

NEEDS FROM BELOW

The stars! *Behold the unveiling of Nuit!*

Shryrae can feel the cool surface air move over her fur as she waits. Wind! She can hear it too, rustling through all the big surface plants. And she can hear the continual cheep-cheep-cheep of the little surface crickets and toads all around her, and some kind of rumbling deep *brumbrumbrumbrum* noise that she doesn't recognize but must surely be some other wonderful surface phenomenon.

She risks another look up at the stars. They're so pretty she just has to, even though—yes, all at once it feels like the ground is moving under her. She puts all six arms out to catch herself as she falls backwards into the damp grass, and the stars whirl overhead as she giggles. She should come up to the surface more often. It's a lot of work to get all the way up here, but with enough practice she could be like Rhazille and all the other spiders that can walk around under the sky without getting dizzy. Well, *too* dizzy.

«Shryrae? Are you there? Where are you?»

It's her! Shryrae tries to scramble to her feet, but the sky-vertigo still has her all shaky. «Rhazille! Hi Rhazille—oof,» she says as she wipes out on a misplaced claw, nearly eating turf.

«Quit messing around. We're going to be late.»

Shryrae looks up and there she is, as austere and beautiful as she remembers her. Rhazille stands not far away, all six arms folded impatiently, tapping one foot on the ground. The slender spider's fur is as dark as blue gets, the color of the sky long after twilight, hard to see even under the light of the nearly full moon. If one doesn't look carefully it's like there's eight electric yellow eyes and two fangs floating in the air.

«Rhaz! It's so good to see you! How long has it been since you've been in the warren, a year? Even more? I missed you!»

«I missed you too. But come on. We don't have much time.»

«What? Why not?»

«I told you in my messages, Shry. The Episkopos has a plan, and we need to follow it. We're already behind the sequence of things.»¹

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE: «Guillemets» have been used to indicate where the spiders' native language has been replaced with a translation. We have endeavored to preserve in English, to the extent possible, the unique idioms and characteristics of the arachnid language. Here we see that it contains no single equivalent word for "schedule".

Shryrae laughs. «Listen to you! Talking about time and sequences. They really have made you into a city spider, haven't they?»

«Do you want your human or not? There are others that can claim him.»

«Well of *course* I want my human,» says Shryrae quickly, doing her best to get to her feet.

«Then we need to get going. It'll take us half a night to get to Midway, and—what is *that*?» says Rhazille, pointing at the other spider.

Shryrae is just managing to take a few unsteady steps now, careful to keep her solid black eyes focused on the ground lest she go all wobbly again. She stands a few inches under seven feet, average for an adult female spider. She has a long straw-colored coat of fur, with lighter cream-colored bands circling her six arms, and two legs that fade to ripe banana brown with speckles that become denser the further down they go like dithered halftone dots. The longer hair on her head is tied into a ponytail, the same sunshine yellow as her body, that falls down her back all the way to her waist. But her coat's most notable feature—and what seems to have surprised her friend—is undoubtedly the intricate, chaotic black tangle of lines twisting their way up almost the entire left side of her body. Somewhere between tribal tattoo, fractal, and labyrinth, it snakes its way up her leg, loops back over on itself in wild, undulating waves that cover her thigh and hip, shoots erratically up her flank to playfully curl under, around, and over the curve of her left breast, reaching its peak at her shoulder. Tentative offshoots like sprouting plants reach out nearly to the elbow of all three arms on the left side of her body. With the spider's fur blowing gently in the wind the pattern seems almost alive as the innumerable tiny pathways constantly shift and recombine.

«You like it? I wanted to look good for our big trip to Midway,» Shryrae says as she spins in place as if showing off a new dress.

«That...is going to be a problem.» Rhazille frowns at Shryrae's left side in the same way you might at discovering that a dog turd has suddenly materialized underfoot.

«Why? What's wrong with it?» says Shryrae, sounding hurt.

«Only Huntsmen go around wearing Eris's Maze.»

«What's a Huntsman?»

«*Us*, Shry. We are. Huntsmen is what the humans call us.»

«Oh. So then...what's the problem?»

Rhazille sighs. «The humans fear us, and the city spiders don't understand us. Midway's not a good place for us. Yet.»

«Not a good place? Is it not safe?»

«Oh, it's safe. But it might hurt our plans if people knew there were Huntsmen among them.» Rhazille refolds her arms and considers her friend's body art. «Well, it can't be helped. If anyone asks we'll tell them you're a big Saint Alaika fan.»

«Saint Alaika? I know Saint Tib and Saint Gulik, but not Saint Alaika.»

«She’s a sound-maker in Midway. Very famous. One of us, and she wears Eris’s Maze in public too.»

«So...everyone knows she’s one of us?» asks Shryrae.

«Oh, no. She’s too famous for anyone to believe that,» replies Rhazille. Shryrae just stands there and scrunches up her face as she tries to digest her friend’s logic, but the night is fading fast and there’s no time to explain human social dynamics. The dark blue spider turns and begins heading downhill, using three arms to beckon to her blonde friend: «Come on, the motion thing is waiting for us.»

«The motion thing?»

«Human machine. You’ve seen them before, right? *Kaarss. Traahkks.*»

«A few times, when I’ve come up to the surface, but never up close,» says Shryrae, almost losing her footing as she trips over a branch. The two big claws on the front of her foot dig into the soft earth as she catches herself. «Are we...actually going to get in one? Really?»

«Well we sure aren’t walking there.»

Shryrae’s warren is connected to the surface through winding tunnels that have their egress here, near the top of a densely forested hill far from any city or town—but not quite so remote as to be entirely untouched by human hands. A couple hills over, snaking past like a dry river, a gray-black human road curves through a valley for just a brief stretch. How many times has she snuck up here? Made the long climb with the other young spiders from her warren despite stern warnings from the elders, just to sit on top of that hill deep in the night and watch for humans? Rhazille herself used to come too, years ago, before she left for Midway. The machines came so rarely at night. They said there were more in the daytime, but no one was quite courageous enough to stay out past sunrise, let alone get close enough for a better look.

As they descend the hill, Shryrae realizes that *brumbrumbrumbrum* sound is growing louder. They reach flat ground, and she sniffs at the air—there is something strange and burnt mixed in with the smells of the earth and plants and rain. And then they turn a corner and there it is, the motion thing, bigger up close than she ever could have imagined.

«Eris above and below!» says Shryrae, mouth hanging open.

«Wait here,» says Rhazille.

Instead, Shryrae walks around the back perimeter of the machine, gawking at the weird surfaces, strange materials, and mysterious lights, though she does not dare to touch anything. She cannot, of course, read the text adorning the truck’s side, nor would it have any particular significance to her:

Shipping Coordinators International
a division of the
Manufacturing, Acquisition, & Reclamation Corporation

Rhazille continues forward to the truck's cab and knocks on the door. Hearing the noise, Shryrae pokes her head around the back of the truck just in time to see, getting out of the front of the machine, a *human!* Right there, closer to her than she's ever been to any human who wasn't already owned by a warren-mate. She can't help squealing. «Is that my human?» she asks eagerly, stepping towards him.

«No!» says Rhazille, putting her arms between Shryrae and the human.

«Oh, sorry—is he yours? You shouldn't let him walk around like that. Someone might take him!»

The human—cute scared little thing—backs away slightly and says something to Rhazille. Rhazille talks back to him, and that seems to put him at ease. Shryrae wishes *she* could talk humanly like Rhazille can. It must make it so much easier to catch them.

«No,» says Rhazille. «This one works with us. He's going to control the machine. Your human is in Midway, like I told you.»

Shryrae nods rapidly, though her eyes are still locked on the human. «Yes yes, okay! Midway! Let's go!»

Rhazille sighs and holds her arms out, a go-ahead gesture to the human. «Don't touch him, Shry.»

The human warily begins walking towards the back of the truck—giving the two spiders a wide berth as he passes them. The whole time Shryrae pivots her head slowly and precisely to follow him, as though the tense gaze connecting them was a steel rod fixing their heads together. He's watching her too of course, keeping an eye on that terrifying and delighted smile she's wearing, like a carnivore privileged to see a very rare and very delicious creature.

Shryrae likes him. He's cute. She's not completely sure how humans look when they get older, but she guesses he's about as old as she is. He's got a nice face, and big, scared white eyes with pretty blue in the middle, and a little bit of light yellow face-fur. Really, what's the point in going to all this trouble? I mean, sure, she wants to see Midway, but...«I really can't just have this one? Wouldn't it be so much easier for us both?» asks Shryrae.

«No!» is Rhazille's sharp and immediate reply. Shryrae makes a small dejected squeak, like two sad balloons rubbing together.

The human takes his time getting to the back of the truck. Shryrae is startled when it makes a sound like a small cave-in as the human pulls open the trailer's door and reveals a vast empty space. He takes a few steps back, careful not to turn away from them, and waits.

«Okay, go ahead and get in,» says Rhazille.

«In there?» says Shryrae, peering into the trailer. She climbs in on all her claws, making heavy clacking noises on the floor. Rhazille follows her in, and then the human shuts the door, enclosing them in darkness. It's nice. Cozy.

The spiders sit across from each other in the empty trailer, and Shryrae tries to settle in comfortably up against the hard metal wall. «Midway!» she

says. «I can't believe I'm really going to see it in person. Can you show me a picture of it, Rhaz?»

«You'll be seeing it in person in a little while.»

«Aw, please? I know you have one of those human...*things*, that can show pictures,» she says, struggling for words. «Everyone who lives with the humans has one.»

Rhazille sighs and takes the rectangle out of the bag she carries on her shoulders. It bursts into brightness, illuminating the whole trailer with an eerie blue glow. She taps at it for a few seconds then passes it over to Shryrae.

Shryrae coos in wonder. It's hard to even comprehend what she's seeing; nothing here is anything she has the proper context for. The biggest cave she's ever seen or that there ever could be. Dots of lights on the ceiling, like the lights on the truck, but impossibly bigger and perfectly, unnaturally lined up with each other. Shining glittery towers that span the whole way from the floor to the ceiling, smaller buildings around them that are still enormous compared to the far-off little human houses she's seen. . . And most incredibly of all, the inhabitants of the city walking around on all those exactly straight streets—spiders and humans, *together*. Not just the humans that had been taken by the spiders, though she can see those too. Humans by themselves, or with other humans, or even with spiders. The humans don't look afraid and the spiders are just leaving them alone, walking together like it's the most ordinary thing in the world. There aren't as many humans as spiders, but they're there. She doesn't understand it, but it's incredible.

Suddenly that *brumbrumbrumbrum* noise gets faster and much louder. Shryrae looks up, eyes wide with alarm. «Hey, careful with that,» says Rhazille. Fortunately, when the truck begins to move a second later and Shryrae screeches in panic, flailing all her limbs and flinging the phone at her, she's prepared to catch it.

«What's happening?!» yells Shryrae, trying to dig her claws into the corrugated metal walls. «Everything is moving! We're falling!»

«Relax, Shry. We're just going downhill. Try to hang on.»

«I don't like this, Rhaz! I don't like this at all! You didn't tell me it was going to be like this! I knew human machines were bad! I knew it!»

“Eris help me, this is going to be a long trip,» mutters Rhazille.

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Holt McGeesken considers his surroundings once again and comes up with no options. He can't get far, handcuffed as he is to this very long, very heavy table, which he's had no success in moving. And these handcuffs aren't the janky kind he's seen in all those lockpicking Youtubes, and he doesn't have anything to use as a shim anyway. The window to his left, occupying nearly the whole wall, looks out over the strange city. If he could get a message out

somehow. . .but the tint suggests no one on the other side can see him. Maybe he could just throw the rolling office chair he's sitting on right through the glass. Would be difficult with one arm, but maybe.

But then, does he really want to attract attention *here*? He can see them moving around down there even from nearly forty stories up. The. . .*spiders*.

They're everywhere in this bizarre freakshow of a city. He can even see six-armed silhouettes moving around in the illuminated windows of the towers across the street, opposite the one he's presently trapped in. The buildings rise from ground level like copies of surface skyscrapers, except instead of terminating in a midair pinnacle they rise right into—and through—the rocky ceiling. He's been told that they were actually connected to their aboveground counterparts via their elevators. That's why he thought he was home free when he managed to make it into one mere seconds ahead of that spider cop that looked hellbent on tearing him apart—finally, he had thought as the elevator rose, back to the surface, the sun, and no more giant spider people that do *that* to humans. Didn't even care if he got paid for this whole insane job anymore. Was ready to just forget the whole thing. Who would even believe him?

Holt remembered being in the elevator, watching the floor number slowly count backwards from 40. Wasn't sure why it was going backwards, but figured salvation lay beyond the zero, and silently prayed for it to keep ticking down. There were some loud, concerning noises between 30 and 20, but the elevator continued to rise. . .until it hit 6, when it began to decelerate. "Come on, come *on* you piece of shit," muttered Holt by way of encouragement, but the machine crept nevertheless to a stop on floor 5 and the doors remained closed for an ominously long length of time. Holt removed his gun from his ankle holster.

Then the doors opened. No one there. Just a dark, carpeted corridor, like after hours in any office building anywhere. Finger on the trigger, he risked a quick peek outside the doors. Nothing in either direction. So he got out of the elevator, hugging the wall, ready to shoot as he slinked down the hallway. Hard to see. The overhead lights were off, but there was light coming from "outside" in places. He walked past one window that was close to one of the city's massive overhead ceiling lights; it looked like it was as big as a car and cast a blue-white beam of light into the dark room like a turbocharged moon. He continued to prowl the hallways in search of an exit. Until, very suddenly, he wasn't moving forward anymore.

It's like he walked into a hundred soft, sticky rubber bands. Panicking, he tried to jump back and was immediately pulled forward again. He dropped his gun—it tumbled and then just *stopped* in midair in apparent defiance of gravity. He reached for it but it jiggled away as though floating in an unseen jello mold. He struggled with all his might against nothing and failed, an invisible elastic force countering his every move in any direction. Something shone in the scant light and it looked, for a moment, like there were silvery linear filaments stretching from one wall to another all around him. But then

there was a sharp pain in his neck and that's all he remembers.

And that's how Holt ended up here. He came to with a light grogginess and knows some length of time got away from him, but he has no idea how much. His watch and phone have been taken, there's no clock in the room, and there's no sun here in Midway to judge what time of day it is.

Well, it's not too bad a place for a prison cell. Clearly they've repurposed a meeting room. Potted plants, a whiteboard, this conference table he's handcuffed to. They've gotten rid of every other chair but the one he's sitting on. What really gives him pause is the long mirror set into the wall opposite the external window, spanning nearly the whole length of the room. It seems obvious that it's a one-way mirror intended for observation.

So who's watching?

He has no idea who the factions in play are here or what allegiances govern them. He got the impression the joint hiring him was some kind of government cutout. He'd never heard of the Metropolitan Area Research Council before and couldn't find out much about them; the man who hired him was only a voice on the phone.

His captors haven't elected to make themselves known, so all Holt can do is observe the city below him, disturbing as it may be. He hasn't known about the spiders long, but doesn't think he'll ever be able to get used to knowing they exist, much less congregate in vast underground cities like this one. (Maybe if it wasn't for what they can do to human beings. . .no, they're too different, too alien. . .) There's a little plaza he can see from here with a fountain in the middle and a few benches around it. Wouldn't even be strange if it wasn't for all the spiders in it.

When Holt was brought in by the handler for the first time, he had to sign the contract then and there—it was either back out completely or sign and go underground for the next two weeks, no contact with the outside world. (He didn't know at the time that underground was meant literally.) He signed, along with the two others, and soon after Holt met his first spider. He knew immediately he'd never be able to be at ease around these things. The eyes, the fangs, the arms, how even the women were so much bigger—no, these creatures were not to be trusted. Even their friendliness was disturbing. The leering shark-toothed smiles. The squeaky, chattering giggling. The way they're all constantly horny. And this was before he found out about what they *do* to people, after which Holt had to wonder why no one has done the world a favor and set off the biggest bug bomb ever made in this place.

He can see humans down there, too. That had disturbed him even further, knowing about the humans—not the ones that had been *changed*, the regular, still-human humans, living and working here who were perfectly happy to coexist with these creatures. It was hard not to think of them as traitors to their species. And many of them they didn't just coexist. There's one down there in the plaza now, walking hand-in-claw with a spider. How can they stand it? How depraved do you have to be to be to fuck one of those bugs?

The pair sits down on the retaining wall of the fountain and—oh god. Holt knows what’s coming by the way they’re sitting, with the human in the space between the spider’s legs. Spiders were perfectly happy to use their grotesque ability right out in the open like this; in fact most of them seemed to take a perverse glee in showing off their acquisition.

Holt can’t look away. It’s a small mercy that at this distance he can only just make out the shapes of the human and the spider. Can’t even tell if they’re men or women.

“Mr. McGeesken.”

Startled, Holt looks away from the window and around for the voice.

“Mr. McGeesken,” it repeats in a light Appalachian drawl—it’s the voice from the phone, the man that hired him, with a filtered edge that tells Holt it’s coming from an intercom somewhere in the vicinity of the mirror. “Awake and alert, hmm? Good. Apologies for the delay. Things are proceeding apace now and we’ll be ready soon.”

“Ready for what?” Holt asks. “Listen, man, I’m not gonna talk to anybody. What am I gonna say? I’d end up in the fuckin’ nuthouse.”

“Oh, undoubtedly. No surface media outlet would touch you, I assure you. It would violate the sequestering protocols.”

“So then what’s the problem? Just let me go, I don’t talk, we’re done.” There is no response. His voice falters, but he continues: “You don’t even have to pay me.”

The voice comes back, chuckling. “No, we don’t. But our concern is other interested parties finding you, Mr. McGeesken. I’m sure you imagine you could withstand interrogation, hmm? Most folks do.”

Sweat beads up on the back of Holt’s neck despite central A/C keeping the room a chill sixty-eight. “Right hand to God I’ll never say anything to anyone,” he says. “I get back up to the surface and I’m catching the first flight back to California. I’m going to ground after this, man. Off the grid. Cabin in the mountains and shit. Nobody’ll find me.”

“That is not an option,” the voice declares, then falls silent.

Holt takes several shallow, raspy breaths. “Look, man, I did my job!” He’s yelling louder than he means to. “I did what you wanted! I held up my end of the deal, now you hold up yours!”

The voice, which had previously spoken with amusement, now comes over the intercom with terse annoyance: “You did *not*. You violated your contract, Mr. McGeesken. Had you followed instructions perhaps things could have been arranged so that extraction was a possibility even after your tactical blundering. But now every spider in the city’s seen your nitwit face on the news from three different angles and it’s up to me to arrange things so that you vanish from the surface *and* depths of the known world.”

“The fuck did I do? I planted your bomb!”

“The gun. I’m talking about the gun, you ass.”

“What, I should have let that...that *thing* catch me? You rather I get caught and squeal on you to those spider cops?”

“In isolation that would have been easily handled. But you brought a gun into Midway, Mr. McGeesken. In specific contravention of the terms of the contract you signed. Firearms. Were. Not. Permitted.”

“Yeah, well, saved my ass, didn’t it? You saw that thing that was chasing me. Had to have been nine feet tall. Couldn’t even tell if it was a man spider or a chick spider. Pretty sure it had tits and a dick. Figured it would either fuck me or eat me or just tear me apart if it caught me.”

“After you fired your weapon at her? Yes, I imagine that escalated consequences to the point of lethality. But you were in no serious danger prior to that point.”

“No serious danger. From those fucking giant bugs. Bullshit.”

The voice sighs. “It all could have been chalked up to a simple misunderstanding. But the thing is, Mr. McGeesken, spiders don’t like guns, and that is a view they hold very strongly. Your little stunt has caused more drama in our fair city than I intended, and were you to be caught now, uncomfortable questions would be asked. Connections could be exposed.”

“Look, man, it was just a warning shot. Who cares? I didn’t even hit it...her...whatever.”

There is an uncomfortable silence before the voice continues, laden with annoyance as though speaking through clenched teeth. “Christ, McGeesken. It reflects poorly on me, of course, for not vetting you properly. For stupidly believing you were a professional. The usual contractors won’t touch subsurface matters, so we end up having to scrape the bottom of the barrel.”

“Hey, fuck you.”

The voice gets louder. “A warning shot, hmm? In a crowded urban setting? No, you idiot, what you did was irresponsibly discharge a wild round. I think I’d be less irritated if you’d just shot her.” The man behind the mirror seems to take a breath before continuing, and when he does he’s mumbling like he’s not even talking to Holt anymore. “Then I’d have barely had to change the plan. In fact, that could have even been beneficial. I have to pry her away from Greenstreet somehow. But it doesn’t matter. I can adapt, McGeesken. Always adapt. I move my chess pieces, Arachnypoundcake moves his, I make my counterplay, and we draw ever closer to my inevitable victory.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, man,” Holt says weakly.

“You don’t need to. Just take in the scenery and I’ll get back to you in an hour or two.”

“So, what, you gonna kill me?” he asks the mirror.

“Oh, I won’t lie to you, that course of action was considered,” the voice says flippantly. “But it was decided otherwise.”

“Otherwise.”

“Certainly, we could put a bullet through your empty head and be done with it, hmm? But it would be a waste. We have associates who can use you.”

“Use me. Like...for more mercenary work?”

“Oh no, that phase of your career is permanently over. But I foresee you’ll be in...tight situations in the future.” Now the voice actually starts *giggling*. It’s a horrible sound.

Holt glances out the window and sees those two figures in the plaza he was looking at earlier, the spider and the human—well, just the spider, now. The human is only a length lying between his legs as he reclines against the fountain, body language the picture of relaxed contentment. Then it clicks for Holt. “You’re gonna give me to a bug? And let it turn me into a fucking cock?!”

“Bravo, Mr. McGeesken. You catch on at last.”

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The semi-truck winds its way through curved, hilly highways cutting through vast forests, running beneath overpasses that soar like Roman aqueducts hillside to hillside above quiescent villages nestled in the beds of nameless valleys. They’re still heading west into darkness as they approach their destination, but behind them the sun is lurking under the horizon and only the brightest stars are left in the rear view mirror as the black night sky takes on a faint hint of navy blue.

Not that Shryrae or Rhazille see any of it, stuck back there in the truck’s box trailer. Between this truck’s thoroughly shot suspension and the commonwealth’s lack of road maintenance out here in the boonies, they both feel like they’re being vibrated apart. Rhazille at least knows what a truck *is*, and treats the arduous ride like humans might treat a grueling trans-oceanic flight: head back against a stack of shrink-wrapped pallets (no button to recline those), claws folded on her chest, eyes closed in the futile hope of a sleep you know won’t come...

Shryrae, on the other hand, has never been in a motor vehicle in her life. She is trapped in the belly of this horrible, noisy, shaking machine. It growls and hisses, it lurches and throws her from side to side. She was planning on saving all her silk in order to catch her human, but she’s actually used a few lines of webbing like a natural seatbelt, strapping herself to the wall in an effort to find some stability. It didn’t work, and every time the truck navigates another bend Shryrae can feel her guts fight inertia, creating this awful swirling pain she’s only ever associated with bad food and the kind of extreme jealousy you get from seeing a warren-mate show up with a new human of their own, big and throbbing hard... the one comfort is that it’s cozily dark.

«Rhazille?»

«Yes?» she replies, without opening her eyes.

«How much longer is it going to be like this? The shaking? And the sound?»

Rhazille taps her phone, shattering the comfortable darkness with a shard of light that stabs Shryrae's eyes before she can look away.

«Not much longer. Fifteen, twenty minutes, probably.»

«And *then* I get my human?»

«Then we have to get into Midway.»

Shryrae moans and throws her head back against the wall of the trailer. It'll all be worth it, she reminds herself, when she finally gets her human. . . she imagines what it'll be like when she takes him. She's only ever seen the change happen a few times, most recently when one of the warren's guards caught a human who was wandering around in the wilderness and brought him back below ground before changing him. The guard was a girl three or four years older than Shryrae and built a lot stronger than her; she proudly hauled her catch around showing him off to everyone. Shryrae remembers how he kept struggling against all the silk he was wrapped in, right up until he couldn't anymore, and then the girl took her big new cock to the orgy caves and let everyone have fun with him for hours. . . soon it'll be *her* with the big human cock, and it'll be *her* everyone wants to play with in the orgy caves. . .

She offers a little prayer to Eris in her head, in the traditional format for petitioning for relief from some malady: *O queen of chaos, daughter of discord, concubine of confusion, I face a great trial: my tummy² hurts. Grant me the strength to endure my pains, and to use them to smite my foes and scatter the forces of order, just as You endured the Original Snub and scattered all who opposed you, though only if you're not busy and you feel like it. Amen.*

The truck comes to a stop. Shryrae expects it to lurch back into motion any second, just as it's been doing, but instead all the noise stops. It's been going on so long that it startles her—it's *quiet*, even though it's still louder than it ever is outside above the warren.

«Is it over?»

Rhazille glances at her phone. «Yeah, I think we're here.»

The trailer's doors swing open and the spiders clamber out. Shryrae doesn't quite have her land legs back yet and she steps forward cautiously, looking around at her overwhelming surroundings. They are just inside a loading bay in some enormous warehouse. Not one of those new-style prefabs covered in siding that seem to spring up overnight, but a decades-old cinder block edifice with dirty windows and walls that have had time to spall and crumble, weeds growing in the cracks at their exterior base, concrete floor dark with oil stains. . . the doors are all open, revealing a sky threatening to dawn any moment, but Shryrae can't make any sense out of the big square buildings, or the lights both moving and still, or the parallel lines strung through the air.

² "tummy" here is an approximate translation from the original "zleabalizirk" which is formed by adding the diminutive particle "-zirk" to the arachnid term for the general abdominal region.

«C'mon.» Rhazille hurries her along. «We can't spend too much time up here.»

This place seems deserted except for them. They go down staircases, tricky to get the hang of at first, impatient Rhazille waiting on the landing below as Shryrae nervously tests each step before shifting her weight onto it, clinging to the railing with three arms. . .they come to a place of straight corridors under the earth, with smooth walls and gleaming white tile floors, and metal conduits and tubes of pure bright light in the ceiling that hurt to look at. They are at a junction between three tunnels, going so far in every direction Shryrae can't see the end. There are signs and written things on the walls in the human language; Rhazille looks at one before choosing a direction and Shryrae follows.

These tunnels are so perfectly straight that it's freaky. Not even the best diggers in the warren could make tunnels like this, and the greatest carvers couldn't do whatever they've got going on with the walls here. Shryrae would have made the tunnels a little taller and a lot darker, but clearly the humans are skilled. «Humans truly made all this? I thought humans were terrible at digging,» she says.

«They have machines for it. They have machines for everything.»

«Wow,» says Shryrae. How odd that the highest calling of creatures that can do all this was to become a penis. Well, Goddess works in strange ways. «Midway is so fascinating.»

«This isn't Midway.» Rhazille laughs at Shryrae's naivete. «This is the place *above* Midway.»

«We're still not there?» Well, at least they're not in the truck anymore. But as the pair walks on it seems to Shryrae that these tunnels might go on forever. It all looks the same no matter how far they go, and there is no change in the gradient, no curvature of the walls, no striation in the soil or rock to serve as a guide here, just the weird human glyphs on the walls. . .it occurs to her that without Rhazille to guide her she'd actually be *lost* here. Lost underground! How shameful for a spider. . .

«Listen, Shryrae. We're almost there,» Rhazille says after they've been walking for a while. «We just have to ride one more motion thing. It'll be much easier than the last one, I promise. But right now the humans are trying not to let anyone in or out of Midway.»

«What? Why would they do that?» asks Shryrae.

«Well, it doesn't matter to us. But just follow me, and if anyone stops us, just wait and let me talk to them, okay?»

Rhazille opens a door, and the pair enters what Shryrae has no way of knowing is a station for the Midway Tube. The room is huge, bigger than any of the caves back in the warren. Everything is so bright and shiny. The vending machines glowing in a rainbow of enticing colors immediately catch Shryrae's attention, but she's also curious about those two tunnels opposite each other—

it looks nice and dark in there, but why aren't they lit like everywhere else down here?

And there are other spiders here! Three of them, all wearing a strange garment: a thick green belt, connected to a sash of the same material that runs from their waist to the opposite shoulder. The sashes look kind of nice—each of the spiders have different shiny things pinned to theirs. The belts look pretty boring, though they seem to have a lot of pockets. It doesn't seem like these spiders were expecting anyone else to be here. Two of them are sitting in the little chairs arranged into rows, splayed out across several at once, poking at those little rectangles like the one Rhazille has. They look up as Rhazille and Shryrae enter, startled. The third, a male with tawny fur in loose curls who had been leaning against a pillar doing nothing in particular, straightens up and begins to approach them.

Shryrae stands at attention, smiling, ready to let Rhazille talk just like she said. She notices these spiders are looking right at her, clearly very impressed by the Maze dyed into her fur. She knew it was a good idea to get that done before she left. He begins to talk humanly—lucky Rhazille's here. . .

"Hey," he says. "I'm guessing you two are from. . .out of town. Midway's locked down right now. No Tube, no elevators, no nothin'. Sorry, but you can't get in."

Rhazille puts on a great big fake smile for the guard as she takes some papers out of her shoulder bag. "Hi, officer! I actually work with the MARC, and we have travel permits. Urgent job for the Safe Caves Initiative. Here, I'm sure everything is in order," she says, and hands the Arachnid Altercation Agency officer a jumbled sheaf of paper. "Have you heard of the Initiative?"

"Uh, no," says the guard as he flips through the papers. He seems far more interested in Shryrae and the pattern in her fur—his eyes keep darting up to her every time he turns a page. Shryrae assumes this indicates interest on the part of the guard and flutters her eyelashes. He's cute enough, and she wouldn't mind some playtime with him—she should have asked Rhazille how things worked in Midway. Where are their orgy caves, she wonders?

"We're working with deep spider refugees affected by spontaneous cave collapse," says Rhazille, "finding housing for them in Midway, and giving them the training they need in social and career skills in order to live and work productively here in a mixed arachnid-human urban environment."

"Oh," says the guard, taking a moment to parse this. "So like, you guys take in spiders when Wallace Shale blows up a warren out in the sticks?"

"While it hasn't been proven that shale drilling operations have any connection to cave collapse," recites Rhazille, "the Initiative is working with the rest of the MARC and human geological institutions to study its causes and we're committed to taking in refugees no matter what they turn out to be. Refugees like Shryrae here, whose warren was unfortunately affected."

Shryrae sees Rhazille gesture towards her and realizes they must be talking about her, so she gives them a friendly wave. (Rhazille's fake smile tightens.

Shit, she thinks. Forgot to tell her to look sad.)

“Uh huh,” the guard says. He sounds unconvinced.

“So, yeah,” says Rhazille, clasping her claws together. “The thing is, we have an appointment at the MARC to get Shryrae situated in her new home, and as I’m sure you can imagine, she’s exhausted from the trip. I think we’re supposed to get on the next train on the Mauve Line, so if there’s any way we can, um, hurry things along. . . ?”

The cop doesn’t seem to be paying much attention to Rhazille. No, he’s still focused on the twisting black ink pattern dyed into Shryrae’s left side. “You’re definitely sure she’s not a Huntsman, right?”

“A *Hunt*—oh, my goodness officer, no, of course not!” Rhazille evidently finds this so funny she makes a big show of giggling, raising her claws to her chest like she just might be overcome. And Shryrae, no clue what’s being said, begins to snicker through her fangs too. “Absolutely sure, officer. The Initiative completely vets all candidates for the program to make sure they understand Midway laws and regulations and know the responsibilities expected of them. Shryrae is not a Huntsman and is no danger to humans or anyone else. And for what it’s worth, officer, wearing Eris’s Maze is actually practiced by many forms of traditional arachno-Erisianism found in deep spider communities, not just by the Hunters.”

“Hunters?”

“Oh, yes, sorry, force of habit—that’s what the Huntsmen call themselves, you see, the Hunters of Nuit, which is generally how we refer to them in our sociological research at the MARC. Know your enemy,” says Rhazille.

“Right. Uh, listen, they didn’t tell me anything about permits and I’m not supposed to let anyone through. I gotta call this in. Hold on.”

“Sure, sure, of course.” The cop takes out his phone and Rhazille stands there watching him dial, doing her level best to maintain a pleasant, professional smile while all she can think about is whether or not these permits will actually *work*. She was told they’d been arranged by the MARC itself, but she has no idea whether or not they’ll hold up to scrutiny. There’s a long, awkward silence. The cop gives the two women an apologetic nod as if to say yeah, they got me on hold. . . Rhazille continues to project patience while suppressing the urge to just haul ass out of here and Shryrae smiles obliviously, no clue what’s happening but no reason to think this is unusual. . .

“Dispatch?” Someone has answered the cop’s call. “That you, Ryekka? Hey, listen, I’m at the Tube stop at the interstitials over Snyrnald Heights, and I’ve got these two spiders here who have permits to get through. Say they’re from the MARC. Names? Uh. . .”

“I’m Rhazille and she’s Shryrae,” says Rhazille, the very picture of helpfulness.

“Rhazille and Shryrae,” the cop repeats into his phone. “The one’s got Huntsman ink on her. Yeah. Yeah. No, it’s Rhazille. Rah-ZEEL. Hey, uh, how do you spell that?”

Rhazille spells her name out, the cop parrots it back to the dispatcher, and there is a long, horrible wait. The cop just stares at them while Rhazille, screaming internally, desperately hangs on to her confident facade. Shryrae has lost interest in whatever's happening now and is looking around at the various colorful posters. And then. . .“Yeah? Alright.” The cop hangs up and shrugs. “Okay, go ahead,” he says. “Trains are still stopping even though no one's here. Next one should be in a few minutes.”

“Thank you so much, officer,” says Rhazille, accepting her papers back. «Come on, Shryrae, we can go,» she says to her companion.

Shryrae, sensing their interaction is complete, tries to say goodbye to the cop. «May your next hunt be successful!»³ she chitters, but he just looks confused, and Rhazille pulls her away, bringing her over to the platform, standing as far from the cops as they can reasonably get without being too suspicious about it.

«I told you not to talk to anyone,» says Rhazille.

«I was just trying to be nice! Besides, I don't think he even heard me.»

«He probably didn't understand you. Most spiders in Midway can't talk like spiders, Shryrae.»

«What? Really?» Shryrae looks back at the AAA officers in shock, as if reconsidering them. «But why?»

«There are so many humans in Midway, everyone just talks like them. No one teaches their spiderlings to talk like spiders, and they go to schools that teach them like they were human children. *With* human children, even.»

«Spiders that can't talk. . .that's so sad,» says Shryrae.

«That's why you can't let the humans seduce you with their toys and food and comfort things. They'll make you forget what it means to be a spider, if you let them.» As Shryrae is pondering this, an expanding circle of light appears in the depths of the tunnel. «This next motion thing is going to have humans on it. Maybe even right next to you. Remember, they're not yours. No touching. Understood?»

«I know, I know.» Shryrae leans over the platform to look at the light.

Rhazille pulls her away from the edge. «Stand back. And I mean it, Shry. You stick out like a ninth eye and I know that guard will remember us. Don't scare the humans.»

«I won't!»

Faster than Shryrae would have thought possible, the circle of light in the tunnel becomes a long silvery machine, a segmented metal snake dotted with windows that comes rushing into the station with a rumble she can feel in the pads of her feet. She takes a few nervous steps back from the huge, noisy thing as it rumbles to a stop right in front of them.

Ding-DING-ding.

³ A traditional arachnid phrase for bidding farewell to anyone with a non-human penis.

Wide doors in the train cars open by themselves. The cars are brightly lit and filled with spiders and, in nearly equal number, humans.

«Come on, follow me,» Rhazille.

Shryrae is frozen. She never could have imagined being this close to so many humans, so many *uncocked* humans, and all these spiders just standing there like nothing was strange. It's. . .it's almost indecent. Do they really not just claim them?

«Shryrae!» hisses Rhazille.

Shryrae steadies herself and follows her slim, dark friend into the car, resolving not to mess this up. Her human is waiting in Midway. She can control herself. She can do this.

Rhazille begins to lead Shryrae to one end of the car, hopefully where they can be as unobtrusive as possible, but the Tube trains are narrow and it's more crowded in here than in even the smallest tunnels back in the warren. Plus they've already drawn attention just by getting on at this otherwise deserted stop, and when Shryrae steps on board and their fellow passengers get an eyeful of the Huntsman dye job occupying half her coat, well, that's it for any hope of going unnoticed—conversations grind to a halt, people look up from phones, a pair of spiders making out at the far end of the car even stops sucking face for a moment to see what's going on. Shryrae would imagine a record player scratching to a stop, if she had any idea what a record player was.

Rhazille and Shryrae wind their way through the now-silent car, maneuvering around the other riders as carefully as they can, everyone's heads swiveling to track them as they go. Humans sitting in the bench seats pull their knees in warily as they pass, but there's one human standing in the middle of the aisle, a skater boy holding on to a strap hanging from the ceiling with one hand and a battered longboard with the other. He locks eyes with Shryrae from underneath a beanie and shaggy blond hair. She knows she'll have to walk right past him—probably even *touch* him, with how crowded it is in here.

Steps away, she can smell his fear. Sweet and buttery, cutting through the muddle of all the other human scents in here. She's breathing through her mouth now, lips hanging open just a little in a way that might, in some other situation, be cute, an otherwise blank expression on her face. They pass within inches, both slowly turning their heads to maintain eye contact, and just as Shryrae brushes the human with her right arms, her long golden fur coming into contact with the bare skin exposed by his rolled-up hoodie sleeve, she emits this low, bubbling gurgle from her throat, too low for anyone else but him to hear it—and hear it he does, as his eyes go wide and the smell of his fear becomes overwhelming. . .

«Shryrae! Here. Sit down,» orders Rhazille.

Shryrae gives the skater a predatory little smile as she takes her seat, and he quickly turns away. Oh yes. She's going to like Midway.

Rhazille's found them two seats at the far end of the car, as out of the way as they can get, and sits between Shryrae and the rest of the passengers so as to block her from view as much as possible.

Ding-DING-ding.

The train begins to move. This startles Shryrae—she jerks her head in alarm (thank Eris that human looked away, that would have been embarrassing) but settles down quickly—this is a lot smoother than the truck. In fact, as the scene outside the windows accelerates into a gray blur, she decides this is actually pretty fun. The other passengers, now satisfied that they aren't going to be involved in the next Huntsman attack, gradually go back to their business. Heads bow down towards phones and murmurs of conversation return, though the humans in particular spare an occasional wary glance towards Shryrae's end of the train.

But while Rhazille busies herself with her own phone and Shryrae, all six claws folded in her lap, looks around the train compartment at the strange wonders within, it is soon apparent that a human sitting directly across from them hasn't stopped staring at Shryrae. She's a young woman with shiny black hair, dark plum-purple lipstick and a blouse that matches it, and the general mien of a sales clerk at some five-figure-minimum luxury store. She has her head tilted at Shryrae with a curious expression on her face as if appraising some unexpected *objet d'art*. On noticing this, Shryrae naturally returns her gaze, fixing the woman with an unblinking stare coupled with a big, fangy smile. This continues for nearly a minute. Rhazille, getting that funny feeling she's being watched, looks up from her phone to see the human woman studying Shryrae while she smiles back as happy as if she was on laughing gas, and thinks: oh Eris please *please* don't let her say anything.

«Hello, human!» says Shryrae.

Rhazille gives her companion the angriest side-eye she can muster and, through clenched teeth, mutters «What did I tell you?!»

«But she's staring right at me, Rhazille!»

“Are you a Huntsman?” the woman asks.

Shryrae snaps her head over to Rhazille. «She's talking to me! What did she say?»

Rhazille heaves a sigh and says to the woman across from them, “Sorry, she doesn't speak English. And no, she is *not* a Huntsman.” Rhazille makes this point in a particularly loud voice for the benefit of the other passengers doing their best to seem like they're not listening in. “She's from outside of Midway.”

“Outside Midway? Oh my god. Is she a deep spider?”

“There was an accident in her warren and she doesn't have anywhere to go, so we're bringing her to Midway. I work for the Municipal Arachno-human Relations Commission.”

“So she *is* a deep spider. What's with her fur? Isn't that what the Huntsmen do to their fur?”

“It’s called Eris’s Maze, and many spiders who follow traditional arachnid belief systems wear it to express devotion to the idea of creative discord,” says Rhazille. “Unfortunately the Huntsmen are trying to co-opt it, but to the spiders who wear it it’s a very positive symbol and an expression of personal aesthetic—”

“So, it’s like, a traditional art form?” the woman interrupts.

“Well. . .yes, exactly.”

The human woman claps her hands before rushing to dig through her purse, a tiny black leather thing that seems to be packed denser than cars in a junkyard crusher. “My name is Ferrica Minuet,” she says, “and I work for a gallery that would love to help with that.” Suddenly she’s got two cards out of her purse and is leaning across the car to hand them to Rhazille and Shryrae; Shryrae gingerly takes hers after watching Rhazille do the same. It’s a delicate little rectangle with squiggles on it that she has no idea what to do with. “We could do a whole exhibit on that and other forms of deep spider art! It would be huge! Cultural authenticity always sells, and people are so interested in that kind of thing right now. Given. . .you know, the situation.”

“Right,” says Rhazille. “The situation.”

“You’re skeptical. I get it. But if you want to stop the Huntsmen from appropriating traditional arachnid symbology, this is the perfect way to do it. Educate people on the positive aspects of your belief system! Compare and contrast! It’d be easy. I mean, as long as you’re not into kidnapping humans to be your cocks forever too.”

“I already said, it’s a completely different thing,” scoffs Rhazille.

Meanwhile, Shryrae is getting frustrated listening to the suddenly talkative human without being able to understand. «What’s she saying? Rhazille! You have to tell me what she’s saying!» she says.

«She says she likes your fur, Shryrae.»

The gold-furred spider is elated. «What else? What else?»

«She has a. . .» Rhazille pauses to try to figure out how to mash the concept of an art gallery into her native tongue. «. . .a public treasure hoard? It’s a place where they collect interesting and pretty things so people can look at them. She wants you to come there so everyone can look at your fur.»

Shryrae gasps with glee. «I *knew* it was a good idea to dye my fur! Yes! Tell her yes! I want to do that!»

“What’s your friend think? She looks pretty excited.”

Shryrae is, in fact, bouncing in her seat, making it Rhazille’s job to throw water on this whole thing. “Shryrae has a lot of settling in to do. She’s already recovering from a lot of difficulties, and she has to get acclimated to life in Midway. The city alone is going to be quite a culture shock for a spider that lived in deep warrens her whole life. I don’t think it’d be a good idea to put her on display.”

Ferrica’s not giving up on her pitch. “Listen, isn’t this the MARC’s whole deal? It’s exactly the kind of thing you guys should be doing over there

if you're serious about improving relations with humans. You saw the way everyone freaked out when you got on. Something to do with a bunch of spiders running around who want to kidnap us so they can turn us into their cocks."

"I promise you, not every spider who wants to change a human is a Huntsman."

"And yet, judging by your friend's delightful body art, and the way she hasn't even bothered trying to hide how bad she wants to turn me into her penis, I'm guessing she may be...sympathetic to their views? Am I right?"

Rhazille rolls her eyes. "Shryrae is not a danger to you or anyone else. Spiders only qualify for our resettlement program if they fully understand the bounds of acceptable behavior in Midway and the need to respect human bodily autonomy."

"Hey, no judgment here. That's why I think she'd be great for an exhibit. I'd sell out every show if humans could come hear about how she thinks we're meant to live as permanent spider cocks, as long as they know they get to leave afterwards. That's key. Like skydiving versus falling out of an airplane. We want the guarantee of safety, but it's thrilling for us, whether we admit it or not."

Rhazille, who was glancing down at that business card (*Ferrica Minuet, Curator, The Minuet Galleries*), looks back up at this human, brow over her main left eye arched and all the other ones on that side of her face mirroring it... "Oh? Thrilling, huh? Considering a...career change?"

Ferrica laughs. "Oh, I've spent plenty of time stiff and throbbing, believe me. I dated a big spider boy last year who made sure of that. I like it. It's fun. But I like being able to go back to normal too. Which is the part the Huntsmen have a problem with, I guess."

"What happened to the big spider boy?"

"Huh? Oh, he got too...possessive. Why? Wondering if I have an interest in spider *girls*? Hmm. Dunno."

Rhazille smirks. "Not sure? I have some friends who I could introduce you to that might help you figure it out."

"Your friends, huh? How generous. Spiders usually don't like to share."

"Oh, you'd be *my* cock. But I'd introduce you to some spiders very, very personally."

«Rhazille! What are you and the human talking about?» An insistent Shryrae leans into the smoldering line of sight between Rhazille and the human. «Are you gonna take her? I see that look...»

Whatever moment they were having is interrupted, and Ferrica takes the opportunity to change the subject. "She's really never seen Midway before? What about other cities? Has she been to the Philly underground? Of course it's no Midway, but at least it's got electricity and running water."

"Nope."

"Sub-Buffalo? The Cuyahoga Collective?"

“Nope. Nope. Lived her whole live in the warren she hatched in,” says Rhazille. “First time ever really leaving it. I’ve shown her pictures of Midway, but. . .”

“But that’s not *seeing* it,” says Ferrica. “Map, territory, etcetera.”

“Exactly.”

“Well. . .now’s her chance.”

Ferrica points at the space between Shryrae and Rhazille’s heads, where through the window just behind them the gray blur of stone tunnels whizzing past has only just now begun to lighten. Shryrae turns around and squeaks quizzically—and then with a flash of light the train car explodes out of the tunnels and into the colossal cavern housing Midway’s downtown core. Suddenly they are in a space so vast Shryrae has nothing to compare it to; no picture or description could have prepared her for this. Squeaking and chittering in alarm and surprise, she falls backwards off her seat. But before Rhazille can even extend arms to help her back up she’s scrambled back into place, kneeling on the hard plastic bench, bonking her head off the shatterproof glass when she presses her face hard into the window to see. «We’re flying! We’re flying!» she yells.

It’s an easy mistake to make. This particular line enters Midway about halfway up and she can’t see the tracks from the side of the train car, just the city unfolding below and around them. Other Tube trains are zipping around Midway’s limited airspace on elevated rails too small to be visible from here, furthering the illusion. Buildings rush by too fast to pick out any detail; they grow denser and taller towards the approaching center, where the cave-scrappers span the entire vertical length and disappear into the massive girders crisscrossing the ceiling, along with the ghostly-translucent freight elevator shafts and, in the distance, what even looks like a waterfall pouring down from on high. And stretching out above, seemingly infinite in all directions, is Midway’s lighting grid—little suns in perfect formation held up by a steel lattice.

Shryrae’s cooing and burbling in amazement, whipping her head around to try to take it all in. Some of the nearby passengers can’t help but smile, even the ones pretty sure they were about to be kidnapped minutes ago—city dwellers may complain about bumpkin tourists, but there’s something endearing about someone gawping at surroundings you’ve long ago become inured to. «Rhazille! This is where you live?! This is incredible! Do you live in one of those?» she says, pointing at a gleaming glass-fronted edifice.

«No, that’s a building for working.»

«Ohhhhh! Wow! What kind of work? Carving? Weaving? Fur trimming?»

Rhazille struggles for a moment. The arachnid tongue has dozens of words describing every possible configuration of sexual congress (hundreds, depending on how you count—it’s a mix n’ match thing, kind of like German) but

precisely zero suitable for explaining the concept of office work. «Moving paper,» she finally settles on.

The train gradually slows as it approaches the first stop on its way downtown, and Ferrica is gathering her things and regarding the spider across from her with amusement. “Your friend seems to like Midway,” she tells Rhazille.

“Yeah. I think she’ll be alright.”

“Well, this is my stop. I teach drawing lessons for kids at a school in Sunkfield. It’s something to do,” shrugs Ferrica. “But, listen, it was fun to meet you. And I hope you’ll consider my offer, Shryrae.”

Shryrae hears her name and turns around to see the human waving at her. She waves back and squeaks quizzically.

“Don’t forget! We’d love to have you at our gallery!” Ferrica, now standing, holds up one of her business cards. The train eases to a stop, and by the time those chimes sound and the doors open the human has already melded into the crowd.

«She’s leaving! Aren’t we going too?» Shryrae is about to get up and follow, but Rhazille extends an arm to stop her.

«No, Shryrae. This isn’t our stop. And sit down in your chair. You can look out the window on that side.»

«Aw. I liked her. She was pretty.» Shryrae looks down at the card the human gave her, folded up in one of her claws. She wishes she could read it. «You should have taken her. I think she’d have liked that. She seemed like she knew her purpose.»

One half of Rhazille’s mouth curls up in a little smile that extends no further than her fang. «She did, didn’t she? But we’re on a mission, Shryrae. Focus. We’re almost there.»

«Right!» Shryrae is newly energized now that they’ve finally arrived in the promised city. She straightens her back, sits upright, and tries to dedicate herself to quiet observation.

Passengers filter in and out of the car; a few humans and spiders alike raise an eyebrow at Shryrae’s body art but quickly lose interest, probably taking her for a dedicated Saint Alaika fan. A female spider boards, a woman with short, velvety brown fur and grass-green bands on her torso. There’s a bored look in her amber eyes and she moves with the practiced routine of a habitual commuter, both present and absent, insulated from the noise of her fellow passengers by earbuds in her triangular ears that connect by dangling wires to a phone clutched in a claw—and hanging below her hips is a titanic gray-green penis, measuring at least two feet limp. It sways with her steps as she takes a place next to a pole and begins idly tapping at her phone.

Shryrae nudges Rhazille with three elbows. «Rhaz, look,» says Shryrae, trying to be sly. «That spider has a human.»

«Indeed she does.»

Shryrae bites her lower lip trying not to smile too hard. Soon it’ll be *her* with the huge human cock, soon *she’ll* be the one getting all the attention in

the orgy caves. She imagines herself strutting around the city with the breezy confidence one must get from having a human bouncing off your thighs as you walk, turning heads everywhere she goes, not even the Midway cityscape able to compete for beauty with her sleek coat, her lithe limbs, her big, thick human cock. . . Her fellow spiders will want to be her, fuck her, or both, and as for all the unattached humans running around down here, maybe she'll inspire some to go find the spider they're meant to be part of.

Ding-DING-ding.

The doors close and the train slowly glides into motion, now creeping along at ground level on recessed tracks in the Midway streets. Shryrae is fascinated by all the storefronts, the way they have their doors wide open to the public offering glimpses of the goodies within, colorful little caves full of strange treasures. . . «What are all those?» she asks Rhazille.

«Trade-places. They all have different kinds of things. Body decorations, jewelry, toys. That one's a 'spa', they'll polish and sharpen your claws for you. Lots of food-places. You can get any kind of food you want here, and someone will even cook it for you.»

«Wow,» says Shryrae, suitably impressed. She'd sampled human foods a few times—snacks someone had scavenged from the surface and brought down, once or twice even something a human had been eating when a warren-mate had caught them. She'd gotten to try a piece of one thing while it was still a little warm, a tube full of colorful fatty goop her friend who was much more knowledgeable about humans had called a *bur ecto*. «I'm hungry,» she tells Rhazille. «Can we go to one of those food caves?»

«We won't have time,» says Rhazille.

«But I'm hungry! I can't change a human on an empty *zleabalizirk!*»

«Okay, okay, we'll get something from a . . . a moving-food-place. But we have to be quick.»

Shryrae smiles. Fine with her. She could always try the bigger food caves later, after she gets her human. In fact, that would probably be better. She'll want to impress the spiders who cook her food.

Electric scooters zip by alongside the train car, another weird and fascinating sight for Shryrae. She realizes they're smaller, less noisy versions of the vehicles she and her warren-mates used to watch from the hillside—but spiders can drive these ones! They look like fun.

«Rhaz?»

«Yes?»

«After I get my human, can I try one of those moving machines?»

«Huh?» says Rhazille, abruptly looking up from her phone. «Shryrae, after you get your human, I have to take you right back to the warren. I told you that.»

«But, come on, can't I stay for just a little while? A day?»

«No. Absolutely not.» says Rhazille flatly. «That was the deal, Shry. The Episkopos wants you to spend as little time here as possible. You aren't supposed to be seen.»

«That's. . .that's not fair! You can't just show me all this,» says Shryrae, waving a claw at the window, «and send me right back! *You* got to leave the warren! You get to live here every day, with the food and the toys and the clothes and the lights and the humans! How can you make me go back to living in the warren when you have all this?»

«First, I'm not making you do anything,» says Rhazille in a slow, low, almost hissing tone. Shryrae's becoming agitated, drawing interest from the surrounding passengers, and she needs to calm her down—Rhazille's silently praying no one can understand her. «This is the will of the Episkopos. And it's what you happily agreed to. Remember what you're getting out of this, Shryrae.»

«But why? Why can't I stay?»

«Weren't you listening to me when I told you not to let the humans seduce you with all their comfort things? And here you are, not even having been in Midway for an hour, and you want to stay here because you saw some food and bright lights and *skuterz*.»

Shryrae sniffs and blinks tears out of her eight eyes.

Rhazille continues. «Besides, we need you in the warren. You're our link to our people. There aren't many *real* Erisians left. You have to go back and show everyone that Eris rewards those who follow her true path.»

Shryrae doesn't respond, only turns her head to the window and glumly observes the passing cityscape. Satisfied that she's not going to make a scene, Rhazille returns to her phone.

The train rolls onwards, making its way downtown like a streetcar. Traffic is becoming denser here, the sidewalks more closely packed with pedestrians. Shryrae continues to watch the scenes moving by outside her window, trying to imagine what life is like for people in the city—a life she won't get to experience—seeing spiders and humans alike walking, working, driving, talking, smiling, *with each other*. . . As the train stops at an intersection, she looks down at one of the scooters in the adjacent lane, and to her surprise it looks like a spider is changing a human boy right there in the middle of traffic while seated on a scooter. Now that would be impressive. It's hard to tell much about the spider; they're wearing a big helmet and a leather jacket with six sleeves, and they're clutching the human sitting in their lap tight against their chest with four arms, holding onto the scooter's handlebars with the other two. But the human isn't changing. He's just sitting there in the spider's lap. Still has his arms, still has his legs, he isn't even twitching. The spider's just kind of. . .holding him there. Why?

She can't even keep track of how many spiders and humans are bizarrely close to one another. Just from here she can see several spider-human pairs walking down the street and chatting like it was the most normal thing in

the world. Outside what looks like another one of those food caves, a spider woman is sitting across from a human woman and having a very animated conversation, excitedly waving all her claws around. On a bench facing the street a big spider male sits with his arm around a human girl. He's already so close and she's clearly been lulled into a sense of comfort—why isn't he just taking her?!

«Rhaz, what is that spider doing with that human?» she asks, both curious and irritated.

«Huh? Which one,» asks Rhazille, without actually looking up from her phone.

«Any of them! That one sitting right next to the human. Or that one holding the human's hand in his claws like that. Why?»

Rhazille only spares a moment to look before going back to her phone. «I don't know, Shry. They're probably with each other.»

«Yes, I can *see* they're sitting with each other. But why do they act like that?»

«What I mean is, that's probably their human.»

«They clearly *aren't*,» says Shryrae, «Is your fur in your eyes? Because that human has legs and arms and a face.»

Rhazille sighs, reminds herself to be patient...«Most city spiders don't keep their humans permanently.»

«What? But...that's so sad. How can you get a human and then just throw them away?»

«They don't throw them away, They just let them walk around like that. And they still think the human is theirs.»

Shryrae looks back out the window, puzzled. She can't imagine being comfortable just letting your penis go off on its own, especially around an entire city of other spiders. She knows the change itself is highly pleasurable, of course, and the spiders in her warren that were lucky enough to have humans would, once a season or so, separate from them just so they could relive the change. But you always changed them back as soon as you were able. Humans in their two-legged form tend to freak out in the warren's dark tunnels, and of course you wanted to have some friends around just in case anyone felt like your human would look better on them...

«The way they act...» says Shryrae, «it's like they think they're mates.»

«They do,» says Rhazille.

«What? With a *human*?»

«Believe it or not,» says Rhazille, tapping and swiping at something on her phone.

Shryrae narrows her eyes at all the human-spider pairings she sees outside. Now she's even more confused. All these spiders can't really think that, can they? That they're...somehow dating their own penis? The idea is absurd. Shryrae imagines curling up with a mate, the comfort of interlocking arms, the warmth of coats merging together—and then imagines trying to do it with

a human. All hairless skin, nowhere for your arms to go, and how small they would feel! No, it would be very unsatisfying. «That’s just silly.»

«Goddess smite me if I lie,» says Rhazille, raising her left claws. No divine wrath appears forthcoming.

In the middle of the platform at the next stop a tall white fountain plays, made out of bright stone and lit from within by an unearthly blue glow, no doubt via some clever human device. The whole assembly is very impressive. It stands over fifteen feet, and seen from above one would notice that the eight jets shooting water from the bowl at the apex are arranged four to a side like the legs of a stylized cartoon spider. The wide lower basin has a lip wide enough to serve as a bench for spiders and humans alike, and a number of them are doing just that.

This would be one more fascinating sight for Shryrae to take in, but now she’s more focused on the behavior of the spiders she sees close to humans, these self-imagined mated couples. . . right now in fact, there’s a spider woman and a human woman sitting in front of the fountain. The spider has her long head-fur done up into a high ponytail that goes almost straight up before gliding down to her shoulders, much like how Shryrae wears her own hair, though this spider’s fur is a light rosy pink. She’s got three arms around the human sitting next to her—an attractive specimen, a buzz cut brunette wearing clothes with lots of shiny things on them. That and something about her face, the way it’s stern but pretty like it was carefully sculpted from stone, makes Shryrae think of her like a human version of Rhazille. The spider on the fountain takes out one of those little rectangles and holds it in front of them, and they lean in close to each other and smile at it. . . they both look so happy. Then the spider puts it away and they kiss.

There is no doubt about it. Shryrae doesn’t know what the little ritual with the ‘phone’ was, but she knows mate behavior when she sees it. How incredibly weird. Now she knows why Rhazille and the other Hunters talk about Midway like they do. Something strange happens to spiders here, something Shryrae doesn’t understand—but she doesn’t want to leave until she does.

+ + + + + + + +

Holt McGeesken has had nothing to do for hours now except watch the street scene unfold from thirty stories above, here in his conference room prison cell. No sound from outside makes it up here and past the thick tinted glass. The only noise is the monotonous whirr of the office HVAC blowing neutral air into the room. The spiders and humans going about their day far below do so silently. It’s like watching TV on mute, or the footage from a security camera. The overhead angle, fixed position, unaware subjects. Nothing to do but watch—and wait.

He knows escape is not likely. He’s still going to try, of course; they may have disarmed him but he still has twelve hours of Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes

and years of watching UFC to fall back on. It'll be an unfair fight, given how even the small spiders have a couple hundred pounds and a foot in height on Holt, and oh yeah the four extra arms—Sensei never taught anyone how to deal with that—but he can't just let them...let them...do *that* to him.

Let them turn him into a giant bug's giant *cock*.

Holt never had a clear plan for his life, but he knows he doesn't want to spend the rest of it as a spider's penis. He was sure of that the first time he saw one of the spiders showing off their little trick—which they seemed to like to do in public an awful lot. They hadn't mentioned that in the initial briefing. First time underground, day before the mission, ten minutes after he met his first spider in person, getting hurried through the train station when out of the corner of his eye he sees this guy just sitting in a giant spider girl's lap and—and *changing* horribly, wiggling and bending in ways people aren't supposed to move...

“The fuck—” was all he'd been able to say before his spider handler pushed him onwards.

It clicked for him later, when they actually filled him and the rest of the team in on the specifics of the mission, and they mentioned it almost in passing—oh by the way there's this *thing* the spiders can do—then he remembered the man in the train station and how his whole body seemed to be stretching into a tube, and how pleased the spider whose lap he was sitting in looked...

He'd have backed out of the whole thing at that point, if it had been an option. But his new employers didn't seem like they would react well, and where can you run to when you're who-even-knows-how-far underground?

Walking around the city, you'd see one of them every so often with a ridiculously oversized cock. Both the men and the women, just going about their day like they didn't have an absolutely enormous dong flopping around. They didn't wear real clothes, but none of them seemed to show the slightest embarrassment about it. It was unnerving to know they were actually *people*. Could they see him? Hear him? What was life like riding around stuck to a giant bug's crotch? And what about the humans who aren't cocks—who *are* all these degenerates that just go about their daily lives down here, living happily right next to these things?

There is a short click and a change in the timbre of the ambient sound in the room that tells Holt the intercom has been activated. But the voice doesn't speak. Just empty air and the telltale hiss of an open line.

“Yeah? What? You there?” yells Holt.

There is a long pause, and then...“Good news, Mr. McGeesken. She's arrived.”

“Who's—”

Holt is cut off by the heavy click of the door unlocking, and then it swings open. He scrambles to his feet immediately.

It's bright out there in the hallway, so he can only see the figures standing in the doorway in silhouette. Spiders, both of them. The one gestures the other inside with three arms, and after her companion steps inside, she shuts the door behind her.

It—she? stands directly opposite the table, seven feet tall, leering at him with a wide hungry grin that shows off dozens of knife-sharp teeth that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. She tilts her head as if to study him. Terrifying as she is, Holt has to admit she's shaped almost like a hot chick (and thank god she's a chick). Yeah, the fangs, the arms, and all those black glass eyes are unsettling. But those curves are all human. It's hard not to appreciate her body even under the long coat of blonde fur draped over it. She has a slender, athletic frame, pert breasts and—and, oh god, what's he thinking? He knows what she's here to do to him.

She takes a step towards Holt, and Holt takes a step back in response. Her grin expands.

The spider's golden fur is as smooth as a horse's mane, shiny as a shampoo commercial, and unlike any of the spiders Holt's seen so far there's a crazy pattern dyed into it on her left side, a wild maze-like tangle of vines that seems to shift on its own as she moves. She seems to notice Holt looking at it, and she—she actually turns her hips ninety degrees and *shakes her ass* at him, making this raspy squeaking that sounds almost like a giggle. Christ alive, this thing is teasing him now?

Suddenly the intercom crackles to life again. It startles the spider, who ceases her dance and starts darting her head around, trying to find the source of the sound. The voice speaks: "Allow me to make introductions. Mr. McGeesken, this is Shryrae. I understand she's really been looking forward to meeting you. Shryrae, this is Holt McGeesken. Ex-soldier. Professional...well, semi-professional mercenary. Quite a catch for any spider, I should think. Er," now the voice switches tones as if speaking to someone else, "could you translate for us, if you don't mind?"

After a second there's this noise, and at first Holt thinks the intercom is broken—it spits out a cacophony of squeaking, scratching, and chittering. But the spider seems to recognize it. Her eyes go wide and she interrupts it with her *own* stream of chittering noise, and Holt realizes this is them talking. These things have their own language, too? All the ones he'd met before spoke English. After they exchange squeaks for a bit she turns back to Holt, and that grin is back, even bigger now.

"What was she saying?" asks Holt.

"Well, first she was asking how I was talking to her," says a new voice, female, with a creaky edge to it that tells Holt she was probably the one speaking spider just now. "Then she asked if you were her human."

Based on the way this thing is grinning at him he thinks he knows what the answer was.

“Listen, wait,” says Holt, holding up his one free hand. “Shy—shry—shry ray?”

The spider tilts her head at him again, amused to see him trying to pronounce her name. She points at her chest with a single claw. “Sshrryyy-raaaaayyy,” she carefully enunciates.

“Shryrae,” he repeats. “I’m Holt. Holt,” he says, louder the second time, pointing at himself.

“Kkhhhoolltt,” she says.

Close enough. “Holt,” he confirms, nodding.

“Huuumaaann.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Human,” he says, nodding faster.

The creature gives him this big smile like he’s a teacher that just awarded her a gold star and puffy dinosaur sticker on a spelling test. Then she says, “Ccccccckkk.”

Holt abruptly stops nodding. “No.” He shakes his head. “*Not* cock,” he says emphatically. Really trying to get that idea across.

Shryrae only smiles wider and nods her head. “Cock,” she repeats. “Kholllt Shryrae huumannn *cock*,” stringing the words together in a way that makes it absolutely clear what she means.

She’s walking towards him again, approaching ever so slowly, one deliberate step at a time. Before she can get too close he begins to back away, as far as the handcuffs will let him, which isn’t far. The male voice interrupts, halting her advance: “I should point out that Mr. McGeesken does have some limited knowledge of hand-to-hand combat, and he may be more dangerous than your friend expects humans to be. We can further restrain him or sedate him, as she prefers.”

More spider speech crackles over the intercom. Shryrae, without taking her eyes off of Holt or losing that vicious smile, chitters something back, low and guttural.

«That one’s a real fighter, Shry. The human here says we can tie him down or make him too sleepy to get away, if you want.»

«Rhazille, tell the human in there he should not insult me or I will take him instead.»

“She said no thank you,” says the other spider on the intercom.

Shryrae is about an arm’s length away from Holt now—*her* arm’s length, one of those six long, yellow-furred, segmented limbs—and she’s reaching one out to him, nowhere left to go for Holt, backed up as far as he can, handcuff chain stretched taut to the immobile table and pulling hard on his wrist. He watches in horror as she gets closer and closer, until...until she grasps the chain, squeezes, and her claw clips the metal into two clean halves like fur-handled bolt cutters.

Holt yanks his freed arm back. Shryrae looks down at him, positively beaming. He stands there perplexed and frozen—she’s just smiling. Then she bends down closer to him, putting her lower pair of claws on her knees for

support, as one might do when attempting communication with some small, timid animal.

He looks up into the spider's face, mere inches away now. He can see her chest rise and fall with each breath and she's so close he can feel each exhalation. She stands stone-still otherwise, just staring at him for an agonizingly long stretch of time. Then she starts making this *noise* without even moving her lips at all, a low rattle that sounds like it's building in the deepest reaches of her throat, growing from a quiet murmur to a burble loud enough that he raises his voice to make sure they can hear him over the intercom when he asks "What...what's she saying now?", careful not to take his eyes off the spider.

There is a pause before the intercom clicks on again. "Those, er, aren't exactly *words*, per se," says the male voice.

"Just horny noises," the woman's voice chimes in.

". . .oh."

Neither of them move for a beat. And then something in Holt—maybe the same primitive instincts that told his distant ancestors when to run from a hungry tiger—tells him *it's go time, dumbass*, and he makes a break for it, juking around Shryrae and scrambling for the door. He hears the spider squeaking at him. He doesn't have time to dwell on it but if he did he might notice it's not so much an angry sounding noise as an excited one.

Somehow he makes it to the door. He pulls hard on the handle and—it turns! It's not locked! He throws his body at the door and crashes out into the hallway. He takes a fraction of a moment to evaluate his surroundings: a wall to his left, to his right another door. Straight ahead, about ten yards down the corridor, a door with a stairwell sign and a glowing red EXIT light above it. If he can just make it there maybe he has a chance. . .

Behind him, claws begin padding across the carpet. The element of surprise has worn off. A heavy click comes from that other door as its handle begins to turn—that must be where the people watching him are. No time to lose. He sprints down the hall, salvation in view. Maybe, just maybe he'll get out of this. Halfway there, he risks looking over his shoulder. The spider is there in the doorway. . .not chasing him? Just smiling?

Suddenly, against his will, he stops.

Once again he has the sensation of being held in place by something as pliable as rubber yet unbreakably strong. He hangs splayed in midair, unable to advance. He can just barely move his arms and legs before they are pulled back into position no matter how hard he struggles, and boy is he struggling.

God *damn*. Not again.

The difference is that this time he can see, once he actually looks for them, the ultrafine lines of the gigantic web he's stumbled into, glinting under the bright fluorescent office lighting.

Shryrae, utterly delighted, stands in the doorway and watches her prey exhausting himself. The spider's burbling, clapping, jumping up and down.

Meanwhile, three figures calmly file out of the door adjacent to the conference room. The first is a human man, and somehow Holt is instantly sure this is the guy that was talking to him. Looking at him is like looking at an old movie with no color. He's got an ash-colored button-up shirt, heavy black rectangular glasses, fine white hair even though he doesn't seem old enough to have gone gray, and a complexion marginally healthier than a corpse. All black and white, except for those bloodshot red eyes.

The others are two more spider women. There's an all-black one wearing—Holt isn't sure exactly what kind of outfit that is, somewhere halfway between a maid dress and bondage suit. That one stands close behind the human man, almost touching him. The other one, a slender spider with short, navy blue fur, walks over to Shryrae with her arms crossed.

“Going somewhere?” asks the pale man with a smile that doesn't manage to spread to his eyes. “You know what they say, Mr. McGeesken. Fool me once, shame on you. . . fool me twice, hmm?”

“Fuck you,” replies Holt.

Shryrae runs over next to the struggling human. «Rhazille! Rhazille! Look! I caught him!»

«You certainly did. Good work.»

With natural ease Shryrae reaches under her tongue and pulls out a thin strand of silk. She squeaks and chitters a little tune to herself, almost like humming, as the spider loops one end of the strand around one clawtip and whirls her other claws around in a complicated knitting-meets-cat's-cradle maneuver, silk rapidly unspooling from her smile like fishing line. In only seconds Shryrae has a stretchy band of silvery fabric, and Holt can only watch as she begins to wrap his body in it.

“She's not going to do a whole cocoon, right?” asks the human in gray. “We're under a bit of a time crunch here. We need to get her out of here and get all this webbing cleaned up before the morning crew comes in.”

«Shry, just tie him up enough to stop him moving and bring him back in there. The human wants you to hurry.»

Shryrae nods and proceeds with her work. She's as eager to get started as anyone. She clips through the lines securing Holt's arm in order to wrap it tight against his body, giving him an opportunity to fight—which he tries to do, but she doesn't even seem to mind. She just calmly grabs his arm, presses it into his side as though he wasn't even resisting and continues wrapping him like a Christmas present. Holt's hopes of escape dwindle further; the strength this bubbly, excited girl can exert without even trying is terrifying. Repeating this for his other limbs it only takes a minute before Holt is fully bound and gagged, immobile as a trussed-up ham. She pulls him out of the web and carries him in her lower pair of arms bride-style. He keeps struggling, but he's not going anywhere. «He's so wriggly! This is gonna be fun!» says Shryrae, carrying him back into the conference room.

“Ah, by the way, one more thing. Skenge, do you have the, er, prophylactic?”

“Yes, Doctor, it’s right here.” The spider in the maid getup hands the pale man a shiny packet the size and shape of a vinyl album cover.

“Here.” He hands it off to Rhazille. “Have her put this on our subject before she. . .completes the process.”

It turns out to be an enormous wrapped condom. Rhazille looks at it: *Trojan ArachnoMaxx XL*. “She’s not going to have any idea what to do with this. It’s not like they have sex ed class in the warrens.”

“I don’t want fluids all over Conference Room E. We’re hosting a delegation from City Hall there for a business lunch and a Powerpoint on our suggested housing allocation for next quarter. Figure something out, hmm?”

Rhazille sighs. “Fine. I’ll go in there with her.”

The human and his maid return to the observation room as Shryrae hauls Holt back into the conference room and Rhazille follows her, shutting the door behind them. As Shryrae passes the long one-way mirror she seems to be inspired by her own reflection. She repositions Holt, moving him as easily as you might pass a bag of groceries from one hand to the other, and holds him in the air so that his butt is up against her waist and his bound torso hangs perpendicular to her—in other words, roughly in position for what she has planned for him. He’s still human-sized, so she has to support him with a couple arms, but the spider clearly appears to be trying him on for size. She even starts striking poses in the mirror, putting an arm up behind her head and thrusting her hips out.

«Look at how twitchy he is!» says Shryrae. Holt is indeed struggling mightily, but is completely unable to break through the silk around him. «He’ll be such a great cock!»

«He does seem like an energetic one,» admits Rhazille as she leans against the wall. «But you need to hurry up and get started.»

«Do you want to help? It’ll be more fun if you help,» says Shryrae.

«Uh, you start and I’ll jump in once you get going,» says Rhazille, looking at the giant condom in her claws. «And if you want to tell him anything, I’ll translate.»

«Oh, perfect! Tell him he’s going to be a great cock, and I’m going to use him all the time.» says Shryrae, gently laying Holt on his back on the long conference table. He immediately tries to roll off, but the spider catches him. «Aw, he’s nervous. Tell not to be worried, this is his true purpose. He’s just doing what humans are meant for!» Shryrae suddenly climbs up onto the table in a fluid skittering motion, legs and arms all flowing together, and straddles Holt. With the weight of the spider on him he’s really not going anywhere. She begins exploring his body, curiously picking at his clothes while keeping him pinned down with claws on his shoulders.

Rhazille smirks and walks over to the end of the table, standing directly above Holt’s head and looking down at him. «Here, let me help,» she says,

moving Shryrae's claws off of his shoulders and holding him down with her own. «You get him ready.» Then she begins speaks quietly, so that only he can hear, and switches to English. “You should be grateful, human. We're allowing you to fulfill your true purpose. And you're even luckier, being taken by a *real* spider. It's sad how few humans ever even get a taste of what their life should be like, the way you keep us from the surface. But you're not being taken by some domesticated city spider that would turn you loose and hope you come back, always cruelly bouncing you between one form and the next, never giving you the *certainty* of knowing what you really are—a cock. No, human, you are being taken by the Huntsmen. We *keep* our prey.”

Holt yells something unintelligible through the silk gag in his mouth and tries in vain to fight his way out from underneath the spider on top of him.

«Did that calm him down? It doesn't seem like he got calmer,» asks Shryrae.

«He's just being human. You keep doing what you're doing. Go ahead and cut through his garments, he doesn't need them anymore,» replies Rhazille, then resumes talking to Holt. She steps forward, leaning into him, so that the crown of his head presses between her legs. She runs a claw through his hair. “Struggle as you must, human. We know it is your nature to resist, even though your reward will be a lifetime of pleasure. No matter what, Shryrae will be your mistress, and you will be her penis.”

The blue spider's getting off on this too, realizes Holt. With his face inches away like this, he can tell she smells like a human woman but different, in a way he can't quite specify. More like...like bananas, somehow? It's not what Holt would have expected from a spider's pussy. He wanted it to be revolting, and it isn't, at all. How can a bug be this alluring?

«Oh good, he's already getting hard,» says Shryrae.

Rhazille laughs and presses herself against his head. “See, you know what you're for. Humans always do.”

Shryrae's right. Holt's halfway to an erection he can't help, try as he might. He has two beautiful women crawling all over him—very large women with too many eyes and arms and teeth, and the one is literally *crawling* over him, but his cock doesn't seem to care about that, or what they have planned for him next. The curious yellow spider has already extricated it from his jeans; she simply drew a line over the front of Holt's pants with the point of a clawtip and they split open like a baked potato, boxers too, leaving the oh-so-sensitive skin beneath unharmed. Shryrae investigates his torso with a couple of roaming claws, passing soft pads over the lines of his abs below where the silk is wrapped around him, but the focus of her present efforts is on Holt's cock.

Pinned at his shoulders by Rhazille, Holt can barely pick his neck up enough to watch Shryrae play with him. As frightening as it is to watch the same claws he saw cut through metal a minute ago stroke his dick, he's getting even harder now. He doesn't feel the hard chitinous clawtips at all, just

the plush inner pads and soft fur moving up and down his shaft...the spider looks at him and grins wide enough to reveal an entire serrated mouthful of interlocking daggers behind the two fangs that protrude from her mouth. Her teeth part, she moves her head downwards...oh god, thinks Holt, she's not gonna use her mouth, is she?

She is, and even the thought of the consequences of being scraped by those knifelike teeth aren't enough to stop Holt from getting fully erect as Shryrae begins by running her tongue, black as squid ink, up the underside of Holt's cock from balls to tip. Pleased with the human's reaction, she repeats the action while Holt twitches and wriggles. She makes a chittery giggling noise at the human's tortured struggles and then, holding him at the base of his shaft in a circled claw, opens wide and engulfs the human's penis in a single gulp, going straight down until her nose is pressed into his stomach. No teeth, just heat and wetness and a long soft tongue moving around him. Holt looks down and sees eight amused all-black eyes looking back while inside her mouth Shryrae is licking him in movements geared not so much for his pleasure but for satisfying her own curiosity about what sucking a human's dick is like. It's interesting, but it isn't too long before she pops her mouth off and looks at Holt's shiny wet, fully hard cock. «I think he's ready,» says Shryrae.

«I agree,» says Rhazille.

Shryrae repositions herself above the human, holding her body over him and moving to mount him. Holt renews his struggles, shaking his head desperately and trying to get away, but there's nowhere to go with one spider trapping him in a cage of furred arms and legs and the other effortlessly clamping his shoulders to the table with what feels like a thousand pounds of force.

“Quiet,” Rhazille tells Holt while holding him down. “You're about to get laid with a pretty girl. What are you complaining about?”

Shryrae grinds into him, his insubordinate cock furrows into her fur and finds heat and slickness, and the spider makes a pleased little squeak at the contact. She drags herself back and forth along him a few times and then, leaning in close so most of what Holt can see is just fangs, fur, and eyes, she moves up and then suddenly down, plunging him into her.

Holt's muffled cries of protest turn into a strangled moan. Shryrae's eyes all go half-closed and she lets out a long, burbling squeal that gradually becomes a guttural, gravelly purring while she sits on top of Holt with him fully inside her.

«Good?» asks Rhazille.

«Very good,» says Shryrae. «Not the biggest human, but he's about to be a much bigger human...»⁴

⁴ An untranslatable pun based on the fact that in the arachnid language “penis” and “human” are the same root word with different suffixes to signify whether the penis/human is erect, flaccid, unchanged, etc.

Holt squeezes his eyes shut and turns his head. This can't be happening, none of this can be real, he's about to wake up from the worst wet dream ever, safe in his bed well above sea level and he'll never so much as go in a basement again. But it all *feels* real, the unbelievably strong silk wrapped around him, the claws like steel beams holding him in place, the soft fur brushing and tickling anywhere his skin is exposed, the hot, wet, spider pussy he's balls deep inside. . . suddenly claws clutch the lower half of his head and forcefully turn him forward, reflex compels him to open his eyes and there's Shryrae, so close their foreheads almost touch, eight eyes staring at him with wild intensity. And now the spider begins to *move*, slowly to start with, rising and sinking while she grips him tight within her. She's saying something, god only knows what, but she's making those scratching, squeaking chattering noises right into his face. . .

«Rhazille, talk humanly for me. Make him say how it feels.»

Rhazille cuts the silk gag in Holt's mouth, passing a claw through it without resistance. "Well, human, how do you like it?"

"Ptoo," says Holt, who is currently trying to spit out the end of the gag that fell into his mouth. Rhazille courteously picks it out for him. "Feels like I'm fuckin' a giant bug," he says once unobstructed.

"I'm sure you know better than to call us that," says Rhazille. "We're *spiders*. And that's your new owner you're talking about."

"Bugs! You're a fuckin' bug, and so is she, and I'm never going to be a bug's cock!" yells Holt.

Rhazille gives him a little slap. "Enough."

«Hey,» complains Shryrae in a ragged voice as she slowly rides Holt. «Don't smack my cock till he's done.»

«You may need to teach this one discipline.»

«Why? He looks mad. Does he not feel good yet? Surely he must feel good by now.»

«Oh, it's just human instinct to fight the change,» says Rhazille. «Have you begun yet?»

«I. . . I think so? I've never done this before. . .»

«Still your mind, and do not allow thought to intercept will,» says Rhazille, calm and even, as though she's leading Shryrae in guided meditation instead of holding down a thrashing, pissed-off human. «Look at him. Feel your connection. He is a part of you. He belongs to you. Claim what is yours.»

Shryrae nods and continues to ride the human, staring him down, a look of determination in her black eyes that remains unbroken even as she makes small, half-voiced moans with every downstroke. Holt stares back, breathing hard through clenched teeth, trying to summon up every bit of disgust and loathing he can for these, these *bugs*, hoping to override everything else, her curves, her tits, the face that would be pretty with six fewer eyes, the soft warm fur (no! no! women don't have *fur*, why is he thinking about that), the tight, slick, hot feeling of her walls squeezing him as she fucks him. . . maybe,

somehow, if he can hate the bugs enough, make himself go soft, she won't be able to...to...but it feels too *good*, hotter, tighter, than any human woman he'd ever been with...

"Give in, human," Rhazille says. "Stop fighting. Accept your purpose and welcome your new life. Allow yourself to become what you really are. Her cock."

"Fuck you," grunts Holt.

Shryrae's moving up and down on Holt's cock faster now, hissing out hot breath from between her teeth and into his face on every stroke. When Holt looks into the spider's eyes he sees not only himself glaring back but something akin to possession, like she's staring through him, operating automatically...Then suddenly she's speaking again in her strange chattering language, louder, faster, until he's got this manic spider on top of him practically screaming into his face and slamming his pelvis into the table.

«Rhaz! It's starting. It's definitely starting! I can tell!»

«Good, good. Savor it.»

Shryrae sits up, takes a claw off the table, and begins to squeeze her boobs. She stretches upwards, throwing her shoulders back, and her eight eyes flutter closed for a moment...realizing her attention is divided and now having one less spidery limb fencing him in, Holt goes for a last desperate getaway attempt. He tries to scoot up between the tall blue spider leaning over him and Shryrae's arms, hopefully all the way off the table. What next, he has no idea—he still hasn't gotten out of all this silk—but it's a moot point, because as he tries to propel himself away from the spider something *tugs back* and he goes nowhere. It's a stretching sensation, like something pulling at him from inside, like...oh god no...

He picks his head up to look at where the spider is sitting on him. Where his dick should be, vanishing into the golden fur between the spider's legs, he instead sees a thickened, unfamiliar band of bubblegum-pink flesh emerging from her and connecting to him, and worse yet the shiny pinkness is actually *spreading*, seeping slowly over his hips like melting strawberry ice cream.

Sensing Holt's failed attempt to pull out or even just away, Shryrae stops kneading her breast and looks down at him, flashing open her eight eyes in unison. She gives him an enormous, terrifying smile, tilts her head to the side with a sudden, jerky neck movement, and then begins to speak—but this time, in her shaky approximation of English.

"Khhholllt Shryrae cock," she says.

Holt screams and begins to thrash wildly, kicking his tied legs and trying to buck the spider off of him. This makes her giggle. "Holt Shryrae cock," she says again, clutching him at the sides of his chest to get him under control. "Holt Shryrae cock. Holt Shryrae *cock*," repeating the only human words she seems to know like a mantra. She's still moving her hips, and the motion is still generating bizarre pleasure even though there's no sense of friction anymore, at least not between the two of them. He can still move his hips,

but only insofar as the spider moves hers—he can wriggle around, but when she goes back and forth he goes right along with her, dragging his ass against the table.

Shryrae is fascinated with the skin connecting them and spreading over the human. She tests a pink patch just below Holt's waist with her clawtip and, to her delight and his horror, they both draw a sharp breath simultaneously. He feels it, and not just as a touch on the waist. Nerves he didn't even know he had are lighting up with pleasure. Everything below his ribcage and above his thighs feels tingly, buzzing.

«He's really changing, Rhazille! Look! You can see it! I can feel it too!»

«Yes, he certainly is. You're doing great, keep going. It'll only be a few minutes before you have a new cock for good.»

Shryrae moans and continues to grind him against the table, even slowly stroking his torso up and down like she would a penis—the change hasn't gotten nearly that far yet, but the silk keeping his arms in place along with his shirt has enough give to let Shryrae move her claws up and down a little, almost like a foreskin.

«It still feels like he's fighting me,» says Shryrae.

«It is inevitable now. Your will exceeds his. Merely enjoy the process.»

Rhazille claps her claws together with exaggerated happiness. “Just look at how excited Shryrae is. I bet you can feel it already, can't you? Feel yourself changing into her cock?”

“Fuck you!”

“You're about to make Shryrae one happy spider. You'll be happy too, once you accept your fate.”

“I don't wanna be a cock!” shouts Holt. “Especially not a bug's cock!”

“You only *think* that,” says Rhazille. “But the truth is you humans can't be happy apart from spiders.”

“I'll be happy as hell if I never see another one of you bugs ever again.”

“Only by uniting with your complement can you find true fulfillment,” continues Rhazille. “That's why the world's so fucked up on the surface, you know. The anti-Erisian force is out of control. Cause you humans run the world. We're here to bring things back into balance, one human at a time.”

“You're a crazy bitch,” says Holt.

«Shryrae, I think your cock needs to see what's happening to his body,» says Rhazille. «Why don't you sit up? Don't worry, he's not going anywhere.»

Shryrae happily complies. She leans back and picks Holt up, manipulating him like he's already a part of her. The way the silk is holding his arms tight against his sides, his upper body already resembles the shaft it's going to become. The spider swings herself around so she's sitting on the edge of the table and hanging her legs off it, bringing Holt with her. Something strange happens to his legs as she moves him—his shoes get dragged along by the loose cuffs of his jeans before they roll away, socks too, leaving the apparently empty bottom third of Holt's pants dangling between Shryrae's legs. The

spider holds the human against her chest, face pressed into the fur above her breasts. He's wriggling feebly, but Shryrae easily controls him.

«Feels. . .feels like he's twisted the wrong way around,» says Shryrae.

«That's normal when you change a human facing each other,» says Rhazille. «Just move him however it feels natural.»

Grasping Holt at his shoulders and sides, Shryrae begins rotating his upper body *independently* of everything below the waist, which seems like it should provoke some kind of distress from the human as the spider puts a 180-degree twist into his spine. But it doesn't, in fact he looks almost relieved—until he gets far enough around to see his reflection in the long one-way mirror. Then he starts screaming again.

«Why is he so loud? That feels so much better. Doesn't he feel better?»

«What the fuck is going on with my *legs*,» yells Holt.

«Great question,» says Rhazille. It's a fair concern; Holt's jeans are still there, but below the knees they hang straight down and flat as though nothing was inside, and above the knees they bulge out so much that it's straining the fly. «Let's cut those pants off you before they cut off your circulation.» Rhazille hooks a claw inside the waistband of his jeans and pulls, ripping through denim and silk alike. The webbing and sundered pants fall to the floor, exposing Holt's lower body.

His legs are still vaguely recognizable for what they were—though it sure wouldn't be your first guess. They're lumpy and swollen, but there are still knobs that might be kneecaps floating around near the midpoint, and at the bottom the protrusions that were once feet are melting into both dangling blobs, leaving only the heel and individual toes still visible. All over the skin is wrinkling up into long horizontal creases and, maybe most disturbing of all, everything's as pink as a pencil eraser.

«I think your legs are Shryrae's balls now,» says Rhazille pleasantly.

«No, no, no,» says Holt in disbelief, watching the lower half of his body turning into a pair of testicles. He tries to kick away, but it feels like he's running through waist-high jello and the effort only manages to undulate the loose, sacklike skin. He has the sense not so much that his muscles won't obey him but that there's less there to command. . .he has the same horrifying sensation in his arms, and while he can't actually see what's going on below the silk and his shirt, when he tries to strain against his wrappings he can barely budge them.

«Wow, I have balls now!» says Shryrae, giving Holt's morphing legs an exploratory jiggle. The human jumps in her lap. That did *not* feel like someone touching his leg. She runs the pad of her claw over the surface of her balls-to-be, where scraggly patches of red fur the exact same shade as Holt's beard and buzz cut are starting to sprout. «Ooh! Oh that—that really itches,» says the spider. With multiple claws, she rubs the places where velvety carmine fur is growing and spreading over the pink skin. It tingles and soothes at the

same time. Spit's building up in his mouth. He swallows hard, and the fluid is pushed only weakly down his throat.

«You should cut his bindings off and allow the human to see what is becoming of the rest of his body,» says Rhazille.

«Okay!» squeaks Shryrae and drags a claw down Holt's chest, shredding shirt and silk alike. She's a little more careless than when she tore open his pants; this time he feels a light scratch and as the torn fabric falls away in the front, it reveals a thin red line going down his bare chest—his utterly, bizarrely bare chest—no trace of the curly red hair Holt expects to see there, even the musculature itself is fading, lines he had worked so hard to define smoothed to evenness...but this shock is nothing compared to when the spider pulls off the last of his torn clothing and reveals that the change is already well underway in his arms too. They almost flop out of the sleeves as she removes his ruined shirt, leaving his bizarrely changed body completely exposed. His arms are now flabby, almost squishy, once-taut biceps nowhere to be seen. . .he can still move them but only barely, like trying to walk on a leg that's fallen asleep. And that pinkness radiating out of the spider is still spreading too. Everything below where Holt's ribcage is, or was, is now glossy bubblegum.

Upon seeing this Holt goes into a kind of reactive panic state. If he was thinking rationally, he might remember the briefing video they made him and the rest of his team watch that took pains to inform him that once The Change (as they always referred to it, in tones so stentorian you could hear the capitalization) had progressed to actual, physical merging it could not be stopped, and could only be reversed around twelve hours later at the earliest—and even then only with the consent of the spider. (That part was always emphasized too, how only the only way to Change back was if the spider wanted to, and they rarely wanted to...) Perhaps then he would give in to the inevitable. Instead, as Holt looks into the mirror and sees himself at the awkward midpoint between “human being” and “spider penis”, he has a full-on body horror freakout, screaming incoherently and flailing desperately, going into total fight-or-flight mode. But flight is no longer an option when your lower body has merged into a much larger creature's. He only manages to fall over in Shryrae's lap, but luckily she has a few spare arms to catch him.

«Oops! Careful, little human, don't get hurt!» says Shryrae.

“Human, your new mistress says to cease your struggles and accept your fate,» says Rhazille. (Yes, she knows she's embellishing the translation a little bit, but you've got to do these things with a certain gravitas that Shryrae lacks.)

Holt pays neither spider any heed. Instead, being unable to run, that fight-or-flight response ticks over to fight and he begins shoving and punching at anything in range with his thinning arms. The spiders put up their own arms to fend off his blows, but he can tell right away something's wrong—he can't seem to generate any real force, and as he tries to push a furry arm away he feels his own arm *bend* unnaturally, between his wrist and elbow

where there's no joint to permit it, but it's not broken, just...bent. Like a pipe cleaner or a paperclip. He stops and stares at his twisted limb. Shryrae takes the opportunity to seize and squeeze him, embracing him from behind in a six-armed bear hug that clamps his arms to his sides. The moment she does they catch and stick to his torso like pieces of wet dough touching each other.

«There! You really are a fighter, aren't you? So much wriggling...now doesn't that feel better? Mmm, it does, doesn't it? You're starting to feel *much* better, just like a cock should.» Shryrae works him up and down a little, holding him tight, pressing her breasts into his back, and not only is there the sensation of fur rubbing on skin but something else too, a disturbing tingle, stronger down where the change has advanced the most...«Let's get a good look at you!» says the grinning spider, and releases him.

Holt springs forward helplessly, and to his horror he can now see in the mirror that below his shoulders he looks more like a shaft than a person. Not completely so—there's still some muscle definition, the more the further up his chest he looks. But his torso is stretching, rounding out. He can feel a strange, insistent fullness in his guts. And below his waist? Well, he just plain doesn't have legs anymore. Below his waist hangs what is clearly a giant ginger-furred pair of balls. When he tries to move his arms they go nowhere, and when he strains harder he sees the taut skin that now connects them to his body stretch. He stops exerting the muscles, and his arms sink back even further into his body than they were, now only just long vertical lumps on his increasingly cylindrical chest...

Holt screams but it comes out faint and rough; he's pushing barely any air and the tube carrying it is restructuring itself to move liquid instead. His lips tingle at the edges and he can't quite seem to keep them closed. “No, no, no,” he gasps.

“Oh, yes,” replies Rhazille as she puts a claw on the side of Holt's hard chest. She moves it up and down, feeling him, appraising his new body... “You're becoming a very nice cock.” As she slides her claw upwards, it bunches up a ruffle of loose skin on the side of the human's new shaft-body, and the extra wrinkles stay there when she takes her claw away. Foreskin.

All Holt can do now is shake back and forth in the spider's lap, describing big, sweeping arcs in the air like a haywire metronome while he wobbles around the point where he's fused to the spider's groin. But he knows he's only even able to move as far as he is now because he's throwing the weight of his head around with the few remaining muscles in his shoulders and neck.

«Look at him go!» giggles Shryrae, watching her soon-to-be penis while she leans back on her upper set of arms.

«Bet you he's going to be a twitchy one,» says Rhazille.

All this struggle is exhausting. Holt gives up the effort and his oscillations quickly stabilize into stiffness, and then he's just sticking straight out of Shryrae's lap, angled around 80 degrees from the table she's sitting on. He

lets his mouth hang open, trying to suck in air, and a dribble of fluid escapes and runs down his veiny, tubular chest.

Holt looks at himself in the mirror and realizes he can actually watch his neck slowly thicken in order to merge with his shoulders. A light force, persistent yet resistible for the time being, like fingers pressing on his forehead, is encouraging his head to pull back and up. He should be more scared than he is, he thinks. And he *is* scared, and angry too, as he watches his body turning into cockflesh, but the adrenaline just isn't there now. That absence is somehow almost as uncanny as seeing himself turn into a penis. He wants to be enraged, he'd settle for terrified, but despite himself he's *horny*. He feels pent-up, constrained, ready to burst.

A muscle deep inside Holt (or inside Shryrae?) suddenly contracts and he jerks violently forward. The spasm brings with it a huge gush of fluid coming the wrong way, propelled unstoppably right up Holt's middle. He feels it coming and tries to keep it in his mouth but just doesn't have the muscle control to even clench his jaw let alone block this upwelling. He drools and dribbles it out all over his long, veiny body, onto Shryrae's claws, and into the fur on their enormous scrotum, creating damp patches of deep red. As soon as this happens Shryrae makes a moan long and deep enough for Holt to feel it resonate up through his erect core, leaving behind a tingle of pleasure—until it is completely drowned out by the euphoric sensation of his spider host grabbing him firmly around his midsection with four claws, squeezing tightly, and stroking hard.

He's getting jerked off, just like the cock he knows he'll soon be. Holt's not sure he has any muscles left to resist with and the feeling of being whole-body masturbated is so intense it's sapping his will to fight back. It's not that he *wants* to be a cock, anything would be better than getting turned into a bug's cock, but what can he do at this point? And when he thinks back to the dozen-odd transformations he saw firsthand in his brief stay in Midway he knows none of them seemed unhappy about it. None of them fought back. At the time he chalked it up to perversion, some kind of corruption endemic to the humans sick and crazy enough to willingly live with these creatures. Which he still thinks is obviously true, but now he knows the process *also* feels mind-bendingly good. He can feel precum bubbling up in gulps from within her and through him, sputtering out his loose mouth like a spouting whale. He's still breathing shallow, ragged breaths, and each one is wet with spray.

The intercom crackles to life. Holt and Shryrae are too engrossed to notice, but luckily the message is for Rhazille: "The condom, Rhazille. I don't want to explain this to a cleaning crew."

Almost forgot—and it looks like she'd better hurry. The dark blue spider takes the giant wrapped condom off the table where she left it and rips the wrapper open at the side, pulls away about a foot of foil, then extracts a latex circle as big around as a basketball. «Slow down a moment, Shryrae.» She's not going to like this.

«But he feels so...so good! I think he's nearly done,» says Shryrae, between little gasps of pleasure. She does not slow her strokes.

«I know, just...just wait!» Rhazille suddenly brings the condom down over Holt and tries to roll it down around the simple shaft he is now. But she can't get it over Shryrae's claws as long as she's still jerking off her soon-to-be cock, and she doesn't show any sign of stopping. She is, however, very confused.

«Rhazille! What—ahh! What are you doing? If you want to help, use your mouth or something!»

«Would you—*ack*—stop jerking off? For one moment?» yells Rhazille, moving in with her shoulder in an attempt to elbow Shryrae away from her own penis. It doesn't work very well.

«Rhaz! Let go! What in Goddess' name—ow! What are you *doing* to my penis?» Baffled, Shryrae lets Rhazille finish applying the strange covering to her human. What bizarre city nonsense is this?

Meanwhile for Holt, it looks and feels like he's being smothered with plastic wrap. Suddenly there is a taut semitranslucent white film stretched across his face, or what he still feels like is his face. His features are still there, but altered now, moved around the surface of his bulging head. His nose makes a protrusion in the latex just above where the reservoir bulges out, his eyes are inward dimples on either side, and his mouth sucks the material into concavity where it hangs open in an uneven thinning O.

Holt can see only blurred lights and moving blobs of color now. All around him the condom adheres tightly to the taut, clammy skin his new body is covered in, admitting no room for air. He panics. He's going to suffocate. When his reflexive gasping barely manages to move the latex membrane he realizes *he's not breathing*, only moving his mouth, and struggling to do even that. There's a pulse pounding through him so strong that it makes his whole body move, but he realizes it's not his pulse. He really is just part of the spider now.

«What *is* that?» asks Shryrae, looking quizzically at her latex-shrouded shaft, which is now much more cock than human despite the odd bumps still visible on Holt's head.

«Think of it like a human sex toy,» says Rhazille, as she strokes her friend's new cock for her.

«I don't know...I think it would feel better without it,» says Shryrae. But she makes no move to stop Rhazille.

«Yeah, well, you're not the first to say that,» says Rhazille. She's using three claws to rub Holt now, giving him long, hard strokes that have the other spider breathing heavy despite her complaint, and Rhazille herself seems almost mesmerized by the still-shifting shaft in front of her. «But he's just about ready, so...I know what would feel *really* good.» Shryrae's not sure she wants any part of whatever Rhazille is planning if it's anything like the flimsy tube covering her new penis. But when Rhazille climbs up on the table with her and swings one leg over her body, she quickly becomes agreeable.

As Rhazille straddles Shryrae, getting into position, Holt can just barely see the blurry form of the spider opening herself up for his entry, impossibly huge above him. He must be shrinking. (An invasive frisson of disappointment cuts through his anger and shame: yeah, he knows he can't be a six-foot dick, but he still feels cheated somehow. If he has to be a cock then obviously he wants to be the biggest cock he can be. . . wait! no! where did that come from, he doesn't want to be a cock at all. . .)

«Lie back and let me do the work, okay? He's still pretty huge,» Rhazille instructs Shryrae.

Shryrae nods enthusiastically and lies flat on the table. «You can definitely take him, Rhaz!»

Well, that's still an open question for Rhazille despite the encouragement.. Even though the human has shrunk down significantly he's still much bigger than the one-and-a-half to two feet most transformed humans end up at, so this might involve some discomfort. But how often do you get to ride a human who's in the middle of changing? Hovering above Shryrae, bracing herself with claws on the other spider's shoulders and breasts, Rhazille grabs Holt and swipes the changing human up and down along her slit. She's ready for this; watching the change happen has made her wet. She holds the almost-cock's tip against her clit and savors the vibrations from his squirming face. «Okay, human,» she mutters, «get ready to finally experience your true purpose.»

For Holt, even just the feeling of being rubbed on the outside of the spider's pussy is mind-blowing on a level he'd never experienced before. His whole face, or what was his face, is on fire with pleasure. He longs to be plunged inside her, even as the vanishing rational part of his mind screams that he's not a cock, that this is all wrong. But now, staring up into what from his perspective is the biggest cunt in the world, it feels proper and right—instinctual, even—he *belongs* in there. Through the condom he can see the spider's lips threatening to engulf him, and he wants them to more than anything.

Rhazille lets herself sink down with a moan, taking Holt's head and the first inch or so of his shaft inside her. With a watery squelch and crinkle of latex Holt's world suddenly goes very quickly from pink, to deep red, to total darkness and sublime heat and pressure.

This is a barrage of unfamiliar sensations for Shryrae, who's only ever been on the other end of a cock before. Having her own is new to her, and so is watching it go inside her companion as Rhazille gradually impales herself on Shryrae's new addition. It feels so good, and the drive to get it further inside Rhazille is so strong, that she can't help bucking her hips and stuffing another inch of Holt into her.

Rhazille grunts and gasps, «Fucking Eris!» in English. The spider takes a breath and says to Shryrae, «Would you *wait?* Your human's *enormous*. A-and he's still moving around in there. . .»

«Sorry,» says Shryrae, between heavy breaths.

Holt is indeed still moving, though the only thing he can do at this point is twitch up and down and wiggle a few things on what's left of his face. Inside Rhazille he can feel the interface between his body and hers even through the interfering condom, a map of his surfaces in ecstasy. He knows what was his head is now shaped far more like a glans and that every time Rhazille rises and falls it gets a little smoother, turning him more and more into the cock he's inevitably going to become.

Rhazille slowly moves up and down a few tantalizing inches at a time, still only accepting the very end of Shryrae's new cock inside her. «Deeper, Rhaz, deeper,» pleads Shryrae.

«Be patient,» says Rhazille.

But Shryrae isn't the only one eager to get Holt further into Rhazille. Holt wants it too, more than anything. Any concerns he had about his prior life as a human, any protests about not being a penis, well, that's all forgotten now before this overwhelming, all-encompassing need to cram himself as deeply into this spider as he'll go. He wants *all* of himself inside her, not just his head and shoulders—not that he has those anymore, now that the only visible evidence he's anything but a gigantic pink cock is buried several inches inside Rhazille.

Rhazille continues to ride Shryrae and her changing human, taking him more deeply now but still not all the way inside her. She moves not just up and down but laterally too, varying the angle at which the human is pushed into her. On one thrust the top of Holt's head and what used to be his back press tightly against Rhazille, on the next his sensitive underside is rubbed hard against her walls, and on the thrust after that he is driven straight up into her. Despite the wonderful, crushing tightness surrounding him he knows he could go further still, and he wants to stretch out, extend himself, bottom out—but it's outside of his control and all he can do is twitch in frustration.

Rhazille picks up the pace, bouncing up and down faster. She steadies herself with her claws placed at various points on the table and on Shryrae, all six arms reaching downwards like guy-wires supporting a radio tower. She's muttering and chattering to herself in a combination of English and arachnid, barely intelligible to speakers of either. “Oh, fuck yes—*zekkarivtk*—fucking Eris I needed this—*zrik-zrizakgt...*”

Underneath Rhazille, Shryrae busily rubs her own tits and runs her claws through the fur on Rhazille's thighs—she may want to stuff as much of her new cock up into Rhazille as she can, but she's being a good girl and lying there like Rhazille said to. Besides, it feels like Rhazille's getting there on her own. With every bounce the slim blue spider gets further down on the human; Holt's well over halfway in at this point.

«Feel good?» Rhazille asks between breaths ragged from exertion while she leans down over Shryrae.

«Oh yes! Yes!» gasps Shryrae. «I never imagined having a human would feel like this!»

«You're going to be a popular girl—*unh!*—back in the warren,» says Rhazille with a little grunt as she sinks down on Holt, nearly all the way down. Almost there. «Everyone's going to want a turn on this thing.»

«Do I really have to go back?»

«Yes. It is the will of the Episkopos,» says Rhazille, definitive and sharp; she's the kind of spider who somehow loses none of her authority even while taking over a foot of once-human cock. But she can read the flicker of hurt disappointment on her friend's face. «Cheer up, Shry. You're going to be too busy fucking to care about Midway.» Rhazille puts some extra oomph into her movements now, riding harder, as if by way of apology. . .

«I thought. . .» It's difficult for Shryrae to speak, both because of what she wants to say and because of the sensation of Rhazille going up and down on her new penis. She pants between the works, saying «I thought. . .I could stay here with *you*. . .it would be like. . .like we were when you lived in the warren. . .»

«Shry. . . we can't,» says Rhazille, slowing her pace. Shryrae looks away, but Rhazille takes a claw and tilts her face back up. «It's just how it has to be. Sorry.» And Rhazille takes one of Shry's claws in hers, and leans in closer, and puts another claw behind her head to pull her in for a kiss, Rhaz angling her head just slightly before contact so their fangs don't clash, and their lips touch, and press together, and open. . .

Rhazille forces herself down, finally getting all of Shryrae's new cock into her pussy. She grinds hard into Shryrae's hips while they make out; the spiders clutch each other in their arms, both of them snaking their claws into the space between them to squeeze and rub the other's breasts. They writhe tight against each other, claws digging furrows in the fur on their backs as they move. Rhazille continues to fuck herself on Shryrae's cock as they kiss, and it isn't long before she pulls away to announce «I'm gonna cum!»

Deep inside Rhazille, Holt is now fully seated into the spider all the way to his base. All around him he's being squeezed harder than ever before by a series of fluttering, rippling contractions that feel so powerful that they should be crushing his body, not giving him the most intense pleasure he's ever felt. He's pure hardness now, built for the environment; it's his duty and pleasure to withstand this pressure. Everywhere Rhazille's muscles press him there is the exquisite sensation of his fleshy shaft body overcoming her grip, pulling out and pushing in against her resistance. This is what he was meant for.

Rhazille throws her head back and lets out a deep moan as her orgasm surges through her. She allows herself to go limp; now it's Shryrae holding her up. Shryrae takes over the motion, desperate to keep pumping into the wilted spider on top of her. She's so *close*—granted, this is her first time with a cock, but this is pretty unmistakable. «I—I think I'm going to cum too,» she says.

“Shit,» says Rhazille, snapping out of her reverie. She knows if Shryrae's giant cock goes off inside her even these spider-size condoms won't be able to

contain the enormous amount of cum released by a human at the climax of the change. With reluctance she forces herself to dismount, wresting herself out of Shryrae's grip and off her body before the very surprised spider can react.

As Holt slips out of Rhazille, Shryrae squeaks unhappily, almost pained, at the sudden absence. «Unh—Rhaz! No! I'm about to cum!»

Holt lashes out in frustration—to the maximum extent a cock can—by using the last little bit of control he has over the movement of his new body to twitch violently. *Back in! Put me back in!* he screams mentally, though the craggy drooling slit his mouth is now doesn't move at all. In fact if the spiders could see through the condom, the only sign of his unhappiness would be the furrows in the faint brows above his sinking eyes; it's difficult to read the expressions of a glans.

«Hush. I'll get you off with my claws.» says Rhazille. She knows it's not nearly as good, and it's not exactly fair she already got to get off on the massive throbbing shaft Holt is now, but Shryrae's nearly there already and momentum will surely get her the rest of the way. She grabs on to the new cock with all six claws and strokes hard and fast. The latex around him is still so wet from being inside her that it glistens. She has the urge to rip the condom off; she wants to watch this thing *spurt*, to clearly see the faint remnants of the human's face as he blows the first load of his new life as a penis. . .but that would be messy, and in her post-orgasmic state she remembers the Doctor watching through that one-way mirror. He's already likely to have uncomfortable questions about her conduct during this procedure. So she rubs fast and squeezes hard, particularly hard at the base to ensure there won't be any leakage. «Cum for me, Shry,» she says.

Lying on the table, the golden-furred spider clenches her claws into little balls, turns her neck and tenses her shoulders, squeezes all her eyes shut, then starts making this shrill, squeaking, rising moan that keeps getting louder and higher until it seems like all the windows should be shattering around them. Her penis, the shaft once known as Holt McGeesken, stiff and hard as steel pipe wrapped in a millimeter of rubber, twitches and bucks so hard Rhazille has trouble holding on. Even through all that cockmeat she can feel the powerful surge of spider cum rushing up through him.

As much as Holt wanted to be doing this inside the spider, whatever complaints he had—along with all other thoughts in his head—are eliminated by Shryrae's orgasm blasting up, through, and out of his body. It feels like he's a fire hose of pure pleasure. His entire conscious experience is the sensation of gallons of pressurized spider jizz forced through him and the joyful feeling of expelling it. Everything suddenly goes milky white for Holt as the condom around him bloats with trapped cum.

Shryrae wriggles and twists as Rhazille continues her ministrations, milking more and more cum out of her, back arched against the table, squeaks of pleasure interrupted by gasps for breath. Rhazille takes a couple claws off

the shaft to rub these big new testicles—have to get as much out as possible. . . Spurt after spurt the condom fills up, and after an orgasm that seems to go on for minutes Shryrae is well and fully spent. She lies utterly exhausted on her back, dazed and happy, limp and panting, while her new cock softens one twitch at a time in Rhazille’s claws.

Shryrae weakly picks her head up off the table and catches Rhazille’s eyes. The spiders can’t help but smile at each other. «Rhazille, that was amazing,» she says.

«If you think that was good, I think you’re going to like having a human,» says Rhazille.

«Oh, yes, I am certain—» says Shryrae, before the door to the room suddenly opens. The two spiders swivel their startled faces toward the figures at the door like teenagers caught messing around when someone’s parents get home early. Sixteen eyes go wide and then squint at the bright highway light.

It’s the man in gray and the other spider from before. He stands there impassively surveying the sordid scene in front of him. Nobody moves. Rhazille doesn’t even release her grip on Shryrae’s cock. “Ladies,” says the Doctor. “Our employees begin arriving a half hour from now, so let’s move things along, hmm? Rhazille, I trust you’ll safely dispose of. . . *that*, and use your keycard to lock up.”

“Oh, uh, yes Doctor.”

“Good. I’ll see you in the office later.”

He closes the door, leaving Rhazille standing there holding a penis rapidly going flaccid and a condom containing an implausible amount of spider cum. It looks like a white watermelon in a grocery bag.

Shryrae turns quizzically back to Rhazille. «What did that odd human want—*EEK!*» she squeals as her friend begins to slide the condom off.

Holt is shocked out of mindless bliss, returning unpleasantly to his senses as the spider pinches him at his base to form a tight ring with her claw and moves up. He’s sensitive all over, far too sensitive to want these touches from Rhazille as she pulls the condom off of his shaft body, squeezing him tight in order to leak as little as possible. Even the plush inner surfaces of her claws are much too much, and the condom sliding off his body is like being tickled while unable to move. He braces himself for when she gets to the ridge separating his shaft from his delicate new head—and when they get there he can barely withstand the spider’s digits rolling over his most sensitive part.

«Ah—*ah!*» squeals Shryrae.

Finally free, Holt welcomes the fresh air moving over his body for the first time. He plops back down into the fur between his new host’s legs. His damp shaft cools in the air, while the soft fur against his delicate underside warms him and lulls him into quickly drifting off again.

«I don’t think he liked that.»

«Yeah, well, he can relax now.» says Rhazille as she ever so carefully tries to tie a knot in the condom. Nicking this thing with a clawtip would be

catastrophic. «But we've got to go.»

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Now Shryrae is waiting for Rhazille to buy her a hot dog. Originally they were going to march right back to the station to begin their long journey back to the warren, but Shryrae quickly found the change had not only exhausted her but made her absolutely ravenous.

«Rhazille! You promised! You promised me we could get something from one of these moving-food-places!» she had whined until Rhazille was worried she was going to throw a temper tantrum right there on the sidewalk. And to be fair neither of them had eaten since they left the warren in the wee hours of the night. Rhazille had to admit she was starving too, and *she* wasn't the one who'd just done the taxing job of transforming a human into her gigantic penis.

So they are now in line at a food truck in a plaza downtown on the Boulevard of Eyes. It's the morning rush and all around them spiders are coming and going. The line is long; they'll be waiting a while. Shryrae is looking all over, at the ceiling, the buildings, the people, taking her first opportunity to just stand still and observe—before now they were always either in a vehicle or she had Rhazille prodding her onward. It's all fascinating and incomprehensible to her but she wants to see *everything*, and her heart breaks all over again that she has to give it up.

Behind them a high-end lingerie and accessories shop occupies the ground floor of a caverscraper. The entire sales floor is visible through the glass storefront and Shryrae is mesmerized by the racks of colorful, silky garments and the six-armed mannequins modeling them. There's a pair of spider women inside browsing the wares; one of them has a human just like Shryrae does. She's trying something on, pulling it up to her hips and trying to fit her dick into it. This takes some manipulation, but soon it is apparent the garment is a pair of panties specifically designed for spiders with human cocks—there's an open tube of lacy material at the front, and as the spider pulls her human through it it becomes a kind of sleeve that stretches around it and extends halfway up the shaft. The spider puts her claws on her hips and strikes a little pose for her companion, who gives her a thumbs up and grins.

How pretty, Shryrae thinks, choking back jealousy at the fact that she'll never get to wear anything like that, never have Rhazille tell her she likes the way she looks in these strange human clothes. . . Then her focus shifts, and she's looking at her own reflection in the glass. Her golden coat, the beautiful, wild lines constituting Eris's Maze, and now the fiery burst of crimson fur surrounding and adorning her new addition, calling attention to the bright pink penis. She's like a sunburst in yellows and reds. She thinks about the human on the train that had wanted her to be in one of those. . . what had

Rhazille called it? The public treasure hoard? Her shoulders slump. She would have been so perfect for it.

«Hey. Here you go,» says Rhazille. She's got six hot dogs and she's holding three out to Shryrae, who wordlessly accepts them.

This is her first time seeing a hot dog as they're meant to be. Given their sacramental importance to Eris she's had them before, of course—but those were the ones that had made the long journey underground, carried by the spiders from the warren brave enough to raid closed gas stations or seize them from unlucky campers. And they were only scraps, meaty little pink shreds after they'd been divided up enough for everyone to have a taste. Bunless, no condiments, lukewarm. The steaming hot weiners she now holds in her claws, with their fluffy buns and bright sine-wave stripes of red and yellow, seem like something entirely different, something almost *heretical* in comparison.

«Can...can I really eat it like this? With a bun?» asks Shryrae.

«You can take the bun off if you really want, but you're going to get *kechaap* all over your fur.» Rhazille digs in without any further comment.

Shryrae can't help staring at the hot dogs in holy awe. She feels somehow unworthy. But...if such a thing was good enough to comfort Goddess after she was so cruelly snubbed, maybe it'll make her less sad about never seeing Midway again. She takes a breath, steadies herself, and takes a bite—and at the very moment her fangs pierce the rubbery skin, flooding her mouth with salty processed meat juices, Eris floods her mind with revelation. Suddenly she knows *exactly* what to do. Goddess has shown her.

The two spiders stand there eating for a minute. If Rhazille was more observant, she might be suspicious about the odd expression of calm that's suddenly befallen her friend, but Rhazille doesn't seem to want to meet her eyes...is it guilt? Now that the hard part of her job is over, Rhazille's single-minded focus on the task at hand has slackened enough to let a little sympathy for her friend seep in. It also helps that she finally has something in her stomach and that she's just been well-fucked by Shry's new cock. Poor Shry. Of course she wants to stay, who wouldn't? But Rhazille has her orders.

«Good?» asks Rhazille, who's almost done with her first hot dog.

«Amazing,» says Shryrae.

«Good. I'll, uh, bring you some more next time I visit the warren.»

«That would be nice!»

«You had better be ready to be popular once you get back home,» says Rhazille. «Everyone's going to want to play with your new human.»

«Sounds fun!»

«How's the human doing? Noisy? Does he still seem angry?»

Shryrae thinks for a second. «He was making some noise earlier. It's strange having someone in my head who isn't me. But he's quiet now. I think he's tired.»

«Yes, cumming does that to them,» nods Rhazille. «It usually takes a while for humans to accept their new shape. He may be uncooperative for a

week or two. Just get him off if you have trouble with him. The more you do it the faster he'll adjust to being a cock. I'm sure everyone in the warren will help.»

«Oh, he didn't seem very mad anymore, just confused. I think he knows he's meant to be a cock. I just wish I could talk humanly so I can tell him it's okay and that I know he'll be a great cock!»

«You don't need to talk to him,» Rhazille quickly says. «All he needs to understand is that he's your penis, and the best way to make him understand that is using him.»

«I suppose that makes sense.»

The pair returns to silence. Midway's street scene plays out around them as they stand and eat. Spiders of all sizes and colors go by on foot and on scooters. Humans too, going about their day totally unconcerned to be doing so alongside spiders. A human man walks right past them, talking into his rectangle, paying no attention to Shryrae, Rhazille, or another spider woman coming the other way—this woman is running for some reason, but not very fast or from anything in particular as far as Shryrae can tell; she's wearing these strange fuzzy bands around her forehead and all her wrists, and something very tight around her chest that seems like it must squeeze her boobs. As the jogger passes the human she turns around for a moment to leer at him, clearly desiring him. But not taking him. Nor does the human seem to worry for a second that she will, or any of the other spiders around him. Such a strange place, but Shryrae's getting used to it.

When they're both nearly done eating, Rhazille says «Listen, I'm sorry you can't stay. I know you wanted to see more of Midway. I know you wanted. . .for us. . .» At a loss for words, Rhazille makes an empty gesture with her claw, shrugs, and heaves a sigh. In a very small voice she adds «It *would* have been nice. I'm sorry, Shry.»

«It's totally okay, Rhaz.» Shryrae smiles. «Don't worry! I know we all have to do what Eris asks of us.»

«Thanks.» For once Rhazille's stern face cracks and she smiles back. «We've got to go, okay?»

«Right behind you.»

It only takes them a few minutes to walk further down the Boulevard to the Tube station. A train actually pulls into the station just as they're arriving, gliding in on the elevated tracks over the sidewalk with a muffled rumble. It's busy and crowded in the station, and they're fighting against the tide of the train's departing passengers, but with Rhazille pulling Shryrae along they manage to make it to the platform before the train departs with time to spare. They are among the last to board, but there are still two free seats along the wall right next to the door. Perfect.

Rhazille plops into one seat, indicates for Shryrae to sit next to her, and immediately pulls out her phone. «Goddess, it's nice to sit down after all that. Doesn't that feel good? Just relax, Shry, we'll be home before you know it.»

Shryrae sits quietly, claws folded neatly on top of the flaccid human cock resting in her lap.

Ding–DING–ding.

At the tone, Shryrae stands up. With her attention absorbed by her phone Rhazille fails to notice for a few crucial seconds. When she senses that Shryrae is no longer next to her she jumps to her feet in a panic, swiveling her head around to find the golden-furred spider, and sees that she is only a few feet away—back on the platform, on the other side of the open doors.

«Shryrae!» she screams. Shryrae just stands at the edge of the platform with a calm smile.

Rhazille rushes to the door, but in the few intervening seconds other passengers have already moved into the empty space as if to block her. “Move! Fuck, out of my way!” Rhazille fights to maneuver around them—Shryrae’s calm expression remains unabated as she watches the struggle—and just as Rhazille gets to the door and is reaching out as if to yank Shryrae back on board, the train’s doors slide shut and the girls are separated by aluminum and glass.

«Shryrae! SHRYRAE!» Furious, Rhazille hits the window with a balled-up claw. «You have to go back!» she screams.

«But I don’t want to,» says Shryrae. She smiles happily, waving farewell with the digits of a single claw as the train begins to move. «Bye Rhazille!»

Rhazille is still pounding on the window and yelling but can no longer be heard over the noise of the train in motion. As it pulls away, Shryrae continues to watch and wave to Rhazille’s angry face in the window, receding into the distance until the train vanishes around a bend, and then suddenly it seems very quiet in the station even with the background noise of Midway going on around her. The platform is empty except for her.

Shryrae looks down at her penis. «I guess it’s just you and me now... *Kkkhhooolt,*» she says, croaking out his strange human name. If she’s going to be a city spider she should probably make the effort to remember her cock’s name. Using your cock’s name seems like a very city spider thing to do.

She makes her way out of the station and back onto the Midway streets. A few spiders and humans alike are giving Shryrae obvious once-overs as they pass. She attempts to give everyone a friendly smile, even the humans, but only a few of the spiders return it. She has no idea where she is within Midway or how to navigate in this unfamiliar place. But she *does* know where she’s going, if not how to get there. There’s something Shryrae’s been hanging on to this whole time, ever since that strange human woman aboard the motion-thing had given it to her—that little paper card, clutched in her lower left claw. And even if she can’t read it, she knows it’s the key to getting where she wants to be: in that public treasure hoard, crowds of spiders and humans alike coming to admire and adore her...

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The intersection of Seventh Fifth Street and the Boulevard of Eyes is one of the busiest in the city, with heavy traffic both vehicular and pedestrian at all hours of the day. Presently among the pedestrians waiting at the corner for the light to change is one Zerrik, nurse at Midway General Hospital on his way in for his shift. A buzzing river of electric scooters separates him from the opposite side of the Boulevard. The light takes forever here, and it always catches him on his way in to work, but he doesn't mind—this corner is where the flagship Vrekniia's Secret store is located, and none of the spider girls inside seem to care about being visible through the enormous storefront windows while they try on the wares. Several are even putting on a show for passers-by. Zerrik's been captivated by this one girl, fur black and glossy as a vinyl record, who can't seem to decide which pair of panties to buy. After she works each pair up her thighs and around her big round butt, she lets the band snap into place off her claw, shakes her ass and looks over her shoulder towards the street. . . Across the intersection, the crosswalk light switches to a six-armed figure in white and scooter traffic comes to a halt. Zerrik isn't watching and doesn't notice. Some days the light'll cycle three times or more before he moves on.

All of a sudden there's this blonde spider girl occluding his view. She's right in front of him, well within his personal space bubble, waving a business card in his face and. . . squeaking something?

"Whoa. Uh, hello," says Zerrik, backing away a step and examining the intruder. She has long, golden yellow fur except for the darker areas around her claws, the bright red around her human cock, and the—is that a Huntsman dye job she's wearing? Sure looks like it. Oh boy.

The girl just shakes the business card and chitters.

Zerrik doesn't know what she's trying to say, but she sounds impatient. "Is that. . . are you speaking deep spider?" The two blink at each other. "Do you not know English?"

Shryrae puts five of her claws on her hips, annoyed. «Honestly,» she huffs. «What kind of spider doesn't know how to talk like a spider?» She waves the business card again. «Here! I want to know how to go here!»

Zerrik looks again at the tangled lines dyed into her fur and the big, limp human penis hanging between the girl's legs. "Are. . . you're not a Huntsman, are you?" He looks around to see if there are any AAA officers nearby. Too late for that human, but feels like maybe the kind of thing he ought to report anyway.

She doesn't respond, but she really seems to want him to look at this business card. Now she's pointing at it with another claw.

"Wait, is this just some kind of ad?" He leans in to inspect the card. "Ferrica Minuet. Curator. The Minuet Galleries," he reads aloud. "Do you

work there? Is this, like, performance art?” He reaches to take the card but Shryrae makes an alarmed, unhappy squeak and yanks it back. “Alright, alright, it’s yours.”

«You can’t help me, can you?» Shryrae sighs and lets her shoulders slump.

“Hang on,” says Zerrik, able to at least understand the defeated tone in the spider’s voice. “Do you want to *go* there?” He leans in again to read the address in small print. “Pixcreel Avenue. Yeah, I know where that is. It’s not that far, you just gotta go down Seventh Fifth and take a left at Four Bees—”

Zerrik points an arm, and as soon as he does Shryrae perks up and burbles pleasantly, then dashes off in the indicated direction. Unfortunately it’s across the Boulevard and the crosswalk light has just switched back to a red, spread spider claw. Shryrae is blissfully unaware of the concept of jaywalking, nor does she have any reason to think this nice clear path is going to have scooters streaming through it in both directions just as she reaches the midpoint, but that’s precisely what happens. All around her there is a sudden cacophony of horns, motors, and squealing tires, and she has no idea what to do other than cover her head with her arms and cower. The drivers, reacting with fury like only motorists who’ve had their commute delayed by three seconds can, buzz past her at daredevil distances so narrow her fur is blown around in the draft, making rude gestures that would certainly hurt her feelings if she understood them. She shrieks, cowers some more, and then begins dashing back and forth, switching directions every time she has a near miss. Somehow, perhaps by the grace of Eris, she ends up safe on the opposite curb. The frightened spider collects herself, smooths out her fur, and then hurries on her way.

Huh. Zerrik wonders what that was all about before realizing he’s missed the light himself, and he’s not about to try the same stunt. Ah, well. He turns back to Vrekniiaa’s Secret, where just beyond the window there’s a rose-colored spider putting on a bra and holding several more in her claws, trying to get the right fit for her large chest, and soon he’s thoroughly forgotten Shryrae.

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Dr. Ewell Schlangenkraft is sitting at a table set for three near the balcony at Egkax’s All Day Egg Roll, Midway’s trendiest 24-hour fusion Chinese brunch restaurant and rooftop bar and Skee-Ball parlor. Decent scenery, he has to admit. The restaurant is located on the negative-37th floor terrace of a cavescraper (three stories up, for topsiders) located right next to the State Underground campus, giving it an expansive view of the city’s downtown to one side and the college’s quad to the other, with its moss-covered buildings and students milling about. But the Skee-Ball machines do not, in the Doctor’s opinion, contribute positively to the restaurant’s ambience.

There’s a whole bank of them lined up across the terrace, right against the opposite balcony, every one occupied with spiders holding drinks and spare

spheres in their claws as they wind up and enthusiastically release balls down polished lanes into concentric hoops, creating an endless rumble and clatter loud enough to drown out not only the Midway traffic but most conversation. Rolling a 500 or better at Egkax's gets you a free cocktail of your choice; it's an inherently self-limiting kind of deal, though there are a few regulars talented enough to reliably get wasted off it. Most are not this skilled. In fact errant Skee-Balls occasionally go wayward enough to sail off the balcony entirely, making the sidewalk underneath Egkax's a well-known hazard for pedestrians and parking alike.

The Doctor is restless. He pushes his heavy black-rimmed glasses up his nose, swirls the bubbly water in his tall clear glass around, brushes a strand of fine white hair off his forehead, and checks his wristwatch, frowning all the while. He sighs at the unoccupied third seat across from him. To the Doctor's immediate right a female spider sits close at hand. She has charcoal-gray fur and wears an odd black and white getup that looks like the result of a French maid's laundry getting mixed up with a BDSM dungeon's. She sits perfectly upright, facing forward, claws folded quietly in her lap and on the table.

"Skenge, you're sure it was ten, right? She said she was coming at ten?" asks the Doctor, without looking at his companion.

"Yes sir, ten. I believe she said something about a faculty meeting that required her attendance."

"Hmm." The Doctor sips his mineral water unhappily and checks his watch again. He asks, tone indicating he has little to no interest in the answer, "What did it cost to get a same-day reservation here, anyway?"

"One of the new social media interns, sir," says Skenge. "The Department of Restaurant Reservation Rationing asked us to transfer a human to their personal supervision for a month."

"Well, that's why we hire so many of them," he says, turning the wine list over again before lapsing back into silence.

Egkax's has a number of wide-screen TVs on the walls and the island bar in the middle of the terrace. The Doctor happens to catch one out of the corner of his eye and grimaces. He certainly can't hear it over all the noise up here, and it's too far away to read the text of the UDKA-TV news chyron, but it's the same damn thing they've been showing for the last two days: Lieutenant Skeila. Clips of her coming down on the freight elevator with Greenstreet. Clips of the interview where she revealed what she'd done to him—likely, sadly, with his full consent. (In a rare show of cooperation, the MARC and City Hall had both leaned on UDKA to stop showing her first impromptu interview, agreeing that she'd dropped far too many inconvenient names.) And clips of her running down the street, chasing that idiot McGeesken, just before he tried to shoot her. And here the Doctor allows himself an almost invisible smile. At least *one* problem was solved.

"Skenge? Sidwell Greenstreet *is* coming in on Tuesday, is he not?"

“Yes sir,” says Skenge. “I’ve scheduled all the usual onboarding meetings and requisitioned a senior grade laptop from IT. Kiklori’s cleared out a desk for him on the SCI floor and we have a badge and keycard for him. His network login is ready, his email address is s dot greenstreet at marc dot spider, and he’ll get 20 MARCMeals points a week on his cafeteria account.”

“Good, good. Set up lunch for the both of us when he comes in. And. . .” The Doctor frowns at the television as the view switches from a candid shot of Skeila in her AAA uniform to a close-up of the spider’s crotch, where Sid hangs between her legs. “And have someone call Lieutenant Skeila and confirm he will be coming in. You know, just a reminder, hmm?”

After a couple further minutes a spider waitress materializes from between the other tables and flits up to the Doctor, startling him. “Hiii!” chirps the waitress, a skinny spider girl with bright red fur and pink bands around her arms. “Would you like to order, or are we still waiting? Can I get you a refill?”

“We’re still waiting, but yes actually, if I could get another Pellegrino—” says the Doctor before suddenly stopping. His gaze is fixed at a downward angle in the direction of State U. “You know what?” he says. “I see our third now. Why don’t you come back in a few minutes?”

Down on the sidewalk, about half a block up the street in the midst of the early morning pedestrians, a spider woman gives the Doctor a big, cheerful, three-armed wave. He does not return the gesture, but she grins all the same. She was wondering when the Doctor would notice her coming. She’d been watching *him* for a minute now of course, sitting right next to the balcony, stark against the dark building, with that little *servant* of his. . .

This spider’s got tan fur the color of heavily creamed coffee and it’s not apparent how old she is; there are some some light lines on her face but it’s difficult to tell with spiders. The claws on her hands and feet are long, black, and polished to a mirror finish. Her eyes are the deep purple of polished amethyst and the two largest ones shine from behind a pair of glasses with thick cat eye frames—those specs, and the tight bun the fur on her head is tied into, give her the aura of a librarian. Yet there is something else in her manner, some extra sharpness woven into her. . .the kind of spider who’d be equally unsurprising found behind the research desk at the Midway Public Book Depository or strapping on some thigh-high leather boots and retiring to her dungeon for an evening of whipping submissives.

And a minute later it’s that spider who’s up on the terrace taking the third seat across from the Doctor. He doesn’t seem happy about it. He acknowledges her with a frown and barely visible nod. Next to him Skenge has gone downright frosty, stock-still and eyes locked on the new arrival like she might be a wild animal that could strike at any moment.

“Doctor! It’s good to see you again,” the newcomer says.

The Doctor begins to say “Mar—” but stops and glances around nervously, as if anyone could hear him over the noise generated by a slammed brunch

restaurant featuring 23 active Skee-Ball lanes.

The spider smiles at her interlocutor's unease. "It's Professor Ehztaria. Lovely to meet you."

The Doctor raises an eyebrow. "Right. Professor."

"Look at us," titters the spider, "just a couple of academics discussing scholarly matters over brunch."

"Mmm."

"I'm sorry we couldn't meet in the *usual* fashion, Doctor, but we had an all-hands faculty meeting just before—my apologies for running late, by the way—and as I mentioned, I have a service to conduct afterwards. Busy, busy, busy. But it's so nice of you to treat me! My students have been talking about this place so much lately."

"We'll expense it. Listen, *professor*, we need to discuss the situation with our...subject."

Professor Ehztaria is just about to reply, mouth open and claw raised in the sort of soothing gesture one might use to shush a baby or calm an agitated herd animal, when all of a sudden that waitress reappears just over the Doctor's shoulder. "Hiii! Are we ready to order?" she asks, sending him jumping a mile high.

"Can you come back to me?" says the professor, resting a clawtip on her mouth in deliberation. "I just can't decide. It all looks so good!"

The waitress looks at the Doctor, who waves a hand dismissively. "I'm not even hungry. Skenge?"

But Skenge turns to the Doctor, full of concern. "Oh, sir, you really should eat something. You barely had any breakfast."

"I know, I know, but I just don't have an appetite. Not with all *this* on my mind."

"We could split the nine piece egg roll basket, sir. It comes with your choice of dipping sauce. You do like dipping sauces, sir."

"I do like sauces," admits the Doctor. "I suppose that's fine, if you eat what I don't."

"You know what we could do," the professor chimes in across the table, "is get the egg roll platter for us all to share."

"I think it would be simplest for the Doctor and I to split our meal," snips Skenge.

The professor continues undeterred, pointing at a line on the menu. "It says here the platter comes with one of each kind of the house dipping sauces. Maybe the Doctor would like to try some *different* sauces?" Skenge's glaring at this professor like she's trying to bore a hole through her head, but she pays her no mind, inquiring to the waitress, "Do you think that would be enough for everyone?"

"Oh sure," says the waitress, "It serves about three spiders or eight humans and it comes with two of every flavor of Egkax Jumbo Rolls, so that's original,

double pork, shrimp, pepperoni, potato n' cheddar, peanut butter, jalapeno raspberry—”

“Yes, fine,” says the Doctor testily. “Sounds great. Egg roll platter for the table.”

“You got it!” chirps the waitress. “And for drinks?”

“Mimosas, right?” says the professor. “It simply wouldn’t be a proper brunch without mimosas.”

“I..oh, what the hell, I suppose I should fortify myself. Why not,” says the Doctor.

“Splendid. Three mimosas, then?”

“Skenge doesn’t drink,” he says.

“I don’t drink,” Skenge repeats quietly, still glowering at the other spider.

“Two mimosas,” says the professor with a dazzling smile for the waitress as she hands over their menus; the waitress takes them as she simultaneously writes down the table’s order with her other claws and then flits away across the terrace, leaving the three to sit in silence. Skenge scowls, Professor Ehztaria happily ignores her, and the Doctor resumes checking over his shoulder for anyone who might be listening in.

“As I was saying,” he says after finally convincing himself there are no eavesdroppers, “we need to discuss the situation.”

“The situation with our Shryrae? Oh, I’m sure she’s fine. It’s her first time in Midway, Doctor, she just wants to run off and have some fun. Spin her silk, as we say. She’ll turn up, don’t worry.”

The Doctor gives her a long stare, drumming his bony fingers on the table. “My primary concern is the human we entrusted to her.”

“Well he certainly isn’t going anywhere without her, is he?”

“Professor. Don’t be obtuse.”

“*Doctor*. Didn’t I warn you about exactly this possibility?”

The Doctor’s knit brows furrow further, but he does not offer a rejoinder.

“I take no pleasure in saying I told you so, my dear Doctor, but you *are* the one who insisted we use an out-of-towner when we have so many perfectly loyal spiders in Midway that could have done the job. I knew it was unwise. If a spider has not been born into this environment,” and here Professor Ehztaria indicates the whole city around them with a grand sweep of her claw, “with all of the luxuries and amusements that you humans so generously provide, and all of the excitement of being around so *many* of your kind for the first time, well, they must be, how shall I say it, so cautiously eassssssed into it.”

Just as the professor begins hissing out that “ease”, two things happen simultaneously: the Doctor’s red eyes widen in alarm and the waitress clunks two mimosas onto the table, spider-sized servings in scaled-up champagne flutes that are bigger than beer steins. He looks up on the verge of panic expecting the waitress to react somehow, but she’s already off to the next table. Nevertheless the Doctor swivels back to Professor Ehztaria with eyes afire. “We are in *public*,” he spits.

“My accent comes out sometimes. It’s difficult to avoid,” says the professor as she proceeds to sip her mimosa. “Oh, this is delightful. So tangy!”

The Doctor tries to collect himself. “Perhaps you should work on that, hmm? And the point of using a spider from outside Midway was to keep the human outside Midway.”

“I can’t help where I come from,” replies the professor, smile undimmed. “And you really needn’t worry. We keep our humans, Doctor. It’s our *raison d’être*. Shryrae’s new penis is as equally far removed from human concerns here as it would be if we sent her to a nest under Siberia. We simply need to wait for the excitement of Midway to wear off. Let the girl have fun and enjoy her new toy.”

“I do not want her staying in Midway! The point of all this was not to send her on some kind of journey of self-actualization, the point was to make a problem vanish. I offered him to you on the condition that you make him go away. I cannot have him turning up again, Margreta! He needs removed from the city!”

The spider does not seem bothered by her agitated dining companion’s outburst. Instead her smile just grows wider.

“Do you find something amusing?”

“Spider or human, we are all products of our environment, aren’t we? Needs removed, indeed.”

The Doctor squints at the spider across from him for a moment before realization strikes. He rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, fine. Needs *to be* removed. Satisfied? That’s just how people speak here, you know. It’s not even wrong.”

“I’m certain I didn’t say it was.”

“I’m not going to sit here and be lectured on English by a spider, regardless of whatever fabricated credentials you’ve set up for yourself.”

“Doctor. I earned my degree as surely as you did.”

“Oh, please, because you wrote some papers about old spider fairy tales? I had to complete a residency—” The Doctor catches himself. He takes a deep breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. “This conversation is becoming unproductive.” Skenge, who has remained silent all this time, puts a comforting claw on the Doctor’s arm before continuing to stare hatefully at the other spider.

“I do hope I haven’t upset you, Doctor. I find your manner of speaking charming and your accent delightful.”

The Doctor is unamused, and if looks could kill then the expression Skenge’s laying on the professor would be lethal out to 50 yards. But at that moment the waitress reappears again, now bearing a circular plastic platter that takes her three claws to hold. She sets it down on the table, presenting the trio with dozens of egg rolls radially fanned out on a blanket of green checkered wax paper. In the center a quincunx of ramekins holds five different dipping sauces: sweet and sour, hot buffalo, blue cheese, pickle relish, and orange marmalade.

“Anything else I can get you? No? Okay enjoyyyy!” says the waitress, and she’s off.

“Good grief,” says the Doctor as he looks over the spread. “Aren’t there all these different flavors? How are we meant to know which is which?”

“Consider it a lesson from Eris in accepting life’s inherent chaos,” says Professor Ehztaria, deftly plucking an egg roll from the circle in front of them. Her fangs pierce the crispy golden brown exterior and she chews thoughtfully. “Bananas and chocolate sauce, I think. Not bad.”

The Doctor selects a roll gingerly and without enthusiasm, as if handling a large exotic beetle. “Hmm. Skenge, bite into this and see if you can tell what it is.”

Skenge does so, taking the egg roll and daintily biting off a corner. “Looks like tuna and cheese, sir.”

“You eat that one. How about this one?”

She repeats the process, holding the original roll in a spare claw and giving the new one a thoughtful chew. “I think this one’s just pork, sir.”

“Perfect. I’ll take that one.”

In this fashion the trio works through their meal, Professor Ehztaria scooping up rolls at random while Skenge serves as the Doctor’s taste-tester and reject disposal. Dipping sauces are daubed (the Doctor carefully pours out small blobs of all five sauces on his plate, so as not to cross-contaminate), mimosas are sipped, and in fact it’s remarkable how much the Doctor seems to loosen up as the man’s belly fills and the level of orange liquid in that oversized glass trends downward. Where he was once hunched over secretive and turtle-like, he now sits at perfect ease with himself and the world, arms wide with one on the back of his chair as he makes expressive hand gestures while he speaks as though this terrace is the court from which he rules Midway. If he wore a tie it’d be halfway undone about now. Somehow he and the professor have gotten deep into the weeds in a conversation on the history of psychiatry.

“Lacan! Of course you’re a Lacanian. God, you would have been right at home in his seminars sponging up that obscurantist drivel. I can just imagine it, back in time, you sprawled out on some Parisian divan lapping up that ridiculous nonsense alongside the rest of his followers.”

“Oh *can* you imagine me, now?” Professor Ehztaria is leaning down with her chin cupped in a claw, elbow on the table. She gives him an amused smile.

“Well, you would have been relegated to the catacombs, of course. Perhaps he’d have held special sessions for spiders, I don’t know.” The Doctor pauses to drain the last drops from his glass. “You *have* spent some time in Europe, haven’t you? Even the MARC’s investigations haven’t figured out exactly where. You hide yourself well.”

She blanks his question. “So I take it, Doctor, you’re one of those psychiatrists who reject psychoanalysis.”

“What I reject,” and here he tips his empty glass in her direction, “is unscientific nonsense. Which is what your Lacan and his Freud and all the other dream-interpreters and fortune-tellers were. They had no *real* conception of the mind, since they had no real conception of the mechanics of the brain. Not that we have a true understanding today, of course, but it’s like comparing Dalton’s basic theory of the atom with Aristotle thinking everything was made out of air, water, fire, or...what was the fourth one?”

“Earth.”

“Earth, yes. Silliness with purely historical value. They ought to ban teaching that stuff to undergrads. Strangle it in the cradle. If you think about it, really, the field was utterly in the dark before Pavlov.”

“I confess I’m ignorant of his teachings,” says Professor Ehztaria, gently patting her mouth with a napkin and wiping off her fangs. “And as much as I’d love to stay here and listen to you explain them over another round of drinks—”

“Ha. I don’t think so, professor. I have to go back to the office and these things must have a half a bottle of champagne each,” he says, idly turning the giant empty glass in front of him.

“In any case, I have to conduct our Revelry, so I’m afraid we must part ways until our next rendezvous. Unless you’d like to come observe the ceremony.”

“Observe. Ha.” Another of those mirthless laughs.

“I’m quite serious. It’s going to be a special one and I think you’d find it quite edifying. I’d personally guarantee your safety, of course. None of my flock would dare lay a claw on *you*, Doctor. I would never let anyone take you.”

There is a silence during which the spider across the table fixes the Doctor with her purple eyes, and as he stares back at her from behind his heavy glasses he has the horrible sensation of falling into an illimitable violet abyss. It’s as if he’s paralyzed. Now, prosaic Dr. Schlangenkraft knows that spiders have no innate powers of hypnosis, no gorgon-like ability to immobilize and kill through vision alone. (Hell, there were studies done on that specific idea back in the 60s when they’d throw money at anything; he’s read them.) Surely he’s just experiencing diminished reflexes from the massive dose of ethanol he’s just imbibed. Yet as seconds pass like years he simply cannot move. Can’t even take his eyes away.

What is it that frees him? An accident of light, city glare reflecting in one lens of his glasses long enough to cut this spider’s gaze down to half-power? Or is it Skenge, who’s been next to the Doctor, *her* Doctor, all the while, righteous anger at this fraud sitting across from her silently building and building like a steel cable under ever-increasing tension. She knows it’s not her place to speak, but in this long, dangerous silence she cannot help herself. She puts a claw on his arm where it lies on the table, a gesture too intimate for a mere employee...“Sir?” Somehow her quiet voice cuts through all the noise up on

the terrace, the raucous conversations, the clatter of Skee-Balls, traffic from below. “Sir?” she asks again.

“Hmm? What?” The Doctor jerks his head left, blinking like someone being rudely woken from a nap, and looks around blankly. He’s shaken; whatever ebullience he had is gone. He draws his arms in again, closing himself off. “Don’t...don’t be ridiculous, professor. Go, do your ritual. But I’m telling you—find that spider.”

“Consider it done. But what I’ve been trying to tell you is that it never mattered which spider we used, or where we sent that human. He’s not coming back. He’s nothing but a penis now,” she says, letting that plain fact hang in the air a moment as she stands. “Well then. Until we meet again, my Doctor—I believe I have a service that needs conducted.” She winks four eyes, an impish smile just starting to form there under those crescent moon fangs as she turns and glides away.

The Doctor and Skenge sit there in silence. Soon he can see Professor Ehztaria down on the sidewalk, making her return journey to the State U campus. She does not look back at the Doctor. This irritates him for some reason he can’t place.

As he frowns pensively into the middle distance, Skenge turns to him and opens her mouth as if to speak, then closes it and turns away. Then repeats. Then, finally, hesitantly, says “Sir?”

“Hmm?” The Doctor turns to look at her.

“Sir, I...I apologize for speaking out of turn. But I do not like her. I do not like her at all. I think she’s dangerous, sir.”

“I’m certain she is.”

“I am concerned, sir. For you. Having to deal with her and her...organization.”

“Don’t worry, Skenge. We’re taking every precaution. There’s nothing that woman can do to harm us.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s fine, Skenge.”

There is another protracted silence, during which the waitress finally arrives to drop off the check. The Doctor immediately hands her a black metal card without bothering to look at it, or her.

After further hesitation, Skenge quietly asks “Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Will I not need to be punished?”

The Doctor lifts one eyebrow. At that moment the waitress returns with the Doctor’s card. He takes his time signing the slip, and finally responds “Punished for what?”

“For speaking unprompted, sir.”

“Do you think you need punished, Skenge?”

“Oh yes, sir,” she says, nodding quickly. “Yes. I do need punished. Very much.”

“Hmm. And what should your punishment be?”

The spider looks down at her lap. “I..I should be tied up, sir. To the bed, as tight as you can. With...with my legs apart. And...and I think I may deserve to be spanked, sir. And...fucked, very hard,” she just barely squeaks out.

“Well, then.” The Doctor stands, smoothing his gray shirt as he does, brushing off the egg roll crumbs. “I suppose you’re really in for it when we get home, hmm? Come along, Skenge.”

+ + + + + + + +

Now here’s Professor Ehztaria, bustling through the storied corridors of Thornley Hall, home of the multiple literature departments at State Underground Midway Branch. She’s got an office here on the third floor of the sub-basement and it seems like she’s in a hurry to get there.

Bear in mind that the basement floors aren’t at all the snub they might be in a surface university. Most of the buildings on campus have more square footage below street level than above it, and their corridors tend to spread out and connect to their neighbors, leaving it unclear where one building ends and the other begins. Nor, when you’re going down, is it always clear where the buildings *stop*. Being one of the oldest constructions in Midway, State Underground’s buildings sit directly on top of the network of access tunnels and temporary excavations used to build the city. More than one faculty member passed over for the more official type of office has staked a claim to some dilapidated closet in the depths that’s been abandoned since before Midway had color TV.

But that sort of thing wouldn’t do for spiders of her stature. On this floor it’s quite nice. These hallways would fit in at any modern institute of higher learning on the surface, except for the lack of windows. She comes to a stop in front of a door where the frosted glass pane announces in white sans-serif letters:

PROF. EHZTARIA
Visiting Lecturer

She produces a keychain that jangles with dozens of keys, unlocks the door, and steps inside. She leaves it an inch or two ajar, and when she turns on the light inside the spider’s blurred silhouette is visible through the door window, facing away from the main hall, limbs all moving as if she’s searching for something... When she steps back out into the hallway Professor Ehztaria is already locking her office back up with one pair of claws, but under a different arm she’s got something silky, red, and shapeless, like a bolt of loose cloth.

Having locked the door the professor is about to hurry off again, but as she turns to go she almost runs over two human boys that have been standing

there waiting awkwardly. Students, no doubt—she can smell the nervous anxiety first years are so frequently dripping with.

The professor startles, but recovers quickly. “Oh! I’m sorry boys, I didn’t see you there.”

The pair seem immediately abashed in front of the much bigger spider, even more so as she puts her claws on her knees and crouches to get eye-level with the humans. “Um, hi, professor,” one begins. “We’re in your two o’clock Intro to Arachnid Linguistics class—”

“Jason! Steve! Of course I recognize you. What can I do for you two?”

“Uh, it’s just that we’re having a lot of trouble with the reading...”

«Chirrare and her Mole-Rat?»⁵

“Uh, yeah, I think that’s it.”

The professor nods. It was distressing how few of her students had any familiarity with the arachnid language at all; she’d started her intro class on light material they could work through with limited vocabulary and they struggled even with that. A sad commentary on how living in Midway alienates the spider from their origins. Of course, her expectations for the few humans brave enough to take her classes are far lower; from them she simply appreciates an honest attempt. If anything it makes her even more annoyed with the spiders in her tutelage—the way they outnumber the humans ten to one you’d think they’d be fighting each other for the chance to study with the humans, but here these poor dears are showing up on her doorstep like abandoned puppies. Obviously city life blunts a spider’s natural instincts as well.

“I’m so sorry, boys. I have an appointment I simply must attend, or I’d be delighted to go over it with you. But you know there’s always tutors in the reading room up on the first floor. Some of them are even native speakers! I’m sure they’d all love to help out a couple of humans studying our language.”

The two young men shoot each other a sidelong look that clearly says they do not relish this option.

“But if you still can’t work through it, come to my office hours tomorrow and I’ll make sure you understand. Sound good, boys?”

“Oh yeah, sure, of course,” says Jason, or maybe Steve. “We’ll come back then. Thanks a lot, professor. Oh, uh...*ak-rizz-gak greeks*.”⁶

Professor Ehztaria positively beams with pride at her pupils. “*Vseekh ssssp’kix griibak vkaknya rakhatak*,”⁷ she says, well aware she hasn’t even begun to cover adjectives yet. The humans smile and nod gratefully.

⁵ An excerpt from a series of popular children’s books where a spiderling solves mysteries with the aid of her trained pet mole-rat.

⁶ While the human vocal apparatus is incapable of producing the full range of phonemes in the arachnid language, this is a decent approximation of the phrase for “Thank you, teacher.”

⁷ “You are very welcome, delicious little ones.”

What nice young men, she thinks, continuing on her way. If they're still unattached by the end of the semester she'll find deserving spiders to give them to. But *surely* that will be unnecessary in a class with 56 spiders, even with the depressingly diminished state of the modern city spider.

She descends flight after flight of stairs, occasionally needing to step out into a hallway for a brief jog to a different staircase. With every new floor her surroundings degrade a little further—the modern-contemporary collegiate corridors with their soft light sconces and low pile carpet become generic industrial tunnels with fluorescent troffers in water-stained ceilings, and eventually even those are replaced by bare bulbs in fixtures drilled into plain rock, connected by heavy black cords hanging in loose catenaries. Things start to become diffuse this far below Midway. The thick layer of dust on all the junk along the edges of the tunnel shows how few people have been down here in the decades since it was carved out.

It's a long walk, and it gives her time to ponder her brunch with Dr. Schlangenkraft. How little he trusts her—and yet how vulnerable he has made himself to her! She can't help but smile. She had suspected it when they first met, but she was sure of it now. It had taken so long but here, at last, was a human *worthy* of her. Educated. Cultured. And oh, what a beautiful specimen. The fine white hair. His delightful pale skin. Those incredible red eyes. What a rare jewel he was. How lovely he would be once he adorned her.

Finally she is almost at her destination. Her cathedral. The corridors under the State Underground campus are not the only way here; this is merely the route Goddess revealed to her. There are such entrances under buildings all across Midway for those who know where to find them. In a sense they recapitulate the labyrinthine interstitials that grant access to Midway itself from the surface city above. There are as many approaches to the holy center, as many possible ways to find the secret zero, as there are spiders in Midway.

She unfurls the diaphanous red thing she's been carrying under her arm—it's a silky robe that she quickly wraps around herself. There is a full hood she pulls down over her face, but strangely the robe itself is only half there, covering the right side of her body alone. It billows around her as she walks. Now she truly is Eris's handmaiden, the Scarlet Woman. Now she is Margreta.

There is an archway and a tall, bisected door in the stone here, carved with an intricate, chaotic pattern reminiscent of the one the Huntsmen dye into their fur. On either side of it stand two spiders, each dressed in red robes far plainer than hers. They bow their heads in obeisance as she approaches. "Episkopos," they say in unison.

"Brethren," says Margreta. "Isssss the congregation ready?"

"They are, mistress."

"Then let ussss enter."

Putting all their arms into it, both ostiaries pull back their side of the heavy stone door and hold it open for their leader. Eyes cast down, hood

hiding her face in shadow, Margreta steps unhurriedly across the threshold. Once inside, the other two follow her in and allow the door to slowly swing shut.

The cathedral is not enormous, but Goddess has granted them all the space they need. The nave is big enough for two rows of pews with a central aisle, and towards the front a carve-out in the north wall provides enough space to admit a chorus of robed spiders who are singing in strange chittering voices. This hymn is low and repetitive, filling the space as though an entire forest of tree frogs and crickets all somehow harmonized on the same Gregorian chant. They and the congregation are deep in shadows; at the front a dim spotlight illuminates the apse but along the aisles and entryway the only light is a galaxy of dancing votive candles, glowing incense burners, and the uncountable pinpoint reflections in the hundreds of eyes in faces turning to see their leader.

Margreta pauses. A good turnout. Full pews, with a few spiders even having to stand along the walls at the back. Word must have gotten out about today's special event. Her various assistants are lined up by the entrance, ready to play their part in the opening procession towards the altar. They quickly get into formation and begin the slow march down the center aisle: first there is the «sand-sweeper» who waves a large broom as they walk to ritually prepare and purify the path for the Episkopos; the «perfume-caster» swings an incense burner that distributes a heady blend of narcotic smoke about the room; the «lectrix» carries, with great reverence, the holy book that Margreta will use during the service's reading; next, «Eris's guardian» carries a ceremonial dagger in each claw, ready to cut down any enemies of the Goddess or threats to the fifth and final member of this procession: Margreta herself.

They finally reach the altar, where the lectrix carefully sets the book down next to an enormously wide but shallow bowl that was already there. She bows to it and to Margreta in turn, while the latter takes her place behind the altar and looks out over the flock. Now that she can see them from the front she sees she has a fair number of humans in attendance today too. Good, good. All the better for what's to come.

“I greet you in the name of our Lady of Chaosssss, my brethren,” begins Margreta.

“Hail Eris!” responds the congregation.

“We, Her faithful, gather together today to delight in Her gifts and revel in chaos itssssself.”

“Hail Eris!”

“A reading from Goddess's Big Book of Saints,” says Margreta, and begins to read from the tome in front of her.

⁴ And Zeremixpham was much aggrieved at the destruction of his dwelling-place, and fell into despair, and walked off alone to live in solitude for four days and four nights.

⁵ On the fifth day Goddess revealed herself to Zeremixpham, saying unto him, hey big Z, what's got you so bummed out?

⁶ 'Tis the humans, my Goddess, saith Zeremixpham with much vexation.

⁷ Aw, what are they up to now, spoketh Goddess.

⁸ They dig carelessly into the earth and ruin our burrows and dwelling-places, saith Zeremixpham.

⁹ They raze the land for their crops and herds and keep the bounty for themselves, saith Zeremixpham.

¹⁰ They build vast cities that befoul the water that seeps down into our rivers and streams, saith Zeremixpham.

¹¹ Goddess considered these words, tapping Her divine claws on Her precious fangs as she pondered. Finally she asketh unto him, well why are you letting them do any of that when you're the ones who can turn them into your cocks?

¹² Having spoken, Goddess vanished.

¹³ And lo, Zeremixpham was enlightened.

Margreta gently closes the book. "On the surfacccccc level," she begins, "the meaning of this passage is clear. Goddess tells us that we have the power to resissssst the destructive forces of humans. They may have machinery and money but it is ordained that their place is part of *usssss*—and it is our Goddess-given duty to show them. For when humans are allowed to run wild it bringssssss only destruction and ruin. Their highest purpose is to be instrumentsssss of our pleasure, to allow us to multiply our numberssssss. We know this, do we not?"

Nods and murmurs of assent from the pews.

"Yes, brethren, every spider knowsssss this truth in their heart. But there is more wisssssdom to be found in this story. For we all know of Saint Zeremixpham and his gloriousssss raid, in which he and his warren-mates captured so many humans that they were able to sire a new generation entirely by themselvessssss. But even the great Saint Zeremixpham could not accomplisssssh this alone, for it is the dessssign of Goddess that one spider may keep one human."

"No, he took his revenge on the humans with the aid of his kith and kin, his warren-matessssss. Thus Eris teaches us that we may only resissssst the humans together. It has always been the way of our people to bond closely with those we live among, but spiders of today are prevented from forming these essssential bonds, since we no longer live in our cozy burrows but in vast human-constructed *citiesssss*. And this is one more way the humans control us, brethren. Without proper warrens, we cannot have proper warren-mates. For would you conssssider all of Midway to be your warren-mates? With its spiders that are so indolent and carelessssss as to let their very own *penisssss* go off on its own?"

The congregation responds with low, negative muttering.

“Would you be the warren-mate of a spider so foolisssssh as to treat a human with the same affection as their own kind?”

Louder chittering now and stronger, even angry.

“No! It is blassssspheemy. This is why we, together, my brethren, must be our own warren—an invisible warren within Midway. We must support and aid each other as warren-mates do. Only with the strength of warren-mates acting together can we prevail againsssst the humans. We must always act for the good of the warren, we must never betray the warren, and one day, brethren, we will find the same successssss as Saint Zeremixpham.”

There’s clapping and a few cheers as Margreta hands the Big Book of Saints back to the lectrix, who bows and accepts it like a box of delicate china. Another assistant in a red robe has just brought forth a silver tray, holding it in reverential silence before her priestess. This tray contains a bowl of salt, another bowl of perfumed water, and a leather drawstring pouch; with the bowls Margreta ritually purifies her claws, sifting the salt between her digits and dipping the sharp black tips in the water. The pouch she takes and places on the altar.

«O Goddess,» she begins, modulating the raspy sound of the spider language with a sing-song chanting intonation. «Queen of all chaos and disorder, we gather here in Your name to bind ourselves to one another and to You. . .»

Performing the reading and homily in the vernacular is a necessity; her congregation is drawn from Midway stock and so even here there are only a few spiders fluent in the ancestral tongue. But for the invocation, English is out of the question. She speaks now to Eris, not to the laity—and they don’t need to understand the exact words of the ritual to understand its beauty and importance; if anything using the old language only adds to the wonder, gives them a proper sense of the numinous. It encourages the ambitious to study the language, deepening their ties to their heritage (and to the Huntsmen). But deep down it is simply a question of what’s proper and right. If Eris is to deliver them from human subjugation, then why should Her mysteries be conducted in the human tongue? One day it will be a properly shameful thing for a spider not to be able to speak as a spider should.

More of Margreta’s robe-clad assistants come forth from the wings of the cathedral, these ones holding jugs of red wine. They wait in line as Margreta takes each jug in turn, makes an arcane gesture over it with her claw, and then lifts it aloft to pour its contents into the bowl on the altar. Like a giant wok, this bowl is so wide that it can hold a great deal of wine without being more than a few inches deep. The silence in the cathedral is so total that the splashing is audible all the way in the back.

One of Margreta’s deacons stands next to her, hood shrouding their face, and when the last jug of wine has been emptied into the bowl this spider rings a bell. Margreta starts to chant prayers that go on for some time, her voice going from loud and clear, to so soft, claws pressed to her lips, that only Goddess could make the words out. . .at times she pauses to perform

further gestures over the altar or move little silvery implements about, and at uneven intervals the deacon rings the bell again—this seems to mark the end of one part of the ritual and the beginning of the next though it is unclear what separates one segment from another. That a room of almost a hundred spiders should not only stay quiet for this whole production but sit in rapt attention is by itself a minor miracle.

At last Margreta seems to be building to some kind of crescendo. «Goddess! Our queen! We give ourselves to You! Let nothing impede us from working Your will, neither Thought nor Reason; let no one ask Why and none answer Because! Let Why be accursed forever, let Because be damned for a dog!» She flings her head back, casting off the hood of her robe, and stretches all six arms to the ceiling, screaming the final sentences: «I offer myself to you, O Eris, that you may slay Reason within us! I would bear the dancing star! To me! To me! *To me!*»

A momentary convulsion ripples through Margreta before the spider lurches forward, grabbing onto all four corners of the altar as though she can only barely manage to hold herself upright. Her head hangs down over the altar, face hidden. She stands like this for some time, during which there is absolute silence and stillness in the cathedral. Nobody moves, nobody even breathes. And then, slowly, Margreta picks her head up.

It seems impossible, the terrible grin stretched out across her face. Humans have always found the way spiders smile to be disconcerting—how their mouths open larger than they ought be able to, how they bare their dozens and dozens of interlocking knifelike teeth. But *this* is something else, something unnatural. Her smile somehow exceeds her head. Still gripping the altar, she shakes—once, then twice, then again and again, as though trying to suppress laughter.

She lifts her arms, extending them to her audience as if to embrace them. «I am the spider that brings pleasure, delight, and bright glory,» she says with perfect intonation; Margreta's accent has vanished and her voice has become something smooth and sibilant that echoes on the stone walls in places where it did not before. Her purple eyes burn with a strange fire that seems to come from a million miles away. «You would worship me? Truly? Then take wine and strange drugs, and be drunk thereof, for they shall not harm you at all!» Now laughing with wild abandon, the spider behind the altar takes the drawstring pouch and upends it over the bowl, releasing a stream of white powder that commingles with the wine. The congregation is yelling, cheering, and shouting. «Come and drink, my children! Drink! Be wild and lost and free! Arouse the coiled splendor within you!» The spider throws her head back and cackles hysterically, her arms raised to the ceiling, louder somehow than even the roar of her audience, until at last something in her seems to give out. The mad laughter leaves her, she goes limp and quiet, and Margreta begins to fall over backwards.

Her assistants know just what to do; they've done this many times. The

robe-clad spiders catch Margreta as she falls and carry her off into the wings of the cathedral so she can recover. One of them makes a brief announcement: “The invocation is complete. Those who wish to dispense to the front, please.”

At this the entire front row and most of the second stands up. More than a dozen spiders, males and females, no obvious commonality among them—aside from that they all have transformed humans hanging between their legs. Only spiders with humans are permitted this honor, so to make the process simpler they get priority seating. They all look eager, humans already at half-mast, and they hurry to form a shoulder-to-shoulder line between the altar and the pews, facing the rest of the congregation with their human cocks proudly on display.

Meanwhile, having stashed their high priestess somewhere safe for the moment, the band of robed assistants has come back out in order to ladle the sacred wine out of the ceremonial bowl back into jugs. They move quickly, trying to balance urgency with respect for the holy. A hundred-plus spiders showed up today and it’s their job to make sure the ceremony proceeds quickly so everyone can get to the *really* fun part. They count the spiders serving as dispensers as they portion out the wine, making sure there’s a jug for each one. . . The remainder of the congregation has begun to move too, forming restless lines in the aisles and crowding up towards the front where the particularly popular dispensers are standing. Some are always favored over others.

Fortunately Margreta does not need to be involved with this part of the service, allowing her time to recuperate. Her disciples handle all the logistics and the dispensers are eager to serve—they are her vanguard, the ones most loyal or useful, that she’s designated as worthy to receive one of their captured humans. Lasck is here, and a number of eager spiders are kneeling around him already. The tall, brown-furred spider with rippling muscles has been quite popular ever since word got around about how his cock was that girl who worked for Wallace Shale. She hadn’t really turned out to know anything useful, but it was still a tremendous boost to morale that an employee of the biggest fracking company in the Midway region was now nothing more than his enormous penis, and after the usual initial difficulties settling in she’d taken to her new life with surprising eagerness. In fact, Lasck’s cock is already quite hard as a spider girl waits in front of him with her mouth open, claws folded almost demurely, ready to receive. . . Lasck puts his cock’s tip into her mouth, having to hold it down because of how stiff it is. Then, taking his wine jug, the spider slowly pours a stream of wine along the two-foot length of his once-human penis and into the girl’s waiting mouth.

Similar scenes are taking place around the cathedral. Those spiders not so blessed by Eris as to have humans of their own wait on their knees, mouths open to imbibe Her gifts, as given to them via a fat human dick. Each of the dispensers is pouring wine over the length of their cock and into the mouth of a waiting spider, but exactly how they do this is up to them, given their differences in anatomy and degree of erection. One girl, Zaideka, is already

so hard that she can't bend her human down enough to comfortably get it into anyone's mouth so she lets it stick straight up and dunks her nuts in the mouths of her receivers instead, running the wine all the way down the length of her shaft and through her ball fur. Nobody is deterred by this; the spiders drinking wine from Zaideka's balls slurp it down as greedily as the others—and they're all very enthusiastic to get their share, though everyone is only permitted three gulps max before having to make way. Many of the spiders give their dispenser a quick lick, kiss, or suck in appreciation before they vacate the position for the next in line.

Margreta is there observing unseen, hanging around those seats in the back rows. It only takes a few minutes for her to recover, but the fainting spell happens every time—it is a fearful thing to be touched so directly by the hand of Eris. She takes note of who's here. Alaika is absent. She usually is these days; today it's probably for the best. When she's here nobody wants to receive from anyone else, and with this turnout it would be a mess. But she's been coming less and less often. The girl is busy with her career, of course, but she can't neglect her obligations to Goddess. Margreta will have to have a word with her.

Next to Lasck is little Kharra, as some of the other Huntsmen insist on calling her. She's a petite girl with black eyes, soft gray fur the color of hot charcoal, and as of a few weeks ago a girthy pink monster of a dick that looks comical on her short five-and-a-half-foot frame. Her cock was another one the Doctor had so kindly fed them, though Kharra had mentioned to Margreta that she was still having trouble getting it to obey her. Presently it's flaccid in her claws as she uses it to direct a stream of wine into a supplicant's mouth, though even soft it's so big it seems like it might make the small spider tip over. It's good she's here; participation in these kinds of events helps break down a new cock's resistance.

And over there is Braizuk, whose cock is so hard, girthy, and constantly twitching that it's a challenge for the faithful trying to drink off of it. Braizuk tries to aim it as best he can, but the spiders drinking his wine usually end up a red mess despite their enthusiastic movement along his shaft to catch what they can. Braizuk's cock is one of the interesting few cases of a human who volunteered to fulfill their purpose, a young human woman who had sought them out wanting nothing more than to be permanently made a spider's cock. They were more than happy to oblige her, though Margreta does keep an extra eye on Braizuk—in cases like that one has to be concerned about infiltrators.

Oh, what was in that powder that went into the wine, anyway? Well, that's Margreta's special blend. There's MDMA to foster an appropriate sense of love and belonging, amphetamines to keep anyone from getting tired before the fun is over, various phenethylamines to heighten the encounter with the divine, and that's only the pharmaceuticals—in order to perfect her concoction she's drawn from traditional spider medicine and its vast catalog of ways to get high. There's ground rock-chewer beetles for their hallucinatory effect,

rajajah mushrooms (that ghastly mushroom of madness!), and of course dried hornymoss, among other treats. In short that three-gulp rule is there for everyone's safety, and the real challenge is keeping things from devolving into chaos before the appropriate time. Speaking of which. . .

Again a red-robed spider rings a bell, signalling everyone to return to their seats, but now a giddy, anticipatory energy simmers beneath the surface of the room. In the narrow aisles the spiders giggle and chitter and grope each other as they slowly file back into the pews. The spiders at the front with their impatiently erect humans, red and sticky with drying wine, are the last to sit down.

"My brethren!" announces Margreta, retaking her place at the altar. She speaks in a loud, commanding voice, knowing she can only hold them for a few minutes. "Today I have sssssspoken on the importance of our community, how we together form a warren, and how we must always remember our duty to each other. But one among us has ssssshirked that duty."

Some gasps from the increasingly noisy audience and a collective *oooooh*, like this is middle school and Principal Margreta just threatened to call someone's parents.

"But Goddess forgives, my brethren, if we are willing to repent! If we are willing to do *penanccccce*. And that is why I now turn her over to you for our Revelry—so that through ssssserving you she shall learn to properly serve Eris. Bring forth our prissssoner!" cries Margreta with an imperious wave of her arm.

Starting from the back of the cathedral, a line of robed attendants proceeds down the center aisle bearing a long wooden pole on their shoulders. There is a spider hanging horizontally from the pole, facing the floor, bound to it with tight layers of silk that secure her arms in place behind her back so as to create three loops to thread the pole through. That and the similar bindings around her ankles lock her in place quite effectively, but she struggles all the same, rocking the pole as she dangles. The silk gag in her mouth renders her unintelligible, but she's furious enough that her muffled shouting can be heard even over all the yelling from the congregation.

Meanwhile, a network of silvery filaments is coalescing above everyone's heads.

The first few Revelries had been awkward affairs indeed. The cramped quarters of the cathedral simply didn't have enough space for an orgy, even with as few Huntsmen as there were back then. The pews were barely big enough for them to sit in, let alone fuck in. And while there's a little bit of room around the altar everyone was always fighting over who got to fuck on it. Amusing to Goddess, no doubt, but bad vibes for an orgy. Not to mention all the hard stone surfaces—getting railed by some spider's two foot long human dong is a lot less fun up against an unyielding granite slab. The solution was obvious once they remembered to think like spiders instead of humans: the cathedral had plenty of room, just not at ground level. Margreta declared

that the ceremonial phase of each Revelry would conclude with the group construction of a web for their activities to take place in, and very soon they were able to span the cathedral with silk in minutes flat. With today's high attendance it's going even faster; any spiders who aren't booing the prisoner are busy unreeling yards of silvery thread from their mouths and throwing it around the room. Already the support lines are in place and spiders are climbing the walls to further reinforce the structure, venturing out into the hazy layer of incense and marijuana smoke hanging under the high vaulted ceiling where, seen from below, it's as if they're crawling on fog.

The prisoner picks her head up as she is carried forward. In the shadowy cathedral her inky blue fur is almost invisible. Her electric yellow eyes are nearly all that can be clearly seen of her, and they are narrowed with rage despite the laughing, grinning, jeering crowd to her left, right, and now even above her, as more spiders crawl out onto the web hanging twenty feet above the cathedral floor. They're yelling things at her—bossy bitch, can't wait to fuck you, knew you can't trust anyone who works for the MARC, that sort of thing.

"Ssssset her upright, if you please," directs Margreta as her servants approach the altar. "Have you anything to say for yourssself?" she asks, reaching over to pull the gag out of the prisoner's mouth.

"This isn't *my* fault!" screams Rhazille. "Shryrae's the one that ran away! What, should I have tried to tackle her? You said not to make a scene—"

"Enough." Margreta clucks her tongue in reproach. "Rhazille, please, take some responsssssibility." ("Yeah *Rhazille*, take responsibility," mugs one of the robed spiders holding her in place. Just below the edge of his hood, there's the hint of a grin. . .)

"I can help you find her!" Desperation in her voice now. She's bargaining. Behind her back silk loops descend ominously into view. . . "There's this art gallery some human got her interested in, she took her card, and—"

"It'sssss being taken care of, child. It is your failure we are here to discussssss."

"Why aren't you mad at *her?!?*"

"Why would I be upssssset with poor Shryrae? She did as sssshe willed. Who could resssssist all of Midway's temptations upon first sssssight? She will have her time among the humansssss and learn of their deccccceitful ways, and we will guide her gently back to the fold. But you, Rhazille, you were given a tasssssk, and you failed it. Failed us. Failed your warren."

The hooded spiders begin to cut through the silk binding Rhazille, but she's no more free than before. Holding her in place, they take the loops being lowered from the web and fasten them around Rhazille's wrists. She tries to get away but the dangling silk cords suddenly jerk and go taut, lifting her into the air by her six arms like a marionette. She flails ungracefully, hovering just over the floor and rising a few inches at a time as the spiders on the other end of those cords reel her in.

“But worry not,” says Margreta, lifting her head to speak to Rhazille as she ascends. “You have a new task, to give pleasssssure to your brethren. Perform it well and I shall consssssider you redeemed before our Goddess.”

Rhazille’s swinging back and forth, kicking at the empty air around her like a pissed-off pendulum. She looks up and sees the faces of her compatriots leering down at her, deranged puppeteers eagerly pulling her towards a gap in the strands of the web. They’re all crowding around the point where her silk strings intersect the web’s transverse lines, waiting until she’s close enough to grab. Lasck is there, grinning and slowly stroking his rock-hard human. She knows he and all the other spiders with humans will get the first go at her, though everyone who wants her will get to have their turn eventually. And it’s not that Rhazille minds being the center of attention for this incipient gangbang—in better circumstances she’d consider it a good time. It’s the loss of face among her peers that irks her. And if there’s one thing she’s certain of it’s that somehow, some way, she’s going to get Shryrae back for this.

Claws clutch Rhazille’s upper arms and roughly hoist her up into the web. She’s thrown onto a springy patch of silk, landing on her back, and the other Huntsmen quickly surround her, forming a tight circle from which a dozen throbbing, twitching humans protrude inwards, the fat cockheads poking at her and smearing strands of precum across her short, velvety fur. Her legs are suddenly pulled open, and there’s Lasck moving into position between them, the giant spider’s muscles flexing under his brown coat as he grabs her ankles and pries her apart.

“Well look at you, Rhazzy,” says Lasck. His transformed human pulses with need as he strokes it. “You don’t know how much I’m gonna enjoy this. After having to listen to you tell us all what to do on every single hunt? You’re not gonna be able to bitch at me about the right way to catch a human when you’re choking on one.”

“Lasck, you big dumb asshole, I still don’t know why Episkopos let *you* have a human,” says Rhazille. “But I know you can’t handle having one. Does yours even listen to you? I’m surprised you can even get it up.”

“Oh, you don’t got to worry about that,” says Lasck, wielding his enormous cock like a bat and smacking it against the palm of a claw, *whap whap whap*, while he looks down at Rhazille from between her spread legs. “It’s practically screaming at me to hurry up and stick it in you. See, I already got it to forget all about its old life. Only took a couple days. Now it doesn’t want anything other than for me to use it like the big fat dick it is.” He then takes his cock and smacks it off the pink lips visible in her parted blue fur, *whap whap whap*. “Oh, what’s that? Damn, really? My cock says you’re wet as fuck.”

Rhazille suppresses a moan. “S–shut the fuck up and use it if you’re gonna use it,” she says.

“Can’t hear you, Rhazzy. I’m trying to talk to my cock.”

He continues teasing her opening. Those eight yellow eyes squeeze shut for a moment as she fights off another moan. . .She arches her back and gyrates

her hips trying to get the thing in or at least in a better spot, looking for something to hang on to she's grabbing clawfuls of silk strands, other spiders' legs and arms, even someone's rock-hard human that twitches in her grip. . . "Eris, would you just stick it *in* already?" she shouts.

"Always tellin' me what to fucking—*ungh*—do!" grumbles Lasck, punctuating the complaint by driving his giant penis into Rhazille with a grunt.

"Aaaah!" Rhazille can't help but scream as the enormous cock enters her. Lasck gives her no time to adjust before his whole human is inside, but by the third pump she's yelling instructions between gasps for breath. "Faster! Come on! You can't do me any harder than that?"

"Holy shit," says Lasck, whose malicious growl of a voice now has a note of real irritation in it, "would someone shut her up already?"

A spider up by Rhazille's other end is happy to help—a claw comes out of the crowd, grabs her by the back of the head, and directs her face towards its owner's crotch, where a stiff pink human is already dripping precum from their tip. Rhazille opens her mouth to engulf the head of the big cock and its spider shoves the head in before she's quite ready, foreclosing on any further complaints with a wet *gluk*. The spider grabs her shoulders and starts to move their hips, but even as Rhazille's beginning to get her face fucked she still manages to turn a few glowering yellow eyes toward Lasck and defiantly raise the middle digit of one claw. . .

Rhazille is held aloft over the bouncing web by the many arms and claws of her fellow Huntsmen struggling for their own piece of her body. Lasck has the greatest claim to it, clearly, the way his two-foot cock drives into her pussy every time he pumps her, his beefy claws on her thighs holding her in place against him. But the spider with their cock down her throat has a good stake too—Rhazille didn't even see who it was before they were jamming their stiff human into her mouth. With her head held in place all she can really see is the spider's gray fur and the fleshy pink base of their penis, and she's far too busy getting fucked to remember what everyone's coat and cock color is. Whoever it is, they're gleefully humping Rhazille's face with no regard to the way she's gagging and choking on the enormous rod, eyes watering, drool everywhere. And there's at least a half a dozen other spiders actively groping her, grabbing at her tits, squeezing her ass, slapping their own humans on whatever free area of her they can find. . .

It's only a minute or two of this before Lasck starts fucking Rhazille harder. "Fuck! Take it, bitch!" he screams. Rhazille can feel Lasck's cock expand, stretching her out even further as it threatens to explode. Her whole body shakes every time the burly spider slams into her, faster and faster now, and suddenly he's bellowing and pulling her tight against him with crushing force, pumping more cum into her than it feels like she can take. Spiders cum a lot when they have a human, but this is almost absurd—it feels to Rhazille like gallons being emptied into her. (For a moment she thinks back to Shryrae—getting to be her first with her new cock, and the way she filled the condom

as she came. . .yes, she still wants her revenge, but if someone's going to cum in her she'd rather it was Shryrae than Lasck. . .)

Lasck thrusts once, twice more, hard—and then finally buries himself to his full depth, slumping down over Rhazille, and even through he stops moving she can feel the penis that used to be some ambitious young human woman twitch wildly inside her as the last of Lasck's orgasm leaks out of it, while its exhausted owner huffs and puffs on top of her.

Rhazille pulls the other cock out of her mouth and, after taking a quick gasp for air, asks “Well, that was quick. What's the matter? That's all big strong Lasck and his new cock has for me?”

Lasck slowly pulls himself back up and shakes his head. “Damn,” he says between labored breaths. “You really are a slut sometimes. Don't worry, you're getting all the cock you can take today.” He retracts his now flaccid penis and the massive amount of cum in Rhazille quickly follows, leaking out all over her thighs and splattering onto the floor far below them. Rhazille realizes she's going to be a real mess after all this.

Indeed, someone's already trying to nudge Lasck out of the way—“alright, alright, fuck off already,” he says, waving away their claws as they prod his back, eager for *their* turn. . .“Have fun, Rhazzy,” says Lasck as he rolls off of her and vanishes into the circle of spiders surrounding her.

Rhazille looks to see who it is as they emerge from the crowd. Ugh. Zaideka. When did she get a human—and *how?* Rhazille's never liked her. It's mostly her intense, always-on personality, but there's a thousand little annoyances with her. She doesn't take Huntsmen business seriously enough, she always has to touch you when she's talking to you, that screechy voice, and Eris, that fur—obviously she can't help her natural orange coloration, but she goes around dyeing highlights into her limbs in various obnoxious pinks, purples, and greens. Just plain tacky, if you ask Rhazille.

“Rhazille! What's up, bright eyes?” screams Zaideka as she takes Lasck's place. There's a deranged glee in her eyes and she wields her swollen lavender dick like a pastel club. “Hey! Remember last month? When you told me I couldn't come on the big surface hunt cause my fur was too. . .oh, what was it you said, *vivid?* And all the humans would see it?”

Already having grabbed onto both of Rhazille's legs to hold them open, Zaideka slaps her cock on the palm of a third claw as she waits for a response. Eris, that thing's huge. “Yeah, I remember,” says Rhazille.

“Anything you wanna say about that?”

The women look at each other for a moment. Oh well, thinks Rhazille, might as well have some real fun. She tilts her head, gives Zaideka a great big smile, and tells her “You're right, that was wrong of me. I should have just been honest about how you never shut up and no one wants to listen to you all night, plus we all know you couldn't catch a human if your life depended on it. I mean, who'd you get to catch that thing for you?”

For a second Zaideka just stares in disbelief—and then, with a shriek of indignation, falls onto Rhazille, intent on getting her human into the other spider as soon as possible. In her fury it takes her a couple tries, her human merely poking into Rhazille’s pelvis until she takes the time to grab it where it connects with her body and aim. Moments later Rhazille feels the huge penis enter her fully in one motion, Zaideka showing no mercy here, even as that other spider she’d been blowing grabs Rhazille’s head and encourages her to get back to work, and the rest of the Huntsmen close in. . .

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Margreta rarely deigns to participate directly in the latter half of the Revelries; her role is that of spiritual guide and vessel for the invocation, and she reserves the gift of the Episkopos’s body for special occasions. Presently she’s sitting in a back pew, stack of papers over her crossed legs—exams for her 300-level Ancient Arachnid Mythology course that need graded. (She chuckles to herself. Ah, if only Ewell had agreed to come. . .) She’s keeping a few spare eyes on the proceedings above, and occasionally an especially loud moan or falling splatter of cum distracts her, but her focus is on grading these exams. It’s slow going. She doesn’t believe in multiple choice questions, much to her students’ chagrin, and this test includes a compare-and-contrast essay question about the legend of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur—specifically the differences between the human version and the *real* story, five paragraph minimum.

It’s been three hours now and Margreta’s only about halfway through the stack (currently mercilessly red-penning some human’s insistence that Theseus didn’t live happily ever after as Ariadne’s dick) when her concentration is interrupted by a chirpy “Have a nice day, Episkopos!” She glances up. It’s Kharra, giving her a pleasant wave on the way out.

“You too, dear. I hope everything was sssssatisfying?”

“Oh yeah, it was great.” says Kharra, resting her claws on her hips. She’s clearly out of breath and her fur is well-ruffled; her soft pink dick, so big that it nearly reaches the short spider’s feet, is still damp from recent use. “Rhazille and a few others are still going, but we’ve had enough for today,” she says, waving her massive flaccid hose like a duffel bag to indicate that it’s her human, too, that’s sated.

Margreta looks at the web above them. By now the majority of the congregation has left, run out of stamina, or broken off into couples and threesomes dotted around the expanse of the web. But the biggest group is still the pile Rhazille is at the center of, and she is indeed still at it, riding one cock cowgirl and sucking another—the one in her pussy is a human, the one in her mouth isn’t, and all the while she’s fingering and fondling the spiders sitting the web around her. Well, good for her. The girl has tenacity, she can’t deny that.

“Wonderful. What did your human think? I know you mentioned you mentioned it was having difficulty embracing life as a penis. Did you face any further resistance?”

“No, you were totally right, Episkopos! I just needed to use him more. And I think it helped that it was with Rhazille, cause I feel like he doesn’t get along with my boyfriend. He was used to human girls, you know? Before he was my cock.”

“Good, good. But do not forget, my child, that your human is there to serve your needs. You are the one who must dictate what your human shall be used for, not vice versa.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s right back to my boyfriend’s butt after this. My human will only get more pussy if he behaves.” Kharra’s about to leave, but pauses. “Episkopos? Can I ask you something?”

“Anything, dear.”

“Well...” Kharra begins, but she seems to be bashful about whatever it is, wringing her claws and looking down at her feet. “We were just wondering, some of us, the other day...and if you don’t want to say, it’s fine...but how come you’ve never taken a human for yourself?” asks Kharra, who quickly adds “I mean, everyone knows how hard you work for all of us, Episkopos! Setting up the hunts and everything. But you always give the humans to one of us! It’s so nice of you, but you deserve to have a human yourself.”

Margreta chuckles. “Thank you. But I simply follow the will of our Goddess.”

“But, doesn’t Eris want us to take control of the humans? Wouldn’t She want one of Her most devoted servants to be blessed with a human of her own?”

“Oh Kharra, you do flatter me. But I am not as selfless as you imagine. There *is* a particular human I...have my eyes on.”

“Really?” Kharra breaks into a huge smile. “Episkopos! What’s he like? She? They?”

“He,” says Margreta. “And he is...” Margreta’s hiss trails off, she places a clawtip against her lips as they curve into a faint smile, seeming to be lost in pleasant contemplation for a moment...“He is a wily one. A very *human* human, if you understand my meaning. He will be challenging prey indeed, but that makes the catch all the sweeter.”

“Well, you should let us all help with the hunt! There’s no human that can outsmart all the Huntsmen working together.”

“Doubtless. But this one... well, I have the sense that Goddess wants me to take him on my own. But he will be mine sooner or later. Every day he wriggles further and further into my web without even knowing it.”

“Oh, I get it. Let ’em come to you. Trap him. Smart,” nods Kharra. “Well, if anyone can trap a human I know it’s you, Episkopos. Good luck, and I hope you get him soon!”

“Thank you, dear,” says Margreta, waving back at Kharra as she leaves the cathedral.

Margreta returns to grading exams, but finds her eyes just keep sliding off the pages. She reads and rereads the first few sentences of some pupil’s uninspired essay regurgitating the bare facts of the narrative—that Theseus had never abandoned Ariadne on Naxos at all; this was where, as a reward for conquering the Labyrinth, the gods granted her the power to merge her lover into her and keep him forever more. Yes, yes, but *why* had the humans felt it necessary to cover up the fact that Theseus left the island as her cock? B-minus work. Her red pen skitters across the page.

The next exam isn’t any easier to get through. Margreta sighs and puts the papers aside, utterly unable to concentrate. She leans back in the pew and closes her eyes, but of course it’s his face she sees, one thin white eyebrow raised, pale lips curved into a mocking smile as if to ask: you can’t even get through a few undergrad essays, and you think *you* have what it takes to catch *me*?

Damn that man. She briefly considers direct action, ways to lure him away from that contemptible groveling servant of his and take him for herself. . . but no. She knows this would be unwise; Goddess will show her when the time is right. Yet she must do something with this sudden surging need within her. She opens her eyes and sees the web above her swaying with Rhazille’s energetic movements as she takes on three more of the Huntsmen at once. Hmm. Perhaps she would join the Revelry at its tail end after all. Let the girl put that sharp tongue to work in proving she would be more mindful of her duties from now on.

Yes, that will do for now. And in the meantime the thing was to remember to avoid haste, not to act rashly or entangle herself in some elaborate plan—that was *his* way, the human way, and by now it was obvious how unsustainable it was, with how he’s always running to shore up the failure of one scheme with two more. Well, for now she will continue to play the part of the helpful partner in crime. Whatever he asks of her the Huntsmen will stand ready to provide. Why, she’ll be as obsequious as his awful sycophantic maid. And when the time comes Goddess will make the Doctor hers. Margreta has perfect faith that this will happen. It would be a fitting reward not only for her but for the Doctor as well. He is one of the many who serve Goddess without knowing it, advancing chaos even as they seek to impose order. And by now he must be one of Her most treasured servants. After all, there’s no sacrifice more amusing to Eris than a careful plan.