

Chapter 235: Back to Water World

Log-a-rhythm:

Status:

Current POT: 1 225

Passive gain: 100 (+250) (+40) POT/day.

(+250 POT/day: bonus - Guardian of the Forest V)

(+40 POT/day: bonus - Natural Growth IV)

Available Themes

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Underground I (300) (-200)

Log-a-rhythm had amassed over a thousand Potential Points in just three days. Priam's tree continued to grow, destined to become a behemoth, both physically and magically. The thought of accelerating its development by helping it acquire a Concept brought a smile to his face.

Underground I ACQUIRED

The ground trembled slightly, but even this minor quake was enough to alert Priam. Placing a hand on the trunk of his tree, he closed his eyes and connected with it. Instantly, he felt the roots burrow into the earth beneath the trunk, reaching for the bedrock that formed the foundation of the floating island where the System had placed the rivals.

From the chasm in the rabhorns' territory, the rock layer was likely hundreds of meters deep. It was highly durable; even Priam's Breath left no mark during the battle against the Brood Mother. Only the corroded shaft leading to Sumstreh's hideout proved it could be damaged.

Gorged with Potential, Log-a-rhythm's roots succeeded too. Empowered by the strength of the Seven, they mined the bedrock ten meters deep for about five minutes. When the power of the Seven withdrew, Priam turned to the Oasis inhabitants gathered around him.

"Log-a-rhythm has created a circular room roughly twenty-five square meters in size. The walls, floor, and part of the ceiling are made of rock, with just an opening the roots used to dig and which they are now sealing," he summarized.

"Log-a-rhythm is plugging the hole with its stump?" Louis asked.

"That's right. It's positioned directly above the future rift to absorb most of the foreign aether that will escape from it," Priam confirmed. "Passing through Log-a-rhythm is the only possible exit."

"Twenty-five square meters is about a three-meter radius," calculated Rose. "My parents' living room was bigger than that."

"When I was a student, my apartment was smaller," Priam recalled. "We still have enough Potential to buy Underground II if we want."

The Oasis inhabitants began debating the pros and cons before Hyshana spoke up.

"It's small for home but perfect for hosting the rift. In case of an invasion, few enemies will be able to get through before piling up."

Alain nodded. "Hyshana's right. If enemies push us back to this side of the rift, this room will be our last defense. Better to fortify it and fill it with traps and turrets than let invaders use it as an outpost."

Priam noticed Rose taking notes and smiled. If an enemy crossed over, they would get a hell of a welcome...

"So, should I use Underground II?"

"Not to enlarge the room, but you could create a second bunker," Alain suggested.

"Do we need that?"

"Rose and I are close to our first Tribulation and we could use a workshop."

Hearing his father's voice made Priam's stomach churn. Conversations hushed; everyone remembered the last person who went through their Tribulations. Mirscella's death was still fresh.

"You..." Fear choked Priam's words.

"Don't worry, son," Alain reassured with a smile. "I've spoken with the Guardian of Secrets. As non-combatants, our early Tribulations aren't lethal."

Priam narrowed his eyes. He knew his father well enough to see through his attempt to avoid causing worry.

"Non-lethal doesn't mean safe."

"Life is dangerous," Alain shrugged. "But we should easily pass our first Tribulations; I wouldn't risk Rose's life if I thought she might get hurt."

"Trust us," the teenager grinned, giving him a thumbs-up.

Priam scrutinized Rose and then his father before nodding. The old man wouldn't risk others' lives.

"Alright. Why a workshop and not a Tribulation Chamber?"

"Our Tribulations won't be destructive but will need a calm and isolated environment. There's a limit to what we can create without specialized tools and working outdoors," Rose indicated the clearing. "You know how annoying it is to carve runes with wasps buzzing in my ears and ants crawling on me?"

Priam sympathized. "I suppose we didn't build rockets by solving equations in the sand."

"They wanted to buy a workshop with their Sun points, but I talked them out of it," Kazuki interjected. "With the tribes arriving soon, having it hidden would be safer."

"If everyone agrees, so be it," Priam smiled.

Underground II ACQUIRED

Current POT: 225

The ground trembled again, and a second room was dug ten meters below the first. The future workshop was fifty square meters and disconnected from the first room.

"I'll leave you to furnish it," Priam said. "Meanwhile, let's set up the rift."

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The white, rough, and indestructible walls of the first bunker surrounded the rivals, and only the dim light from Log-a-rhythm illuminated them. A massive root descended from the ceiling, and the crimson sap flowing within produced a fantastical ambiance.

Priam, Kazuki, Jasmine, and Esmée stood in the room's center. It was decided that the rivals would ensure the rift's safety before inviting others. Priam had hesitated to invite Esmée, the only one whose allegiance was uncertain. After a half-second of intense reflection—a monumental duration for someone with his vivacity—he decided to extend a hand. It had nothing to do with him finding her attractive or pleasant; it was a political and pragmatic choice.

Esmée, like Osiris or Eve, was a genius in her field. She could easily obtain information and manipulate the world to achieve her goals. Alone, Priam was only half-confident about surviving if the princess wanted him dead—she didn't know the mechanism of his resurrection but knew he had the power. If she decided to kill him, she would go all out, knowing only one of them would make it out alive.

However, Priam wasn't alone. If the princess targeted Oasis, he'd be powerless to prevent a surprise attack. The conclusion was clear: if Esmée ever proved to be an enemy, he'd have to eliminate her ruthlessly.

A monumental waste. As an ally, the princess could be invaluable. Whether it was managing Oasis, keeping the tribes at bay, spying on their enemies, or even spotting opportunities, Esmée's skills and education made her an exceptional professional partner.

Priam watched the young woman touch the rock with a finger while consulting her grimoire. The System had placed ten rivals in Elysium, and some personalities were bound to clash. However, he was convinced he would go further by forging alliances rather than eliminating all competition.

"Is there a problem?" The princess stood, pushing a stray blonde lock out of her eyes.

"None," Priam smiled. "Everyone step back from the center: I'm going to place the rift."

Accessing his interface, he pointed to the room's center. The System descended, and in an instant, an invisible vortex began to distort light and space. A black orb appeared at the siphon's center, breaking the silence. A shrill noise made the rivals wince as air and ambient aether were sucked into the singularity.

Seeing the phenomenon grow, everyone stepped back. A minute later, the black hole stabilized after reaching the size of a human head. The air stopped rushing into the void, and a cascade of foreign energy erupted from the passage. Priam distinctly felt the aether of Elysium vanish inside, exchanged for that of Valaryth.

"I can feel Valaryth's aether much more easily than in the cenote," Kazuki noted.

The hoplite had already seen the rift when he used it to threaten Seth.

"It might be a hidden System reward, but the flow is about five times greater," Priam measured.

"Can we cross?" Jasmine asked, beginning to stretch. The young woman was ready to contort herself to fit through the small opening.

"Only if you have multiple lives," Esmée replied. "This rift is stable, but it's not a portal. The dimensional currents behind are deadly."

Priam focused for a moment before understanding the princess's point. His sphere of authority enveloped the rift, yet the information he received from the other side was scrambled, as if space itself was being shredded.

Jumping into this rift was like leaping through a ship's propellers, hoping to pass through unscathed.

"Good thing we have the Sun Shop," Priam said.

"How do you plan to use it?" Esmée asked. "You're thinking of creating a ritual using Stability fragments?"

The Tier 1 Concept fragment was purchasable directly, but Priam had a more straightforward solution.

Sun Shop:

Territory:

Some infrastructures are available as blueprints at half the cost.

Protective Barrier VI (250 000 points) - A protective barrier capable of covering 25 000 square meters and stopping attacks from a strong Tier 0 Elysian Marquess.

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Rift Stabilizer T0 (500 000 points) - A ritual allowing Tier 0s to pass through a wild rift.

"A ritual would likely be cheaper, but I'd rather buy the stabilizer; it seems safer."

"A stabilizer?"

"Rift Stabilizer T0, half a million Sun points," Priam read.

"As a Marquess, I can't see items more expensive than 250 000 points," Esmée grimaced. No matter their fortune in Sun points, the System refused to sell its best items to the weakest.

"You're not even a Duchess?" Jasmine asked, feigning shock.

"You've been a Duchess for less than twelve hours," Esmée reminded her.

"Still a Duchess."

The princess frowned before turning to Priam.

"Since only a Duke can exploit a rift, it's normal that a stabilizer isn't purchasable without reaching that rank of Nobility."

"I guess so," Priam said, then grimaced. "I hope I can disable it from time to time to level up **[Space Resistance]**..."

Under his rivals' flabbergasted gaze, he bought the stabilizer, and the System manifested once more.

A two-meter diameter runic circle appeared before the rivals. The structure floated perpendicularly to the ground, emitting a low hum. At its center, the rift's intense blackness contrasted with the millions of tiny white runes flashing on the stabilizer's surface.

Suddenly, the hum intensified, and the tool began siphoning ambient aether at a furious pace. The runes absorbed the fluid, transforming it according to a mind-blowingly complicated pattern. The ritual began rewriting reality, manipulating space and time to connect two different worlds.

Priam started recording the array's functioning before a wave of dizziness brought him to his knees. His vision blurred, and his thoughts began to escape him. His personality multiplied, and a cacophony erupted in his mind as his fractured ego screamed.

His mind—or was it his soul?—couldn't comprehend the changes enacted by the stabilizer, and he urgently retracted his Domain and aether perception. His add-on would kill him before he went insane, and Priam wanted to enter Valaryth with **[He Who Eludes Death]** primed. *Another time*, he promised himself.

Turning his head, he met Esmée's gaze, who was also bleeding from her eyes. He hadn't been the only one to attempt something foolish.

The two rivals exchanged a weary smile as the hum subsided. Priam waited for the silence to return before looking back. In the room's center, the rift had expanded to touch the white

circle. Now large enough to accommodate a standing man, it no longer resembled a singularity but a portal.

A hole in reality opened onto a sandy beach. In the background, waves periodically crashed on the shore. A bird's cry echoed in the bunker.

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You have just left the Concepts Universe.

Location: Valaryth - fragment 84.

As an invader, the laws of Elysium will allow you to remain in this world as long as the rift you exploit is operational.

Happy invasion!

Priam felt the dry sand caress his bare feet as he walked toward the water. A few steps later, he crossed an ephemeral boundary and felt the coolness of moisture refresh the soles of his feet. The tide was going out, and the wet sand he trod was firm. He moved further to let the waves lick him. Foam covered his toes, and he took a deep breath, feeling the air fill his lungs.

The ocean invigorated him.

"Welcome to Valaryth," Priam smiled as he turned around. Through the rift, he could clearly see his rivals watching him. Being the most likely to survive a space storm or an ambush, he had crossed first.

Kazuki followed. The hoplite strode across the sand with the confidence of habit. The difference in gravity or atmosphere didn't seem to perturb the warrior. He smiled, closing his eyes. "Here, the wind speaks to me," he said before frowning. "The System *grants* me two months of conditional freedom."

Priam nodded. "The laws of Elysium won't let us leave easily."

"Unless I join your army."

"Indeed." The hoplite looked pensive, and Priam continued. "You know it means nothing to me. You're a friend and a rival, not a subordinate."

Kazuki laughed. "You don't need to reassure me. I'm not that insecure. I worry about my soldiers and my people. Even if it's just in name, being under your command will have political repercussions."

Priam was glad he had refused any political responsibility. If Prometheus was interested, he could have that glory.

"I understand. It's up to you, my friend."

"If only it were up to me," the hoplite growled before looking around. "Do you recognize this place?"

"No, the rift's destination has changed," Priam replied. "The first time, there was a ruined city behind me and other islands on the horizon. I have no idea where we are."

The two rivals stood on a beach trapped between a forest and the ocean. To the right and left, the strip of sand ran a few hundred meters before reaching tall cliffs. The System had placed the portal exit at the center of a medium-sized bay, shaped like a perfect crescent. The rocky coastline extended over a hundred meters into the ocean at both ends, forming a natural harbor sheltered from storms. *A pirate's dream.*

"It looks like a perfect defensive position," declared Priam.

"Against an attack coming from the sea," replied Kazuki. "But the hinterland could surprise us. I'll do some reconnaissance."

"Meet back here in twenty minutes?"

"That's fine with me," declared the hoplite, heading toward the forest.

Shortly after he left, the rift rippled, allowing Jasmine to step through. The young woman froze at the sight of the ocean, her eyes wide.

"Impressive, right?" said Priam as a larger wave crashed on the sand. The water surged up the beach, and Jasmine stepped back just before her feet got wet.

"You mean terrifying," she breathed.

"I would say inspiring," declared Esmée as she crossed through next.

The contrasting reactions of the two women made Priam smile. Jasmine looked at the sea a moment longer before turning to the cliffs bordering the bay. "I think I prefer heights to depths. Can I climb up there? To see where we are."

"We'll meet back here in twenty minutes. Have fun."

As the assassin sprinted off, Esmée approached the water to dip her feet.

"It's cold!" she exclaimed.

"You get used to it," Priam laughed. "Is this your first time seeing the ocean?"

"Indeed. The Royal Palace often flew over seas, but this is not the same," the princess smiled, opening her grimoire.

Priam thought she was going to write something, but to his surprise, she began to sketch the landscape. With a few strokes of graphite pencil, she captured the sea, the waves, and the sun.

When she set down the charcoal, Priam didn't hide his admiration. With his memory and dexterity, he could have reproduced the scene with photographic accuracy, but Esmée had added an artistic touch that eluded him. The waves seemed ready to crash onto the sand, and just looking at the foam, he could almost feel the spray on his skin.

"You have a gift," he said. The compliment felt almost bland compared to the emotion the drawing evoked in him.

"I'm sure you could do just as well."

"I'm good at many things, but not drawing," Priam replied. "I have trouble visualizing images in my head."

That had partially changed thanks to **[Eidetic Memory]**, but only for his memories. When he needed to visualize the design of a rune in his mind, Priam used his add-on.

"Oh, you're slightly aphantasic?"

As Priam prepared to ask what that meant, his earpiece crackled and activated.

"I have good news and bad news," said Kazuki's voice. "The bad news is I just found fresh footprints. The good news is they might be of draconic origin."

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 707

Constitution 1 105

Agility 614

Vitality 1 040

Perception 760

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 570

Dexterity 652

Memory 824

Willpower 1 134

Charisma 661

META:

Meta-affinity 779

Meta-focus 405

Meta-endurance 608

Meta-perception 342

Meta-chance 274

Meta-authority 207

Potential: 13 517
Tier 0

Sun points: 1 479 396 (-499 827)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 156 days 16 hours 22 minutes 53 seconds.

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