

## Chapter 142: Once Upon a Time

Esmée turned to her brother. "Galinthor, aran'shan enithrin'kai enithoron. Ilin'dor enithalon en'dorithor shan'althar."

The commander's face turned crimson. The man - or rather, the empyrean - appeared furious as he visibly struggled to breathe. Despite Priam's efforts, the situation showed no signs of de-escalating. It wasn't entirely surprising; Priam had more or less taken their princess hostage.

In response to Esmée, the man grunted. A rather disrespectful response when addressing a princess.

### **[Identification]**

**[Aydan] - Empyrean Crown Prince. Seventh Strategist of the Empire.**

*The Crown Prince?* Behind his mask, Priam narrowed his eyes. Who was truly in charge of this expedition then - Aydan or Esmée? It was undoubtedly a matter of politics, and the truth might not be straightforward.

Anyway, it didn't matter. The System had chosen Esmée as a rival for a reason. If Priam had to bet on one of the two, he already knew which one.

"Galinthor, solithrin'kai, malorin vethar'shaldor. El'altharion enithor'lin, shan'dorinthalon en'dorithor," Aydan finally responded through gritted teeth.

*[Empyrean language: decoding in progress.]*

Priam smiled as he read the notification on his add-on.

Esmée nodded before turning to Priam.

"My brother easily worries," she explained. "But I apologize; I haven't introduced myself yet. Esmée Lóthandorim, Princess of the Empire, and one of your nine rivals," she said. The ensuing bow was impeccable.

*So, there are ten of us. Two more than on Seth's map. Either they had eluded the rays of the Necromoon, or they had no fixed camp.*

There was, of course, one last hypothesis - they were dead.

"Certainly the prettiest of my rivals," he complimented her. "Priam Azura, Champion of Humanity."

He then executed a bow that must have been an affront to all royal etiquettes. Looking up, he noticed that Esmée seemed unsure how to react to his compliment. Perhaps people didn't court each other in her world? Or was it his mask? After all, she had to suspect that Priam wasn't really serious.

Shrugging mentally, Priam refocused.

"Now that introductions are done, I would like some explanations."

"Explanations?" Esmée asked, surprised.

"You used a divination skill on my friend less than a minute ago."

Was this one of his rival's powers? If so, it explained how she knew the exact number of existing rivals.

"Oh, I apologize for that, Lord Priam. I simply felt that a rival was approaching, and I wanted to verify their identity. Some can be hostile."

Priam briefly thought of Seth and Arnold.

"Why not use the skill on me?" he asked.

Esmée gave him a smile. "Because I knew—"

"Shan'dorinthal enithalon'kai?!"

*Lvl Up: [Mask] lvl 5*

*WILL +3*

*CHAR +3*

*META(AUTH) +3*

Priam frowned, turning to Aydan. The man had just identified him. Had he succeeded, or had **[Mask]** canceled his skill? Either way, Priam found the sensation unpleasant. His grip on Promesse tightened as he shot a dark look at the prince. Remembering that Aydan couldn't see his face, Priam projected his aura. With his high charisma, the impact was almost physical.

The prince recoiled, letting out a cry. Priam had tried to convey his anger, and Aydan had received it as a slight. Despite the insult, he kept quiet.

*Lvl Up: [Intimidation] lvl 3*

*CHAR + 3*

While Esmée looked at her brother, Priam's gaze shifted to the slave. Muyri was staring at the prince, naked terror in her eyes. She fears him. *Did he do this to her?*

Looking at the scars on the poor woman, Priam's hearts raced. He wasn't a hero, but he wasn't one to stand by while a woman - or a man - was tortured in front of him without reacting. Especially if he had the power to change things.

Suddenly, his anger opened Priam's eyes. The almost human appearance of Aydan, Muyri, and Esmée had thrown him off. Instinctively, he had treated them as humans, seeking explanations. It was a mistake; he was now in Elysium.

"Tell your brother not to interfere," he demanded from Esmée with a stern tone.

"|—"

"Tell him," he insisted.

Esmée turned to her brother. "Galinthor aran'shan enithalon'kai ilin'dor."

The prince gritted his teeth, shooting Priam a complicated look. He must not be used to being commanded but was too scared to attack.

*[Note: Galinthor has been pronounced twice in a sentence directly related to you. This word seems to be your designation in Empyrean.]*

"What does Galinthor mean?" Priam asked.

"... The First," Esmée answered after a pause. For someone with so much vivacity, the pause was very long. She had clearly hesitated to respond.

Priam analyzed her answer. First was the word Esmée and her brother used to talk about him. This meant they knew he was the first to finish the Tutorial. Moreover, they had already talked about him. *They know me, but I don't know them.* The situation bothered Priam.

It confirmed that Kazuki hadn't been the first on whom Esmée had used her skills. Among his levels of **[Divination Resistance]**, how many came from the princess?

Above all, had she limited herself to spying, or had she manipulated his luck?

While contemplating the various ramifications, Priam remained silent. If Esmée was an enemy, he had to act now.

As he thought, a part of his consciousness felt a sense of unease emerging. Right behind it followed fear. Priam blinked before realizing that these were not his feelings but those of the guards and Muyri. A moment later, he understood. Enveloped by his charismatic aura, those with too weak charisma couldn't hide their emotions. It was a powerful ability and reinforced Charisma's importance as an attribute.

Unfortunately, neither Esmée nor Aydan were affected.

"What is your arrival position, Princess Esmée?" Priam finally asked.

"Lord Priam, I sense your anger, but there is—"

"If I were angry, Princess, you would be dead. Answer my question, please."

Priam's tone was as polite as it was cold. Esmée might be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but his imagination now conjured the worst. Had Arnold been sent by Esmée's misfortune? Had his father fallen because of her? Had all the unfortunate events in his life an empyrean origin?

"I was second," Esmée finally answered. "I arrived a few hours after you. You were unavailable, so you didn't sense the portal."

*I was dead.* But why had the princess taken such care to hide her arrival only to move with clumsy guards today?

Esmée's gaze changed. "Let me be completely honest. I've used my manipulation power on you only twice. Once for you not to detect my arrival. The second time to help your father survive not long ago. I swear it on my Potential."

The attention of the Concepts focused for a moment before dissipating. Priam nodded, feeling a bit embarrassed for imagining the worst. Also relieved not to have to execute eight people based on suspicions.

"I apologize if I frightened you, but I couldn't take any chances. I actually prefer this kind of frank and honest conversation. Why did you help my father?"

"To gain a favor from you."

Priam grimaced, realizing the stupidity of his question. For what other reason would a rival save his father?

"I don't know to what extent you helped my father, but your first manipulation made me..." Priam stopped. Esmée might or might not know about his resurrection power; there was no need to mention it. In any case, he would have died even without her manipulation. She didn't make him thirsty.

"What favor do you wish?" he asked. Priam was grateful she had helped his father, but he wasn't about to jump into the fire to pay back a debt.

At least, not twice.

"If one day you can save my life, I will be grateful. Within the limits of the value you attribute to my favor, of course." Esmée's smile seemed genuine, and her gaze had changed. The conciliatory princess had disappeared.

"... Very well."

The question was: what was the value of this favor? Priam was almost sure that Esmée didn't know. His father might have survived without her, or he might not have. The princess was playing on that uncertainty, and she was right. For Priam, his father's life was invaluable.

"I have a few questions. How do you know who I am?"

Priam could have played the expert pretending to know everything, but he preferred to lose some mystery rather than information.

"My power gives me information about people who have a role to play in my life."

"That's vague."

Esmée laughed a little, a laugh Priam found charming. "We are rivals. Future ally or enemy. I won't give a potential opponent the list of my powers."

"What stops me from eliminating you right now? You may have saved my father, but you may also have caused his fall. Your manipulation power is dangerous, and you imply that we might become enemies." It was a bluff, but Priam wanted to know who he was dealing with.

"Would you assassinate me in cold blood?" she asked, raising a perfect eyebrow.

"I prefer the term preventive self-defense."

Esmée snorted as a flame lit up in her eyes.

"I can't do anything against my brother, but against you? Despite all my respect for your achievements, I have the means to defend myself. However, I don't think it will be necessary. If you were willing to preemptively assassinate anyone who might one day be a danger to you and your family, you would have already attacked me."

*She's proud.*

Priam remained silent for a few seconds before smiling.

"You're sure of yourself. That's a change from the beginning of the conversation."

"I was playing a role."

"As we all do," Priam replied, shrugging. He had played a role his entire life and could recognize those who did the same. Esmée wasn't as submissive as she showed. A flame burned in her, making her even more beautiful.

Priam cleared his throat. It's been too long since I've been around women...

"Why not establish the foundations of a cordial relationship while we're here?" he suggested. "Your power must have given you interesting information, and I'm willing to exchange mine with you."

Esmée remained silent for a moment before responding.

"Something huge is brewing. A war. In a way, it's already underway. Rifts are widening in Elysium, allowing Tier 0s to slip through first, followed by the Tier 1s, 2s, and so forth. Our involvement will be mandatory. As a Champion, our race will inevitably be entwined in it."

Priam welcomed the news calmly, but not Kazuki. A surge of anger, swiftly suppressed, radiated in his aura for a moment. The hoplite lingered in the shadows, poised to react if the situation spiraled out of control.

"In six days, an event is set in motion," he offered in return. "The Necromoon is on its way, corrupting the atmosphere. Without epic resistance, the slightest contact with a mutant creature is deadly. Or worse. One of our rivals is contaminated and seeks to kill us all."

"The Corrupted," Esmée grimaced. "Slain by the Third."

"Arnold?"

"I prefer not to use his name."

Priam nodded. *So, I'm not the only one pursued by the Var Elegis.*

"One last thing. I would like..."

He left his sentence hanging. The crux of this conversation wasn't about extracting information or improving relations with the royal family of the Empire.

Priam had a much more important goal: obtaining the genetic and ethereal code of the empyreans. If he could enhance his race again, he would push back the thresholds of his Tribulations.

In a corner of his notifications, the countdown of Tribulations ticked away. Four Tribulations were already waiting, and Priam knew that if he triggered them today, he would die. He still had one hundred and seventy-five days ahead and wanted to make the most of it without fearing his Tribulations.

Priam had no desire to spend the next six months restricting his level-ups. *He needed* that information.

"Yes?" Esmée asked, seeing him lost in thought.

"I need a drop of your blood."

*It sounds like a vampire.*

"I mean, I'd like to blend our genetic heritages."

Esmée looked at him with wide eyes, and Priam heard Kazuki laugh in his earpiece.

"No, wait, that's not what I meant."

Priam grimaced behind his mask. He was socially rusty, especially with pretty women.

"I have a hunch that by mixing our ethereal codes, I could create a Tier 2 race." *Better.*

"Oh." Esmée let out a charming little laugh. "My family has spent centuries optimizing our genes to make Empyrean a Tier 1 race. I'd be willing to help, but if you succeed, I want to benefit as well."

Priam nodded. "That sounds fair. I'd need a drop of your blood, I think."

Esmée hesitated for a moment before fixing her gaze on Priam's black mask. "I have a better idea. You see the girl next to me?"

Priam turned slightly toward the slave. "Yes?"

"I would like you to take her with you. I don't think a Tier 0, no matter how incredible, can merge two complex aether structures from just a drop of blood. You'll need a lot of genetic material, and Muyri is your best option. She's one of the royal family's bastards, her race is Tier 1."

Disgust engulfed Priam.

"I'm not planning to experiment on a huma... on her!"

In the pursuit of power, one had to consider moral boundaries. Priam refused to torture slaves.

"I hope not," Esmée replied. "Just look at her face or the way she looks at my brother to understand that her current life is a nightmare. With you, her life can only improve. Muyri isn't a fighter, but she'll be safe in your base."

"If you're so concerned about her safety, why don't you defend her?"

Esmée lowered her eyes. "Because I can't disobey my brother," she murmured, her cheeks red. Out of shame or anger, only she could say.

Priam's gaze turned to Aydan. The man stared at him, a hand on his sword. He seemed as fearful as he was angry. Priam hesitated to eliminate him. He felt that's what Esmée wanted, but if the man had truly inflicted those scars on the young slave, he deserved it.

*Unless she's manipulating me right now?* She might have orchestrated everything with Myuri to make me kill a man whose language I don't understand.

Esmée raised her eyes. "Before you think of anything: yes, I want to kill my brother. But if you attack him now, I'll be forced to defend him and avenge him. So it's not a scheme for you to kill him."

"How are you forced?"

"Magical compulsion," the princess spat. It was the first time Priam saw her features betraying rage. Priam understood her. Having to defend and obey one's worst enemy... A fate worse than death.

"Won't he mistreat you?" Leaving a beautiful woman with a psychopath capable of lacerating faces didn't sit well with Priam.

Esmée shook her head. "I'm not the only one with a compulsion."

"Well," Priam responded before turning to the slave. "Do you agree to come with me?"

Myuri looked at him with wide eyes. Priam knew she couldn't understand his words, but he wanted her to feel the kindness in his voice. Instinctively, he used his aura to send her the equivalent of a wave of comfort. The slave's shoulders relaxed.

"Galinthor, enithil'kiran, ilin'dor enitharinthal enithor'shaldor. Shan'alor enithalon aran'dorinthal, shan'alor enithalon ilin'dor enithorithalon," Esmée said to Muryi in a gentle voice.

While the slave's eyes widened, Aydan began to roar. The teleportation of Promesse a few inches from his face instantly calmed him. Priam had saturated the surroundings with invisible mist for this moment. In the absence of proof and on Esmée's words alone, he wouldn't kill Aydan.

But if the man thought he had a say in Muryi's decision, he was mistaken.

The slave had jumped when she heard her master roar before looking at him again. Crimson with rage and powerlessness, Aydan made a superhuman effort not to explode. Seeing his master so weak for the first time gave Myuri the courage to nod. The sign was universal, and Priam opened a portal to his world. The other side of the portal faced the black border of his world, so as not to give any hint about his Talent to the empyreans.

Encouraged by Esmée, Muryi stepped into **[Concepts Archipelago]**. Priam closed the portal behind her before turning to Aydan and Esmée. It was time to leave.

With a nod, Priam greeted the crown prince. Why burn a bridge when he had only received an opinion so far?

He then turned to Esmée.

"Princess, pleasure to see you again," he smiled behind his mask.

"Lord Priam, likewise," Esmée replied, executing a perfect curtsy. Her white and gold hair flew backward, and Priam's hearts pulsed.



*I hope Disney is right for once. In movies, pretty princesses were always supposed to be kind.*

The next moment, Priam vanished into the mist. The day was young, and they still had many locations to plunder.

\*

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

*PHYSICAL:*

*Strength 399*

*Constitution 662*

*Agility 404*

*Vitality 538*

*Perception 584*

*MENTAL:*

*Vivacity 332 (+3)*

*Dexterity 429*

*Memory 134*

*Willpower 648*

*Charisma 427 (+9)*

*META:*

*Meta-affinity 336*

*Meta-focus 251*

*Meta-endurance 185*

*Meta-perception 119*

*Meta-chance 216*

*Meta-authority 15 (+3)*

*Potential: 549 (+5)*

*Tier 0*

*[He Who Eludes Death] charge: OFF. Reloaded in 1 hour 23 minutes 12 seconds.*

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

*Future Tribulations delayed until:*

*Time: 176 days 1 hour 56 minutes 25 seconds.*