

Chapter 244: Abyssal Explorer

“What did you learn from the fight?” asked Kazuki.

“My blade struggled to pierce its scales,” Gallad reported.

The former instructor nodded, eyes on the shredded corpse of the amphiptere. The winged serpent had ambushed the two hoplites as they explored the city. Knowing his rival had a penchant for slaying draconic creatures, Kazuki had first tried to repel the beast before realizing it was rabid and killing it was necessary.

“Draconic talents are formidable.” The Hoplite Champion had no trouble breaching the creature’s defenses, but his build was tailored for armor-piercing. “What else?”

“Considering the size of this beast, it’s not an adult. The creature Blueberry is cooking is at least four times larger... This world is dangerous, even for Titan-class warriors,” Gallad said, frowning. He was disappointed but too disciplined to deny the truth. “Yet, data from the Reunion suggests I should be able to handle most Tier 1s without issue.”

“I felt more resistance piercing this serpent’s scales than Eleha’s skin,” Kazuki said, kneeling to touch the amphiptere’s scales. They were still tough, but much less so than during the fight. “The harsh environment forces the inhabitants to push their limits to reach Tier 1. It’s good training for us.”

Gallad nodded. “We will fight to pave the way, sir. What’s our next move?”

“Let’s keep exploring. We can’t leave such powerful enemies near the rift.”

If Priam had wanted to kill every amphiptere, he would have done so. The two hoplites continued exploring the ruins for almost two hours without encountering any new adversaries.

“According to the Guardian of Secrets, draconic creatures breed like rabbits, yet this city is empty,” Gallad noted.

“It’s possible a certain density of aether is needed for these creatures to reproduce easily. Or something is culling them,” Kazuki replied, eyeing the two buildings at the city’s heart.

The warriors headed toward the first building, which resembled a temple. Priam had likely visited it already, as two enormous winged serpent corpses lay inside. After analyzing the hall to better understand the amphipteres’ strengths and weaknesses, they moved to the second structure. Its double doors were titanic, nearly ten meters high, but dwarfed by the edifice’s towers, some of which reached two hundred meters.

Pausing at the entrance, the warriors surveyed the lobby. The monumental room was tall enough to comfortably fit Log-a-rhythm and nearly a hundred meters long. Besides the opulent decor that had weathered time well, Kazuki’s eyes were drawn to the hundreds of skeletons littering the floor.

“Amphipteres died here,” Gallad stated the obvious.

“The question is: were they hunted or did they come here voluntarily?”

Kazuki scanned for traps and found nothing.

The corpses were scattered haphazardly, some piled on top of others. Only the staircase at the lobby's far end, leading to the building's core, was free of remains.

“Permission to scout ahead.”

“Permission denied. Go inform Hyshana and bring back all the soldiers on break,” Kazuki ordered. “Tell them to bring their mechs.”

Gallad saluted, then left without another word. The hoplites weren't obligated to help Priam invade this world, but compensation might tempt them. *Something tells me this building hides interesting secrets...*

Kazuki surveyed the lobby without stepping inside. The doors could shut behind him, and he refused to die foolishly.

His gaze returned to the remains. While the flesh had decayed, leaving only traces on the floor, the bones had endured. Kazuki noticed they were far from intact. Some had been crushed, sliced, pierced, or burned... others had simply vanished.

Each amphiptere had perished in violent conflict. But against what adversary?

A faint noise alerted Kazuki, who leapt back. The doors slammed shut, nearly pushing him inside. *A trap.*

Summoning his spear, the hoplite prepared for battle.

Five minutes passed with the doors remaining closed. The enemy was cautious.

Kazuki pointed his spear at the heavy stone doors. In a fluid motion, he channeled maximum energy from his feet to his shoulders and struck the stone. The air vibrated, and the shockwave swept the ground before the building.

The door remained intact.

Kazuki's face showed no disappointment or frustration. Mobilizing Micro II and Spear Mastery II, he repeated the attack. The impact shook the ground, and a fragment of stone chipped off the door.

Stretching his wrists, sore from the shock, the Spear Virtuoso contemplated improvements. He could enhance penetration by focusing his Mastery on the spear tip rather than the blade. With a stationary target, he could plant his feet firmly, drawing more power from the ground. Agility was unnecessary; the strike needed to be powerful, not swift. Micro II could overclock other muscles while reinforcing his wrists.

I could also take inspiration from Priam and his high-intensity barrage...

Kazuki resumed his stance and attacked again. The ground trembled, his spear vibrated, and a fragment of stone sublimated, transformed into gas like a flint being struck.

Three tries later, he doubled the fragment's size with each strike. Ten tries later, he developed a new epic skill for destroying hard materials. Forty tries later, a fist-sized hole was visible in the right door.

Sweat beaded on the tiny scales covering his skin, but the warrior was satisfied. His spear skills made progress, and that was what mattered.

When the hole reached fifty centimeters in radius, having penetrated half the door's thickness, the invisible enemy had enough. The double doors opened again, revealing a statue at the lobby's far end. Descending the stairs, the stone figure locked eyes with Kazuki.

“After all this time, the Concepts send soldiers... Isn't the fate of this fragment cruel enough?”

Rather than answer, Kazuki took a defensive stance. His instincts told him this mysterious foe was at least as powerful as Eleha. His chances of victory were slim, but the Champion refused to back down.

His defeat against Eleha had confirmed that the only way to protect his people was to become stronger.

[Symbiosis - Nightmare], [Odyssey - Legendary].

As his armor materialized around him and his Story unfolded, Kazuki identified the stranger.

[Multi-Analysis]

[Stone Sentinel - Tier 1 - Earl] - A sentinel controlled by a vengeful spirit.

The sentinel leapt. Breaking the sound barrier with its acceleration, it arrived in front of Kazuki in an instant, swinging a warhammer. The hoplite parried instinctively and countered with **[Odyssey - Legendary Thrust]**.

His third legendary skill, boosted by Odyssey, struck the sentinel's neck. The blow sent the sentinel flying like a puppet hit by a missile.

According to his AI, the combo created by the two skills was powerful enough to decapitate Eleha if the Tier 3 allowed herself to be hit. The sentinel stood up and mended the crack with a wave of its hand. Kazuki tightened his grip. The fight would be tough.

That was exactly what he wanted.

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***Title upgraded! [Atlantis Citizen - Silver] becomes [Abyssal Explorer - Gold].
Congratulations!***

[Abyssal Explorer - Gold] - One kilometer deep. You've reached a zone where light never penetrates. The pressure is terrifying, but for now, you've realized it's not a real problem. Your instincts are sharp; the Abyss is a mysterious place. Humanity has conquered space but not the ocean depths.

As a Champion of Humanity, it's your role to be the pioneer.

Increases the learning speed of underwater skills.

AGI +30%

Valaryth's Ocean's reward: Level up **[Asphyxia Resistance]** x5; **[Smooth Scales]** x5

Lvl Up: **[Asphyxia Resistance]** Lvl 23,...., 27

VIT +10

META(Endurance) +5

Lvl Up: **[Smooth Scales]** Lvl 11,...., 15

AGI +15

With the Title's upgraded bonus and level-ups, a primal energy nourished Priam's physique. His agility increased, transforming his muscles, tendons, and bones, while he felt his dependency on oxygen decrease, relieving him of a burden. He had made a mistake by not resurfacing for air, but his resistance plus **[Breathless]** still gave him another half hour. So, *I have about twenty minutes to find the Terror...*

Descending below a thousand meters hadn't been too complicated. Thanks to his knowledge of physics, Priam knew that the water making up sixty percent of his body was nearly incompressible. Theoretically, an ordinary human could dive ten times deeper without their organs bursting.

Several difficulties prevented this feat, the primary being the need to breathe. The pressure of the air in the lungs must equal that of the outside environment. This was a problem for divers with tanks, as the density of gases increased with pressure, requiring greater breathing effort and modification of the inhaled air. This wasn't an obstacle for Priam because he could hold his breath for a long time.

However, without taking a breath, the air in his lungs was at a much lower pressure compared to the outside. The water's weight compressed his lungs, and while his constitution and **[Sun Steel Body]** kept him from being crushed like a soda can, this was a temporary aid. Priam had found a better solution by filling his lungs with saltwater. Without a void to press on, the pressure on his ribcage vanished.

The sensation was obviously uncomfortable, but Micro sealed his lungs. Other physiological issues would arise at greater depths, but for now, Priam could continue his hunt without a problem.

Eyes closed, he swam, feeling his powerful muscles propel him towards the abyss. Guided by **[Echolocation]**, he entered a canyon. The chasm had straight edges as if cut by a gigantic sword. It lay at the foot of an underwater volcano and seemed anything but natural.

Priam wasn't there to study the local topology and continued his descent. At fifteen hundred meters, a creature akin to giant squids crossed his path. Possessing about twenty tentacles nearly forty meters long, it approached within ten meters of him.

Priam prepared for battle, summoning Promesse and a dozen ice spears. To counter the water's viscosity, he covered them with Spear Mastery and Conquest Aura. The misty halo created a glow that pierced the darkness, seemingly terrorizing the cephalopod, which retreated. *It's afraid of the light or the Aura.*

Shrugging, Priam resumed swimming towards the depths. He encountered other inhabitants, but none sought trouble except for a lamprey he froze using **[Kinetic Control]**. His instincts whispered that nightmarish creatures inhabited the abyss, but for now, they showed no interest in him.

At two kilometers deep, he reached the bottom of the underwater gorge. The two steep sides met in an artificial line running the length of the canyon. No Terror was visible on the horizon, and there was no way to go deeper without digging a hole through the rock.

Frowning, Priam touched the bottom before passing his hand over the perfectly smooth stone. A thin layer of sand covered the canyon, but nothing indicated the presence of his enemy.

Was Esmée wrong? Knowing she could scry him despite his ideal Epic resistance, Priam doubted it. Maybe he had swum diagonally? His add-on confirmed he had deviated by about fifty meters during his vertical dive.

Using Domain to anchor himself to the ocean floor, Priam ascended the chasm before reaching a new point. Nothing seemed different, but his Domain detected an absence of sand. The young man roamed the seabed for a few minutes before noticing a nearly one hundred square meter section of stone was pristine. No sand, no small algae, no organic debris rested on the stone.

That's suspicious.

A hidden gate?

Priam infused his aether into the ground and tried using Domain to probe it without success. Equipping Promesse, he struck the ground several times—in vain. His spear skills were ineffective underwater as his weapon benefited from his Titles and Talents, but not from his resistances. This was regrettable because **[Smooth Scales]** alone could have turned him into a master of aquatic combat. Currently, his only attack capable of piercing rock was Breath and it would transform the surroundings into vapor, likely injuring him in return.

He searched for a clue, a crack, and even ended up pronouncing "Mellon" with an old wizard accent before admitting the truth: the riddle eluded him.

As his lungs began to cry out in distress, Priam used his kinetic mastery to cool the water in a sphere around him. The goal was to create an ice shell to safely open a passage to Concepts Archipelago. He could then breathe and consult the Phoenix.

Priam siphoned nearby kinetic energy, wary of a potential ambush. The ambient temperature dropped to zero degrees Celsius without the water solidifying. When it reached minus eight degrees Celsius while remaining liquid, Priam was astonished. Saltwater had a lower freezing point than pure water, but not by that much.

Intrigued, he continued channeling his skill, observing the water's behavior through his Domain. His Supremacy wasn't fine enough to study individual molecules, but his add-on could perceive trends.

Forgetting his prey for a few seconds, Priam focused on his kinetic proficiency, trying to understand the molecules' behavior through his skill. As the water approached minus ten degrees Celsius, his Ultimate Sensory Memory recalled the phase diagram for water—a diagram showing the state change temperature of a pure substance depending on its pressure.

I'm so dumb.

He had forgotten his physics lessons. At two thousand meters deep, the water pressure was two hundred times that of the atmosphere. On Valaryth, this pressure was greater than on Earth, resulting in a much lower state change temperature.

The water began to freeze at minus fifteen degrees Celsius. As the ice dome appeared, half of Priam's attention was focused on his kinetic skill. Through his Domain and skill, he now saw a link between pressure, temperature, and kinetic energy.

This epiphany resonated within him, deepened his understanding of the skill, and allowed him to delve deeper into its intricacies.

Lvl Up: [Physics - Matter] Lvl 2, 3, 4
VIVA +9

Lvl Up: [Physics - Energy] Lvl 3, 4, 5
VIVA +9

Priam was taken aback when he saw his Vivacity so close to six hundred. If he gained eight more points, he would trigger a sixth Tribulation. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he instructed his add-on to block any level-up with Potential.

Forcing himself to ignore this annoyance, Priam focused on digesting the inspirations and knowledge he had just acquired. This would help him better master his kinetic ability and understand its limits and possibilities.

The System appeared to agree.

[Kinetic Control] has reached level 60, its maximum level as an Epic skill.

Another upgrade unlocked. Three upgrades are available:

[Kinetic Domination - Legendary] - Prerequisites: Domain, [Physique - Forces], [Physique - Energies], [Adaptive Golden Meridians].

You know about subtle kinetic applications but prefer power. Shock and velocity become your main weapons. You sow great destruction on the battlefield. High upgrade potential. Potential Cost: 360.

[Chemical & Kinetic Control - Legendary] - Prerequisites: Pyro Concept (Affinity), Domain, [Physics - Matter].

Pyro grants you an affinity with thermal energy. Domain allows you to finely manipulate particles. You can now catalyze or halt certain chemical reactions. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 180.

[Thermal & Kinetic Control - Legendary] - Prerequisites: Pyro Concept (Affinity), Domain, [Physics - Energies], [Physics - Matter].

*Your affinity with thermal energy and Domain enable you to manipulate thermal agitation as well as the movement of molecules and atoms. You understand the role of pressure in the grand scheme of things. In your Domain, different states coexist. Impressive. High upgrade potential. Potential Cost: 360. **NEW***

Priam felt his heart race upon seeing the high upgrade. With this new prerequisite checked, he was sure that mastering the Pyro Concept was the final hurdle before achieving an ideal upgrade of his most versatile skill. *But first...*

As the ice layer shielded him from the pressure, Priam opened a passage to Concepts Archipelago. The water around him surged into the portal before a rush of air flowed from the opposite direction.

Taking a deep breath, Priam smiled as he felt his cells revive. There were few things better than taking a gulp of air just after narrowly escaping drowning.

Satisfied, he took a step forward to cross through the portal and collided with the beak of the phoenix standing at the entrance.

“Well, well... A draconic lair.”

Priam could have sworn his mentor was smiling.

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Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 725

Constitution 1 105

Agility 864 (+22)

Vitality 1 058 (+18)

Perception 767

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 592 (+22)

Dexterity 657

Memory 842

Willpower 1 163

Charisma 692

META:

Meta-affinity 798

Meta-focus 409

Meta-endurance 624 (+7)

Meta-perception 340

Meta-chance 274

Meta-authority 216

Potential: 13 637 (+32)

Tier 0

Sun points: 1 481 193 (+89)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 153 days 11 hours 9 minutes 40 seconds.

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