

LOCKDOWN

TEDDY SLOTH



TS

FOUR PACKS OF HOT DOGS—is it going to be enough? He really considers going back for more. He’s never seen anyone *eat* like her; last night she demolished three orders of sesame chicken plus a quart of fried rice, so you can understand his caution here. These all-beef franks he’s toting aren’t (only) for him, they’re for his, er, his bodyguard, is what he’d call her. And he only bought one pack of buns, but he’s got a hunch she prefers meat.

He crosses the narrow side streets slowly, thick baggy hoodie flapping against his skinny frame in the wind this late night, unkempt curls of brown hair flying around his eyes, plastic bags all aflutter. She’d told him to stay home, yes, but she’d also eaten everything edible in his apartment except for some chili powder and what could be scraped out of an empty peanut butter jar. They have to stay in town one more night, since tomorrow he’s responsible for delivering almost fifty copies of the exclusive Sidwell–Greenstreet Report to almost fifty of the city’s highest-paying corporations and government offices. He’s also responsible for writing it. (And it isn’t *nearly* done.) His name is Sidwell Greenstreet, but he usually just goes by Sid.

See, Sid didn’t want delivery Chinese three nights in a row, and his bodyguard mentioned that once they got back underground she really wanted to go get hot dogs. She probably won’t even notice he’d been gone. After she’d fallen asleep on his bed and he hadn’t, taking great care not to wake her up, he cautiously wriggled out of her arms—not easy, since she has six—and took a walk down to the GetGo. It’s a beautiful night, and he enjoyed the stroll; doubly so because of the joint he smoked on the way. He felt like he should savor it, because he’s not sure how long he’ll be spending below ground. Note to self: remember to ask her what the herb situation is down there. . .

Back at his apartment on the first floor of a four-story building, there are no lights on in the windows. Slowly, he unlocks the door and enters the dark room. Skeila must still be asleep. He softly shuts the door behind him and locks it. Takes stealthy steps down the hallway. He can probably creep right back into bed with her. Heh. He was *worried* there for a sec—

Something very strong grabs his legs and lifts up so fast that he doesn’t have time to hit the ground before he’s been flipped fully upside down. The hot dogs thunk down to the floor; the plastic bag slushes down around them. His hoodie turns inside out and covers his face as he dangles.

“Hey, this is familiar.”

“Shut up, *asshole*. Where the fuck were you?” A simmering voice no less fearsome for its high pitch and squeaky timbre. Uh oh. She’s pissed.

“Didn’t you see my note? I just went down to the store. I was only gone, like, 20 minutes. I didn’t know you had me on lockdown.” Nervous laughter which she does not return.

“Yeah, I saw your fucking note, okay? That’s not the point! The *point* is I told you not to go anywhere!”

“Skeila, I didn’t have any food left! This is a nice neighborhood. C’mon, you’re being crazy.”

“Crazy?” Okay, *now* she’s pissed. “If something happens to you out there, you think I can just run around knocking on doors? Sayin’ hi ma’am, I’m a giant spider, and have you seen this skinny little shit? I’m not allowed to let humans see me up here! We’d both be so totally screwed!”

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry! Can you let me down?”

She lowers him enough to keep him from busting his head open before unceremoniously allowing him to fall over on his ass, which he does, then ends up flat on his back looking up at her. Geez, she’s even wearing her Arachnid Altercation Agency uniform—a thick utility belt connected to a green sash decorated with her lieutenant’s stripe and a handful of medals, the ensemble doing nothing to provide anything like the human idea of “modesty”. Her three pairs of arms are placed akimbo up and down her hips. She steps forward, hooked claws clacking on the hardwood floor, and plants her feet on either side of his head, bestriding him like the Colossus. Directly above him, looming at the apex of her legs, hangs her black granite cock.

“The Mayor himself told me to keep you safe, Sid. Remember? You were *there*? Not like you could run away from me at the time. Look, I doubt the Huntsmen actually care about you. And I super-doubt they’d ever come up topside. But I mean, what about something else? What if you get hit by a bus? What if some other human decides he wants your money and stabs you with a knife? Even if *you* don’t give a shit about yourself, do you know how much trouble I’d be in? Did you think about that for even a second? My job is to protect you from that one-in-a-jillion chance.” She bends down and picks him up one-clawed by his sweatshirt like a cat picking up a kitten, lifting him up off the ground so he can look directly into her eight eyes. “I am *not* fucking up a job the Mayor gave me.”

Her eyes bore into him; they’re like stones dipped into ink. She snarls, baring two big fangs along with the rest of her arsenal of teeth, a mouthful of sharp, interlocking white daggers. He can feel her hot breath on his face. She drops him, and instead of looking into her eyes he’s suddenly looking into her substantial breasts, covered like the rest of her in fine brown fur. She steps forward, backing him into the wall. He tries to look up at her, but he can’t quite meet her icy scowl. Another step forward, and her tits are pressing into his face, and—is that her cock jabbing into his stomach?

“I can make it so you can’t run off again real easy, y’know.” Oh, he knows; it’s only been a week since he spent the most bizarre sixteen hours of his life so far. For a brief interval, he *was* the spider’s penis.

She leans into him, notices a grocery bag—“the fuck did you even buy, anyway?”

“H-hot dogs,” he says, muffled by mouthfuls of her intruding chest. “You said you missed them, and I felt bad cause I didn’t have any... She doesn’t say anything for a long time, but Sid can feel her chest expand and fall as she sighs deeply. Is that a good sign? He doesn’t dare look up. “Uh... want me to cook some?”

She moves backwards to give him breathing room and levels a severe stare at him, each pair of her arms crossed. “If you wanna make it up to me, you gotta do better than *that*.” Whether she does it on purpose or whether it just happens he doesn’t know, but at that moment, below her belt, her hard cock twitches upward like an eager dog straining at its leash.

Sid obligingly sinks to his knees as Skeila approaches, cock pointing forward. He watches it come nearer with his lips barely parted, until she stops just when the dark, fat tip is underneath his nose. He opens wide to accept the thick end into his mouth and she pushes forward, anchoring him with a claw on the back of his neck. His mouth fills with the head, and a little beyond it his lips manage to enclose a few inches of her shaft.

He bobs his head, into and then away from her crotch, but doesn’t go any further down than he has, barely able to suppress a gag when her cock reaches his throat. The fluid leaking onto the back of his tongue drowns out the muted taste of her skin. He withdraws the massive organ to give himself a literal breather and keeps jacking her off while he regains his breath, his long fingers just able to encircle her organ by half a thumbnail. The glossy black head, shiny as a wet road, reflects broken bands of streetlight coming in around the blinds. His spit drying on her penis amplifies her natural scent in a bizarrely irresistible way—just like the pre-cum dripping into his mouth is like nothing found in a human penis, tasting sweet and faintly like bananas, the spider’s body smells like grass and trees and now, like wet rocks and heavy rain... Impatient claws apply pressure, urging him to continue, and soon she is stuffing his mouth again. Those claws press harder, and he is forced down, audibly gagging as Skeila slowly shoves more than half her cock into his face—it’s an awful lot for a novice like Sid, but he handles it like a champ, making quiet choking sounds but holding his position as his eyes flood with water he feels would really be better used in his mouth right now. Finally she allows him to retract. He slides the cock out of his mouth and kneels there panting, with her wet dick smearing his cheek. She ponders the scene.

“Mmm... not good enough. You *left* me.”

Skeila manhandles him towards the couch, making a chattering noise somewhere between a giggle and a growl. She sweeps a pile of books and laundry off the couch to make room for her to sprawl out in; even so, it’s only wide enough for three sitting humans, wholly inadequate to contain the reclining spider’s many limbs. She picks Sid up by his armpits and sets him down on her legs. He feels the smooth, solid curve of her nails against his hipbones, and rushes

to open his fly and wriggle out of his jeans before she tears through them. With her many arms, she swiftly disrobes him, and she tosses his clothes over her shoulder, leaving him sitting on top of her somewhat disjointed and very naked.

He's as hard as she is, though not as big. She collects their cocks together, sensitive undersides rubbing within her grip. He caresses a breast, long fingers unable to grasp more than half of it, Skeila's tits each being bigger than his head. His hands slide around to her back, traveling with the grain of her fur. He reaches lower, hoping for her ass, but she's so much bigger than the human that he's got to lean in, all the way up against her, just to get close—and he still only manages to reach her lower back.

All of a sudden two things happen concurrently: claws seize his wrists like padded handcuffs, and *more* claws grab his *own* ass, squeezing the meager padding on his skinny frame hard enough to pop a water balloon. An unexpected poke at his asshole impels him to flinch into her.

"Where 'zactly do you think you're going with those hands?" umm err I—"This is 'sposed to be *punishment*, human." She's manacled his thin wrists together behind her back with a single claw and pulled him forward as far as possible, leaving his chin flat against her and him looking up into her face at a neck-bendingly uncomfortable angle, while his butt remains scooted much further down. Eight images of Sid trying not to look scared, in various sizes and angles, vanish momentarily when Skeila blinks. He is embarrassed at his uncontrollable heart pounding out hummingbird beats against the spider's chest. Or maybe he should play it up instead. In his limited time among the spiders, he's picked up on the way they react to human fear. She's practically drooling.

"Are you gonna... change me?"

The spider's face blossoms into a delirious open grin, flashing dual rows of pretty, gleaming white shark-teeth sharp enough to disfigure. (The night they got here, when she blew him on his bed, she was, well, adorable. Framing her face with her arms, winking half her eyes, and he didn't feel a scratch the whole time she enthusiastically slurped away, but at present he can only think about how narrowly he avoided castration.) Her eyes have become huge and wild, and he feels like if he makes any sudden movements he's in danger of tripping a prey response that'll leave him with his head bitten clean off.

"It'd keep you from runnin' away again... She speaks quietly in a throaty voice, with an undisguised note of hope squeaking in. "You *want* me to?"

Why's she staring at him like that? Wait—she's *asking*? ... do it. Tell her to do it. "I... don't think... Just tell her. *Tell her*. "Not yet."

A little bit of the excitement in her eyes goes away. She doesn't seem quite as ready to devour him, not anymore. "...Fine. You still need punished, hope you know." The clawtip in his butt he'd forgotten about for the briefest moment drives forward. "You are gettin' *fucked*."

Skeila rises, dumping Sid onto his back. Her lowermost arms pull his legs open, while she holds her cock at its base and repeatedly slaps it against his ass. Simultaneously, she's fumbling with her Agency belt, trying to open one of the side pouches without looking. She extracts a little packet that turns out to contain lube and squeezes it out onto her hard cock; grabbing Sid's hand, she orders him to work it in. The slippery skin slides around in his grip. It feels huge in his hands and looks even bigger, and even though it has before he doesn't think it's ever going to fit. Some lube drips off the end; she catches it and smears it around his ass.

Skeila lowers herself over him, using most of her arms to support herself in her precarious position across most of the couch, but reserving one to curl around his back. She lines herself up, and he can feel the blunt end of her cock pressing inwards. The spider's breath is hot against his cheek. A soft clawpad traces the distance from his clavicle to the opposite side of his chest, stopping to playfully tweak his nipple, jolting his eyes open—he didn't realize he'd closed them—and suddenly, there she is, huge and up close, eight eyes waiting to lock on to his own. And when they do, she pushes forwards.

Sid can't help crying out; Skeila's not being nearly as gentle as she was last time. The spider produces a satisfied growl that trails off into a throaty hiss as she slides inside; she mercifully pauses when she's painfully inserted at least half her length, straightening up to look down on him from between his legs. She makes some pleased, chittering spider-sounds and begins to fuck him. Her many arms both support her and cage him in. He bites his lip and turns his head to the left to find his forehead pressing against a furry, tensed arm. With each thrust, her tits smack into his face, and when she holds herself in on a deep stroke he's briefly smothered.

Soon it starts to feel good, real good, worryingly good. The only other time in his life Sid got fucked it culminated in him becoming Skeila's cock, so he can't really be sure if what he feels now is the normal thing or if it's the prodrome to being a penis. Is his tingly skin wrinkling up below the waist? Does it feel so good when she strokes him because she's jacking herself off? In a moment, will he see blackness spread up into him as he connects to her hips? It's impossible to single out any one sensation as Skeila's furry body bucks against him, pounding him into the couch and stretching his ass. He closes his eyes, remembering what it was like to be stiff and immobile between her legs, what it will be like again to grow to full length, at home or in a crowd, touched off by—his arousal or hers? it wasn't easy to tell, sometimes—

Skeila curls up around him, pounding him fast and hard. She hisses into his ear, "I'm, I'm gonna cum—" In an explosion of squeaks and gasping, she does. He can feel it, and that makes him cum too, all over his own chest.

The spider lowers herself. Her body is hot and enveloping; her fur is damp from exertion in places, and becomes damp in others from the sweat on his chest. She breathes slow and deep, making a low, satisfied chittering that trails off into silence. She slips out of him. They're separate. He doesn't need

to wiggle his toes to know each one is still there.

They are sitting down now to a feast of wieners. After witnessing the spider's incredible appetite over the last few days, he's elected to go ahead and boil all four packs of hot dogs, and Skeila does not disappoint: by the time Sid has carefully drawn a thin line of mustard down the middle of his dog, Skeila has eaten her first three, no buns. With both of them awash in good hormones from sex and food, apologies begin to flow.

"Can't believe you got hot dogs. Sorry 'bout yelling at you earlier," she says between mouthfuls. "It's just, I get grumpy when I'm hungry, you know..."

"It's fine. Really, it is. And I'm sorry I left, that was dumb. Uh... thanks for not changing me, I guess..."

She shrugs a few shoulders. "I know you don't want me to. Yet."

He shrugs back and says nothing. He doesn't realize they just had makeup sex until she's helping him load the dishwasher.

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"Oh my god, beds suck. How do you sleep on these things? My back's gotta be one giant *knot* by now. I'm making you a web next time we're up here..."

"Uh huh..." mumbles Sid. He's constructed his own kind of web here in his bedroom, in the form of an incomprehensible collection of sticky notes, printouts, and clippings, taped to his wall, his bed, and most other flat surfaces. They are sitting together on his bed, Skeila up against the headboard and Sid up against Skeila, nestled between her spread legs. His trusty laptop is in his lap, and the white glow it emits is the only light in the room. His needle fingers fly across the keyboard, except when he needs to take a moment to cogitate—then he uses Skeila's thigh as an armrest, and puts his chin in his hand Thinker-style.

The spider yawns and stretches. She rolls her eyes and stares at the ceiling, at the walls, over Sid's shoulder at the flowing columns of meaningless numbers. She winds some of his loose, curly hair around a pointy digit and lets it spring free. She drums her nails on his smooth belly. She sighs dramatically. He just keeps typing.

Skeila looks over what's left of the joint they'd been passing back and forth and decides against trying to suck out the dregs. "Ooh, remind me when we're in Midway to take you to the Psychedelicatessen. That stuff's not really my thing, but I think you'll like it. Hee hee. I'm not even used to weed. It always makes me so talky. Don't you think?"

"Uh huh..."

"Are we gonna listen to this music all night? It sounds like robots fucking."

"Uh huh..."

“How many times are you gonna resize that graph? A million?”

“Uh huh. . .”

“Wanna be my cock?”

“Uh, nope.”

“Can’t blame me for tryin’,” she says, letting her arms hang limply.

“I gotta finish this. The Report’s supposed to be there every Friday morning, so if you still want to leave before sunrise. . .”

“I know, I know know know, but I’m so *bored!* I never thought I’d say that topside!”

“Normally I don’t have to do things at the last minute, but someone’s been distracting me the whole time we’ve been here.”

“You know you like it.”

“You make it awful hard for a guy to do math, is all I’m saying. I already had to dip into my B-roll here. I mean, I put in a two-page spread on unusually high chicken prices. I’m out of page-filler, and if I don’t get this done they’ll have my ass. . .”

“Well, I don’t know who They are, but that’s *my* ass now. They can’t have it.” She demonstrates ownership by giving her possession a firm squeeze, making Sid jump. “At least explain some of this stuff to me.” Sid bites his lip, estimating the enormity of this task. “Geez, I’m not *stupid.*”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just—well, let me start at the beginning. This is kind of a running series, side-project type of thing. You ever hear of Wallace Shale?”

When Skeila doesn’t respond, Sid has to twist his neck around to see her expression of combined disgust and disbelief. “Have I heard of Wallace Shale? Yeah, of course.”

“Uh, well, I’ve been doing a bunch of stuff on the fracking wells around here. Subscriptions to the Report have more than doubled since I started.”

“What kinda stuff you print? How many spiders they’ve killed?”

“. . . killed?”

“Yeah, killed. Fracking’s all about breaking up rocks underground to let that gas out, right? Well, that caves in our tunnels. . . and if that doesn’t kill anyone, that shit they pump into the ground will. They’re *s’posed* to get everyone out beforehand, but it’s not like everyone down there has an address and a phone number. Good luck even *finding* all the deep spiders, and if you do, try tellin’ em you want them all to move so you humans can suck poison out of the ground. Guarantee you won’t ever make it back to the surface.”

“Wow. I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

Skeila shrugs. “Whatever. What’s your math ’zine thing have to do with it?”

“That shit they pump into the ground—that’s called fracking fluid. They drill the hole, then they pump it full of high-pressure fluid, and that cracks up rocks underground so gas can flow through it. Basically. That fluid’s really nasty stuff, though.”

“Oh, we know. There’s spiders that didn’t even drown in it, they just got some on ’em and got really, really sick.”

“Yeah, you see that happen to workers every now and then in the news. The companies got a law passed so they don’t have to tell anyone what’s in the fluid—” Skeila interrupts with a derisive snort, and Sid continues: “I mean, there’s certain really bad stuff they aren’t allowed to use, I think. . .”

“How’s anyone even know if they’re using it, if they’re allowed to just keep it a secret?”

“Uh. . .”

“Fuckin’ *humans*.”

“Well, that’s kind of what this is about. See, I’m trying to figure out what blend of fluid they’re using at all the wells. You can get an idea based on the proppant—er, that’s fine particulate matter, sand, ceramic, stuff like that. Of course, even to figure that out, you’ve got to watch the shipping, and that’s not easy. I figure two wells operated by the same company, with the same kind of proppant coming from the same place are gonna use something similar; start looking at the EPA’s groundwater reports for the area and you can begin to make some educated guesses. . . It’s all hypothesizing though, I mean there’s a cluster of wells out near Centralia run by Wallace Shale Co. itself, and I can’t get anything on them. . .” Sid continues, stupefying the spider with a procession of charts, invoices, and cross-references that leave her marveling at the human ability to detach from the messy processes of destruction and death.

“Alright, alright, alright. Just try n’ hurry it up, cause the sooner you’re done, sooner we can get to Midway. And. . . can we listen to something else? Whatever this is, it’s awful.”

“I know it *sounds* like noise, but it’s actually really complex—aw, never mind,” says Sid, opening iTunes. “You like British stuff, right? We’ll compromise. The Orb? The KLF?”

They end up listening to most of the KLF’s back catalog, repeating *Chill Out* two or three times. (Apparently it’s something of a spider classic, and Cauty and Drummond are revered as “true Erisians”—you ever hear about any *other* humans that literally burned a million pounds?) Skeila is thus prevented from being bored completely to death, and Sid only has to put up with some intermittent groping. More than put up with it, by the time he sends the final copy to his Laserjet he finds himself grinding back against her in response to the claw inside his pajamas, but quickly realizes that’s liable to cause further delays, and they’ve only got two or three hours before it starts getting light outside. . .

Time to go. A beat-up backpack left over from his CMU days is the only luggage Sid has, and he presently wanders his jumbled room looking for things to pack. His laptop is first in, and after it he crams a few days’ worth of T-shirts and boxers inside, figuring jeans last until you spill something. Toothbrush, deodorant. What else?

“How long you think we’ll be down there?”

Skeila shrugs with her lowermost arms, without eye contact, like she’s irritated to have it brought up. “The Mayor wants to make sure you’re safe from those Huntsmen, so I guess till they catch ’em.” She sits up on the bed and stretches the last few hours of inactivity out of her limbs with a variety of exercises, pulling her arms behind her back, flexing them above her head, but nothing as awe-inspiring as when she simply stretches her arms out as far as they will go, back arched, touching the ceiling. She fills the room.

She finds her Arachnid Altercation Agency uniform on the floor, steps into the belt and tightens it above her hips, then pulls the sash over her head. She pats the pouches on her belt to make sure everything’s still there and she’s ready to go, and soon she’s bouncing impatiently by the door as Sid paces his clutter, realizing how little of it he really needs.

“I can’t freakin’ wait to sleep in my own web again. And take a shower, too. I feel so grody. Are you ready yet? It’s gonna take us at least a half hour to get to the tunnels, and then we gotta go hand these things out. . .”

“I. . . yeah, I guess I’m ready.” Sid turns out the lights and wonders how long it will be until he turns them on again, then they step out into the night.

Skeila stays in the shadows as they walk hand-in-claw, carefully steering Sid away from the pools of streetlight collecting on the steep sidewalks. Tonight it’s chilly enough to make Sid glad his bodyguard is so big and furry; they walk so closely that he’s kept toasty on one side. The walk is tense; Sid understands there’s some unnamed danger in being seen. The spider has a knack for discerning threats. Before even spotting a pedestrian or seeing headlights turn onto their road, she will vanish from his side, his hand holding for a moment a chitinous finger, then nothing, trailing out into air. He continues alone, propelled by inertia. If he comes to an intersection he won’t know which way to go. Low-grade panic sets in after a minute of unaccompanied travel—is she. . . gone? Was this all just some kind of trip, some four-day arachnohallucinatory bender he’s just now coming down from, alone, on the empty sidewalk of some late-night side street? But before the fear can really sink its teeth in, his fingertips fit into the padded palm of a claw taking his hand as silently as it left. Even after the third time the threat of being seen necessitates Skeila’s absconion, Sid feels exposed under the dim night sky reflecting the city like a spotlight, hoping that there are still eight spider eyes back there watching him (and nothing else. . .)

They make it to the nearest entrance to the underground, an unmarked door in a featureless building at the top of Secane Ave, near those smokestacks everyone knows aren’t really smokestacks, but ventilation shafts for the tunnels cutting through Mount Washington. But how few of the thousands of drivers that pass through them every day know what *else* gets ventilated? Alright, Tannhauser, time to go back under this mountain. . .

Past a chain link fence, through a steel door, down a flight of cement stairs, and now they are in the interstitials—the labyrinth of access tunnels between

the surface and Midway. There are beige walls with grey electrical boxes and long yards of conduit and piping; a low unified thrum from whatever subterranean machinery is unseen behind the periodic push-bar doors; clanking boilers, whirring HVAC systems, and somewhere around the Double Tree, a bank of washing machines. The watery rush of cars above sharpens into nearby engines when they pass a parking garage. Buzzing from fluorescent lights shining their supercool harshness—irritatingly bright for Skeila, and for most spiders, but when they renovated a few years back the MARC made a lot of noise about the tunnels being “welcoming” for the humans, and now it all looks like a hospital.

There’s something unsettling Skeila, though she hasn’t said anything out loud. They’ve been dropping off the Report at all the different companies that pay Sid for a weekly copy. Downtown, every human building with a basement connects to the interstitials, sometimes with just an unobtrusive door and a mail slot, sometimes with an opulent lobby. She’s led Sid around to each of his subscribers, taking about two hours to get the whole stack distributed, and in that whole time they haven’t seen another spider *once*. It could be a coincidence, maybe. There’s been a few humans—nurses and doctors in single-color scrubs heading to their shifts at Mercy, technicians from Allegheny Power inspecting circuits, and assorted topsiders who know about the underground using it to cut across the geography of the city, none of who pay any particular attention to her. But no other spiders.

“That went way quicker than usual,” Sid tells her.

“Glad I could help. If you’re lookin’ for a way to thank me...” she says, cupping her crotch.

“What, right *here*?” asks nervous Sid. He looks over his shoulder at the group of scrub-clad nurses they just passed.

“I’m only teasing,” she reassures him. Not that she’d have turned down blowies in the tunnels, no ma’am. “Hey, take it easy. You’re not scared, are you?”

“It’s just that... we were around here when we ran into those spiders from the Huntsmen or whatever, right?”

“Yeah, we’re going to the same Tube station we took last time. But listen, the interstitials are totally safe. Huntsmen attacking people up here has *never* happened before. That’s why everyone was freaking out about it. You don’t even see them in Midway, really. Most of them are deep spiders, and—th’ fuck?” Skeila is pulling on a door that should be open, first with one arm, then with three, but it doesn’t budge. And there should be lights on inside too, but it’s dark. She cups her claws around the window and peers in—rows of unfilled seats in front of a black canyon where the Tube train normally waits. What the hell is going on tonight? “I guess this station’s closed. Uh, let’s try the Gateway Center one. It’s not far.”

“Sure,” shrugs Sid, and follows along. “So most spiders don’t come up here either? Haven’t seen any others.” Ugh, course he’s gonna notice the

pattern, that's like his whole *thing*... at least he's happily unaware of how friggin' weird it is for a Tube station to be shut down. The Tube *never* stops.

"Well... sun's comin' up, so everyone going topside's probably there already. Though it's usually busier than this." He nods and yawns. "Tired?"

"Mmm-hm." She's been holding his bony lil' hand as they walked for a while now; he takes a few steps forward while leaning on her. "I wouldn't mind getting in to that web of yours about now."

"If you'd let me change you, you wouldn't even have to walk the rest of the way..." He laughs it off. "Beg all you want. I'm just too tired to change you now. You'll have to wait till tomorrow."

They make it to the interchange under the Gateway Center buildings. Here, dozens of tunnels connect in an open space three stories high—there's escalators, little trees, a fountain, a bank of currently closed fast food kiosks on the second floor. There's *always* spiders here, but not today. And of course, when Skeila pulls on the door to the Tube station, first with one arm, then with three, it doesn't budge. "Something's wrong here," she says, trying to see in the dark window by cupping her claws around her face. "This place is never closed." She folds her arms in consternated silence.

Sid searches for a suggestion. "Huh. Uh, well... should we go back to my apartment?"

"Sun's gotta be up by now. I'd get seen."

"Huh." The human shuffles around, unable to come up with any further ideas. She'd be happy that he didn't suggest that *he* should go back up to his apartment, but she can't stop worrying about whatever's behind the deserted tunnels and the Tube shutdown. Smart thing to do, probably, would be to camp out here till the Tube comes back online—gotta happen *sometime*, right? Someone who knows what the fuck's going on might show up, at least. But sleeping on that tiny, flat human bed for two nights has killed her back and she *really* wanted to sleep in her own web tonight. Plus every minute they spend up here is another minute who knows what the fuck might happen to them—Huntsmen in the tunnels, a Tube shutdown, what next? And—well, she was really looking forward to getting Sid into her web, too...

"Alright. If the Tube's not running anywhere, let's try and hitch a ride down on the freight elevators."

"Sure." He's so easygoing. Ready for just about anything other than letting her change him... "Far from here?"

"Not too far. They're under your football stadium."

"Weird place for freight elevators."

"Nah, that's where they always put 'em. Good place to hide. Already have loading docks, trucks always coming in, plenty of space off-limits to the public. You remember when they blew up the old stadium—hadda be like, ten years ago? It was cause it only had two elevators."

"Holy shit, seriously? That was huge. I remember the dust cloud over downtown until noon, and how they shot fireworks off even though it was

morning.”

“Yeah, now we’ve got ten. Midway’s the biggest underground city on this side of the continent, you know. We had actual shortages cause we couldn’t get stuff down quick enough. I remember when they built the new ones, they made huge webs where the shafts were going, straight up to the ceiling. Workers would climb up all the way to the top to put stuff in place. You could see them from everywhere.”

“So they ship food and stuff down there on giant elevators?”

“Well, only fragile stuff. Anything that won’t break just gets packed up and sent down Apostrophe Falls. It’s pretty cool—remind me to show you the boxes landing.”

They continue on down hallways that go on as far as city blocks, the tunnels under the rivers where there are no basements to connect to, and there’s just a long beige stretch whose other end is somewhere further than you can see, past the fluorescent white point the straight edges of linoleum tiles and light tubes converge towards. They finally reach the freight elevator station, and while Skeila is ready by this point to kick down the door, it is thankfully unlocked.

Normally, teams of spiders and humans would be working together around the clock, loading the super-wide elevators with pallets of groceries, microwaves, electric scooters, flat-screen televisions, refrigerators, high grade audio equipment, and other human-manufactured delights. (Every half hour there’s a cab filled up entirely with boxes sealed with that familiar “Amazon Underground” packing tape.) But today there’s no activity, just one human with his feet up at the front desk, surfing Youtube on the receptionist’s computer. He seems surprised when Sid and Skeila come in, and pauses the cat video. “Morning, officer.”

“Hey . . . why are you guys shut down?”

“Cause Midway’s not taking any cargo today. Figured it was a holiday or something. I thought Maladay was coming up soon, right?”

“What about the Tube? All the Tube stations are closed.”

He shrugs. “Dunno. I live up there, in Ross Township.”

“Okayokay whatever. We need sent down to Midway.”

“Uh . . . well, we got an e-mail from the Municipal Arachnoid Relations Commission that said the elevators weren’t supposed to run at all. I’m just here cause someone has to unlock the doors for the trucks.”

“I don’t give a shit what the MARC says. Turn one of ’em on.”

“I’m, uh . . . not supposed to . . .”

Little *pissant*. She leans over the desk above the now-cowering human at what you might call a threatening angle, crossing her middle arms and holding the upper ones akimbo. She’s got the cop’s gift for intimidation, aided here by both parties’ natural instincts: the predatory urges spiders feel towards humans, and those primitive monkey fears of fangs, claws, venom, teeth—teeth that Skeila’s being sure to display as fully as possible as she growls “Are

you fucking *kidding* me? D’ya see this badge?” Tapping here on the pointy golden starfish-thing on her sash. . . “Means I’m with the Arachnid Altercation Agency. Turn an elevator on.”

“H-hey, look, listen,” says the cowering clerk. “I’m only doing my job here—”

“Your *job*?” That’s not an excuse that’ll hold water with any spider. “*You* listen, human! I need to get home and I’m gonna punch a new fuckin’ hole in you if you don’t send me there!”

“Jesus, alright!” *thunk*—the human’s backed his chair into the wall. “Get in bay five. Shit, lady. . .”

“Hmph. Thanks,” she grunts, mollified a little by being called “lady”, unladylike as she may be at the moment. Threatening impalement might’ve been a squinch excessive. But really—the MARC? The fuck are they doing now?

During the yelling, Sid awkwardly sidestepped away to look at the posters. They’re the same ones that are at all the major transit points between Midway and the surface, about all the stuff you’re not supposed to do topside. She particularly hates the one he’s looking at now—it’s the one with the giant boot about to crush a cartoon spider. It’s the way it’s standing there, pathetically raising all of its arms to try and protect itself in the shadow of the boot, and all around it is this ring of faceless human silhouettes, *pointing*. DON’T LET THE HUMANS KNOW! says the top in huge red letters. FOR THEIR SAFETY—AND YOURS—OBEY THE SEQUESTERING PROTOCOLS! Stupid thing looks like they painted it during the Cold War, and there’s a jillion copies in every Tube station.

“Ugh, fucking come on already.” She picks him up without giving him the chance to turn around and slings him over her shoulder.

The elevator is empty, save for a few wooden pallets stacked in the corner. Skeila sets Sid down next to the wall opposite the door, then leans against it herself and stretches out, ever so ready to go home. Spending time topside is fun as hell (especially when you’ve got a human, even if they won’t let you change them, yet) but it’s aggravating, too, having to stay cooped up inside. It’ll be so nice to get back to the relaxingly chaotic environment of Midway, to sleep in her own web again, instead of on a flat freakin’ slab. . . She hears the elevator doors whisper shut. To sleep in her own web, curled up around her skinny little human. . . all worn out from being fucked. . .

She opens her eyes, and there he is—staring at her tits, totally spaced out. The elevator begins to sink, the freight office slowly ascends out of view beyond the clear glass door, and he finally notices her smirking at him. He sheepishly looks down before realizing that leaves him looking directly at her cock. Aw, he’s blushing. Adorable.

“See somethin’ you like?”

“. . . Yeah, I do.” She chitters approval at his confidence and sidles closer, slipping some arms behind him, but Sid tenses up. “Here? In the elevator?”

“Sure, why not?”

He considers for a moment and, to Skeila’s great surprise, his skinny fingers wrap around her hardening cock. He laughs nervously. “Guess it’s no big deal for spiders, huh?”

“Ooo, I think maybe I’m rubbin’ off on you.”

“I’m the one rubbing you off here. . .”

She bends down to kiss him. It’s nice, but when they’re both standing like this she has to stoop to do it. That makes her cock tricky for him to reach, which is no good at all for the handjob. Yet another advantage of webs. She settles for a few quick tongue-smooches before straightening up and smushing his face firmly into her boobs.

“Better close up?”

“Mmmf hmm,” agrees Sid.

She holds him tight against her body, buried ear-deep in her breasts and wrapped up in her arms, with only enough space to keep jacking her off. She’s enjoying the intimate little handjob, when suddenly, new light breaks into the compartment, and Midway scrolls into view all around them as the clear elevator lowers itself into the city.

They are level for a moment with the giant steel beams, themselves tall as buildings, holding up the very ceiling of this titanic underground space. They form a uniform lattice that stretches far off into the cave fog, and from them hangs an equally invariant pattern of the huge halogen floodlights that provide Midway with its simulated daylight. (They’re big, but Skeila never knew they were *that* big. Geez, what if one fell down?) Obstructing their view of the city, like tree trunks in a forest, are the towers that interrupt the girder grid to poke right out of the ceiling, stretching down all the way to their *real* first floor in Midway.

Sid, detecting the change in lighting, slows his stroking, extracts himself from deep in her breasts, registers his expansive surroundings—then squirms away in terror.

Sigh. She lets him wriggle free. “The hell’s your problem?” already knowing it’s some ridiculous human hangup.

“The—the whole city can *see* us!”

Skeila rolls her eyes. “Now the whole city can see me get blue balls instead. That’s way better.” Humans. He’s lucky she’s not so tired, or she’d make him assume the position right up against the wall and then she’d really give them a show. “We’re all the way up here and you *don’t* wanna fuck? Seriously, I’d be more embarrassed about *not* getting me off.” He walks off, nervously scanning the vista, so she comes up behind him, covers him in arms and makes sure her erection presses into his back. Even wiggles it a few times.

“See? Down there, they’re looking at us! I told you they can see us!”

“So what? You think they’re gonna put us on the news? ‘Terrible Handjob On City Freight Elevator’. That’ll be the headline.”

“Hey,” he says, a little wounded. “You liked it.”

“Moldweorp will interview me, and she’ll be like, Lieutenant, what made the handjob the worst one in the whole history of Midway? Well, it’s cause it was so *awesome* at first, but it turned out he was just *teasing* me... But it’s alright, all part of the job, they’ll probably give me a medal for Extreme Sexual Frustration, maybe two... geez, c’mon. I’m only teasing you.”

“I’m starting to get kind of freaked out about everyone watching us.”

Sure enough, in one of the towers, forty or fifty feet out and a few stories below them, there are some spiders gathering at a window to watch them pass. Okay, it might be a *little* unnerving if you’re the self-conscious type like Sid is. Up here you’re kind of the center of attention. In fact...

Normally, all of the city’s freight elevators are running, clear cabs slowly floating up and down the glowing shafts like dust motes in sunbeams. But out of the six under PNC and the four over at the Heinz Depot, theirs is the only one running. And usually there’s a dozen Tube cars whizzing through Midway’s interior sky like giant tin fireflies, but today? None. Just her and Sid up here above the city, more and more spiders stopping to look as they descend. They’re clearly some kind of attraction. Sid looks up at her, having gone past worried and into terrified. What happened down there?

“I’ve never felt more like I was being watched,” he says.

“Hey,” she says, tapping him on the forehead. “Relax. Remember what I said?” She looks straight down into his eyes. “I promised I’d keep you safe.”

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TWENTY FIVE HOURS EARLIER.

The first thing anyone sees when they walk into Melmon Bank is a giant dollar bill etched into a marble slab thirty feet across and taller than any spider. You have to walk around it to get into the bank proper. Humans coming here usually stop and stare for a minute; the immediately eye-catching thing is that instead of Washington in the center oval you’ve got a sweaty, bulldog-jowled Richard Nixon staring insanely at something out of frame, like he just saw hippies holding a sit-in. Further inspection of the light tracery on the dark stone reveals more peculiarities. The leafy boughs in the corners are twisting suckered tentacles. Below Nixon, in the stout serif’d typeface that normally reads ONE DOLLAR the legend reads YOUR ONLY GOD.

Walk around the carving and the space suddenly opens up; Melmon Bank is a rotunda and all the action happens along the circumference, which is divided into roughly a dozen sections. Each section belongs to one of the human banks, and each one has a row of tellers behind glass and a winding queue of customers. This being the only place in Midway where the banks can operate, the lines regularly overflow their rope mazes. The banks are all itching to further open up the market, but it took protracted argument just to get the spiders to agree to the Melmon Charter of 1956, which officially restricts them

to one and one branch only, right here, the building shared among them—spider thinking being that it's safer to keep 'em all in one place. The banks have several other responsibilities: for one, they have to hang a tapestry over their section, “handsomely Fringed and festoon'd in Embroiderie depicting thy Corporate Logoe,” according to the Charter, which Mayor Pixcreel insisted on writing in his version of olde English. They have to abide the close proximity of their competitors; security guards, separately hired by each company, are there not just for the protection of the capital but to keep espionage to a minimum. And once a week they all have to put up with a preacher from the Fifth Church of Our Lady of Discord ceremonially flipping a card table and cracking a whip at customers until they run away.

A professionally neat young woman has been studying the altered dollar in the entranceway for a few minutes now, as incoming and outgoing customers fork around her. Mousy and pretty, with a tiny nose and long, straight brown hair tied into a sensible ponytail, she wears a green blouse under a crisp gray blazer that matches her skirt and the messenger bag resting on her slim hips. It's Delenda Cartwright's first time in Melmon Bank; she's only been in Midway for two weeks now and everywhere she goes she gets distracted by these bits of local culture, which are always the most interesting when they're forced to abut capitalism in some way. The spiders sure do lay it on thick. Of course, she's heeding her boss's strident warnings to stay well detached from the locals themselves, in every sense of the word.

Delenda heads for the line forming underneath PNC's tapestry and waits patiently. Most of the other customers are human too, spiders not having much use for banking services. Some AAA officers in their green sashes patrol the area, though all of the private guards are humans. In the center of the bank, amid modernist benches and squared-off topiaries, one female spider sits and licks an ice cream cone while her male friend kneels between her legs and licks her. All of the humans, including Delenda, pretend not to notice, but the spider girl for some reason notices her. “You look uptight. Wanna borrow him for a minute?” she asks, indicating her friend, who looks up from between her legs with eight puppy-dog eyes. “He's real good at this!” Delenda blushes and avoids eye contact.

They'd sent her to a special class for all of their underground-bound employees. Before even mentioning anything with six arms, it started off with a three-day crash course in Chicago school economics that was perhaps intended as an inoculation. When they finally got around to mentioning the giant spider people that had been living among us for all of history, and some of her fellow execs-in-training called bullshit, they dispelled disbelief by introducing one to the class, right there. He had to crouch under the doorframe when coming in, and he was a light, wintry gray all over, with pale green eyes. His name was Sezzed, or something like that, and the braver students got to go up and shake his claw, though Delenda stayed back. She thought maybe he was looking at her for a moment, but then realized she couldn't tell. Someone

asked him why he was wearing pants and no shirt. “I didn’t want to wear the pants either, but they said you guys would freak out—I don’t know how you put up with these things.”

Naturally that made the students curious about spider culture. The next session, which Sezzed was not present for, began with a brief description of the spiders’ unsophisticated society, with its opposition to order and structure and resultant technological stagnation. They were warned that the spiders still lived in a kind of communal fashion—“we’ve been trying for decades to get them to see how efficient free markets can help,” said the lecturer gravely, “but their insectoid brains probably predispose them towards primitive, collectivist societies—one might say hives. Before humanity built the underground cities for them, they were limited to living in rudimentary tunnels and warrens. In fact, it’s thanks to local steel production that Midway was the first major underground settlement in North America. But I digress. There is one thing every human who may be exposed to spiders must be aware of, one thing even *more* dangerous than socialism, and that is the Change. . .”

Delenda’s turn arrives, and her teller turns out to be a spider—a black one, with green eyes the color of a pool table. He has a crisp little bow tie and one of those visors worn by hard-nosed accountants and poker players. When she approaches his window, he does not even make a cursory attempt to disguise checking her out. “Nice shoes,” he says.

“Gee, thanks.”

He radiates a toothy smile and neatly folds two pairs of claws on his desk. “What can I help you with today?”

“Hi, my company has a safe deposit box here, and I need to get some things from it.”

“No problem. Name?”

“Delenda E. Cartwright,” she says, passing the spider her driver’s license.

“Nice to meet you, Delenda—my name’s Kalak, by the way—but I’m gonna need the company name, too.”

“Uh. . . Wallace Shale.”

He pauses for a split second, his cockeyed look belying the dramatic shift in mood Delenda has learned to expect when namedropping her employer. It reliably causes friendly spider exuberance to curdle into some mixture of pity, dejection, and disgust, but on the plus side there’s no surer way to deflect flirtatious arachnids she doesn’t want to deal with.

“C’mon back.” The spider curtly buzzes her through a door into PNC’s designated space. Not far inside is the vault, lined with boxes. “You got a key, right? You’re looking for number six sixty six.” Delenda is confused when she follows the numbering all the way to the end of the vault’s inner edge and finds out that the boxes stop at 500, and over on the other side they start again at one. She looks back at the teller and he only gives her an exaggerated shrug. No help there. When she gets into the sixties, though, she stops—someone’s used a label maker to attach another six to #66. From behind her, the teller

laughs. She unlocks the box and directs an unamused glare his way. “Uh oh, we *offended* her. Hey, do you have any idea what your company is doing down here, let alone up there?”

“I’m only a personal assistant.”

“So, no, you don’t. Right? Cause it’d just break my heart to know a pretty human like you knows about all that stuff and works there anyway. We like to pretend the only really evil humans are the old fat guys in suits.”

“Look. I *don’t* know what particular thing you have a problem with, but I promise you I had nothing to do with it. I don’t decide anything.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” The teller sighs. It’s never just the suits. The spiders have known about coal and oil and gas for centuries. Compressed black deathstuff, seeping poison, hidden suffocation lying in the earth to punish those who dig too deeply. The collective spider instinct is to fear them. What scant organized scientific research spider society has ever been able to conduct has largely been directed towards the avoidance of such deposits. Yet nobody was surprised, many years ago, when the humans decided to direct most of their incredible world-altering machinery (that of it which they could spare from killing each other) towards digging the goddamn stuff out of the ground. Deep down every spider assumes that humans, no matter how individually lovable, harbor an instinctual drive to destroy the world.

“Listen,” says Delenda.

“I’m listening,” he says, but Delenda doesn’t actually have a defense prepared, so she only stands there with her arms crossed. And then suddenly—KERBLAAAAAAMMM.

The explosion, originating from somewhere near the main area of the bank, is so loud Delenda can feel it in her chest. The floor shakes. “Holy shit, says the teller, running out of the vault, and Delenda follows him. “Holy *shit*,” he says again when they get outside. Chunks of stone litter the floor and the corporate tapestries are singed at the edges. There is a huge hole blown into the side of the building, almost the full height of the wall, beyond which some Midway side street is visible. A tank rolls in through the hole, treads rumbling over the rubble, yes a real WW2-style tank, which presently judders to a halt just inside the building. There is a muffled metal clanking, and the bank becomes remarkably quiet before the tank’s hatch cover swings up as it is thrown open from inside.

“Move! They’re gonna get away!” screeches a nasal New Jersey accent from inside the tank, and then a chubby orange spider girl squeezes herself out of the hatch, rolling over the side when a comrade pushes up from underneath her. Her bright fur is pumpkin-colored, her eyes and claws are solid black, and she is wearing nothing but a *Stahlhelm* strapped below her chin. Delenda’s heart sinks—now that her lower half is visible, so is her leg and the twisting maze of creeping ivy running up it, a marking indicating her status as one of the spiders Delenda was repeatedly warned to stay away from at any cost—the Huntsmen.

“Like you could even catch one,” says the spider coming up from below—this one’s a guy, black eyes and dark brown fur with black edges, like charred wood. The intricate tribal patterns snaking up his left leg are done in white, for better contrast with his body. “Hell, they already ran away,” he says, in no particular hurry. “—’cept for that one there. Mine.” He is pointing, of course, at Delenda, who now sees that all the other humans have scattered and only a few spiders have been too curious or frightened to run. (Two AAA officers look poised to do something, but another spider from the tank fires a quick burp of warning shots from an automatic rifle, halting their advance.) He steps towards her, openly appraising her body, and smiles a malicious little smile of approval, to Delenda’s utter horror.

“Lasck, you jerk! I want a cock!” whines the orange spider in the helmet.

“Then go run one down, fatty. Episkopos promised the next one to *me*,” says the spider approaching Delenda, without taking his huge, dark eyes off of her. He’s got a long, blocky face and a high forehead; the fur on his head is swept up and backwards into a quiff made of individual hair-spines. “And I’m taking her.”

“Yo!” The bank teller interrupts, voice cracking. “Wait! You guys won’t take another spider’s human, right? It’s part of your code! So...fuck off! That one’s mine!”

Lasck grumbles, but stands still. The orange female says “That’s bullshit! Seriously, how many times are we gonna let a good cock get away cause of that dumb rule?” Both of them, and all the other Huntsmen in the bank, look back towards the tank—there’s now another spider standing there. A woman, in red and purple robes and a hood that covers most of her face. She smiles peacefully, fangs out. Her robes are an intricate manifold of scarlet silks, yet they only cover half her body, leaving her three tan left arms exposed, though thanks to careful folding her vestments do cover the space between her legs. They wait for her direction.

“It issss true,” she begins, “that we must always resssspect the bond between our people and their humanssss. But—you will forgive me—I musssst *quesssstion* your bond. Why are you allowing your penis to walk around on her own? It issss...most incautious. It demonstrates a...disssssrespect for the sacred bond. Tell me, issss this *really* your human?”

“Yeah,” says Lasck. “How do we know you’ve even met her before? If she’s yours, what’s her name?”

Now all eyes turn to the teller. His first second of hesitation is enough to answer their question, but the Huntsmen don’t give him the easy out, they just stand there grinning until he’s forced to guess. “Uh...Desiree?”

“Desiree? *Desiree*? Do I look like a stripper?!” shrieks Delenda. “You saw my ID! It’s Delenda!”

“Oh man, that’s right.” The teller snaps a claw. “Knew it was D-something.”

Lasck laughs. “You’re both wrong. If she was *really* yours the right answer would have been ‘my cock’.”

The teller shrugs apologetically. Delenda sighs; not like she remembered his name, either. . . But she’s got one more trick up her sleeve; it’s a long shot, but doesn’t she have to try? “You don’t want me! I. . . I work for Wallace Shale! People will come looking for me!”

Oops. If there was some magic phrase that could have gotten her out of this, that certainly wasn’t it. Nobody among the few remaining spider spectators looks impressed. Even the two AAA officers share a sidelong glance, and the teller sucks a breath in through his teeth. The Huntsmen all turn and stare, seething, until the chubby orange one screeches “*Get that cunt, Lasck!*”

Is there any sense in trying to run? As Lasck reaches for her, oozing grim judgment, she isn’t sure her legs would even obey her if she tried. She finds her mouth and tongue certainly won’t, as she screams but only gets an escaping whisper of unshaped air. He’s big, so much bigger than her. He seizes her without urgency, around her waist, her wrist, and her neck. There is no hope for clemency in his unbreakable grip.

“One moment, Lassck.” It’s their robed leader, approaching one of the bank’s surveillance cameras. She removes her hood, revealing dazzling clear purple eyes and a lightly lined face, looking about as old as spiders can—which could put her anywhere from 40 on up. She angles a camera towards her and begins to speak.

“Sssspiders of Midway—you poor, ssssoft things. You have lived among the humans for sssso long you are forgetting your true nature. Ssssome of you believe it is possible to love a human with the ssssame love you have for your fellow sssspiders. Humans! Those fragmented vessssels, those poisoners and murderers! They have one purpose, and that is to complete *ussss*. Do you not ssssee what they do when left unchecked? They kill and desssstroy! To leave them to roam and yet claim to be connected—this is an utter inversssion of your true insssstincts, your real Will.”

“You cannot ssssee the truth because you live in these pleasssure caves the humans have built for you. But the underground cities are zoos. For what other reason would the humans sssspend such vast amounts of their precious money? Make no mistake, brothers and ssssisters, you are being domesticated. But we will remind you of the true order of things. We will sssshow the humans, and those of you that choose to live as their pets, what their purpose truly is.”

“There issss nothing more ssssacred than the connection between a sssspider and their human. We, the Hunters of Nuit, have dedicated ourselves to reassssserting the primacy of this bond. It issss the natural order. The Perfect and the Perfect are one Perfect, and not two; sssso it is written. Hear me, denizens of Midway! No longer will we honor your imaginary connections. No matter what falsities they have taught you, a human that is not a part of one

of ussss is an unclaimed human—and an unclaimed human issss fair game for *taking*.”

She aims the camera at Delenda and the spider holding her. “Brother Lassssck, I have already delayed you too long. Please—*demonsssstrate*.” He doesn’t need told again: his claws rip through her clothes at once and shred her Aspirational Young Businesswoman getup. She stands all but naked in the chilly bank, then Lasck tears off her panties too, and the only sound is snapping elastic and her tiny whimper. All eyes, including whatever ones watch from beyond the CCTV, are focused on her.

The monstrous thing presses his body against her. She can’t do anything other than turn her head to the side, eyes squeezed shut so she won’t see any of this—it can’t be happening, any of it, it won’t end up for her like this, she has so many plans, Director, Vice President, *Senior* Vice President, if not at Wallace Shale than somewhere else, but either way she’s destined for boardrooms and corner offices, not for being permanently installed in the crotch of a huge, hairy spider monster. This kind of thing doesn’t happen to people like her, she’s an executive-to-be, not some kind of degenerate freak who’d be *okay* with being nothing but an organ, unable to do anything other than—than get hard and spurt cum... His chest presses into the side of her face, bristly fur hot and scratchy against her cheek; his scent is like the faded ghost of cologne in a root cellar.

Lasck’s claws launch an uninvited investigation of her body. He touches an ear, traces an eyebrow, brushes aside her hair to investigate the curious curve of her smooth neck. This whole time he’s growling quietly, a two-stroke engine of a rumble from far down in his throat. “You’re scared. All humans are scared, at first. But they never want to go back.” There’s a claw between her legs now. “Not once they feel what it’s like to be a cock. What they’re *supposed* to be. Humans *never* want to go back once they find out how good it is.”

Doesn’t that make it all the *more* terrifying?

They taught her about the Change in class too, with a VHS tape halfway between middle-school sex ed and Cronenberg. Someone had asked, “—is it dangerous?” Oh yes, said the lecturer. We believe it can change how you *think*. Something in it that causes anti-establishment thinking. But even worse is that you are at the mercy of a *spider*, an irrational, chaotic creature. Remember that you are helpless. Fully incapacitated. Utterly immobile. They can turn you into part of them and decide, on a whim, to never change you back...

So this is where Delenda goes while the spider violates her, back to her company-sponsored initiation into the underground... She doesn’t hear him command her to spread her legs, so he picks her up and positions her as effortlessly as a doll, with an arm for each limp limb and two to stabilize her. He holds her out in front, running a claw up her cream-white back, along her bumpy spine and over sharp shoulder blades, pulls the ponytail holder out of

her hair, leaving that glossy brown curtain free to slide off her shoulder and into her face. (Later she will remember these last minutes in her body and realize that she was already being held as though she had taken on her new, permanent role. Soon, his arms will not need to support her; her own internal rigidity will be all that she needs. . .) She squeals when Lasck puts his cock in her, but that's just automatic, something her body does. She's still back at the corporate lecture hall learning Their tips n' tricks for dealing with the spiders: don't wear suggestive clothing (as he pulls her back against him, all the way inside) and definitely don't get into any political arguments (as he pulls her away again).

"Hurry up, Lasck! You even *start* yet?" The fat orange spider, with her grating voice and oily Jersey accent, somehow manages to be the thing to snap Delenda back to the present, in time to hear him grunt his reply: "Jussst did." Delenda knows the only thing they can be talking about, of course, but still looks back to confirm it, low so as not to see his face, and yes, it's happening; she's being Changed.

The balls of her heels have connected to her buttocks, and her thighs and lower legs are melting together. From beneath the spider's bristly fur, deep burgundy brownness spreads in blotches across her hips. Her toned legs lose their definition, becoming shorter and rounder. She looks expectantly at her arms, at her chest, to see if there are signs there, too, but nothing—yet. (She knows that it happens differently for every spider. What you look like after it's all over—when you're a penis—depends on you. But the spider determines how you change. The first change she ever saw, in a droneclub on her first night in Midway—the girl was there one moment, then her face was a giant cockhead the next. Her head changed first, and faster than her body, so for a brief minute she was a giant pole with tits—but soon she lost those too, and for the rest of the night Delenda couldn't help casting glances at the spider's long cock and thinking about the young woman it really was. . .)

Heat envelops her hips as a ring of Lasck's dark skin creeps up her body. She's being consumed rather than morphed, like a toothless snake is trying to swallow her. It moves so fast that reflexively she brings a hand down to her waist to try and stop it, but that's a mistake—instead her hand gets trapped under the encroaching ridge. She tries to pull it back, but it's stuck in there good. She screeches and does the same thing with the *other* hand before she can stop herself, and now both of them are stuck in there up to the wrists and then past them, forearms feeling the squeeze as she's sucked deeper in.

Delenda flails around without the support of her arms and tries to straighten up. She tries to kick her legs too, but only gets a small, distant response from them, like they've both gone to sleep and she's trying to kick through a very viscous gel. She sees why when Lasck, in order to get better control of her, sits down on the bank floor—her legs are now big round fuzz-covered balls, with only a few lumps, smoothing out before her very eyes, to suggest they were ever anything else. Where her hips once were is now the round ridge sep-



arating the furry ballsack from taut brown flesh, her body and simultaneously his.

She's found her voice again—can't stop screaming, in fact, which certainly isn't helping anything, although it makes Lasck laugh. She's pulling and pulling, trying to get her arms out of the shrinkwrap spiderskin tube sucking her in, but the more she pulls the faster she seems to be stuck. It's up past her belly-button now. A moment ago she could feel resistance in her wrists, tugging on her knuckles—but now she can't feel them at all behind the tingly, homogenizing warmth inside this sheath. The sensations of her lower body are not absent but altered; when the spider obscenely fondles his new testicles, Delenda feels it not as rubbing on her leg but on her balls, even though she's never had balls before and they currently occupy the same position in sensory space that her legs *used* to. . .

The cockskin cocoon is nearly at her tits. Inside, some unimaginable metamorphosis is happening; the outline of her fingers has softened away entirely and her lower arms have turned into soft, puffy tubes. She still struggles, but it's more symbolic than anything now, and she quiets down to moans alternated with ragged gasps for air. Once it reaches a little past her waist, the terror subsides—that's her adrenal gland going away. (One more fun fact from her training.) The intellectual, entirely rational fear of spending the rest of her life as a penis is still there, of course, but now it's the spider's hormones coursing through her and not her own, clouding her mind not with primal terror but an uncomfortable miasma of lust which, she feels, is wholly inappropriate to the situation. She does not *want* to be turned on. But her sexuality has been taken, pussy nowhere among the crinkly scrotal folds where it was a minute ago. (Not like she was using it anyway. Hm? Intrusive thoughts here, coming if not from her own unwillingly horny mind, then—something more sinister—are they sneaking across nerves from him to her, via newly forming bridges linking the spider's brain with whatever she's becoming?)

She admits to herself that it's physically pleasurable. She can even feel a sensation building, like an army on the far side of a distant hill, that resembles an orgasm. But it's a long way off, and meanwhile she still fears the rising Change consuming her body, ready now to claim her shoulders. Her breasts, never notable to begin with, have already gone under and flattened out. She can't move her arms at all. They are now only prominent veins running up and down her tubular sides. It's only seconds away, but she dreads the sheath rising above her neck, closing her in, cutting off the light. Will she still be able to breathe, will she not need to? What will it do to *her*—to her *mind*?

The same scared thoughts chase each other around Delenda's brain a dozen times in the space of a few seconds, but Lasck interrupts: he grabs her phallic body at its base and pulls upwards, squeezing out one low, long groan, and for a moment, every thought in her head. She's never been touched like that before, never had that kind of sensation—but she's never been a cock before. How can she resist something that feels so good? She can feel a strange



compressing force on her shoulders, rounding them out painlessly. Like a cresting wave, the unfamiliar skin has wrinkled and bunched at its upper edge, forming a ruffle of foreskin, and it begins to tickle her chin. She stretches her neck out to get away, like someone caught in quicksand trying to keep their head above the fatal line a little longer, stay connected to the daylight even though no help is coming and there's that irresistible pull tugging her down, down...

Suddenly, the skin lurches upwards. Delenda is cut off mid-scream as it seals around her head, leaving only a small tuft of her hair poking out the top like unshucked corn. Her mouth left open in surprise, her fine nose, her light brow and wide eyes all leave a topography of bumps and dips in the veiny surface of the spider skin covering her head, but in seconds they all smooth into nothing, leaving the familiar shape of the tip of a penis. The light brown hair still poking out of the end falls away.

Lasck rolls the foreskin of his new cock back, confirming for the camera that there is no visual trace of Delenda left—her pretty face is now only a plump, dark glans. The reveal seems to push him over the edge into violent orgasm, hunching over and bellowing as he masturbates Delenda's new body so fast that his claws blur, the penis that was a young woman spasming upwards as it blasts jizz all over the scattered corporate signage littering the ground. Lasck even turns to ensure he spreads the wealth to as many of the banks as possible before he slumps to the ground. The CCTV will show him with a satisfied, faraway smile, big chest heaving as he catches his breath.

There's no rest for the wicked, unless you've got friends. Lasck may be too weak to walk, but two of his compatriots team-lift him by his arms. The orange spider walks around scattering pellets too small to be seen onscreen, which explode with tiny white flashes and fill the room with impenetrable black smoke. There is the sound of another explosion, but this one is different in character than the tank shell, tighter and more focused... When the smoke clears, the Huntsmen will all be gone, leaving their tank behind and a seemingly bottomless sinkhole in the middle of Melmon Bank's polished stone floor.

That's all the viewers of UDKA-TV will ever see played on the news, and when the Arachnid Altercation Agency reinforcements arrive in a few minutes, they will be dismayed to find the hole leads directly to the tunnels underneath Midway, a maze twistier than even the interstitials, parts of which were used for, and had not been touched since, the initial construction of Midway. Of course there are connections to the deep tunnels. How can you stop a spider from simply digging upwards, any more than you could stop a person from walking through a field? The perfunctory search will be called off after a few hours.

But here and now, the Huntsmen are racing through depths dark and unknown, not sure if they are being chased or how close their pursuers may be. Somehow, the Episkopos is out in front. Lasck is being carried on someone's

back, allowing him to see the chubby spider struggle to keep up at the rear of the pack. This is deeply amusing to him. “Attagirl, Itkil. You can use the exercise.”

“Fuck (huff) *you* (puff) Lasck,” she says with great effort.

They hustle through the detritus of a lost era, some of this stuff obviously untouched for decades. Overturned school desks, freon-leaking fridges in mint green, baroque streetlights, wrecked movie projectors and their tattered film reels, long sections of wrought iron fence. . . As they travel, the tunnels grow less finished, giving way to black canvas walls and unadorned wooden supports. It’s a little like being backstage at a theater, huge set pieces all around, and the combined energy of a massive collective not far away, just on the other side of a thin barrier. . .

Their red-robed leader raises a claw. “I think. . . we may ressst now, children.” They all stop and find a place to sit on the floor, except for two that stand watch on opposite sides of the small group, staring down the dark hallways as if challenging them to produce something capable of taking them on. Lasck leans against a clump of ripped-up sandbags, letting flaccid Delenda flop to the floor, leftover drips from her tip wiping out years of accumulated dust in circular spatters. His neat quiff has been demolished from the harried trip, spiny hairs sticking every which way. Itkil takes a seat next to him and, without asking permission, plays with his new penis, twirling and rubbing it in a fashion more inquisitive than sensual. Lasck doesn’t appreciate this, but he’s too tired to object.

Delenda hasn’t gone anywhere. For a minute there, things got a little strange for her, especially when she was cumming. She had never felt, or imagined, anything like it, and any objections, any thoughts at all she had were temporarily obliterated by the orgasm that wracked her entire form. The ensuing afterglow was deliciously peaceful, carefree as laughing gas even as the spiders scrambled down these dark tunnels, away from the life she’d known, possibly forever, and her unable to do a single thing about it. She is reminded that she has no conscious control over her phallic body when her useless, invisible attempts to evade the orange spider’s claw don’t move her flaccid self a millimeter. Itkil’s clumsy rubbing doesn’t feel good at all; not only is Delenda totally spent, but she finds Itkil personally repugnant.

“You want me to suck her?” (*Oh god, please don’t*, thinks Delenda.)

Thankfully Lasck shares her sentiment. “Naw. Let go. You’re just mashing her. And she thinks you’re gross, anyway.” (*How did he know that?!*)

“Fine,” huffs Itkil, releasing Delenda. “She don’t know what she’s missin’.”

“Don’t worry,” says Lasck, addressing his own penis. “We can do way better than her. We’ll find you someone you’ll really like. . . you want a boy or a girl? You pick.”

It is a sudden reminder that Delenda’s new role is that of a copulatory organ, and it’s not going to be all handjobs and jacking off. She gets these images of herself in her new body being aimed twatwards at some spider chick

with her legs spread open, begging for Lasck to rail her. Previously Delenda wouldn't have even ranked herself as bi-curious, but there's now some kind of strange attraction at the thought, though she can't be sure whether it's hers or the spider's. But when she thinks (or has the thought come from him?) of being stuffed into the forbidden asshole of a spider male, just as strong and built as Lasck, and being the central point of their dirty connection... she begins to stir.

“Mmm. You want a boy. Alright.”

If she still had a face, she'd be blushing.

+ +

IF YOU'RE WALKING THROUGH LIMESTONE HEIGHTS TONIGHT, in that enclave of moneyed humans where the financiers and a few of their spider consorts dwell in mansions and glass condos, you may see a particular human, thin and paper white, pace impatiently through the second-floor picture window of a particular Gothic Revival mansion—dark wood, wrought iron window frames, and soaring finials on the parapets that reach out to Midway's stone ceiling (though Schlagenkraft Manor was, of course, constructed no earlier than the forties, when a handful of human tycoons decided it might not be so terrible to have a vacation home among the hedonistic, savage spiders...)

The Doctor paces his sitting room, as he's been doing for most of the past 25 hours. He's got a kind of command center set up here, where the expansive window bathes the room in Midway's artificial light and lets him look out over the city. TV's tuned in to the news, laptop charging on the couch, phone waiting to receive a call. He's barely slept, so his already red eyes are bloodshot terrors, and there's a scatter of angel-fine stubble on his clenched jawline, catching the light on his marble skin like quartz dust. His thin brows have settled into furrows of simmering anger. The normally fastidious Doctor has even skipped his morning shower, surprising Skenge. (“But sir, I could come in and get you if someone does call...” “Yes, you'd like that, hmm? I think not.”)

The Doctor is aware, peripherally, that Skenge is upset, possibly even scared. He has been shorter with her than usual. It gives him no pleasure, but his maid's feelings are not currently at the forefront of his mind. She is in the adjoining kitchen, cooking, even though he has given her no indication that he wishes to eat. She knows better than to press him, but she has been hovering nearby all day, as she so often does whenever he is visibly frustrated. Her concern for him is endearing, but aggravating. After he declined dinner tonight, she asked him to fuck her, even bringing him an assortment of whips herself in the hopes that he could be coaxed into taking out some frustration on her... Skenge, for heaven's sake, can you cease thinking with your vagina for an hour? Do you understand the *importance* of these matters?

Firstly, there was Margreta's band of terrorists overplaying their hand. How the devil did they manage to get a *tank* down here? It was understood there'd be some kidnappings. It's their group's whole *modus operandi*, after all, and it creates a healthy sense of fear besides. But it's going to take a month to repair Melmon Bank. Naturally, PNC, BoA, Chase, and the rest aren't pleased with losing their only inroads into Midway, and they've certainly been letting him know it.

Yes, other than the wanton destruction of capital, the Huntsmen's little show was perfect, really. He's been encouraging Margreta to play up the religious angle, and it paid off beautifully. There's no hotter item in today's Fear Market than fundamentalist terrorists of any creed. Margreta's monologue has been playing nearly nonstop on UDKA-TV. He wrote a press release for the MARC advising Midway's humans that their safety could not be guaranteed here (as if it ever could be anywhere). If only fear was more effective on spiders; all he could wheedle out of Mayor Arachnypoundcake, despite hyperbolic warnings of kidnappings and threats of sanctions, was a reluctantly given three day lockdown.

But that was still a small victory. His real problem is that Sidwell Greenstreet was out of hand. Somewhere on the surface, after his minder from the Arachnid Altercation Agency decided to take him on a little jaunt up there without any kind of prior authorization—not that the AAA would care about that in the first place, or about the 24-hour rule. And he was now stranded there—thanks, maddeningly, to the Doctor's own machinations. He could have Arachnypoundcake end the lockdown at the cost of an immense amount of credibility, not to mention pride. No, he'd just have to hope Greenstreet showed up after the blockade ended, even if that did scuttle his hopes that a way could be found to make it permanent. . .

How did Greenstreet end up in the custody of this spider, anyway? That wasn't the plan. This Lieutenant Skeila could be a problem. She was chosen *so* carefully to match his psychosexual profile. The Doctor was pleased when he pulled Greenstreet's internet history and discovered a predilection for transsexuals, not uncommon at all among the spiders—and so he could delve into specifics. Deeper analysis of the young man's tastes revealed, perhaps, a subconscious yearning to be dominated, controlled. . . The MARC keeps better personnel files on the AAA than the AAA does, so it was a simple matter to find in their number a young trans spider with a reputation for rough treatment of humans—a HAARPie, even. Perfect. But she was supposed to be *bait*, only bait. . .

The Doctor silently ruminates over his problems, staring out into the subterranean skyline. And then—one of the freight elevators lights up, the almost invisible glass pillar turning without warning into a bright column of rectangular light. The Doctor's eye twitches. Rage is beyond him; a kind of cold, focused wrath is as close as he ever gets. But oh, is he there now. Three days—a *mere three days*—was all he could wring out of that old bastard, and

the bug kept his promise for barely a full day. He can't decide whether this is an intentional slight or just the result of arachnid stupidities, but either way, Arachnypoundcake would pay, oh yes—

“Skenge? Fetch my binoculars. They're in the bureau in the study, top-right drawer, in a leather case towards the front.” He turns, throwing a burning red-eyed glare her way. “Now, please.”

The spider rushes off, resembling for the instant a blurry black-and-white photo. She's as colorless as her master, all soft greys and whites in a shiny black maid's outfit. (Skenge knows better than to hesitate, but it is precisely the *lack* of anger in his voice that frightens her now. The Doctor lets his guard down around her, around her and nobody else does he display irritation, frustration, sometimes even worry, voice slipping now and then into that West Virginian twang she finds so cute. But now his voice is as flat and affectless as she has ever heard it, as unemotional as when he addresses his employees at the MARC. . .) In seconds she's back with the binoculars; she waits patiently by his shoulder for further instruction as he locates and focuses in on where the clear glass shaft meets the stone ceiling. They wait in silence—and slowly an freight cab lowers into view.

He zooms in. A spider and a human molesting each other, briefly. The human pulls away. The spider, curiously enough, is an Arachnid Altercation Agent, green sash and all. Seeing it from the back, the Doctor is momentarily confused: it has sizable breasts but an oddly male build; broad shoulders, muscular arms, no hips to speak of. . . and when it turns around, there's an erection there, not nearly large enough to have been a person. Oh—of *course*. A grin splits the Doctor's pale lips, thin as a hairline fracture in ivory.

There is Order in this universe. He does not even need to look at the human; he is as sure as he has ever been about anything. But he does, just to see the face he has only seen in grainy security cam footage and Facebook pictures years out of date, and there he is—Sidwell Greenstreet. The Doctor's grin breaks into raucous, open-mouthed laughter, totally uncontrolled, head tilted back, face to the ceiling.

Skenge stares in horror. She's never seen the Doctor act like this. Oh, he's not *humorless*, he allows himself a chuckle here, mild laughter there, but never anything this unseemly. She knows better than to question him, but. . . “S-sir? . . . what's so funny?”

“Oh, Skenge,” he says, removing his heavy glasses and wiping tears from his eyes. “Everything's so *perfect*.”

This does nothing to assuage Skenge, but she stays quiet as the Doctor returns binoculars to red eyes to watch the rest of the little drama play out. Sidwell looks agitated about something. Seems to be. . . avoiding Lt. Skeila, actually, who follows him around the elevator. Hmm. Now the spider is holding him from behind, and she's saying something. . . no telling what. (Skenge, take a memo to Mr. Waterproof, tell him to have audio recorders installed in all freight elevators. . .) She touches his forehead, and—oh dear.

They're kissing. Hmm.

This could be problematic; at best the spider would be a distraction. But if they're stuck on each other, it'll simply have to be a matter of finding the right crowbar, that's all. The Doctor has the zeal of a man in the service of a higher power. Who knows how many promising young minds have been lost to the productive world, down here among the spiders, and Sidwell Greenstreet is what you'd call the at-risk type. Well. He won't be losing Greenstreet. He *needs* him.

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