

Chapter 232: First come, first served.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Priam said, floating down.

"Pleasantly?" Esmée replied, rising gracefully. She performed a flawless curtsy, which Priam mimicked with dexterity.

"Of course," the young man winked. Seeing the princess's smile, he guessed his curtsy had probably broken half a dozen Emyrean etiquette rules, but it didn't matter.

"Who's that?" Esmée asked, looking past Priam.

"Esmée, this is Jasmine Kaldwin... A trusted friend." The young assassin's eyes widened. "Jasmine, meet Esmée Lóthandorim, one of our rivals."

"Jasmine," Esmée acknowledged. "I am honored to meet the Assassin."

"Mmh, yeah," Jasmine responded distractedly, her eyes fixed on Priam. The young man cleared his throat.

"So, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I was looking for you. The odds of finding you here were the highest," Esmée smiled.

"Regarding our agreement?"

In exchange for passage to the Moon of Humanity, the princess had promised to mutate his Moon Wyrms so it could reach the potential of a Sun Wyrms. Since the creature was potentially one of the trophies Priam sought for his temperance, he had agreed.

"Due to a..." Esmée hesitated, biting her lower lip. She continued, "change of plans, I have the opportunity and desire to distance myself from my brother. Accessing the Colosseum this week would be a waste, and I wondered if you could use your Hearthstone in two or three weeks... If that works for you, of course."

Priam took a moment to consider the proposal. He'd read too many stories where someone died for a pretty face to make the same mistake.

If he opened a passage to the Colosseum in three weeks, he, Jasmine, and Kazuki could cross over with Esmée and collect some rewards from the Colosseum just before the tribes tournament. Better yet, he could trigger his Tribulations away from Elysium and Sumstreh.

"Three weeks sounds good," he smiled. "But I'm not sure I can wait much longer for the Moon Wyrms' mutation. The egg is already starting to stir," Priam said.

Esmée nodded, tucking away her grimoire. "I'll handle that while preparing for my Tribulations; it will hatch within two days."

“Perfect. We can go as soon as I’ve secured that,” he said, pointing to the rift a few meters underwater.

“Secured?”

“I plan to make a few trips inside. Since I don’t want an enemy destroying this rift while I’m on the other side, I’d better secure it.”

Valaryth had draconic creatures useful for Priam’s temperance, but the rift was nearly five kilometers from Oasis. Without surveillance, nothing would stop an enemy from closing or trapping it. As Elysium always recalled its inhabitants, the consequences wouldn’t be final, but Priam would have no way of returning to the water world.

“Smart,” Esmée acknowledged. But it’s easier said than done. When I arrived, I glanced at the rift, and moving it promises to be challenging.”

“If the gentle method doesn’t work, I’ll use my Duke privileges,” Priam smiled, invoking the description of one of his Titles.

[Elysium Duke - Mythic] - Where the Marquess must defend his power, the Duke begins to conquer.

The System grants you this power.

Letter of Nobility (Elysium):

Baron - Designate a territory shielded from the creation of wild rifts and Concept storms.

Viscount - Instantly return to your territory - cooldown: (Ten to the power of Soul Tier) years.

Earl - Unlocked Sub-System: Army.

Marquess - Defend your territory against an invasion to earn a reward (2 Necro Wave defeated.)

Duke - Elysian laws allow you to exploit (1) wild rift. A successful exploitation strengthens your Nobility Title.

It was time to see what the System meant by exploiting a wild rift—and it might be his ticket to becoming a Prince. After all, even if he had no intention of helping Sumstreh, he was interested in becoming a royal.

“Exploiting doesn’t mean moving,” Esmée commented. “Unless you know something I don’t?”

“I’m an optimist,” Priam replied. “I’ll find a way.”

“I’ll check if any enemies are nearby,” said Jasmine.

“There’s nothing but ashes here. Without flora or fauna, the area doesn’t interest the undead,” Esmée noted.

“Nothing but us,” Jasmine retorted before merging into the shadows.

“She doesn’t like me,” remarked Esmée.

Priam grimaced. “She is… wary.”

"I would have said jealous," replied Esmée before furrowing her brow and opening her grimoire. "Something followed you. I'll show the Assassin that she's mistaken about me."

Before Priam could say anything, the princess had vanished without a trace.

"I almost feel sorry for the undead who will find themselves caught between them," Priam mused before diving.

The cool water embraced his body as he descended towards the rift. Moments later, he activated Pyro to create a boiling mist around his body. The steam barely concealed his nudity underwater, and he didn't want Esmée to think he was a pervert.

The rift was slightly larger than the last time he saw it. It was no longer unidimensional but slightly oval, allowing a flat hand to pass through. Visually, the black hole in the air was strange, but it was nothing compared to the perception offered by his meta senses.

His understanding of the world was shaken as he saw two opposing currents intersecting at the passage. Primordial fluid entered and exited simultaneously. The two flows crossed without interfering, as if their different affinities prevented them from reacting together.

The physics governing the behavior of aether was often similar to what Priam knew... and sometimes completely alien. Here, it was the latter, and the young man felt his hearts race as **[Ideal Aether Perception]** analyzed the phenomenon.

The aether flowing out of the rift was imbued with a foreign Concept. Through synesthesia, the ideal skill assigned a scent to the affinities. For example, the Fire Concept smelled like the embers he used to blow on as a child. This was useful because it allowed Priam to instinctively identify an unknown Concept.

The Concept flowing from Valaryth smelled like a growing tree defying the storm. Something akin to adaptation or resilience. Priam sensed he had an affinity with this Concept, but his add-on confirmed that none of the Concepts offered during his Soul Harmonization had the same scent.

Lvl Up: [Ideal Aether Perception] lvl 16

META (Affinity) +3

META (Perception) +6

"It's not one of the Concepts under the Tribulation's dominion..." Priam murmured. He briefly connected to his Potential and realized it didn't allow him to understand the Concept better, as it had with Mist or Fire. "A Concept beyond the reach of the Seven?"

This seemed strange to Priam. That another Universe could resist the Seven was one thing, but here, it was just a fragment of a world. *Strange...*

His attention then turned to the ambient aether pouring into the rift. Invisible to the naked eye, the current perceived by his skill was terrifying. Its strength was such that the rift was growing in real time. Within a month, it would be large enough to let a cat through, and within a year, a standing man.

His add-on calculated that given its expansion rate, it had been created the day he arrived in Elysium. *It was placed here for us.*

Knowing the System was nearly omniscient was one thing; realizing it had scattered resources to aid the rivals was another. The real question was: what else had it done?

Fortunately for Priam's paranoia, his Patron had been clear: the Seven Concepts wouldn't treat him any differently from all other users. *However, when giants walk, ants are sometimes crushed.*

The world went dark, then bright again. Priam looked up, sensing two bodies enter his Domain. Creating a bubble with his kinetic energy control, he welcomed the two young women beside him. At the same time, he clothed himself in mist and flames.

"What happened?"

"A Tier 2 had followed us. I took care of it," Jasmine declared, inspecting her nails.

"I told you I could make it leave without revealing to the whole valley that we're here," Esmée replied, frowning. "The corrupted are coming. A horde."

Jasmine shrugged. "I won't turn down Sun points."

Priam's gaze shifted between his rivals before he understood. Both possessed the same competitive spirit he shared with Kazuki, but their methods were radically different. Jasmine was an assassin, and Esmée was a strategist. After weighing the pros and cons, Priam decided not to interfere in the rivalry between the young women as long as the results were positive.

"Can you move this rift?" Esmée asked.

Priam shook his head. "Every second, a hundred times more aether than I possess flows through here. It might be possible to move it with some finesse, but without a suitable Concept or skill... Impossible. It's time to exploit the System."

Micro Rift detected.

Tier 1 - Rank: Earl

Destination: Valaryth - fragment 84

Use 500 POT to open a secure passage?

Use [Elysian Duke - Mythic] to exploit the rift?

Opportunity detected.

Would you like to own this rift?

"The last time Priam interacted with Valaryth's fragment, the System offered him an opportunity he earned by triumphing over his quadruple Tribulation. Now, it provided the same chance again, hinting at its relevance to exploring other worlds.

Priam grinned as he accepted. There was undoubtedly a fundamental difference between exploiting a resource and owning it.

Micro Rift (Valaryth - fragment 84) owned.

Congratulations!

This rift is your property for (10) years and is now part of your Land. The territory within a kilometer radius around this rift (on both sides) is now part of your Land.

Land Owner Bonus reminder:

- *Baron: POT cost -10%*
- *Viscount: Aether regeneration x2*
- *Earl: Knowledge about your land*
- *Marquess: Locked*
- *Duke: Locked*

Stabilizing this rift is necessary for safe traversal.

Note (owner): You can relocate this rift within your Land once for free.

Note (owner): Destruction of the rift incurs no penalty.

Note (owner): Any Elysium Earl has the right to conquer this rift. As the owner, you have one week to respond to a challenge and set the terms of combat.

Note: Elysium laws do not prevent you or your Army from residing in a world you are invading.

“Judging by your smile, I assume the news is good?” Jasmine asked.

“Definitely. As the owner, I can move this rift, and destroying it won’t result in any punishment.”

“So, it can be destroyed,” noted Jasmine. “What else?”

“I’ll need to stabilize it myself to cross without dying, but I have the necessary funds,” Priam said as his add-on displayed the various stabilization options offered by the Sun Shop. “As long as I own it, my army and I can stay indefinitely on the other side and receive bonuses when near the rift. Useful for defending against natives or an Earl trying to steal it.”

“Your army?” Jasmine asked, surprised.

“Well...”

“Every Earl unlocks a special sub-system,” Esmée explained, seeing Priam’s awkward grimace. “Priam can assign roles, distribute Nobility Titles, and grant his soldiers certain bonuses.”

Priam blushed under Jasmine’s accusatory stare. “As residents, you partially benefit from this, and... I should have addressed it earlier. Sorry.”

One of Priam's flaws was his tendency to focus too much on his personal progression and neglect that of others. In addition to being selfish, it sometimes disadvantaged his allies.

"Take care of it as soon as we get back," sighed Jasmine.

"I promise."

A bit ashamed, Priam reviewed the rest of his notifications.

First Quest update: Invasion I

*Valaryth's 84th fragment roams outside the Concepts Universe.
This quest is shared with your Army.*

Defend the rift.

Any significant attack on it is considered a Wave.

Reward: Micro Rift (Valaryth - fragment 84) remains your property

Difficulty: Variable

Pacify your Land.

No hostile individual should live on your territory.

Reward: Any territory pacified for six months is incorporated into your Land.

Difficulty: Variable

Valaryth - fragment 84 Map. (Quest chain)

Reward: Your property title is extended by one year for each significant location discovered.

Difficulty: Silver

Valaryth - fragment 84 Bestiary. (Quest chain)

Reward: Your property title is extended by one year for each Tier 4 or higher unknown race encountered.

Difficulty: Gold

Absorb (10) natives among your subjects. (Quest chain)

Reward: Information about Valaryth's history.

Difficulty: Variable

Release the soul of (?) natives possessing an alien Concept. (Quest chain)

Reward: Alien Concept fragment.

Difficulty: Variable

Release the soul of (?) natives possessing an alien racial Talent. (Quest chain)

Reward: Racial Talent (Complete).

Difficulty: Variable

Endure an alien Tribulation.

Reward: Variable.

Difficulty: Mythic

Retrieve the World Key.
Reward:
Possibility to exploit a second rift.
Upgrade of your Nobility Title.
Ownership of Valaryth - fragment 84.
Difficulty: Mythic

Priam shared the details of his quests with Esmée and Jasmine to get their opinions.

“Exploiting a rift is lucrative, and the rewards are interesting but not as much as the quests,” summarized Esmée, frowning her brow adorably.

“What do you mean?”

“From my perspective, exploiting has a negative connotation,” explained the princess. “Yet, only two quests encourage killing people or monsters. This shows that the Seven are more interested in novelty and discovery than in material resources.”

“Or the resources of a Tier 1 fragment are too mundane to interest entities at the helm of a universe,” Jasmine scoffed, crossing her arms.

“That’s a possibility,” Esmée conceded calmly. “In any case, these quests are mainly to help the rift’s owner without overly influencing him. If they want to exploit a world and its resources ruthlessly, they can, but the System will rarely reward it. If they prefer forming alliances, it’s their right.”

“What matters to the Seven is the result,” Priam summed up. “I have about ten years to dominate this world fragment. If I fail within the given time, I’ll lose ownership of the rift.”

“What will you lose in practice?” Jasmine asked.

“I suppose if the rift is destroyed while I exploit it, I’ll be punished,” theorized Priam, rereading the System’s messages. “I’ll also lose the buffer week between a challenge and an attack.”

“With the Land Owner bonuses—and the current Sun Shop—you have a defensive advantage over the natives,” reassured Esmée with a smile. “Ten years to retrieve a key seems feasible.”

Priam returned her smile.

“The quest’s difficulty is Mythic, but in ten years, I’m confident.” It might have been arrogance, but given his progress in a few months, he suspected a decade would make him a powerhouse. If he survived. “The problem is, the quest’s difficulty changed: the first time, it was Legendary.”

“The World Key might have changed hands since then, or the current holder knows the rift is now being exploited and is on guard,” Jasmine added. “It’s always harder to steal from someone alert.”

“Another possibility is that the world itself holds it and is growing stronger by absorbing Elysium’s aether,” Esmée suggested.

Distant howls punctuated her words, and Priam winced.

“Interesting theories but unverifiable for now. There’s only one pressing question: should I move the rift to my internal world or Oasis? Any opinions?”

“With Oasis, the hoplites and our current defenses can help protect this side of the rift,” Jasmine remarked while sharpening her epic dagger. “But I suppose we’ll have to share with them.”

“I won’t ask Kazuki and his soldiers to fight for nothing,” Priam confirmed.

“If you still plan to let the tribes come to Oasis for trade, they’ll obviously notice the rift,” Esmée added, gesturing to the massive aether siphon around it. “Forging an alliance with the Elysium tribes could be a good idea if you fear you can’t hold Valaryth’s side alone.”

“I don’t think we’ll have problems with that; the natives are pretty friendly. Some might even be interested in a stabilized rift.” Priam recalled the desperate look on Titus, the Rehms’ chief, when he realized Priam’s rift couldn’t accommodate his people.

“I hope they’re not *too* interested,” Jasmine grimaced.

Priam nodded. “I’ll need to test the waters before telling them. I plan to exploit this rift as peacefully as possible, but a counter-invasion could be catastrophic. I want to trust the Rehms, but I’ll prepare for the worst,” he said, remembering the warm welcome of the aquatic tribe that had saved him. Not all aliens might be so benevolent.

“The rift’s level is Tier 1 Earl,” Esmée pointed out. “No overly powerful enemy should be hiding in this world.”

“You’re mistaken,” Priam countered. “I’ve only met a few Rehms, but their local chief was at least as powerful as I am currently.”

Titus had fended off a Charybdis’ descendant, a creature that could negate Hecate’s New Moon suppression in just two seconds. It was barely longer than the time Eleha took during their last duel—and the Tier 3 had been motivated by her imminent death.

“The System wouldn’t have placed a rift here without it being challenging,” added Jasmine.

The statement wasn’t based on any concrete evidence, but Priam agreed.

“That doesn’t answer the question: Oasis or Concepts Archipelago?”

As if in response, a howl made the cenote tremble. An instant later, a corrupted creature peered over the sinkhole, saw the three rivals, and roared. In the next moment, a hundred more appeared.

“I’ll handle it,” said Esmée and Jasmine simultaneously.

"You're going to make them stumble into the water?" taunted the assassin.

"It'll still be faster than slitting their throats one by one," replied the princesse, finally letting slip a hint of annoyance.

A wave of fire annihilated the visible corrupted, ending the argument, and Priam grinned at the two young women. "First come, first served."

Esmée smiled at him, Jasmine stuck out her tongue, and the three young rivals sprang into action.

*

Status:

PHYSICAL:

Strength 707

Constitution 1 105

Agility 614

Vitality 1 040

Perception 760

MENTAL:

Vivacity (D) 552

Dexterity 622

Memory 787

Willpower 1 134

Charisma 661

META:

Meta-affinity 756 (+3)

Meta-focus 405

Meta-endurance 608

Meta-perception 342 (+7)

Meta-chance 274

Meta-authority 189

Potential: 13 475 (+3)

Tier 0

Sun points: 682 064 (+47)

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED

[Tribulation]: Five Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 157 days 11 hours 32 minutes 14 seconds.

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