

Chapter 124: Wormhole?

Three hours later, the fire began to subside. Priam was aware that the immense blaze must have piqued the interest of many foes. Fortunately, **[He Who Eludes Death]** was still primed.

Seeing the flames wane, Priam decided to advance. The longer he waited, the greater the risk of someone beating him to the punch.

Stepping into the flames, Priam winced. The temperature must have still been hovering around six hundred degrees Celsius. Holding his breath, Priam braved the fire, enveloped in a shroud of liquid mist.

Without **[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism]**, he would have had to wait several hours longer.

The fires parted in his wake, while the heat attempted to boil his blood. The world was a black and white painting, kissed by red hues.

*Lvl Up: **[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism]** lvl 12*

VIT +2

CONST +1

His bare feet sank into the incandescent ashes, and Priam trembled. Micro dulled the pain but not the information. What reached him was grim. The soles of his feet had sizzled like a juicy piece of meat. Then, the heat had turned his skin to charcoal. Finally, the charcoal had crumbled away, revealing raw flesh beneath.

To break this vicious cycle, his body was evolving. If he lost this race, Priam would end up walking on his own bones.

*Lvl Up: **[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism]** lvl 13*

VIT +2

CONST +1

Perhaps thanks to Micro, teetering on the edge of evolution, Priam felt **[Veteran]**, **[High Human Adaptation]**, and **[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism]** battling the consequences of thermal energy. His body was strengthening and adapting every second to survive.

*Lvl Up: **[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism]** lvl 14*

VIT +2

CONST +1

His vitality approached five hundred points, and his regenerative capabilities were rapidly increasing. Each new cell was tougher than the last. On his path of ash, Priam closed his eyes, focusing on his new favorite skill.

[Infantile Phoenix Metabolism - Rare] - Your body is transformed. Your cells become half material, half aetheral. The chemical reactions your body needs to function change. Slowly, you're letting go of your humanity. It is the path you have chosen in order to survive. You can now convert part of your thermal energy into pure aether. The water in your body remains liquid even at over 100°C - 1 bar pressure.

He felt his cells change. Some were burnt by the heat, but their ethereal aspect resisted. When a new cell was born, this aspect fused with it, strengthening and accelerating its evolution.

*Lvl Up: [Infantile Phoenix Metabolism] lvl 15
VIT +2
CONST +1*

Priam was still unable to grasp exactly what was unfolding within his body. His mastery of aether was in its infancy. But his Talents and Titles didn't need his help. The attributes he had painstakingly earned and the Titles he had fought for were synergizing, regenerating his body. His body was tempered by the flames.

*Lvl Up: [Infantile Phoenix Metabolism] lvl 16
VIT +2
CONST +1*

Arriving at the gaping hole that had once held the abandoned tower, Priam was almost disappointed. Behind him, the fire still roared in its fury. Seeing his attributes skyrocket so swiftly, Priam realized he had underestimated his greatest asset: his adaptability.

He decided to grind his resistances as soon as possible. If he had to plunge into all those acid baths, become a human lightning rod, and be chewed on by evil creatures... He would.

I should use the die as soon as possible... He had brought it into his inner world. Just in case.

Focusing back on the present, Priam leaped into the hole. It wasn't that large, barely fifteen meters in diameter, just a tad bigger than the base of the abandoned tower. The glowing pit reminded him of the Gates of Hell in Turkmenistan - a natural gas fire that had been burning for over fifty years.

Landing fifty meters below, Priam winced. The temperature in the cavern was infernal. Expanding the size of his mist cloak, he surveyed the surroundings.

The silk had burned completely, leaving only scorching ashes. The stone that formed the cave walls was blackened from the gases released by the combustion. Despite the heat and the explosion, not a crack was visible. The composition of the rock on the continent or island he was on was unknown, but its resilience was immense.

In the center of the room floated a sun, peacefully levitating. In the cave, no other flame remained. Priam suspected that the star had something to do with it. His perception noted

that it had slightly grown, and Priam retrieved it, satisfied. His gamble had succeeded, and he had another card in his hand.

Beneath the vanished celestial body, only a mound of ashes remained where the silk throne had once stood.

Gripping Promesse, Priam slammed the end of its shaft to the ground, creating a sonic wave and a rush of air. His Domain selected the latter, and **[Kinetic Control]** boosted its kinetic energy.

The enhanced wave swept the ashes in all directions, clearing the floor. The synergy of a Supremacy and an epic skill had turned a simple action into an explosion.

This new application tipped the scales.

*Lvl Up: **[Kinetic Control]** lvl 40*

VIVA +2

DEXT +3

META (FOCUS) +4

***[Kinetic Control]** has reached level 40. As an epic skill, a bonus is available. Choose one of these three options:*

***[Burst]** - Your meridians are less affected when you expend a large amount of kinetic energy in a burst. POT -30*

***[Reserve]** - Doubles your kinetic energy storage capacity. POT -30*

***[Microscopic Control]** - You handle kinetic energy on a microscopic scale better. POT -30*

Priam hesitated for only a moment. All the upgrades were incredible, of course, but he could work around the issues of the first two. **[Erosion Resistance]** would eventually address his burst problem, and he had a hunch that one of his Meta-attributes was linked to his aether reserves - and thus, kinetic energy.

In comparison, the third option was something Priam had been eagerly awaiting.

POT -30

***[Microscopic Control]** - You handle kinetic energy on a microscopic scale better.*

Instantly, Priam felt his knowledge crystallize. Previously, he understood the theoretical relationship between kinetic and thermal energy at the molecular level. Now, he could apply that knowledge.

Temperature was a measure of molecular agitation. When molecules were well-ordered and slow, matter was solid. By imparting thermal energy, they became more agitated, transitioning to a liquid and then gaseous state.

Other possible states like the Bose-Einstein condensate, superfluids, absolute zero, or even plasma existed. However, Priam suspected he'd need to increase the rarity of his skill before approaching such intriguing phenomena.

The influx of knowledge and possibilities made Priam smile. The next moment, he wanted to ascertain the scope of his new ability.

Creating a mist cloud at his fingertips, Priam condensed it before slowing down the molecules. He couldn't select and manipulate them individually due to the uncertainty principle - a complex quantum concept - but his Domain and **[Kinetic Control]** seemed to bridge the gap between this impossibility and reality.

The water molecules slowed and arranged themselves. The temperature dropped. Soon, an ice flower appeared at the tip of Priam's index. Without needing Potential, he had changed the state of water!

A burst of laughter echoed in the bubbling cavern. Not even the sensation of being cooked in a giant oven could dampen his optimism. Just a few days after the apocalypse, he owned magical powers! It was his childhood dream, and Priam allowed himself to be carried away by the moment.

An observer might have wondered about his sudden joy. After all, he had already achieved impossible feats like fighting a wyvern or traveling to another world.

Well, one must understand the fundamental difference between those actions and creating this flower: he had made this flower alone.

Fighting the wyvern had been a series of more or less suicidal and profoundly destructive actions. Traveling to Elysium had only been possible thanks to the System.

Here, Priam had used hundreds of calculations per second and inhuman perception to sculpt a flower. His perfect memory had provided its structure, and his Domain had followed its construction ice crystal by ice crystal. He had created water through his affinity with mist - a concept that was part of him - and had slowed down the molecules by the sheer force of his will.

The System could vanish tomorrow, and Priam would still be able to create an ice flower. It was the *fruit* of his efforts.

His kinetic reserves were slowly depleting, consumed in the battle against the ambient heat. Priam eventually released his skills, and the flower melted in moments. He was here for something else.

Turning his gaze to the ground, Priam knelt. The shockwave had swept the floor, leaving only bare rock visible. Yet, Priam's perception detected something else. There was a tiny rift in the air. Almost invisible, its white hue contrasted against the black background of the stone. The fissure was about five centimeters above the ground.

Priam brought his index finger closer and tested the texture of the disturbance. Almost painless, he felt his skin and flesh part around the crack. It was like touching the sharpest blade in the world.

Intrigued, Priam withdrew his finger and observed it. Despite his constitution, not for a moment had his skin resisted. *A space disturbance?*

If so, Domain couldn't detect anything beyond this disruption. Either the space beyond possessed a different dimensional geometry, or his Supremacy was too weak.

For several minutes, Priam observed the rift, using his new senses and skills to analyze it.

Lvl Up: [Infantile Phoenix Metabolism] lvl 17

VIT +2

CONST +1

According to **[Aether Perception]**, a significant amount of aether was infiltrating it. The rift was as thin as Priam could imagine, yet it absorbed massive amounts of aether. The space behind had to be poorer in aether than Elysium, and the fluid sought to balance itself.

But there was something more interesting: the rift wasn't just absorbing, it was giving.

It was thanks to **[Tribulation Hunter]** that Priam understood. The skill recognized a concept. An unowned concept, capable of enhancing a user's affinity. A portion of the ambient aether was tinted by this source. Approaching his finger again, Priam watched it regenerate before his eyes. *A concept of healing? Life? Growth?*

There was something behind this rift. A space low in aether but rich in something else. Something that had allowed the Brood Mother to advance to Tier 1. Priam harbored no illusions: the mother of spiders was undoubtedly the weakest Tier 1 he would encounter in Elysium.

Nonetheless, the rift had allowed her to rank up. It was too important not to delve into this enigma.

Bringing his hand closer again, Priam tapped into his Potential. He needed answers. Could he pay to get them?

Micro Rift detected.

Tier 1 - Rank: Earl

Use 500 POT to open a secure passage?

The System confirmed that it had discovered a rift. Possibly a passage to another world. Or *another universe?* That was unlikely. Priam was pretty sure a rift to another Universe wouldn't be labeled as a Micro Rift.

What did he know about these rifts? Almost nothing. [Eidetic Memory] reminded him of a recent conversation. Bechar had let slip that Elysium was the spearhead world. A world certainly connected to many others.

By extrapolating a bit, Priam decided it was possible for this kind of rift to be common in Elysium. Of course, not all natural rifts could allow the passage of objects or people. They very likely had to be wide enough for that.

However, it hadn't escaped Priam that the System had given him a clue. He could pay to open a secure passage. This meant a path was already there, albeit unsecured. Should he pay? If so, should he do it now or wait until he returned to his base? *If one of the rivals discovers it during my absence...*

Lvl Up: [Infantile Phoenix Metabolism] lvl 18

VIT +2

CONST +1

While Priam was still kneeling and his body struggled against the ambient heat, his Domain registered a probe. His instinct trembled, and Priam's face darkened. According to **[Phantom]**, he had a high likelihood of being detected.

Priam slowly rose, then turned to observe the cavern's entrance. Behind him, he wove a thin thread of mist. Then, he remained on guard and waited.

A second later, a figure appeared at the edge of the pit. It stood out against the red and white flames burning in the night, but the distance prevented Priam from identifying it.

The stranger leaped into the blaze, and Priam felt the impact on the ground. The newcomer was heavy. But that wasn't the question that interested Priam. *Friend or foe?*

He remained silent, disinclined to give information to a potential adversary. The heat in the air blurred his vision. Like a mirage, the light propagated abnormally due to layers of air at different temperatures.

The individual began to walk in his direction, and Priam remained on the defensive. His opponent seemed oblivious to the ambient heat. Moreover, they had easily detected Priam despite **[Phantom]** and his mist cloak. Priam wasn't betting big on his victory if a fight erupted.

At less than twenty meters from each other, Priam began to make out the stranger's features. Tall, inhuman, and muscular, his eidetic memory found an immediate match.

Arnold!

The homunculus leaned forward. Immediately, Priam activated his connection with his mist and disappeared, following his thread.

The rift trembled.

Arnold halted halfway through his salute. He hadn't even had the chance to finish his bow before the First vanished.

Frustration etched across the Var Elegis's face as he straightened up. As he approached, his sensors picked up on a spatiotemporal rift. Its aether density was low, but the Concept emanating from it... *Growth? No, more like evolution or adaptation.*

The rift was minuscule, too small to pass through. The System demanded 500 POT to open a secure passage. Should he follow the First?

The Var Elegis hesitated, analyzing the rift. Upon reading the results, his mood dropped even further. The spatiotemporal rift would obliterate him in seconds. As part of his consciousness calculated the constitution and resistances required to survive such a journey, a new feeling stirred within him.

Even with luck on his side, traversing this rift would demand thousands in constitution and spatial resistance to make it through. Arnold growled. He had hoped to narrow the gap with the First thanks to the Reunion, but the First still held a significant lead. *Have I even reduced the distance between us?*

Disheartened, the homunculus quickly scanned the cavern before departing. If the First had refused to acknowledge him, he certainly wouldn't be pleased to see Arnold push the issue.

As he left the blazing pit, Arnold weighed his options. Becoming enemies with the First was unthinkable. He needed to mend their relationship.

Maybe with a gift?

For a brief second, a whirlwind of color greeted Priam. Then, his eyes exploded.

Micro alerted him that one of his legs had vanished, then a second. His human heart squeezed, and his right arm stretched out, victim to spaghettification. *Am I near a black hole?*

Lvl up: [Gravity Resistance] lvl 5,6

CONST +6

Lvl Up: [Star Iron Body] lvl 21

CONST +3

Lvl Up: [Cut Resistance] lvl 18

CONST +1

Lvl Up: [Perforation Resistance] lvl 11,12

CONST +2

For the span of a heartbeat, Priam felt his body toughen. His constitution had just breached five hundred. The threshold fortified his form, fine-tuning his cells and molecules. It wasn't quite enough. The spatial tempest shredded through him.

Lvl up: [Gravity Resistance] lvl 7

CONST +3

Lvl Up: [Star Iron Body] lvl 22

CONST +3

Lvl Up: [Cut Resistance] lvl 19

CONST +1

Lvl Up: [Perforation Resistance] lvl 13

CONST +1

After three seconds, Priam's body was nothing but tatters. Guided by **[Tenacious Spirit - Silver]**, his mind then tried to withstand the spatial storm. Focusing his Potential into **[Spirit Resistance]**, Priam clung to life as if it were his last. Which it very well might be if he resurrected amidst this inferno.

Lvl Up: [Spirit resistance] lvl 2

WILL +3

His mind fractured.

Where was he? Who was he? It didn't matter. He wanted to live, and that desire echoed within him. His instinct roared, and his will raged.

Lvl Up: [Spirit resistance] lvl 3

WILL +3

Something resonated within him. **[Tribulation Wyvern Heart]** had been destroyed, but not the tribulation it had merged with. It awoke and enveloped his mind.

Lvl Up: [Spirit resistance] lvl 4

WILL +3

The surrounding chaos continued to rage, rapidly eroding the protection. Finally, it shattered. At the same instant, the fractured mind sensed a change.

Congratulations, you are dead! Your Talent [He Who Eludes Death] brings you back to life once a day.

Number of deaths: 14

Synergy detected with your talent [High Human adaptation] and your Titles [Three-Headed Hydra] and [Veteran]. Your body and spirit are rebuilt and will be more resistant to what killed them:

CONST +8
WILL +11

Lvl up: **[Gravity Resistance]** lvl 8,9

CONST +6

Lvl Up: **[Star Iron Body]** lvl 23,24

CONST +6

Lvl Up: **[Cut Resistance]** lvl 20

CONST +1

Lvl Up: **[Perforation Resistance]** lvl 14,15,16,17

CONST +4

Lvl Up: **[Spirit resistance]** lvl 5,6,7

WILL +9

[Cut Resistance] has reached level 20, its maximum level as a common skill. Depending on your background, three upgrades are available:

[Cut Resistance - Rare] - General upgrade. No future upgrade possible. Potential Cost: 5

[Cut Resilience - Rare] - You've been cut up many times, but that doesn't stop you. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 10

[Atomos - Rare] - Uncuttable in Greek. High upgrade potential. Potential Cost: 40

POT -40

You've acquired the skill: **[Atomos - Rare]**.

[Atomos] - He Who Can't Be Cut? You've faced dimensional blades, one of the universe's most terrifying physical phenomena, and lived to tell the tale. Your body's structure is changing. Ordinary physics can no longer explain your incredible resistance. Models used to study you now need to be based on aether.

Remember, the Greeks were wrong. An atom isn't unbreakable.

CONST +3

You've acquired the skill: **[Space Resistance - Epic]**.

[Space Resistance] - Of all the cosmic threats out there, few are as perilous as a dimensional storm. Yet, you decided to take a swim. Is it arrogance or just a dash of recklessness? Probably a bit of both.

Next challenge: jumping into a black hole!

Your body is forging its own dimensional identity.

CONST +9

Title upgraded! **[Veteran - Bronze]** becomes **[Weathered - Silver]**. Congratulations!

[Weathered - Silver] - You have acquired twenty different types of resistance. You have left a trail of adversaries, each one a lesson etched in scars you wear with pride. You have stared down death for so long, its claws struggle to find purchase on your armor.

But you know better than anyone: it only needs to win once.

CONST +20%

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: OFF. Reloaded in 5 hours 35 minutes 10 seconds.

[Tribulation]: Two Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 178 days 6 hours 8 minutes 23 seconds.

A faint ache jolted Priam awake. According to Micro, something just made a go at severing his pinky. Domain spotted the culprit: a crab. The wielder of the claw took a second shot, prompting Priam to crack open his eyes.

The crab's bravado dwindled, and it scuttled away. Priam swiftly got to his feet, surveying his surroundings.

He was undoubtedly on a beach. Behind him, a city lay in ruins. Ahead, an ocean stretched out.

A lone sun gleamed in the sky.

Priam voiced aloud the first of a thousand questions swirling in his mind.

"Where the fuck am I?"

*

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

PHYSICAL:

Strength 339

Constitution 599 (+120)

Agility 319

Vitality 490 (+20)

Perception 554

MENTAL:

Vivacity 300 (+2)

Dexterity 374 (+3)

Memory 99

Willpower 598 (+41)

Charisma 418

META:

Meta-affinity 295

Meta-focus 225 (+4)

Meta-endurance 166

Meta-perception 84

Meta-chance 216

Meta-authority 12

Potential: 1099 (-9)

Tier 0

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: OFF. Reloaded in 5 hours 5 minutes 10 seconds.

[Tribulation]: Two Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 178 days 5 hours 38 minutes 23 seconds.