asked Priam. Perhaps this was yet another trap set by his enemy.

"My family is the most important thing to me. I know I have little chance of resurrecting them myself. Almost none, in fact. Some super factions are waiting for the lion to show any sign of weakness. Your proposal assures me of resurrecting my daughter. I accept with pleasure."

A smile lit up his face and he continued. "My wife would die of grief without her baby, so better resurrect my daughter."

"... Perfect then," replied Priam after a pause.

Anatole seemed capable of dying for his daughter, but something was fishy here. Perhaps he had a way to resurrect himself? If so, Anatole would be disappointed. By pissing on the statue of Viracocha, Priam had acquired a particular skill. **[There is no Heaven]** was capable of damaging the souls of his enemies. Priam had no desire to let his enemy live a third time.

"Let's make a contract," proposed Anatole.

"That's what I was going to suggest."

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Lvl Up: [Aether Perception] lvl 13,14,15,16
META (PERC) +12

Lvl Up: [Aether Manipulation] lvl 3
META (PERC) +1
META (AFFI) +1
META (FOCUS) +1

Lvl Up: [Poison Body] lvl 6,7,8,9
CONST +4
VIT +4
META (END) +4

Lvl Up: [Fitness] lvl 11,12
STR +2

A spider approached and sank its fangs into Priam's forearm. Its venom invaded his bloodstream. The toxin was magical, its purpose being to burst the victim's meridians. Priam was careful to inject only small doses. Tribulation was coming, and he needed to be in top form.

The spider backed off, and Priam started doing push-ups again, with Sphinx lying on top of him. Her miniaturization skill wasn't reducing her mass. Sphinx was constantly using a skill that allowed her to manipulate gravity to reduce her weight. At the moment, Priam felt as if an elephant was sitting on him. *I know you don't ask a girl her weight, but my hands are sinking into the rock right now!*

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Priam breathlessly.

"If you're not going to kill your friend," Anatole said, pointing at Sphinx. "That's the best plan."

Priam growled.

"Your daughter won't be resurrected if you lie to me."

"I know."

Anatole's idea was based on Priam's plan: to obtain the Earl Title just after triggering his Tribulations. The timing had to be perfect. Killing the Noble too soon would trigger a fifth or even sixth Tribulation. If the Earl survived too long, the Tribulations would keep Priam busy, leaving him no time to finish off his enemy.

"I don't understand why you're so bent on killing Safamu. The mushrooms that cover the Jubokko are highly flammable. We could kill it very easily now that it's weakened," sighed Anatole.

Priam shook his head. "The tree must die poisoned."

His clones had spoken of a Crimson Fruit, obtained by the Poisoner. It was a safe bet that the tree would put all its energy into creating a fruit as it felt itself dying. The flames would kill it quickly but destroy the fruit.

"You want it to die slowly, but it'll take almost ten hours with the poison. It would be closer to twenty hours without the mushrooms; that's still too long for your Tribulations," remarked Anatole.

Priam set about finishing his push-ups.

"Too bad," he muttered, arms outstretched to face the ground, before starting another push-up. The Crimson Fruit could wait until his Tribulations were over. Priam had high hopes of it synergizing with Log-a-rhythm...

So he needed another target. Of course, killing the spider controlled by Anatole seemed more straightforward than destroying Safamu - even if wounded.

"And you, sure you can't control your spider better?" gasped Priam.

Anatole looked down at the creature of horror that served as his mount.

"I wish I could solve our problem right now, but I can't. If you attack it, it'll fight back. I can influence it and attack the Jubokko, for example, but it retains its survival instinct. What's more, its death means mine. If I die, the Concepts may ask you directly who you should resurrect. I don't want my daughter to be surrounded by hundreds of thousands of giant spiders. She's arachnophobic," he explained.

"Like her Dad."

"Yes," smiled Anatole before recovering himself. "Which leaves us with the lion. I'm keeping an eye on his Tribulation. We'll come up as soon as it nears the end."

"To kill him directly if his Tribulation is too dangerous or to ambush him," Priam finished.

Lvl Up: [Fitness] lvl 13
STR +1

"Okay, that's enough!" he declared. Sphinx jumped down, and Priam sat cross-legged. "Show me the exercises again, please," he asked Anatole.

Priam had been waiting for nearly three hours but hadn't rested. The first thing he had done was to fetch Sphinx to witness their contract. The mythical creature told him she could create the contract herself, and Anatole agreed.

The terms were simple. Anatole would do everything in his power to ensure that Priam survived his next Tribulation. In exchange, Priam would kill Anatole a few moments before triggering his Tribulations. He would then resurrect Rose directly - Anatole had no confidence in Priam's ability to survive his Tribulations - and entrust her to Sphinx. Once the Tribulations were over, a certain Seraphine would come to fetch Rose, and Priam would let her collect the child and leave.

The contract was very basic, but according to Sphinx, it was for the best. Finding a loophole in a complicated contract was possible, but a simple one didn't have this problem.

On the whole, Priam was satisfied. His resistance to poison was increasing and he would be able to resist the egg-laying mother more easily when he would have to kill Anatole.

However, the real opportunity laid elsewhere. Priam didn't know the Revenants' master's background, but he was a genius when it came to manipulating aether. By explaining a few tricks and giving Priam a few exercises, the young man had made a giant leap forward in aether manipulation.

During the first hour, Anatole had taught him how to color his aether and force it into specific shapes. Thanks to his mental attributes, Priam had quickly mastered a few simple exercises. Anatole didn't comment, but he sensed his opponent's surprise.

Priam had unlocked level three of **[Aether Manipulation]** when he succeeded in making the still image of a Rubik's Cube. The exercise may have seemed simple, but the reality was quite different. Priam had to materialize nine threads of aether and bend them in such a way as to imitate twenty-seven cubes that then formed one. Because of the level-up, Priam had to temporarily stop his experiments. META (Focus) was at 99, and just one more point would trigger a new Tribulation.

Priam was disappointed to stop there and asked for exercises to improve **[Aether Perception]**. Handling aether reminded him of real magic. Talking to Anatole, he had learned that aether could produce different results depending on the form it took. Apparently, System skills were extremely complex runes of aether engraved in a person's soul.

The master of the Revenants and Priam had exchanged theories on aether, the System, the eighth Concept and even various hypothetical Titles or Achievements. Priam found himself admiring the Revenant's brilliant mind. *If only he weren't a complete psychopath...*

"I sense useless thoughts. There's not much time left, the Earl's Tribulation is nearing its end," Anatole announced, ending his demonstration.

"Okay. I think I'm ready," Priam replied. It was only half true, as he had waited a little longer than necessary. Indeed, the Viscount-rank spiders' poison had lost its effectiveness almost a

quarter of an hour ago. But despite their contract, Priam wouldn't have gone near an Earl-rank spider without a fail-safe. He smiled as he read his latest notification.

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

Anatole nodded, and the colossal spider slowly approached Priam. Its mandibles opened, and he held out his hand. The spider's fangs closed, and Priam clenched his teeth with all his might.

The Earl stepped back, and Priam began to breathe again. He ran his tongue along his teeth. One of his molars had cracked under the effort.

The spider's venom was slowly spreading through his veins. Priam tried to concentrate his aether but to no avail. **[Moon Mist]** was equally useless, and no mist was created. *However, I can still control the existing mist...*

A few minutes later, his body had analyzed and destroyed the poison.

Lvl Up: [Poison Body] lvl 10

CONST +1

VIT +1

META (END) +1

"I suppose it worked?" guessed Anatole, noticing Priam's smile.

"Yep. What do we do now?"

"Now we go to the surface. We have to stop Safamu from joining the Jubokko. If we don't, they'll help each other, and we'll lose everything," concludes Anatole.

"We go up, and I kill the big lion," Priam summed up.

Sphinx climbed onto Priam's shoulder, and he leaped towards the surface. Behind him, Anatole followed.

Priam's heart clenched with excitement. In less than two hours, he would be unleashing his Tribulations.

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

PHYSICAL:

Strength 159 (+4)

Constitution 284 (+6)

Agility 194

Vitality 298 (+7)

Perception 299

MENTAL:

Vivacity 176

Dexterity 202

Memory 50

Willpower 295

Charisma 150

META:

Meta-affinity 148 (+1)

Meta-focus 99 (+1)

Meta-endurance 98 (+5)

Meta-perception 51 (+13)

Meta-chance 114

Potential: 1200 (-27)

Tier 0

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

[Tribulation]: Tribulations are coming.

Time: 4 hours 33 minutes 15 seconds.