

## Chapter 72: Dear Spy and Spiders

Survivor tips: You can ask twenty questions to an assembly over the next twenty-four hours. This council is formed by an infinite number of hypothetical Priams who have just survived their Tribulations. These questions must concern your survival. Each answer will consist of a single short sentence.

Sitting on one of the huge branches of the Jubokko tree, Priam reread his reward description. He didn't want to leave anything to chance - or rather, he tried to leave nothing to chance. Perhaps there was a trick he could exploit by twisting the words?

There were an infinite - or almost infinite - number of questions to ask, some of which could decide his life or death. *Hardly stressful*, he quipped. So, whenever the opportunity arose, Priam thought about which question to ask. He had recounted; there were still twelve questions available. It was both a lot and too little.

Another critical point was the duration of this assistance. Survivor Tips would expire after twenty-four hours. It gave Priam just under eleven hours to spend his questions. His Tribulations would begin in just over nine hours, allowing him to ask questions during them - or at least their beginning. A golden opportunity to understand the dangers of his Tribulations and how best to survive them.

Priam ran a hand through his hair, staring into space. The System was not his friend. If he could know the method of defeating its Tribulations, then it was a safe bet that the method was simple: be strong enough to survive.

Even so, if there was a way of overcoming his Tribulations more efficiently, he had to know it. Priam decided to reserve at least five of his questions for his Tribulations. It left him with seven available questions. He had an idea for the first question.

*What question should I ask now?*

It was a shame to waste a question like that, but at least he was sure he wasn't missing out on something important.

Answer: *Ask about Anatole Aely'Samael's plan, position and weaknesses.*

It confirmed his hypothesis. Like the cockroach he was, Anatole was good at staying alive. Priam checked the urn hanging from his belt. One could never be too careful.

*Where is Anatole Aely'Samael, and what is his plan?*

Answer: *Araneaes would poison the Jubokko to grant Anatole a wish.*

One of the advantages of Survivor Tips was that the council formed by his clones didn't have to answer precisely the question he'd asked. It gave them some leeway in directing their answer. Of course, a ten words answer still sounded bizarre. Fortunately, Priam knew that

his clones communicated mainly by keywords. He reread the sentence several times before asking another question.

*What other events do I need to know about?*

*Answer: The tree's fall heralds a battle, the factions brace themselves.*

Only nine questions remained, four of them before the Tribulations. However, Priam was satisfied. Turning to his friends, he outlined the information he possessed.

Firstly, the Crimson Fruit - the reward for poisoning the Jubokko - seemed to interest a lot of people. Secondly, the grove, or the area around it, was about to become the scene of a major battle. It would certainly be the climax of the Reunion for the various factions of the Dome. Obviously, whoever came out on top would use the end of the Reunion to maximize their advantage and crush their enemy.

For the time being, Priam's goal, and by extension Sphinx's and Blueberry's, was to kill Anatole. One of his quests offered to resurrect someone in exchange for Anatole's life. The other promised to increase the quality of his Phoenix bloodline. Anatole was a monster, and Priam needed no further reason to act.

"Anatole wants to kill the Jubokko. So he must be close by," said Priam. Sphinx and Blueberry agreed. "How did you intend to poison the tree?"

"A few days ago, the Earl sent me to destroy some fungi that were parasitizing and poisoning some of the trees in the grove. They reproduce at an astonishing rate and love the sequoias. I was thinking of throwing some spores of this fungus into the Spring. The pond would make them overgrow the tree in a few minutes," Blueberry explained.

"That's smart!" exclaimed Sphinx.

Priam nodded.

"The Jubokko's main weakness is that it's static," Priam admitted. "My Tribulations are coming fast. Can't we kill him faster? By burning it, for example?"

"Impossible. The forest is weak against fire, but most trees develop resistance to this disaster when they become ennobled. I'm not saying it can't burn, but it would take extreme temperatures."

"Too bad," Priam replied, rubbing his shins. They had grown back, but he needed to ensure they were there. Despite his Willpower, his deaths and wounds sometimes weighed on the young man's mind. Sphinx touched his shoulder, and he smiled back.

"It's all right, don't worry. By the way, Blueberry, do you know of any spider colonies nearby?"

Blueberry froze.

"Why?"

Priam raised an eyebrow at the ursid's discomfited expression before bursting out laughing. "You're five meters tall and afraid of little spiders?"

The bear frowned, and Priam apologized. "Sorry, I shouldn't have made fun of you. If Anatole wants to use spiders to poison the Jubokko, I don't think he's importing them from Earth. There must be a nest nearby."

"There aren't a few little spiders. There's a gigantic colony of huge spiders," Blueberry replied, shivering.

"Where?" asked Priam. His doubles seemed to think Anatole was ready to manipulate spiders to poison the Earl.

"Everywhere." At the confusion on Priam's and Sphinx's faces, Blueberry explained. "The Moon has been renovated. Not just the surface but the whole Moon. Underground, there are caverns, galleries and monsters. Under the grove, there's a colony of spiders as big as wolves. Their webs stick to my fur, and it's an ordeal to get them off..." grumbled the ursid.

Priam then reminded his friends of the clues his doubles had given him.

"Anatole wants to use the spiders to poison the Earl, and that would give him access to a wish?" he concludes. "But why would the lion keep spiders under his precious tree? Either they're harmless and Anatole plans to make them toxic, or there's another Earl out there..."

Looking up at Blueberry, Priam saw the bear even more puzzled than he was.

"I know!" exclaimed Sphinx before laughing as her two friends turned to face her.

"Really?"

"I'm good at puzzles and riddles!"

"That's right," laughed Priam. "Excuse me, Sphinx. Give us the answer then, please."

"There may be an Earl under there, but there's another explanation for the lion's inaction. By defending the tree against its natural enemies, he was taking advantage of Spring. Without spiders, the Jubokko would have had no reason to allow the lion access to Spring. They're more partners than allies," concluded Sphinx.

"That makes sense," Priam said, clapping his hands. "If Anatole really is trying to poison this tree, we're going to help him."

"What?" said Blueberry.

"Yeah. My Tribulations are in about ten hours, and I want to finish this as soon as possible. We kill the Jubokko with Anatole's help, and then we kill him. We get the fruit, kill the Earl and I survive my Tribulations. Easy!" announced Priam with a smile.

"... I don't believe that for a moment," Blueberry murmured.

"Don't raise flags!"

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The entrance to an underground passage was at the foot of the Jubokko, between two roots the size of the fuselage of an A380. Blueberry had accompanied them to this point before slipping away. His job was to look after the mushrooms.

For their part, Priam and Sphinx had ventured into the dark tunnel. Despite the tunnel's comfortable size - three elephants could have walked through it abreast - Sphinx had chosen to shrink. She was currently perched on Priam's shoulder, purring as he was petting her. To be perfectly honest, Priam had no idea how to deal with a sphinx. Perhaps petting his friend was considered a grave insult, but Priam couldn't bring himself to stop. Sphinx purrs were too cute.

Smiling, Priam soon arrived in a large hall. Above him, the base of the trunk flared out, forming roots that sank into the ground. With a torch in his hand, Priam observed the ceiling, particularly the line that separated it in two. It gave the impression that the tree could bend in two.... Or open.

"There's a lot of fear and rage lingering here," murmured Sphinx.

Priam looked at her for a moment before resuming his petting. It was certainly the 'mouth' of the tree. After all, he knew the lion regularly sacrificed animals to increase the Spring's volume. Shrugging, Priam turned and probed the darkness. His perception was exceptional, and despite the dim glow of the torch, he could make out several tunnels descending into the darkness.

"Any preferences?" he asked Sphinx, pointing to the various tunnels. The adorable creature picked out one of them - certainly at random - and the two friends entered.

The circular tunnel was not abandoned. On the earthen walls, lines of some kind produced a faint bluish glow. Reaching out, Priam touched them with his fingertips. Bringing his finger to his nose, **[Sense of smell]** activated. A scent of flour filled his nose and **[Eidetic Memory]** manifested itself. Priam had smelled these odors before, walking through forests in autumn. They were characteristic of mushrooms.

"Luminescent mushrooms," he whispered. Sphinx remained silent. Priam had warned her that spiders could hear sounds thanks to silk spread over their bodies. They were clearly not the creatures with the keenest hearing, but Priam didn't want to take any chances until he found Anatole.

Reassured, Priam continued on his way. Under his bare feet, the soft earth was cool, almost cold. It couldn't have been more than a few degrees, which seemed normal, given that the Moon's core was almost five times colder than the Earth's. The ground was slightly sloping, moving away from the surface, as the spider colony was certainly hiding outside the Jubokko Domain.

After about ten minutes of walking, Sphinx raised her head and Priam stopped. In front of them, stretched across the middle of the tunnel, was a thin silk thread. It was Sphinx who had alerted him. Despite his keen perception, Priam wouldn't have noticed it until he touched it.

"Well done, Sphinx," he murmured, observing the wire. The low luminosity made it more or less invisible to the naked eye. Consulting his aether reserves for a moment, Priam decided to reactivate **[Aether Perception]**. The thread began to glow. A skill had undoubtedly been used to place it here. Any careless adversary would have broken it while walking, alerting the entire spider colony. *Which might come in handy soon.*

His Tribulations would be triggered in less than nine hours. By then, Priam intended to finish off the spiders. What could be better than intentionally setting a trap to lure in his enemies? With a bit of luck, he might even have time for a micro-nap.

Bending down to dodge the wire, Priam continued on his way. A hundred meters further on, the tunnel turned. Priam concentrated on **[Stealth]** and decided to stick to the wall. He walked the next three meters, paying particular attention to his surroundings. Suddenly, he stopped. His foot had just moved a bit of earth, and **[Aether Perception]** detected something.

Priam blanched as he observed the ground. The wires in the tunnel were decoys. The real traps were buried. Satisfied to have detected an obvious trap, Priam had let his guard down. Shifting a little earth with his toes, Priam discovered a multitude of buried threads separated by a few centimeters. Sphinx stirred on his shoulder and Priam bent down.

"Priam..."

"Wait."

With his right hand, he lifted the earth from under his feet. His right foot had crushed and broken three wires.

"Priam," Sphinx repeated.

"One second..." he said, turning around.

As he gently cleared the earth beneath his last footprints, Priam realized that he had broken threads with every step. Certainly, from the start. Sighing, he straightened up.

"You're smelling spiders, right?"

"Yes. I've been trying to tell you for ten seconds already," Sphinx frowned.

Priam scratched her head behind her ears and apologized. "Sorry."

"Do you need help?"

"I don't think so."

He could hear them at last. Priam grabbed Promesse, and his spear nestled in the palm of his hand. Head held high, Priam moved forward, then turned the corner. Ahead of him, some fifty meters away, he saw a dozen spiders. White as snow, each one must have been about a meter high. Two weeks earlier, Priam would have closed his eyes watching the spiders in the second Harry Potter film. Today, he was smiling.

"Bring it on!"

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Using every last drop of his reserves, the Earl roared. His aether, guided by his skill, formed a circle in front of his mouth. Within a radius of thirty meters, all the air molecules were sucked up and concentrated in a sphere created at the center of the circle. The Abomination approached in silence, its howls banished by the absence of air. It raised its arm to strike a decisive blow, and the Earl took advantage of the opening.

### ***[Wrath of the Wind].***

The sphere exploded, and the circle directed the energy toward the chimera. Just below the armpit, a plasma tunnel pierced the monster. The flames parted, the flesh disappeared and the attack met a bone cage two meters in diameter, tearing it like paper. Despite the material's resistance, the lion's ultimate attack annihilated all defenses.

The battlefield took a brief respite as the chimera collapsed to the ground. Gasping, the Earl collapsed too.

"Sir, Sir! Pull yourself together, we're winning!" exclaimed one of his Barons. Indeed, most of the Revenants' army, transformed into flaming skeletons, had been reduced to ashes. The lion opened one eye towards a monkey whose name he hadn't even tried to remember.

"Run away, boy. Your presence is useless here," he breathed. He'd defeated the giant Abomination, but at what cost? He was exhausted, drained by the battle. Underground, the rune was becoming more and more charged by the minute. Saint Helena was angry with the Earl, and everyone who stood beside him would suffer.

The Baron stood stunned for a moment before shaking his head. "I refuse."

The lion coughed in surprise. "Excuse me?" he asked, growling.

"Sir, I refuse. You are my Earl and you will be my King. I may be a coward and tremble with fear," he said, showing his trembling hands. "But you give me the strength to fight my fears. I will follow you to the death!"

"You fool," roared the lion. "You're useless. The only reason you're here is to die absorbing these flakes! I'm using you to facilitate my Tribulation!"

The Earl had not tried to be discreet, and for the second time, the battlefield fell silent. His subjects looked at each other, uncertain, and the lion sighed. He felt better; honesty was taking a weight off his shoulders. In any case, it was better this way. Better to die alone than take thousands of lives with him.

"Mmmmmh!" Raising his head in surprise, the lion saw a buffalo run into a flake and burst into flames. The next second, a dozen animals began jumping, trying to catch wisps rather than run from them.

"I'm not the only one keen to protect you, Sir," remarked the Baron. "I'm glad. I thought my death would be useless, but it's not. Please survive." With that, the monkey jumped in the direction of a wisp. The Earl stepped forward and tackled him to the ground.

"You... I... What do you think you're doing?!"

"I sacrifice myself for you? If I'm going to die, I might as well do it for a noble cause," replied the monkey. "Please, this is the first time in my life that I'm proud of myself and not afraid. I've lived as a coward but want to die as a hero."

The Earl opened his mouth before closing it again. What right did he have to prevent his Baron from sacrificing himself? None, he was doing his duty. *And I didn't do mine...*

Straightening up, the noble lion took a breath. "My people, listen to me! Flee. I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll survive the second part of this Tribulation. You obey me, and I protect you. It is my honor as a Noble. I had forgotten it, and you reminded me. Let me be proud of myself one last time. Let me believe that Safamu, Earl of the Dark Woods, deserves your allegiance."

The animals were silent. Most were unable to speak, but all understood the Earl's intentions. For a few moments, no one moved. Just as Safamu was about to speak again, the monkey bowed.

"I'm sorry, but I still refuse. I feel your conviction Sir, and it makes me want to fight for you even more. If you don't give me another opportunity to help you, I'll throw myself between you and the next death flake."

Safamu growled. Opening his mouth to scold his subordinate, he stood still. The wind was blowing a secret in his ear. The next moment, the breeze continued on its way, and he sighed.

"What crime have I committed to deserve such subjects..."

The monkey had the good sense not to answer.

The lion resumed and extended a paw.

"Humans are coming this way. These wisps take lives, but they don't have to be ours." He turned and looked at the monkey.

"What's your name?"

"Borza, Sir"

"Borza will guide you. Lure them here. Kidnap them. I want a human alive under every one of those flakes," Safamu roared.

Thousands of animal cries shook the battlefield.

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

*PHYSICAL:*

*Strength 152*

*Constitution 276*

*Agility 193*

*Vitality 286*

*Perception 299*

*MENTAL:*

*Vivacity 176*

*Dexterity 201*

*Memory 50*

*Willpower 288*

*Charisma 150*

*META:*

*Meta-affinity 141*

*Meta-focus 98*

*Meta-endurance 90*

*Meta-perception 32*

*Meta-chance 114*

*Potential: 1237*

*Tier 0*

***[He Who Eludes Death]*** charge OFF. Reloaded in 4 hours 27 min 39s



**[Tribulation]: Tribulations are coming.**  
Time: 8 hours 47 minutes 33 seconds.