

Chapitre 119: Back to basic

"Have you encountered other rivals?!" exclaimed Priam.

Dishnu was the first rival who hadn't tried to kill him when they met. Priam was now a bit wary of those among the new civilizations who had finished the Tutorial the quickest.

Dishnu blinked, his eyelids like vibrant green leaves, before making a peculiar sound. *Seems like the twittering of a small bird*, Priam mused.

'I've only encountered two other rivals besides you, but the Forest revealed to me the presence of ten people. The plants know how to listen...'

"You're speaking in the past tense," remarked Priam.

'One of them is already dead, hunted by the Var Elegis.'

"Arnold..." Priam gritted his teeth.

Kazuki turned to him, and Priam quickly explained his encounter with the homunculus.

"A being of no honor is as repugnant as it is dangerous," commented the hoplite. Priam almost laughed, thinking back to his first meeting with Kazuki. Apparently, there were rules to follow even in rival assassinations.

Priam turned to the Drya, who was gently caressing some blades of grass.

"Is it chasing us?" he asked, his voice oozing with anger. If the Var Elegis threatened his family, it would find Priam standing in its way.

Dishnu blinked, and Priam felt his anger and fear dissipate. He knew he should have feared someone who could dispel his negative emotions, but it was complicated to be afraid of the Drya. *He looks like the son of Buddha and a dryad.*

'Your anger contaminates the world. Don't let it control you,' advised Dishnu before continuing. *'The Var Elegis has ceased his pursuit since the Reunion. He must be preoccupied with the Necromoon.'*

"The undead wolf was tainted by that thing. What exactly is it?"

'According to Nature's memory, the Necromoon descends periodically. Then, the living hide and the dead awaken.'

"I'm on a bad news streak... So, it's an astronomical phenomenon corrupting the world. I suppose we'll have to wait for it to pass."

Dishnu shook his head.

'The curse has already corrupted one of our rivals. I felt his rage and indignation. He will hunt us down.'

A foreboding feeling washed over Priam. "How is that possible? Does he still have free will?"

The necro wolf was immensely powerful, but it was feral. If there had been a glimmer of intelligence left in the beast, it would have slaughtered Priam and everyone else.

'That's the impression I got.'

"The corruption starts with the body and then attacks the mind. Perhaps he secured his mind," suggested Kazuki, nervously rubbing his cursed wound.

'That's possible,' Dishnu agreed, looking at the hoplite's bandage.

Despite his constitution and resilience, the wound was incredibly stubborn. If anyone other than Priam were affected...

"Is there a remedy?" Kazuki asked.

'None that I know of.'

"Log-a-rhythm - my tree - might be able to synthesize something," Priam proposed.

Dishnu pondered before closing his eyes. Log-a-rhythm's branches began to stir, and Priam sensed an inquiry. His tree indicated that the Drya wanted access to specific fragments of its memory.

Priam hesitated for a moment before agreeing. *Block the memories concerning those present in your whitelist.*

Usually, Priam wouldn't have so readily agreed, but the Drya could access the memories of the clearing's trees to understand most of Log-a-rhythm's history. Moreover, if he tried to force his way... *I wouldn't be able to stop him.* Again, a feeling of weakness overcame him. Gathering his colossal will, Priam crushed the emotion and summoned a sense of hope.

In this world, weakness is temporary. I was an insect compared to Kazuki just a few weeks ago. I'll catch up to Dishnu soon, he encouraged himself.

Finally, Dishnu opened his eyes and made a sort of pout.

'It may be possible, but he will suffer to unlock a resistance...'

"He?" Priam looked at the Drya in confusion.

'Log-a-rhythm was a male elf before.'

"I'm not sure there's much of him left. Anyway, I think I can command it... him, to ignore his pain."

In addition to appeasing the Drya, Priam wasn't particularly keen on torturing the nascent intelligence of his tree.

'Thank you. However, he could fail to develop a resistance.'

"Do we have a choice? We don't know how long the Necromoon will linger."

Priam wasn't one to bury his head in the sand to avoid problems. If the phenomenon persisted, someone would eventually be infected. It would then be too late to save them.

Kazuki seemed hesitant, and Priam noticed.

"Do you know something?"

The hoplite took a few seconds to think. "The night is falling earlier, and the temperatures are dropping. In the evening, there's a light spot in the sky that's slightly enlarging..."

"A light spot? Like a moon?"

"Possibly, but it's still very far. If its influence grows as it gets closer..."

The news didn't sit well with Priam, who grimaced.

"Everyone needs to unlock this resistance," he decided.

The Drya didn't seem concerned by the news. If Kazuki had managed to unlock a resistance, then surely he could too. Watching him tend to the clearing's herbs and flowers, Priam had an idea.

"Dishnu, I have a proposition. Log-a-rhythm's influence on the surroundings is growing. By growing large enough, he could protect a part of the forest by sharing his resistances..."

'You want my help in cultivating the tree?'

Priam almost felt ashamed to propose such an unbalanced partnership for the Drya. But he had nothing to lose.

Dishnu stared at him. His inhuman eyes, the color of honey, remained open, while his broad but solid figure stood still. Refusing to look away, Priam presented his arguments.

"If Log-a-rhythm fails to develop resistance to the Necromoon, everyone will die. The flora and fauna will become puppets of a force beyond us. But if he manages to resist, he can pass on this quality."

At least, that's what Priam counted on. Dishnu caressed a blade of grass lengthwise, seeming to see more in it than Priam ever would. The two beings were on different trajectories.

Again, Dishnu chirped.

'Both unique and part of a whole... I accept.'

Priam's smile froze as he watched the Drya's next actions.

To the astonished eyes of the onlookers, Dishnu plunged his hand into his chest cage. The wood that composed his body creaked and then split. Inserting his fingers into the fissure, the Drya pulled out a blackened and shattered bone.

As large as a human femur, the bone fragment exuded an aura that made Priam step back. Dishnu laid the bone on the ground, and the grass began to gray.

With a disgusted expression, Priam identified the object.

[Identification]

[Fragment d'os - Tier 2] - A bone fragment.

Laconic...

"You kept this within you?" The aura of the fragment was so vile that Priam was reluctant to touch it. Nevertheless, the object would allow them to train their resistance in a nearly secure manner.

The Guardian of Nature nodded. *'The Guardian watches over the forest. It's my responsibility to bear this curse...'*

For the first time, Priam sensed a negative emotion in Dishnu's voice. A crackling of flames consuming a trunk that sounded like a declaration of war. Some things could irritate a Drya.

More importantly, Priam felt Dishnu's aura increase. Now that he was no longer compelled to keep the equivalent of a biological bomb within him, his strength was laid bare. The Drya was monstrously strong. His race evolved with nature, and the Elysian environment benefited him even more than the other rivals.

A smile stretched across Priam's lips. He looked forward to training.

'I must go,' announced Dishnu. *'I'll return tomorrow to help Log-a-rhythm.'*

"... Thank you." Priam found it hard to fathom the Drya, but he hadn't tried to kill or steal from him. That was something. Even as the sound of his voice didn't reach the edge of the forest, the Drya had already vanished.

A breeze swept over the meadow, causing the grass to sway. A moment later, the herbs tainted by the necrobeast and the bone turned black. The Guardian of Nature had no intention of leaving behind such an abomination. Nature had called back its children.

Sighing at the casual display of power, Priam turned to Kazuki.

"I have a quest to finish and resources to find for Log-a-rhythm, but before that... I'm going to train," he announced.

The hoplite wore a serious expression. "Likewise."

"Would you mind giving me some advice?"

Kazuki arched an eyebrow. "Are you finally deciding to learn to use your spear?"

"It's now or never."

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"If you continue like this, you'll soon face a wall."

Kazuki and Priam sat cross-legged by the river. In the background, Louis and Mirscella were training the rest of the group.

The sound of water soothed Priam. Looking at his hands, he wondered if he'd ever felt like he'd hit a wall before. The hoplite meant it in terms of progression, but Priam had constantly developed his skills. If he was slow, what did that say about the rest of humanity?

Seeing Priam's pensive expression, Kazuki sighed. He tossed the wooden spear he held to Priam, who caught it. Kazuki conjured a second wooden spear out of thin air and took a defensive stance.

A spatial talent. That's probably where he hides his armor, noted Priam.

"A demonstration is worth a thousand explanations. Let's spar without using active skills."

The two warriors sized each other up briefly before Priam launched an attack. Using Micro, he propelled himself forward. His dexterity guided his spear toward the center of Kazuki's chest.

The hoplite blocked smoothly. In one motion, he slid the spear against Priam's, countering just as swiftly.

In a fraction of a second, Priam used his agility and perception to analyze the attack and attempt to find a counter or evasion. The hoplite's attack was too fast to evade. Priam tried to bring his spear back in front of him, but Kazuki's own spear kept it at bay.

A tenth of a second later, the wooden tip struck Priam's chest ineffectively. **[Kinetic Control]** had nullified the force of the blow. *Damn.*

Kazuki stepped back without a word. Using his near-perfect memory, Priam reviewed the fight, trying to find a solution. Finally, he groaned.

"I lost the moment I attacked. I overextended during the initial attack."

"Exactly. You're an exceptional fighter but a terrible spearman."

"Tact isn't your strong suit, you know that? Am I really that bad?"

"When you're not wielding your own spear? Yes. Some legendary hoplite weapons have the ability to bond with their wielders. They correct their placement and influence their actions. For a beginner, it's counterproductive. That's what your weapon does."

Priam winced at the hoplite's comments.

"It makes sense, and I should have thought of it earlier..."

A faint smile played on Kazuki's lips.

"I think you were preoccupied. But now, you can change that. Mastering the basics is an essential step. A tall tower must be built on solid foundations."

This logic held true in any field, and Priam agreed. Kazuki continued.

"With your attributes, my guidance, and the density of aether, your progress will be swift. However, be careful not to rush. If you have high-level skills with your spear, I advise setting them aside for now. I don't want you mixing everything up."

"I'll follow your advice," Priam said, inclining his head slightly. For hoplites, the trainer was almost a fatherly figure. Priam didn't plan to go that far, but if Kazuki was a good teacher, he deserved his respect.

"Let's begin. You'll learn or review different basic techniques and then string them together. Combat isn't a series of actions; it's a flow."

Kazuki raised his left index finger. "I'll give you a week to reach this stage."

"How will I know if I succeed?" Priam asked.

"The System will tell you. Flow is the name of Mastery's Stage 0."

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Lying on the ground, Sphinx watched Priam train. His movements were slow but precise. She had no doubt that her friend would soon be an excellent spearman.

Not far from him was Kazuki. The System had taught Sphinx the hundred most common human languages, but hoplite wasn't among them. Yet, she understood the Champion's character relatively well. Advocating duty and honor, Kazuki was a sort of modern-day knight. Or perhaps a samurai. Sphinx had some gaps in her history knowledge.

In any case, the hoplite was training hard. He was already a true killing machine, but it seemed not to be enough for him. *I wonder how powerful he is with his armor.*

"Are you training hard?" a voice called out.

Suppressing a yawn, Sphinx turned to Mirscella.

"I'm trying to manipulate gravity by lifting this pebble," she lied.

The old woman sat down next to her with a smile. "You avoid physical training because your true form is too imposing? Don't worry, Priam's illusion camouflages us. Without it, Blueberry would spend his days sleeping in the tree.

Sphinx thought the bear would have appreciated the program.

"My strength lies in my bloodline," Sphinx replied, shaking her head. "I need to learn to control karma and gravity."

The real reason Sphinx didn't use her true form was that she wanted to be able to accompany Priam. Her friend was happy to carry her when she was small, but he couldn't lift a monster weighing over ten tons. Leaving her princess spot - his head - was out of the question.

Mirscella folded her hands. "What a plan! You're training hard so Priam takes you into the forest with him, right?"

Sphinx got up, roaring with the power of a kitten. "Exactly! He'd better work hard if he doesn't want me to leave him behind!"

The corners of Mirscella's lips stretched.

"Perfect. By the way, I think it's time for you to release Rose."

Sphinx looked at the old lady, stunned. She had completely forgotten that she had swallowed Rose before going through Priam's inner world portal. After spending over four hours in her pocket dimension, the girl would likely be angry.

Oops. Maybe she'll forgive me if I meow? Humans seem to like that...

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

PHYSICAL:

Strength 320
Constitution 477
Agility 309
Vitality 469
Perception 538

MENTAL:

Vivacity 294
Dexterity 365
Memory 99
Willpower 557
Charisma 414

META:

Meta-affinity 288
Meta-focus 213
Meta-endurance 165
Meta-perception 81
Meta-chance 213
Meta-authority 12

Potential: 985

Tier 0

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: OFF. Reloaded in 21 hours 2 minutes 55 seconds.

[Tribulation]: Two Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 179 days 22 hours 6 minutes 8 seconds.