

## Chapter 208: Contact

*Lvl Up: [Revelation Resilience] lvl 6*

*MEM +3*

*META (AFFI) +3*

*META (AUTH) +3*

The wyvern heart in his chest quickened, pumping hot blood through his veins. A steam cloud escaped his mouth, and Priam became aware that his body temperature was going off the charts. His body surged with a draconic instinct awakening, calling upon his heritage. The evolution of vivacity had nothing to do with the System and would not unfold gently.

Priam knelt, bracing for the pain.

Without warning, his bloodline froze, resonating with its origin across time and space. The world around Priam slowed as if a divine trial was approaching. Something primordial had just answered his bloodline's call.

Reality blurred a few centimeters in front of the young man. As a pure and transparent liquid surged from the air, Priam recognized its draconic origin. Three streams burst forth from the aether fountain. The first penetrated his soul, the second watered his spirit, and the third irrigated his body.

**[Ideal Aether Perception]** confirmed that the aether was as pure as his Potential. Like the System's reward, the fluid bathing Priam possessed a sort of instinct. The Homo Elysian widened his eyes as energy began to alter his essence. Mixed with his blood, the draconic aether concentrated in his brain, destroying and then regenerating cells. The sensation felt like insects trying to devour the organ and was as unpleasant as it was painful.

Trembling and groaning in agony, Priam activated Micro. The Supremacy couldn't stop the abominable suffering, but it allowed him to observe the changes occurring in his body. Priam threw himself into analysis, hoping to divert his attention from the torment.

The first thing he noticed was that the evolution was tailored to his endurance and constitution. His blood threatened to burn his arteries without ever reaching a lethal temperature. His brain was modified without erasing or altering his personality. His bloodline was undergoing a metamorphosis, but draconic law was as absolute as it was just.

Simultaneously, his spirit changed. **[Tenacious Spirit]** felt this mutation without being able to describe or understand it. Priam's spiritual knowledge was still poor.

Between screams of pain, Priam noticed he had just vomited bile. On all fours, he had to gather all his willpower not to collapse. His body trembled, and sweat matted his hair.

As the world swayed, Priam clenched his fists, refusing to faint. There was something terrifying about entrusting his fate to the draconic power that was reshaping his brain, spirit, and soul. If something went wrong, Priam wanted to be conscious to act. **[He Who Eludes Death]** was primed, and he didn't rule out any option...

*[It is not advisable to end your life during the evolution of your attribute. The draconic power could interfere with your Patron's Concept.]*

"Fuck," Priam groaned, his voice hoarse from screaming too much. Seconds turned into minutes as his attribute evolved. In the ocean of pain engulfing Priam's soul, a thought emerged. *If dragons are so powerful, why inflict this pain on me? System evolutions are rarely traumatic.*

Despite his state—naked, his fingers digging into the earth, his vocal cords shredded—the train of thought was detached from the agony his body felt. Surprise flooded Priam as he realized he could think calmly despite the pain. Half of his mind was paralyzed by turmoil, and the other observed, reflected, and analyzed.

*Vivacity has evolved!*

Tears of joy streamed down his cheeks. The agony was coming to an end. A few seconds later, his draconic heart slowed.

Priam sighed as he felt the pain recede. Without a word, he crawled to the pond at the center of his world and plunged in. The cool water felt good, and he sighed in relief. A parallel thought activated **[Three-Headed Hydra]**. His entire body needed regeneration.

Instead of restoring a part of his body for free, Priam activated his new Merit.

*[Three-headed Hydra - Silver] - Tier 2: Exchange your lifespan to dramatically increase your regeneration speed.*

The effect was immediate. His cells' activity exploded, creating a wave of revitalization that flooded his body. In a matter of moments, his scalded arteries, traumatized organs, and tired brain recovered. Paradoxically, an indescribable physical fatigue struck him. This simple round of healing had just cost him days of life.

"So?" asked the phoenix.

"I feel my soul aging because of its connection to my body," grimaced Priam. "It's not pleasant."

"I was referring to the evolution of vivacity."

Instead of replying, Priam closed his eyes. His soul tapped into his aether reserves and began to shape a rune. A few seconds later, a luminous orb appeared before him. A second followed, then a third. A few minutes later, not four, but five runes orbited around him.

Priam opened his eyes and smiled. "It's both strange and natural. Instead of having two halves of my mind each managing their own aether, I get them to work together. There's an expression that says 'unity makes strength'... But I have all the advantages of teamwork, without any of the drawbacks!"

The phoenix nodded. "Each of your thought strands is independent but can synchronize, preventing errors and allowing optimal cooperation. How much of your total vivacity can each of your thoughts mobilize?"

Priam let his add-on find an answer. The evolution of vivacity theoretically allowed him to double his raw thinking capacity, but in practice, he would have to train before reaching a perfect score.

[Analysis complete.

*Each thought strand currently possesses 72% of your total vivacity (372 attribute points).  
Effective vivacity with two simultaneous strands: 144%.]*

"About seventy-two percent each," Priam informed. So, he could solve two problems at once, each with seventy-two percent of his maximum mental capacity. Seeing the phoenix's surprised look, he asked, "Is that a lot?"

"One of my best friends was the heir of a draconic clan, the Riuslings. When he evolved this attribute, each of his thoughts possessed about sixty percent of his total vivacity, and he was considered a genius."

"He was?"

"My original killed him after his corruption."

"Oh..."

The phoenix changed the subject. "**[Homo Elysian Obsession]** is an overpowered Talent. Your soul and brain must have resonated during the evolution."

Priam grimaced. "Maybe, but it was painful."

"Painful? You exchanged a few minutes of agony for an effective increase of forty-four percent of your vivacity. A boost that doesn't count towards your Tribulation thresholds," reminded the phoenix.

"But my Tribulations will take that into account," grimaced Priam.

"Of course, but the power of a Tribulation remains fixed. Even if the trial changes, the energy it contains is limited. The fewer weaknesses you have, the more likely you are to survive."

The phoenix flew off before perching on Priam's shoulder. "Don't forget the most important thing: Tribulations are there to sort the wheat from the chaff. The System is harsh but fair: if you have the skills to succeed, you will live. See this trial as an opportunity to become stronger and patch your weaknesses."

Priam stared at the firebird. "Was that your mindset?"

"That's the mindset of all the greatest geniuses," said the phoenix with a straight face. "Those who fear exams are those who haven't studied enough. When you know you're the best, you can't wait to get there and clean up."

As Priam looked into the phoenix's eyes, he detected the shadow of an old, consuming passion. The Prince had been an Ace proudly facing Tribulations. He had lit up the sky of Sector Hope with a powerful mindset. *Maybe he's right. When you're ready, there's no reason to be afraid.*

"I'm going back to training," declared Priam.

The phoenix shook its head. "You should check Oasis before that. You've been gone for almost three days, and the Necromoon isn't a funny event."

"As if that existed..."

"It does."

"Wait, really?"

The phoenix's eyes wandered into the distance.

"At Tier 5, I participated in an event sponsored by Sweet Mama—a famous Tier 7. The goal was to swallow as much of Mama's cake as possible. You could store them in your internal world, digest them quickly, slip them under your skin, or compress them, as long as you ate them without cheating. These cakes were packed with rare resources, drugs, and energy. I finished third with a memorable hangover and four requests for child support," smiled the phoenix. "Those were the good times..."

The event was ridiculous, but something else caught Priam's attention. "Do you have children?!"

"Probably. When my mother took control of the local clan, it became a matriarchy. Male phoenixes are breeders who are not allowed to raise their children. In my case, it's better this way..."

Who knows what his original would have done if he had access to his children? The phoenix's eyes showed an evident sadness, and Priam thanked it before opening a portal to Oasis.

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"We're here," declared Laepa, decapitating the ten thousandth undead of the day. The huntress representing the Gaeserts had no trouble navigating the deadly forest.

Gabrielle glanced up and grunted at the broad back of Viktol. The Snaherts Shaman's apprentice must have merged with the core of an anaconda to get that muscular.

The young girl circled around him to get a better view. In front of the group of six, the trees gave way to... more trees. This didn't look like the base of a Champion.

"Is he underground?" asked Viktol.

"There's a camouflage," said Katara, the apprentice of the Aelbes Shaman.

Her guardian, Eleha, nodded. "We'll stay here for a few minutes to give the Champion a chance to greet us. In the meantime, try to pierce the illusion with your eyes."

The three young Shaman apprentices turned towards the illusion. Gabrielle squinted, trying to focus on the information provided by **[Illusion Resistance]**. Most illusions could be spotted by minor errors. *The trees look the same before and after. There are undead footprints on the ground and the clouds are well drawn in the sky. The leaves of the trees move with the wind and...*

"There are no corrupted coming from that direction!" she exclaimed. It was impossible. The six of them, three Tier 0s and three Tier 3s, had run for almost six hours to get here. During all that time, undeads had attacked them every twenty meters. It was the first time she hadn't seen any undead when looking in a direction.

As she said this, her mind understood it was under a ritual's influence. Gabrielle struggled, engaging her will to break the illusion. In vain.

"Ah!" exclaimed Viktol. His smile indicated that he had pierced the mirage.

Annoyed, Gabrielle rummaged in her bag and pulled out a white leaf. Placing it delicately over her eye like a lens, she blinked and looked towards the illusion. A huge dome appeared.

*Lvl Up: **[Illusion Resistance]** lvl 28*

*MEM +1*

*META(AFFI) +2*

"There's more than just an illusion," declared Katara. "I see a protection ritual and a purification ritual."

Gabrielle nodded as she removed the plant lens and rinsed her eye.

"There's also a symbiosis and growth ritual," added Gabrielle. "The trees under protection are bigger than the trees outside and it's even more obvious for the more distant trees."

"For a base built in less than a month, it's quite impressive," acknowledged Laepa. "They're not Champions for nothing."

"They're just Tier 0s," said Eleha. Despite her smile, Gabrielle felt her disdain.

"For now."

An undead cried out to their right. It was Tier 1, easily capable of decapitating Gabrielle before she could react, yet she didn't even glance at it.

Vysharratjekto—his name was easier to pronounce than to write—raised his hand and the animated corpse exploded. The Tier 3 Snahert was as talkative as an old boar. Gabrielle didn't know much about him. He was tasked with protecting Viktol and was also anticipated to become a Tier 4, making him one of the elite of his tribe.

"... Are we going to stay here long?" asked Viktol. "These Tier 0s are rude to make us wait."

Vysharratjekto growled as he turned around. The man with draconic features was as slender as Viktol was imposing. Despite the difference in size in his favor, the teenager bowed before the flame burning in the eyes of the Tier 3.

"Vyphers thought he was a genius and lost both his duel and bloodline. If you don't want to shame the clan, bury your arrogance," spat the warrior. The tirade seemed to physically push Viktol, who lowered his eyes, crestfallen.

The terrifying atmosphere of the necro corrupted undergrowth became even heavier until a movement caught Gabrielle's attention.

An iron golem had just passed through a tree portal about ten meters before them. *A mineral race?!*

"My name is Hyshana and I welcome you to Oasis. You must be a delegation sent by the local tribes?" asked the golem in a feminine voice.

Eleha stepped forward, a surprised look on her face. "You speak our language?"

"I learned it some time ago thanks to an information crystal."

Gabrielle's eyes sparkled. The Chief was right, this Champion had access to the Auctions!

"This will make our discussions easier," smiled Eleha. "We hoped to discuss access to the Auctions and get to know our new neighbors."

The golem remained silent for a moment before its helmet retracted. Gabrielle was surprised to see an organic head. The woman could have passed for a Gaesert or an Aelbe.

Her delicate face had pale skin covered with tiny scales. Her bright red lips and sky-blue eyes seemed like the effects of a rare bloodline. Gabrielle's eyes traced the tattoos on the stranger's neck before rising. Hyshana's almond-shaped eyes gave her a powerful yet fair gaze that appealed to the teenager.

"Very well. Follow me; our cook is preparing a welcome meal."

Gabrielle took one last bite with a sigh of contentment. Under the branches of a crimson Tal Quercus—a majestic tree—she and her group enjoyed a crumble. It was obviously a trick to make them wait, but it worked.

"It's delicious," complimented Laepa as she helped herself to more. "But I don't see any animals, how did you find milk for the butter?"

Hyshana relayed the question to a huge bear standing at the end of the table. Despite its sharp fangs and claws, the animal didn't scare Gabrielle. Its gaze was calm, more interested in food than in conversation.

"Thanks to the Auctions," replied Hyshana, translating her companion's words.

Laepa nodded. "Of course. It allows you to focus your strengths on defense and to buy certain items impossible to produce."

"Exactly. If I may, why do you want access to our Auctions? I'm sure a tribe as powerful as yours could easily obtain a channel."

Laepa grimaced. "We belong to three different tribes. Gabrielle and I are from the Gaerserts tribe, Katara and Eleha are Aelbes, while Viktol and Vysharratjekto are Snaherts. As for the Auctions... We have our reasons."

Hyshana nodded. "Well, I don't think there will be any problems using the Auctions, but Priam has the final say."

"Priam?"

"Priam Azura, the Lord of Oasis," said Hyshana, indicating the camp around them.

"One of the Champions of the System?" asked Vysharratjekto. Hyshana nodded and the Snahert continued. "Will we be able to meet him soon?"

"He's training. I have no way of contacting him at the moment."

Vysharratjekto smiled before crossing his arms in silence. Gabrielle was surprised by the warrior's passivity but mostly annoyed by the lack of response. She glanced worriedly at Laepa, who nodded.

"Do you have an approximate idea of when Priam will return?" insisted the huntress.

Hyshana shook her head. "I have no idea. He could come back in a few minutes or in a few days."

"But we don't have a few days, our warriors need elixirs now!" exclaimed Gabrielle. All eyes turned to her. Normally, she would have blushed, but not here. Some wounded were struggling against necro corruption and the apprentice apothecary wouldn't leave without the necessary resources to make the elixirs.

Eleha shot Gabrielle a dark look before turning to Laepa. "Your kid should keep quiet when the adults are talking."

Laepa glared at Eleha. "Easy for you to say, it's not your brothers and sisters who are suffering. Gabrielle is right, we can't wait several days." She turned to Hyshana. "Thank you for the dessert, but we need to use the Auctions before the end of the day."

Hyshana hesitated. "I understand your—"

"We're going to use the Auctions." Eleha stood up and let her Aura burst forth. "I'm tired of acting like this is just a request. When a Tier 3 asks you for something, it's ridiculous to think it's anything other than an order."

Gabrielle turned to Hyshana and saw the warrior flush with rage. Although the young girl was ashamed of Eleha's words, her clan members' lives were at stake.

"Let's calm down," coughed Vysharratjekto. "I want to distance myself from Eleha's words. The Snahert tribe won't resort to violence to access the Auctions. Our Chief has a high opinion of the Champions and believes that trade is the best solution here. If we have to wait for your leader to return to discuss terms, then so be it."

Gabrielle, Laepa, Katara, and Eleha stared at the Tier 3, astonished. The Snaherts were well known for cutting out the tongues of impolite children. They were then treated, but never forgot the punishment. That the Tier 3 was so sweet with their hosts was as ridiculous as it was incomprehensible.

"What are you talking about?! These are trash Tier 0s; they should consider themselves lucky if we don't ask for protection fees," said Eleha without even looking at their host.

As Hyshana grew even more incensed, a deep voice rang out.

"That's the last time you insult us."

Gabrielle jumped, surprised. Behind her, a warrior stood less than five steps away. He was a head taller than Hyshana and had matte black hair. His pale skin shone in the moonlight, and Gabrielle could see a myriad of tiny scales. His irises were gray, nearly black, resembling the color of an angry sky. His calm gaze confronted the Tier 3s without flinching.

The stranger was more than a warrior, he was a storm.

"My name is Kazuki. I shall cleanse my wife's honor with your blood," he said, looking at Eleha. The Tier 3 warrior blinked before bursting into laughter.

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*Status:*

*PHYSICAL:*

*Strength 557*  
*Constitution 860*  
*Agility 552*  
*Vitality 840*  
*Perception 719*

*MENTAL:*

*Vivacity (D) 516*  
*Dexterity 588*  
*Memory 461 (+5)*  
*Willpower 1 036*  
*Charisma 631*

*META:*

*Meta-affinity 555 (+4)*  
*Meta-focus 360*  
*Meta-endurance 354*  
*Meta-perception 260*  
*Meta-chance 230*  
*Meta-authority 54 (+3)*

*Potential: 10 031 (+2)*  
*Tier 0*

*Sun points: 135 922 (+153)*

***[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.***

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

***Future Tribulations delayed until:***

***Time: 162 days 6 hours 4 minutes 12 seconds.***

***Next thresholds: 6 attributes > 600 / 3 attributes > 900***