

Chapter 121: Silk Land

"Be careful," warned Alain.

"Always," Priam smiled.

Without further delay, Priam headed toward Kazuki and Louis. The man and the hoplite were training together near the river. It seemed as though the two warriors were engaged in a slow-motion battle. Priam quickly realized they were simply comparing their respective arts.

Every fifteen seconds or so, they would pause to discuss. What was the most optimal combination? Which hold provided the best immobilization? The difference in physique between men and hoplites was a fascinating subject for a warrior.

In any case, terrestrial and hoplite arts convergence promised a powerful fusion. *I'll ask them to teach me later.*

"I have a quest to finish," announced Priam after spectating an exchange that favored Louis.

Kazuki took a few seconds to catch his breath. Priam was genuinely impressed by the hoplite's work ethic. He had been training for over a day now without a break for sleep.

His attributes alone couldn't explain this; Kazuki was the most motivated and focused person Priam knew. *Is it because he is a hoplite, or is he just extremely diligent?*

"Put the thrust into practice," Kazuki finally replied. "Don't try anything else for now. If you mess up - and you will - unlearning it will take precious time."

"No problem. I just wanted to know if you've been that way recently," Priam asked, pointing in a specific direction.

"Where are you planning to go exactly?"

Priam crouched down and traced a circle in the earth centered on the portal that had spat him out into Elysium. One cross symbolized the position of Log-a-rhythm and a second one, the position of the spiders.

"I spotted an old stone tower that housed about thirty spiders. I think it was the day you arrived. My quest requires me to destroy them."

Kazuki grimaced. "That was a month ago. Things have changed since then."

Priam had almost forgotten the time difference between Elysium and the Reunion.

"What do you mean?"

"I passed through the area about a week ago. I saw nothing except for kilometers of webs strung between the trees. It's a fortress," summarized the hoplite, tracing the perimeter of the spider base.

"Damn. I'm not sure it's still worth it."

"It depends. You have a quest, right?"

Priam quickly checked his quest.

Quest: Hunter

Being a prey is a tiring condition. But even prey can sometimes become hunters.

Exterminate the 34 *Trichonephila Aether clavipes*.

Reward: A scarlet silk ball. Potential + 50.

Difficulty: Medium

Remaining time: 3 Days

"The reward is ridiculous. A spool of thread - even magical - won't make me face a spider invasion," Priam shuddered.

"Arachnophobe," Louis chuckled. The old man had stepped forward.

"When I was little, very much so. Today, it's just disgust," said Priam.

"Those creatures aren't exactly beauties," Louis laughed, stepping forward. Kazuki shifted to allow Louis to take a look at the map.

"If these spiders have advanced so much, they'll end up reaching here," grumbled Louis. "Someone will have to deal with them."

"You should do it," added Kazuki, looking at Priam.

"I'm not sure... Maybe one of our rivals will take care of it," Priam replied.

Dying trapped in spider webs was an excellent way to die repeatedly.

"Maybe, maybe not. However, the System is fair. If the difficulty has increased, so will the reward. Besides... for these spiders to have developed this much, there must be an explanation - beyond just the ambient ether. Thirty spiders couldn't have built this fortress."

Priam hesitated for another second before standing up. "I said I'd do it, so I'll do it."

"A bold way to live."

Upon hearing these words, Kazuki drew his spear in a flash. Priam and Louis jumped before recognizing Mirscella's voice. Priam carefully surveyed the surroundings, trying to spot the thief - or an enemy mimicking her voice. Despite his impressive perception, he detected nothing.

"Mirscella?" he tried after searching in vain for several seconds.

According to Domain, the air pressure varied slightly to his right, and Priam turned in that direction.

"Oh? You can sense me? That's annoying," the thief murmured, reappearing. She stood less than three meters from Priam, and he hadn't detected a thing.

"How?"

The thief gave him a grandmotherly smile - full of kindness and experience.

"Creating skills here is much cheaper. I now have three epic-tier skills. One to escape light, another to negate my scent, and the last to hide my aether signature. I'm pretty sure I made no noise - I have a Title for that. How did you detect me?"

"You displace the air when you move."

Mirscella grimaced. "That's hard to prevent."

"Partial control of friction, maybe?" Priam suggested.

"Perhaps..." The thief looked thoughtful. "Anyway, I don't have enough Potential left to create a new skill. We'll see about that later."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," Priam encouraged her. "By the way, could you teach me how to detect hidden enemies?"

"Of course, that's the whole point of assembling a group of specialists. But it will take time. Instead, I can come with you today."

Priam winced at these words. "I thought of going alone; I probably won't be able to protect you."

"I planned to stay in your world and only come out if you need me. To dodge the webs, for example. I don't think you have much experience in that, do you?"

"None," Priam admitted.

"That's what I thought."

Priam thought back to the stealth Mirscella had displayed. With that kind of skill, she would be safe.

"I accept. Let's go while there's still daylight," Priam said, opening the passage to Concepts Archipelago. He watched Mirscella step in without objection before closing it. The old lady was a professional, and Priam trusted her not to put them in danger.

Which couldn't be said for the two young girls approaching.

"Can I come?" Rose asked.

"No."

"I'm coming," Sphinx declared.

"Nope. Sorry, but this isn't a game. If you died, I'd be very sad," Priam said firmly but definitively. The argument struck a chord, and the two girls nodded sadly. Priam still glanced at Louis, who nodded. The old man would keep an eye on the two girls.

After a final embrace, he left the protection of Log-a-rhythm and ventured into the forest.

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Five hundred meters further, Priam found himself smiling. A week ago, the forest had seemed terrifying to him. Since then, he had changed. **[High Human Adaptation]** allowed him to see this environment positively. Here, he could become stronger.

Navigating through the vegetation, Priam stopped every hundred meters or so to uproot a plant that resonated under the gaze of **[Aether Perception]**. Most offered no clues under **[Identification]**, but a plant charged with aether couldn't be useless, right?

Tossing his findings into his inner world, Priam covered almost two kilometers before coming to a sudden stop. The forest ahead seemed clear, but Domain had just detected a thread a few centimeters from his face. Stretched between two trees at about waist height, the line was entirely invisible to both his eyes and **[Aether Perception]**.

*You have gained the skill: **[Trap detection - common]**.*

***[Trap detection - common]** - Sometimes, your enemies will try to detect or weaken you before a fight. It's a guerrilla or defensive tactic that often gives the upper hand against a superior enemy. You pay attention to your surroundings.*

You might be paranoid, but you're alive. Can your enemies say the same?

You detect these traps more easily.

PERC +1

*Lvl Up: **[Trap detection]** lvl 2,3,4*

PERC +3

It was clearly an alarm, and Priam squinted. He was about to enter the territory of the spiders. Opening a portal, he let Mirscella out. Without a sound, he indicated the position of the thread to her.

Mirscella moved forward cautiously before nodding. The old lady must have had better eyes than him - or more likely, a specialized skill.

"We'll need to proceed slowly," she whispered. "The area seems covered in these threads. They're coated with a paralyzing contact poison. I'll go first."

Priam nodded before watching the thief carefully step over the thread. She looked at him as he imitated her, then nodded in satisfaction. She took only two steps forward before contorting again to avoid another invisible obstacle.

At this rate, it's going to take a while...

*Lvl Up: **[Art of Movement]** lvl 29,30*

AGI +2

PERC +2

DEXT +2

It took Priam almost an hour to spot the first visible webs. The young acrobat was smiling, though. Practicing his skill in a different way had allowed him to level up. The day he would create an Epic and then a Legendary skill with his own hands wasn't far off.

Lvl Up: [Trap detection] lvl 5,6
PERC +2

Looking up, his smile faded. One thing was for sure, the spiders hadn't done things halfway. From the ground to the treetops, thick webs enveloped the trees like silk cocoons. The white silk was both beautiful, reflecting the sunlight, and dangerous.

Underneath the cocoons, most of the trees were dead, a sign of the poison permeating their prison.

"We won't be able to go much further," Priam sighed.

Between the trees, dozens of webs extended like bridges between the cocoons. Even moving slowly, some places would be impossible to navigate. It was a veritable fortress; even the spiders probably couldn't venture in.

Mirscella remained silent before shaking her head.

"I could go on, but not you. However, I doubt the spiders use this route to enter and exit their territory. There must be more open areas."

"You mean more heavily guarded ones."

"Perfect for improving your stealth skills," Mirscella smiled.

Priam hesitated. He could, of course, use his mist to pass through the threads, but they would then be wet. The increase in their mass would make them even more taut and could risk attracting the guardians. That wasn't the goal - at least, not yet.

"I don't want to make them suspicious before attacking. Let's go around until I can observe one. That should update my quest."

The two of them began to circle the silk domain. From time to time, Mirscella pointed out a thread better hidden than the others. The forest was covered in them.

Lvl Up: [Trap detection] lvl 7
PERC +1

It took them almost two hours to find the entrance. It was easily recognizable: two spiders the size of horses stood guard next to a silk tunnel.

When Priam's gaze fell on the first one, the system reacted.

Updating Quest: Hunter

*Being prey is a tiring condition. But even prey can sometimes become hunters.
There are a lot of prey here...
Exterminate the 786 Trichonephila Aether clavipes.
Reward: A massive rainbow silk ball OR [Golden Silk Creation - Rare]. Potential + 150.*

*Bonus: Kill the Brood Mother.
Reward: [Sixth Sense - Epic].
Difficulty: Medium
Maximum time: 7 Days*

"Holy..."

Mirscella shot him a dark look, and Priam closed his mouth. Almost a thousand disgusting creatures. He should have suspected it when he saw how many webs there were. One thing was for sure, this couldn't go on like this.

Mirscella had started to retreat, and Priam followed quickly. A few dozen meters away, hidden behind a tree trunk, the thief whispered.

"So?"

"Almost a thousand revolting creatures and their mommy, the Brood Mother."

"Lovely. What are you going to do?"

"I'll take care of it," Priam said through clenched teeth. "You should go back inside."

Mirscella nodded. "Good luck," she murmured.

A few seconds later, he was alone again. Turning towards the spider's realm, he smiled.

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Priam waited for the cover of night before making his move. During this time, he observed dozens of spiders entering and exiting the fortress, bearing cocoons on their shoulders. Most still wriggled, but Priam was sure it wasn't out of kindness from the tormentors. Fresh flesh rotted slower...

Priam had long debated his attack plan. He ultimately decided to start by taking out as many enemies as possible. Most spiders detected their prey through vibrations in their webs, changes in the air currents, or their sense of smell. Few relied on vision to spot their foe.

The species Priam faced was known for its impressive webs. **[Eidetic Memory]** didn't provide him with information on whether these spiders had good eyes or not; Priam had never read anything about it.

He chose to bet that they didn't. His vision, enhanced by his perception, High Human genetic modifications, and **[Broad-spectrum Vision]**, granted him excellent night vision. Tapetum

lucidum, one of the High Human modifications, was particularly useful. This reflective layer behind the eye allowed him to gather maximum light.

Four hours later, the night had fallen. The starlit sky barely provided Priam with enough light to orient himself. Convinced that the spiders must be blind, he approached the entrance of the silk tunnel.

On each side, the two enormous spiders continued to stand guard. Priam decided not to identify them, afraid of alerting them.

Moving with cat-like stealth, he headed towards the left spider. For now, a few trees still obstructed the view of the monster. Priam's stride was supple yet confident. There were almost no threads in the air. Apparently, the occupants saw no need to trap the places they themselves passed through. The massive spiders could never have squeezed through the threads even if they had wanted to.

Twenty meters from the spider, Priam began to hold his breath. He focused on his Domain and **[Stealth]**. The skill whispered advice on muffling the sound of his steps or optimizing his movements. Micro kept his heart from racing. Step by step, Priam closed in on his target.

At five meters, Domain detected a taut thread in his path. Priam calmly stepped over it, almost reassured. It would have been suspicious not to encounter any traps.

Three meters further, Priam stopped himself from swallowing. He had just passed the last tree, leaving his visual protection behind. Aside from the dim light, nothing remained to prevent the spider from spotting him.

He forced himself to continue while surveying the extent of the monster's grotesqueness. The webs of golden silk might be splendid, but the long yellow and black legs were hideous. Worse, its small eyes seemed lifeless. Priam remained calm and circled around the creature.

The eight black eyes of the beast didn't detect him.

*Lvl Up: **[Stealth]** lvl 20
AGI +1*

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

***[Great Stealth - Rare]** - General upgrade. No future upgrade possible. Potential Cost: 5*

***[Furtivity - Rare]** - You've evaded detection from over ten different enemies. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 10*

***[Softpaws - Rare]** - Your velvet steps raise no alarm. Future upgrades possible. Potential Cost: 10*

Priam disregarded the various options. He wanted a skill with high evolutionary potential. If given the choice, he preferred an option geared towards combat. He could be an assassin, but not a mere thief.

Moving to the side, less than a meter from the motionless creature, Priam was on high alert. At the slightest suspicious movement, he was ready to exterminate his enemy. He preferred, of course, to remain discreet, but if that wasn't possible... *We'll see if I can take them head-on.*

It took only a few seconds for him to find himself behind the spider's abdomen. It was both a short and long time, especially when fearing an attack.

Priam closed his eyes. This was the last moment to turn back.

As if that were possible.

Opening his eyes, Priam sprang into action. He summoned Promesse, which materialized before him. Naturally, his two hands positioned themselves on the spear. Through habit, almost without thinking, Priam executed the move he had rehearsed a hundred thousand times.

[Unrelenting Thrust].

The spear pierced the giant spider, briefly emerging from one of its eyes. Priam retrieved his spear in one fluid motion and used a wisp of mist to teleport behind the second guardian.

Before the spider could react to its sister's death, Promesse ended its life.

Without wasting a moment, Priam allowed Promesse to merge with his mist. The scent of blood could have alerted his enemies.

He remained still for a moment, listening intently. Nothing stirred. In the distance, an owl hooted.

Satisfied, Priam turned towards the evening tunnel and ventured further in. He needed to move quickly now. When the bodies of the guardians were discovered, the fortress would be in an uproar.

A few meters ahead, the tunnel came to an end. Beyond, the forest had given way to a field of dead trees. Hundreds of silk cocoons were visible, gleaming under the faint starlight.

Priam began to slowly retrace the path marked by the spiders. The absence of grass and the slightly hollowed ground indicated regular passages. *The Brood Mother must consume a large quantity of protein to grow the colony.*

A few seconds later, Priam detected the approach of enemies. He veered to his right, swiftly stepping over a few threads before half-hiding behind a cocoon. A patrol was approaching. Determined to reduce the enemy numbers, Priam crouched down and began to release his mist.

Five spiders the size of dogs were moving along the path. A wisp of mist rose into the sky. When the spiders were less than twenty meters away from him, Priam controlled his mist, ordering it to descend.

The spiders were arranged in a pentagonal structure, leaving a gap between them. The mist streamed in, and Priam reappeared amidst his enemies. Promesse materialized in his hands. A moment later, the blue blood of the arachnids splattered the ground.

Priam, as a shadow in a moonless night, resumed his path. *Just seven hundred and seventy-eight more.*

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

PHYSICAL:

Strength 330 (+10)

Constitution 477

Agility 313 (+4)

Vitality 469

Perception 548 (+10)

MENTAL:

Vivacity 294

Dexterity 367 (+2)

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: 1001 (+9)

Tier 0

[He Who Eludes Death] charge: PRIMED.

[Tribulation]: Two Tribulations pending.

Future Tribulations delayed until:

Time: 178 days 13 hours 45 minutes 19 seconds.