

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

The room is dark with isolated bright spots, glowing shapes cast across the carpet where the window blinds slice streetlight into bands. A girl reclines flat on her back on the couch, face awash in ghostly blue-white glow as she holds her phone right above the tip of her nose, making her pale features into a marble mask of boredom. Her lanky legs kick idly as they hang over the armrest and her long black hair pools on the cushion around her head, shining under the screen along with her glittering earrings and nose stud. She's wearing a sweatshirt a size too big for her and well-worn jeans, the kind of outfit one wears when embarking on some arduous voyage where comfort is essential and style is not. Clothes for transoceanic flights and overnight bus rides. Traveling clothes, for trips where the return is uncertain.

Outside, electric scooters buzz down the street. Traffic is starting to die down a bit. Emily had bid goodbye to the surface world just before 1 AM and it took her about an hour and a half to make it here. The elevator ride going eighty-odd floors underground was quick enough, but the walk from downtown took a while; seemed like she'd had to wait at every crosswalk. Midnight in Midway is rush hour, and the streets were still full of spiders on scooters. She'd have taken the Tube, but wasn't in any particular hurry—Ketta doesn't get off work at the bakery for hours yet. Nothing to do but scroll the endless feed. She'd have gone upstairs to say hi to Skeila, but, well. . .

A squeaky voice floats through the ceiling, punctuated with a particularly heavy smack: "Yeah, take it, human!"

They've been at it for about a half hour now, at least since Emily let herself in with Ketta's key. Repetitive pounding sounds plus the occasional chirpy spider grunt or human moan. Emily doesn't want to interrupt them, of course—and she's observed Sid enough by now to know he'd probably be so embarrassed he'd shrivel up and vanish. But she can't help imagining what they're getting up to up there. It sounds like Skeila's really putting Sid to work. Emily pictures the skinny boy helpless in Skeila's web, tied up with unbreakable silk. Or perhaps Skeila's simply holding him in place below her, six arms easily able to manipulate him as she pleases. Or maybe, just maybe, Skeila's going to change him. Now wouldn't *that* be delicious, both spider roommates getting their cocks back in the same night. So unfair to Emily that he'd get to go first though, she's been waiting so long. . .

Owww. Blue balls? No, it's her legs that hurt—oh. She stopped kicking her knees and went rigid with her legs still hanging off the couch. Emily snaps out of her reverie and gently lowers her legs, and her muscles stop complaining. Ugh. Stupid limbs. Stupid *body*. Why isn't Ketta home yet?

She heaves a deep sigh and returns to her phone, willing herself to somehow concentrate on the infinite trivialities sliding past on her Skitter feed. (The app only works down here in Midway you see, they've geo-fenced it somehow. Sometimes she can load it in the interstitials but she's never gotten it to work topside.) It's all the usual nonsense. Posts from spiders showing off their humans—she quickly flicks by all of those, trying not to think about how Ketta will soon be able to post dick pics of her too. There's a post from the official MARC account, evasive on when the travel ban will be lifted. Well, it didn't stop her from getting down here, and she doesn't care about going back to the surface any time soon. A post from some spider girl Emily only knows through Ketta, a grad student at State Underground bragging about working with some museum on a new exhibit about deep spiders. Oh look, Skeila and Sid—the news articles about them are still going around, and someone reposted one of them with a photo from their front stoop press conference, Sid standing at full attention. Lucky him.

On her back with her legs elevated like this, Emily can almost pretend she's home again, *really* home, hanging off her spider's crotch. She's upside down, of course—normally it's her sensitive underside resting in the fur of Ketta's thigh. And there's too much pressure, she's too heavy for her body—her numb, insensitive body, which doesn't feel anything like how it ought to. And she's too inflexible. Not inflexible like when she's hard, when her whole self becomes one beautiful, unitary rigidity. No, instead she's got a million joints all reminding her of their limited range of motion. Useless little knuckles, elbows and knees that max out at 180 degrees, a spine that barely even bends backwards. At rest she should be able to flop and twist and curl. To be painlessly stretched out and wrapped around her spider's finger. How can she really relax if she can't be flaccid?

Emily tries to stuff her irritation back down and focus on her phone. When she's this close to finally being the cock she *should* be again it's hard to think about anything else. Sometimes she feels like being a cock has made her impulsive, impatient with the whole human world. She gets bored again now the way little kids get bored, tangible oppressive boredom you can feel crushing down on you like being deep underwater. Yet she never gets bored of being a cock, despite the dramatically simpler life cocks tend to lead. She could spend the rest of her life hanging between Ketta's legs. There's an excitement to everything when you're a cock—it's like being stoned that way, except instead of every mundane experience tempting you down deep wells of introspection every single thing makes you *insanely horny*.

She'll do this to Ketta all day long when she's at work, especially if she neglected to take care of her that morning. Every coworker, every customer

that walks in, there's Emily in the back of the spider's mind to suggest what Ketta and her could do to them. Every shiny surface, every pane of glass they pass that presents the barest smudge of her reflection reminds her that she's a cock, Ketta's cock, and it's a tragedy for a spider to be ignoring her big, beautiful, needy cock like this. You should hear her when Ketta's trying to roll out a pie crust. Must be something about that big heavy rolling pin that always has Emily telling Ketta to whip her out and slap *her* on the table instead.

Emily delights in being an annoying, bratty cock when she knows Ketta won't be able to get away and properly punish her. She counts it a victory if she can make Ketta take an unscheduled break—the spider rushing into the bathroom and locking herself in a stall, squashing her up against one of the dividers like a bully holding a nerd up against the lockers and growling “how d'ya like *this*, you big greedy *cock*...” Of course being pressed up against the cool flat metal feels wonderful to them both, and this only makes Emily leak a big smear of precum all over the stall and herself, and that leads to Ketta sitting on the closed lid of the toilet jacking her off the way she does when she's trying to cum quick. Emily knows by heart every one of Ketta's masturbation styles, from the languid odyssey of self-care she'll go for when she has hours to spend lying in her web feeling herself, to this—hunched over forward, clutching her tit with one claw and her balls with another, while a third goes up and down Emily, up and down squeezing *hard*...

Ow. *Owww*. Goddamnit she's doing it again, gone all stiff on the couch without meaning to. She swings her sore legs around and sits up, relaxing her complaining thighs and calves. Won't have to worry about those soon enough, but for now she needs something else to distract herself. Hungry? Mmm, no, doesn't feel like it. Thirsty? ...yeah, she could drink something. There's that dry, parched feeling in her throat there's no direct analogue for in cock-mode. (She's got to remind herself to perform these manual interrogations from time to time, or those unpleasant bodily feelings build up until they angrily push to the forefront of her consciousness to remind her of the many irritating needs of her current form.)

Emily heads into the kitchen, which in Skeila and Ketta's townhouse is adequate for humans and cramped for spiders. The front door opens into an open-plan room split down the middle by a long counter, dividing it into a dining area and linoleum-floored kitchen; bar stools on the dining side provide a place to sit and eat. The cabinets are chintzy veneered particle board and the countertops are nondescript beige laminate—Midway stamped out streets full of townhouses just like this one forty years ago and they haven't really been updated since, but the girls have cheered things up with decorations: patches of fake ivy and moss on the walls, a big scrap-metal clock one of Ketta's art school friends welded for her, a gilt flea-market frame around the dry erase board where Skeila and Ketta maintain their shared grocery list, and Skeila's hung up a print of the album art from *The Brickwork Bastards EP* (the first

release from influential 90s UK archnopunk band Dead End Blokes; it shows the front man, Spewbowl, leaping fully nude from the stage into the crowd with an erection and beers in three claws. Fans have debated the identity of the human shown for years, and several humans have claimed to be that famous boner. Spewbowl, for his part, claims not to remember most of the year the album was recorded.)

The kitchen has an overhead light, but Emily eschews the harsh fluorescent bulb as she navigates to the refrigerator. The girls leave the range hood light on as a kind of nightlight, and it suffuses the kitchen with a soft yellow glow cast from face-height, which is washed out into white neutrality by the light inside the fridge as Emily opens it and rummages for something to drink. Water's too boring, milk's too heavy, that pitcher of iced tea at the back was already old when she went topside. . . she ends up pouring herself a glass of cran-raspberry juice, and as she lifts it to her lips and begins to drink she has phantom sensations, a vision of the glass held up to a giant cockhead and poured down the urethra—*her own head*—she can feel the rim of the glass pressing into her pliable glans flesh, the cold tart fluid flowing down her urethra, no, her throat, not a smooth continuous tube anymore. . .as it backs up in her mouth she remembers to operate her epiglottis. She swallows clumsily, her cheeks fill, she goes to swallow again—which is when she notices Sid.

The rail-thin human's standing on the landing halfway down the flight of stairs in the dining room that goes up to the second floor, gripping the railing and frozen like a deer in headlights. Sid's wearing nothing but a threadbare pair of green boxers and, curiously, a crudely woven band of spider silk wrapped around his bony chest just below nipple height, which trails off in a single silk strand running leashlike back up the staircase.

Emily attempts to greet him, but she still has a mouthful of juice and is out of practice controlling her facial muscles. What was intended to be a cheerful "Hey Sid!" comes out something like "hbluhg" as she inadvertently sprays purple juice across the kitchen.

Sid, obviously not expecting to encounter anyone, emits a terrified yawn of surprise as he falls over on the staircase with a thump. A split second later there is another, heavier thump from upstairs as a few hundred pounds of bipedal archnid hits the floor running. "SID?!" screams Skeila. It only takes her a few stomping strides that reverberate on the ceiling before she's storming down the staircase—and there she is, standing defensively over her prone, mostly naked human. Standing nearly nine feet tall, covered in deep coffee brown fur except for the lighter tan bands around her elbows and knees, the spider is nude herself as well; her cock, a respectable seven inches soft but clearly not large enough to be a transformed human, is still swinging back and forth where it dangles between her legs from the momentum of crashing down the stairs. But despite not having her customary Archnid Altercation Agency uniform on she's no less intimidating than ever. Skeila's holding the other end of Sid's silk leash in one claw and has the other five balled up and held out as

if ready to fight. Her eight black eyes scan the first floor for danger. “Emily?” says Skeila, confused. “Izzat you?”

“Who?” asks Sid, nervously scooting backwards under Skeila’s legs.

“Heeey guys,” says Emily. She’s got her hands up no-sudden-movements style and the front of her sweatshirt is soaked in juice. “Uh, sorry, would have come up and said hi but it sounded like you were in the middle of something. . .”

A couple minutes later the trio’s standing around the kitchen, after Skeila picks Sid up and makes the necessary introductions—“Sid, this is Emily. You’ve met, kinda. She’s Ketta’s cock.”

Sid looks at her. “Oh, uh, hi,” he says haltingly. “Nice to. . .meet you.” She can watch him knitting the idea together that the foot-long penis he’s seen on Skeila’s roommate and the girl standing in front of him are one and the same. “So you’re Ketta’s, um, her. . .”

“Her cock, yeah,” Emily finishes Sid’s sentence for him with a wide smile. It doesn’t take a mind reader to tell how flustered he is—she’d have thought he’d be more comfortable talking to cocks by now, but he’s a high-strung one.

“Uh, maybe I should go put some clothes on—” Sid says.

He turns to head upstairs, but Skeila’s long brown-furred arm holds him in place. “Pssh. You’re fine like that.”

“I don’t mind,” laughs Emily.

Sid rolls his eyes and slumps back against Skeila’s chest. The spider folds her six arms around Sid and asks “Where you been, Em? Not like you and Ketta to be apart so long.”

“Had to go topside for a week. Family stuff—My sister got married. Couldn’t miss it,” Emily says.

“Don’t they still have the Tube shut down and everything on lockdown?” Sid asks from within Skeila’s embrace. “How’d you get back down?”

Emily shrugs. “Yeah, but it’s really just the spiders they’re worried about. You can still use some of the caverscraper elevators if you’re going down. I went to school with a guy who washes dishes at the Ruth’s Chris in that tower downtown, so he just lets me in the building and I use that one. The code there’s easy, you just hold the button for the bottom floor of the parking garage and hit door open five times. Only works between midnight and 4 AM, though.”

“Huh. Good to know.”

“Not as flashy as coming down on a freight elevator, I know,” smirks Emily.

“That was *her* idea,” says Sid, looking up at Skeila as he seems to try to retreat into her fur. “If I’d known they were see-through I’d have figured something else out. Or at least I wouldn’t have been. . .you know.”

Skeila’s smiling wide enough to show off plenty of those big sharp teeth. “I thought it all worked out pretty good.”

“It was cute,” says Emily. “Are you keeping him on a leash now that you two are famous?” she asks, pointing at the silk wrapped around Sid’s chest.

Sid rolls his eyes. “I wanted to get some water—”

“Yeah, he really worked up a thirst,” says Skeila, grinning.

Emily suppresses a laugh as Sid, mildly peeved, continues: “—but she didn’t want me to go downstairs unsupervised, and was too lazy to get out of her web herself. . . ergo, a compromise.” He picks at the tight silk around his chest.

“Wasn’t lazy, you just blew me so well I couldn’t move. You oughta be proud,” snickers Skeila, as Sid’s face turns bright crimson and the spider clutches him tighter still to her chest. Mercifully, she changes the subject. “So what was it like running around topside? I know Ketta’s been moping around all week.”

Emily slumps. If this week’s been hard for her, she hates to think about what it’s been like for Ketta. “It sucked, Skeila. This isn’t what I *am*, you know? I miss Ketta. I miss being me.”

“Aw, poor little dick,” says Skeila. “Well, Ketta’s going to be one very happy spider when she gets to put you back in place. She still at the bakery?”

“Yeah, she gets off at five. Stay up and wait with me! You two can help me change back. It’ll be fun,” she says with a suggestive bounce.

“Be happy to, but. . .”

“. . . but we have a big day tomorrow. Or today, maybe.” Sid finishes Skeila’s thought for her, squinting at that scrap metal clock.

“What’s tomorrow?” asks Emily.

“It’s my first day consulting for the MARC, and her first day on that task force the Mayor set up to investigate the Huntsmen,” Sid says.

Skeila makes a sigh as pointed as her fangs and her multiple brows furrow unhappily. The temperature in the kitchen, or at least the conversation, seems to suddenly decrease. “Still can’t believe you’re going to work for the friggin’ MARC,” mutters Skeila.

“Just on a provisional basis!” protests Sid. “Your friend Anthony Waterproof emailed me. There’s this new project they’re starting they want me to take the lead on.”

“You could be helping *me* on the Huntsmen detail.”

Oops. Seems Emily’s stumbled onto a touchy subject. Well, there’s a way to fix that, and she’s already rooting through the cupboard for the shot glasses. “Sounds like a big deal! We oughta toast to it.”

“Aw, I dunno. . .”

“Shots!” demands Emily. “Shots!”

Skeila grins. “Yeah, whatever, alright. Gimme a shot. What are we drinking?”

“Skeila, we have to be awake in like five hours,” says Sid. (He gets a six-armed shrug in response.)

Emily’s already set out three shot glasses and is hunting through Skeila and Ketta’s booze selection, a sparse collection of bottles on top of their fridge she has to stand on her tiptoes to reach. “Oh, here we go.” She plucks one that’s

mostly full of a slippery-clear fluid with a red and yellow label and something at the bottom of the bottle.

“...Gusano Rojo?” Sid’s squinting at the label. “What is that, tequila?”

“Not quite,” says Emily. “Ever have mezcal?”

“I...don’t think so?” He hasn’t or he’d know. Emily pours three shots, full to brimming, and hands them out. Sid winces at the fumes coming off of his; he’s not certain Emily hasn’t poured him a glass of kerosene.

“To Sid having a good first day on the job,” says Emily as she raises her glass.

“To Skeila catching the Huntsmen,” says Sid.

“To Emily going back to being the cock she wants to be,” says Skeila.

“Cheers to that,” says Emily. They clink cups and it’s down the hatch.

A collective shudder runs through the trio. Skeila’s eight eyes crinkle up as she undergoes a convulsive full-body shiver of disgust. Emily, who doesn’t quite seem to know how to control her face, gags a bit and starts to drool. “Jesus, it’s like drinking a burnt rock,” exclaims Sid.

“Fuckin’ Eris, that’s awful. Don’t know why we even have this stuff,” mutters Skeila, sticking her black tongue out between her fangs. She wipes her mouth off with the fur on the back of her lower left arm. “Alright, Sid’s right, we gotta get some sleep. I’m goin’ back upstairs and try and brush this shit out of my fangs. Emily, see you tomorrow when you’re back where you should be.”

“Oh, uh, alright—” says Sid, turning to follow Skeila.

“Nah, stay for a few minutes. Emily’s been around here so much and you two ain’t even talked yet! You should have a little human chat for a while. It’s cute,” says Skeila. Waving to Emily with one claw, with another she holds up the long strand of silk connecting to the band around Sid’s chest. “If I get too bored I’ll just pull your leash.”

The two humans watch Skeila ascend the stairs, brown-furred legs and black-clawed feet vanishing up above the ceiling, before Emily turns to Sid. She waits expectantly. Emily feels a sort of duty to *guide* him, the kind of compulsion one has to share a great song with a friend, to clue someone in on a valuable experience, to pass the joint around the circle...He’s still so—reticent? Closed? Even after being with Skeila for what, about a month, and letting her change him twice? Especially if he’s going to be working with the people from the MARC. He needs some help. Some *counterprogramming*. How many examples does he see of something beautiful a human can have with a spider—examples that can speak up for themselves at the time?

Emily lets a few seconds of awkward silence hang in the air, then asks “So are you used to life in Midway yet? How’s things with Skeila?”

“Oh, uh, yeah! Good. Pretty good,” he says, nodding amiably. “Yeah?” “Yeah,” he replies, continuing to nod.

Okay, not much of a conversationalist, this one. “Cool. Seems like she’s really into you when I see you two,” she says.

“When—oh, right,” says Sid. “I forgot I’ve, uh. . .seen you around, even if we haven’t really met, exactly.”

“Should’ve just asked Ketta, could have met me any time.”

He makes an awkward laugh that comes out more like one sudden cough and looks away. “I, uh, don’t know if Skeila’d like that.”

“Pff. You don’t think Skeila would be happy to have a chance for her and her roommate to play with their cocks together?”

Sid nearly chokes. The boy reddens *dramatically*. “Okay, I’m not her—”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what I said about Ketta at first.” Emily snickers, pleased with herself. “Sorry, Sid, I’m just messing with you.”

“I’m surprised Skeila’s okay with *this*,” he mumbles.

“What do you mean?”

“I guess she knows where I am,” says Sid, probing the strand of silk running upstairs from the band around his chest. It’s tight enough to show the ridges his ribs and sternum make on his chest. “Maybe don’t tell her I said this, but, uh. . .”

“Cocks don’t talk,” says Emily, raising her hand as if to swear a pact.

“I mean, she gets. . .a little possessive sometimes, right?”

“How so?” Emily leans forward in eager listening mode. That mezcal must be doing its job by now—there’s a band of flushed warmth on Sid’s face stretching from cheekbone to cheekbone that isn’t only embarrassment.

“Okay, case in point. . .you could probably tell she’s not real thrilled about this job at the MARC,” Sid says.

“They’re not a real popular bunch right now.”

“Well, there’s this other spider girl I’m going to be working with, and I don’t think she likes her very much. I think that’s one reason she’s not happy about it. But then she’s like sure, hang out with some girl you don’t even know while you’re, uh,” and here he looks down again at his boxers and that homespun silk band, “. . .not extremely clothed.”

“Dude, she’s not going to worry about leaving you alone with her friend’s dick,” scoffs Emily. “But what about this other spider?”

“Oh, uh, someone I’m going to be working with. She’s a statistician for the MARC. Skeila and her have met a couple times, actually. I. . .don’t think she liked her very much. Though, uh. . .” Sid gets mumblier yet, and his gaze shifts from the cabinet next to Emily’s head to a spot on the floor even further away. “We were at this club, Blurred Vision—”

“Oh, I love that place! Did Skeila take you there unchanged? Humans don’t walk out of Blurred Vision,” says Emily, fondly recollecting her and Ketta’s trips there. She unconsciously stands up a little straighter.

“She changed me before we went,” he admits, continuing in a tiny voice. “But when we were there, um, well. . .We fucked this other spider girl. Skeila and me. She, um, *used* me to, I mean.”

“Ahhh.” Emily considers this. “Doesn’t necessarily mean she likes her. You think Skeila sees her as a threat?”

“As in, competition? Yeah, probably,” sighs Sid. “Sometimes it seems like she considers everything a threat until proven otherwise. But I would never. She doesn’t have anything to worry about.”

“Look, in my experience spiders are mostly worried about some other spider swooping in and stealing their human. This other spider...you said she’s a statistician? So someone you can talk to about your work. Like you speak this whole other language she doesn’t.”

“You’re making it sound a lot cooler than it is.”

Emily shrugs. “You’re the one who thought Skeila might have a problem with this girl. I’m just trying to figure out why. What is it you’re going to be working on with her?”

Sid hesitates. “I’m...not really clear on the details myself yet. I guess the goal is to be able to drill for oil without flooding out the deep spiders? Or something like that. I saw some of the preliminary calculations and it’s, uh, pretty gnarly.” He gets this faraway look in his eyes. “I mean, it’s fluid dynamics, so obviously Navier-Stokes is going to show up, but it looked like they were using the Maxwell field equations too, makes no sense...” He shakes his head and trails off, mumbling about vectors and tensors.

“Well...it sounds like a nice cause. I could see Skeila worrying about it, though. It’s a way this other spider can connect with you that she can’t. Just make sure Skeila knows you’re *her* human.”

“So I should...?”

“That’s up to you, dude,” says Emily. “But there’s no better way to be connected to your spider than to be *connected* to your spider.”

It takes Sid a few seconds to catch the implication—Emily can almost see him working it out. He releases another awkward burst of a laugh before gulping it down. “Well, uh...I imagined doing that now and then was going to be part of being with a spider, right? I’m...I’m not opposed to it. Temporarily, of course,” he rushes to add. “Our work schedules make it pretty inconvenient, though. It...it might be something we could do on the weekend sometimes.”

“There must be twice as many cocks in this city on the weekend. Being a dick with a job didn’t really work out for me,” Emily chuckles. “But I’m sure that would make Skeila a very happy spider.”

Sid draws in a breath, steeling himself for something. Emily waits patiently for him to get it out. “Can I...look, I don’t wanna pry or anything, and if this isn’t cool just say so, but...can I ask about you and Ketta?”

Emily beams. “Of course, dude. I’m an open book. Ask away.”

“So, you’re Ketta’s...her, uh, her cock, right?”

“Sure am,” Emily says with a definitive nod.

“Like, that’s who you *are*? Would you say it’s your identity?”

“Absolutely. I, Emily Standowne, am a penis.” Flat, direct, and simple, the way you’d say it with your hand on a bible and a stenographer punching it into the court record.

Sid takes a moment to digest this. “Even though you’re here, now, not, uh. . .penis-shaped.”

“Sure. A cock’s a cock, even when she’s got to deal with some non-cock stuff.”

“Like the wedding. So Ketta changes you back for the ‘non-cock stuff’? And then it’s just. . .right back to it?”

“Soon as she can, yeah. We’ve spent so long together it feels *wrong* to be separated. Pretending to be something I’m not. I’m a cock! I don’t want to have to hide it!”

“Wow. So how long have you been with Ketta?”

“I met her. . .” Emily looks up towards the ceiling, calculating. “Around three years ago? But I’ve only been her cock for about a year.”

“How’d you know that that was, uh, what you wanted to be?”

“Wasn’t like a switch turned on one day or anything. Ketta and I had been hooking up for a while by then. More and more when I was on the surface I wished I was in Midway with Ketta, and when I was with Ketta I was dreading having to go back to the surface.” Emily looks up at the popcorn ceiling, remembering that period of her life as a half-dream. Sleepwalking through gatherings of her old friends, surface sunrays making her translucent in her mind. Less of her to go around up here, some portion always back down there with her spider. “When we were together—*together* together, you know—she was clearer in my mind every time. I could feel her thoughts, her feelings. It started to be like I was alone everywhere else.”

Sid nods, looking at her for a moment with some flicker of recognition. “Yeah, I can hear Skeila talking to me in my mind when I’m. . .you know. It’s pretty intense.”

“Pretty rare for that to happen so soon, dude. You believe in fate?”

Sid makes an incoherent gesture in response, some triangulation between a shrug, raised eyebrow, and head shake. “How long did it take you?”

“About four months after I started letting her change me, but up till then I’d just been a weekend dick a couple times a month.” Emily laughs to herself, both at the memory and at his clumsily dodging the question. “I’d taken a week off work and planned to spend the whole time as her penis. Told people I was going camping, no cell service. First time I heard her I thought she was *actually* talking. We were at a bar downtown, there was a line for the bathroom a mile long, and we had to piss real bad. I keep telling her I can’t hold it in much longer and I just hear her yell, *bitch I know!*” Emily laughs again. “Romantic, right? We ended up leaving and using the bathroom in a hot dog place down the street.”

“So does anyone you know from the surface know about Midway? Or who you, uh, really are?”

“Nah. I don’t talk to my old surface friends much, and my family’s all topsiders.”

“Do you have, like, a cover story?”

“Oh, yeah. Gotta have a good cover story. Midway has some programs to help humans keep things secret. Fake companies, addresses you can get mail at, apartments you can take pictures in. Me, I do remote night shift customer service for Niwatori Light Manufacturing Ltd. It’s this optics company in Japan, like mirrors and lenses and stuff. They mostly sell within the country, but they have me and a few people for international customers to call.”

“Is . . . any of that true?”

“Entirely bullshit. I know, I know. I don’t like lying to my family, but that’s how it goes.”

“You ever think of telling anyone?”

Emily shakes her head. “Can’t,” she says flatly.

“Why not?”

“Cause they’ll think you’re crazy. And don’t think you can show them, either. Not how it works. I’ve tried bringing people in, but . . . if you’re meant to be here, you’ll get here. If not . . .” She gives him a rueful little smile. “It’s tough to even split the difference. If there’s people you want to stay connected with on the surface you can do it, but it takes a lot of work.”

Sid nods as he digests this, and in the intervening silence the only sound is the low buzz of the fridge and an electric scooter whirring down the street. The kitchen window briefly lights up as its headlight hits the blinds, then the whirr fades as it heads north, away from Midway’s center. “Huh,” is all he has to say.

“No regrets, though. I’d do anything to be with Ketta.” There’s a certain steel in her voice that says she means it and wants Sid to know.

“I want to be with Skeila, but . . . not in the same way as you and Ketta, I think. No offense,” he hurriedly adds.

“None taken,” she reassures him just as quickly. “Every couple’s different. It’s up to you and Skeila to figure that out.”

“Yeah, but . . . that’s what every spider wants, right? A human to be their full-time cock? I . . . I wouldn’t mind doing it now and then, but . . .”

“I think you’re over-generalizing, dude. They’re spiders, but they’re not a hive mind. They want different things.”

Sid’s brows knit together, and if where his gaze is directed is any indication he’s become very concerned with the floor. “What do you think Skeila wants?”

“I think you should ask *her* that.”

He sighs at the cop-out. “C’mon. If you’ve known Ketta for years, you’ve known Skeila longer than I have. Give me *something*.”

Emily mirrors Sid’s sigh right back at him. “I think you shouldn’t stress about it. You two are good together. Ketta thinks so too. Skeila’s always been pretty . . . intense, you know? It’s like you both take each others’ edges off, the way you relax into her.”

An oddly intimate observation from someone Sid met just minutes ago, until he reminds himself again that they *haven’t* just met. With all the time he’s spent with Skeila over the last few weeks, every time they passed Ketta on

the stairs or going out the door Emily was swinging between the spider's legs, Emily's been there listening to every minute of their small talk, she's killed time with them watching TV on the couch, a silent observer Sid had known was human but only in the theoretical sense—and now Ketta's cock is here in front of him, having a conversation.

Suddenly, the silk line trailing off of the band around Sid's chest goes taut and he lurches a clumsy step to his left. He manages to steady himself by grabbing on to the refrigerator door handle, only for his leash to get pulled again seconds later, forcing him another few steps towards the stairs.

Emily grins. "I think she wants *you*, dude."

With an apologetic wave to Emily, Sid stumbles jerkily towards the staircase. "Think I'm being summoned. I guess I'll see you tomorrow," he says, realizing he won't see her like *this*. "Good night, good luck changing back, and—" nearly tripping here trying to walk backwards as he's pulled up the stairs, "—thanks for the, uh, human chat."

"Night, Sid," she says, waving back as he disappears upstairs. "And don't forget to tell Skeila we should play together!"

That went alright, she thinks as she returns to the living room. Not perfect, but it doesn't sound like Sid's going to be running away, and she didn't want to sound like she's proselytizing. So what if he doesn't want to be a full-time cock? It's not a lifestyle for everyone.

Emily pulls her still damp hoodie off over her head and hangs it on the back of the couch to dry, leaving her in her jeans and a comfortable black sports bra. She lays down on the couch and folds her legs up under her heels-to-butt. This is a little relaxation technique she invented herself to get her through these spiderless nights, lying lonely in her bed without any lover's welcome presence in her mind, inhabiting a body she no longer fully feels is her own. Legs up and curled beneath her like the scrotum they should be. She pulls the cheap polyester blanket off the back of the couch and lays it across her, and that's Ketta's fur. Spine straight but relaxed. Limp, not erect. Extraneous arms at her side like they're not even there. Eyes closed, deep slow breaths. In and out, in and out, as though the air is her spider's blood flowing into and filling her.

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The next thing Emily is aware of is the clatter of a key in the front door, though only in that way one has a sense of what's woken you up after the fact. When she opens her eyes, there in the doorway between the living room and kitchen stands a dark six-armed silhouette, nothing but her sharp Cheshire smile visible in the low light. And when the silhouette flicks on the lamp, she barely changes except for the shine on her eyes and claws, as if the light just vanishes into her short velvety fur coat of black fur.

“Ketta!” is Emily’s drowsy cry as she tumbles off the couch and charges into the spider’s outstretched arms. The girls collide, giggling.

“E!” shouts Ketta. The spider effortlessly picks Emily up and spins her around. “E! E!” It comes out in these quick inhuman screeches the way she says it, the kind of noise that would have the average topsider hydrating their pants if they heard it in the middle of the night, but to Emily it’s the most comforting sound there is. Less a human letter than a sound from the pair’s own private language, Emily knows it means *her*. “I missed you, E,” says Ketta as she sets the human down.

Emily clings to Ketta inside her embrace, still giggling. She presses her face hard into the soft fur below her neck. “Sssh! Quiet!” she manages to sputter out between laughs. “Skeila and Sid are upstairs sleeping. They gotta get up early.”

“Whoops,” says Ketta sheepishly, grin undimmed.

“I missed you too,” says Emily, taking a deep, happy breath. Ketta’s scent is botanical with a faint peppery edge, the spice of fresh-cut pinewood. The pair pulls back for a moment to just look at each other. Emily gazes lovingly up at Ketta, her adorable stubby fangs, eight glossy black eyes, and fur as black and soft as the most luxurious sable.

“I missed you more,” says Ketta, giving the human a playful poke in the flank with a claw.

“No way. You have *no* idea.” She hugs the spider tighter, pressing her whole body up against Ketta. “I’m just so glad to be back where I should be. And what I should be, soon.”

“Pssh, you’ve been running around on the surface with all your human friends. I haven’t had my cock for two weeks!”

“Yeah, you better fix that.”

“Food first. Not going to change you on an empty stomach.” They adjourn to the kitchen where Emily takes a seat on one of the counter stools; Ketta’s brought a couple of unsold baguette-style rolls home from the bakery, one of which she holds down by her crotch as she winks a few eyes at Emily. “This’ll be you soon.”

“Not soon enough.”

“Patience, my pretty penis.” Ketta, foodie that she is, likes to feed Emily on the rare occasions they’re together separately for any length of time. It’s not just to show she cares, there’s an element of fascination now—yes of course she knows humans have to *eat*, it’s just that’s how strongly she thinks of Emily as her cock. It’s almost perverse seeing something go down the other way.

She cuts a roll in half, making a clean slice down the middle with her claw. A six-inch section for Emily and the rest for her. “We missed our shot with Zandi, you know. Everyone was drinking at the bakery after we closed Saturday and she was so hitting on me.”

“Zandi? Oh, shit. I wanted in her. You didn’t go for it?”

“Duh, I’m not gonna fuck her without my cock.”

From the fridge Ketta procures various sandwich fixins and a big bag of chipped ham. (There's a taste for it down here too; every day pounds and pounds of the constituent pink loaves are packed up in surface delicatessens for the ride down Apostrophe Falls.) Her six claws go to work in remarkably synchrony like some meticulously timed clockwork machine, one pair of claws slicing bread lengthwise while the rest layer down smoked gouda, pile up those delicate paper-thin ham sheets like pink clouds, spread aioli, and stuff pickled red onions into the whole assemblage.

"How was the surface? Wedding go alright?" asks Ketta, handing Emily her sandwich. The human just makes an unhappy, closed-mouth grunt in response as she takes the plate. "Not great?"

"It was nice, but...you know I love my folks but they were driving me *in-sane*." She bites into her sandwich before continuing. Ketta sits and listens, watching her blunt human teeth crunching into the crust. "Lindsey was neurotic about the whole thing the whole time, which, okay, sure, you're getting married, but her maid of honor was a huge bitch to everyone. Me and Taylor try to help out, she yells at us, we sit down, she yells at us. And my mom! Oh my god. Four times she said 'At least one of my daughters is getting married'. I counted."

Ketta makes a squeaky, sympathetic chuckle, "I'm sorry, E. Did you at least get to see any of your topside friends?"

She nods with a mouthful of baguette. Ever since she's been with Ketta—*really* been with Ketta, been part of her—it's like there's this interposing psychic later between herself and everyone from her old life. There's too much of her now that she can't explain to any of them. "Yeah, Jason and Marissa did a board game and beer night in their garage like old times. Lot of people weren't in town, but a few showed up. It was nice too, but anymore it's hard to really talk to them. It's like, what are you doing these days Emily? Oh, well, I like to spend most of my time as my spider's cock..."

"Honesty's the best policy, right?" snickers Ketta. "I haven't been up on the surface since...I think it was that night with Miles. You see him?"

"That was...god," Emily trails off, thinking back to when they decided to try showing the guy she'd been talking to what her and Ketta had been doing. It feels so incredibly long ago now it's unpleasant to think about. But was it really that bad? Or is it just how different a person she is now? "That was a mistake."

Ketta shrugs. "It was fun."

"It was fun, but it didn't work. No, I haven't talked to him in ages. I...kinda ghosted him."

"Aw. I liked him."

"It would have been too difficult with him topside, and he never found his way to Midway. If he was meant to be here..."

"...he'd be here," Ketta finishes her sentence, biting off a big chunk of sandwich. The girls eat in silence for a while. "Have any trouble getting back

down with the whole lockdown thing?”

“Nah, the caverscraper elevators still all mostly work if you’re going down. Got back about one o’ clock. Was trying to stay up till you got in, but I guess I fell asleep. Talked to Sid for the first time.”

“Oh yeah? How’d that go?”

“Pretty good, I think. I just wanted to give him a little encouragement about being in Midway, but I don’t know if he really even needed it. He *did* seem pretty curious about what life as a spider’s cock is like,” says Emily with a self-satisfied little smile. “I tried to give him the soft sell.”

“Oooh, Skeila thanks you, I’m sure. Did you give him all the embarrassing details?” Ketta bites her lower lip, fangs protruding down over it. “Like how I can still make you twitch like a cock even when you look human?” She reaches over with one of her lower arms to squeeze Emily’s hip by way of demonstration, and sure enough the girl makes a little *eep* and immediately sits up much straighter.

“Mmmh, not fair,” moans Emily. “You need to hurry up and change me back.”

“Patience, my little dick.”

A mock-offended gasp from the human and a playful smack on the arm. “I am not *little!*”

“Until I put you back, you are,” she says, going back to the last few bites of her sandwich. They’re both right, in a paradoxical sort of way. Emily’s a rather petite-framed sort of girl and soon she’s going to be a few feet smaller yet, but as a penis she’s huge.

“Hmph. Anyway, no, I didn’t give him *all* the details. Like I said, I was trying to sell him. I’m not going to bring up stuff like how half the time I sit down to pee I automatically open my mouth.”

Ketta snickers some more while she wipes her claws clean with a napkin.

“You should have seen me at the wedding. They were trying to fix me up with one of my brother-in-law’s friends. He was cute, but he had to think I had some kind of condition. I went so rigid when we were dancing it probably felt like moving a mannequin around. At least I didn’t drool on him.”

The spider laughs. “Poor human. Sounds like I need to put you back in your place.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” replies Emily.

They grin at each other and Ketta leans down to kiss Emily, who responds enthusiastically, though she’s not quite in the habit of kissing back anymore; most of the time now when they’re kissing Ketta’s curled over, long black tongue probing her urethra, nothing to do but enjoy the feeling of the muscle slithering into the narrow slit in her purple, plump head, and twitch and throb in her spider’s grasp to show her appreciation. . .In fact she has another involuntary twitch just then, a full-body spasm that ripples through her.

Ketta pulls back from the kiss with a mischievous smile. “You really are getting twitchy, huh?”

“I can’t wait to get back to how I should be.” Practically panting, now. “I haven’t been able to think about anything else.”

“Should we go ahead and start, then?”

Emily nods quickly, *so* ready. . . “We gotta be quiet, though. Don’t forget about Skeila and Sid upstairs.”

“Well that’s no fun,” says Ketta.

Emily shrugs. “I can be quiet.”

“I know, but I don’t want us to have to hold back. . .” Ketta pauses, then makes a sly nod at the door. “Wanna take a walk?”

“A walk?” It takes Emily a moment to catch on. “Oh, you wanna change me outside?”

“Could be fun. We can go find somewhere out of the way. Or not so out of the way, if you want,” says Ketta, grinning wide enough to show off most of her teeth.

The human’s face reddens. They don’t really play in public much, but after having to put up with stifling human society for so long. . .well, why not? “Alright,” she says, getting up to put their plates in the sink. “You’re on. Ready to go whenever you are.”

“Perfect,” says Ketta, getting up too. “My little human’s going to walk out that door on two legs and come back as the cock she really is.” The spider pauses for a moment, thinking. “But before we go. . .take off your underwear.”

“W-what?”

“You heard me,” says Ketta, smirking. “Your panties. Lose ’em.”

“I. . .it’s not like I’m wearing a skirt or anything,” says Emily, pointing to her jeans.

“So go commando. One less thing I’ll have to carry back.”

Carry back. Right. Because she won’t be able to carry anything back on the way herself, and she certainly won’t need clothes. Ketta’s not usually so bossy, but the change has always brought out her *domme* side. . .and Emily likes it. She nods, lightheaded, and with a nervous laugh kicks off her sneakers and wriggles her jeans down, revealing her panties, plain gray cotton snug to her pale hips. “Sid and Skeila better not come down right now,” she jokes.

Ketta’s watching this while leaning against the kitchen counter, all three pairs of arms crossed. “Oh, *that* would be embarrassing? But not tomorrow when they see you hanging between my legs?” she teases.

“Well, yeah,” says Emily. She could never explain it, but there’s a strange confidence to be found in being a spider’s cock. Sure, you might be naked and exposed before the world as someone else’s sex organ, but there’s something comfortable and reassuring there too, the same comfort as the anonymity of a crowd, a safety found in submersion of the self within a greater whole.

Hooking her thumbs in the waistband, Emily pulls her panties down too, revealing a strip of dark, trimmed hair. She straightens up, allowing Ketta to get a good look at her, then the human takes her underwear and lets them hang on one outstretched fingertip, then fall to the floor, and then Emily is

just standing there bottomless in nothing but that sports bra, naked below the waist. She can't help the way she's blushing, but she looks her spider right in the eyes with as confident a smile as she can muster and even a, a certain *defiance*...

Ketta raises the four eyebrows on the left half of her face and smirks, enjoying the sight of her half-nude human for a few moments. "You putting your pants back on or are we going out like that?"

With her underwear still on the kitchen floor Emily hurriedly shimmies back into her jeans. "Lemme go get my hoodie," she says, scurrying back into the living room to fetch it.

Ketta waits, claw on the doorknob. "Get your shoes on, baby..."

The light in Midway is strange these days. The city has been messing with the lighting schedule ever since an ordinance passed last month wresting control of the municipal dimmer switch away from the MARC and turning it over to the newly created Midway Ambience & Light Levels Subcommittee. MALLS had been formed out of a collection of eminent spider specialists across a wide range of fields: biologists and doctors specializing in the study of sleep, photographers and architects and color theorists to guide the aesthetics of the light as it played over the city's buildings, even a leading theater set designer renowned for her artistic stage lighting. Every one of them immediately fell into a series of bitter, recriminatory feuds. Perhaps most notably, scientists Dr. Kebbelax and Dr. Yttrius Crab became arch-rivals due to their competing theories on the spider circadian rhythm: Kebbelax proposed a 17 hour cycle and Crab a 35 hour, and as these are coprime numbers their favored lighting schedules were, obviously, utterly incompatible. When Crab, in a fit of aggrandized pique, threatened to shut the lights off and plunge the city into darkness, Mayor Arachnypoundcake was forced to step in. Threatening to disband MALLS, he set minimum and maximum luminosity levels and decreed that henceforth the city lights would be controlled by majority vote of whoever happened to be in the MALLS office. Since then most members of the subcommittee have elected to live in the office, which is now strewn with laundry, pizza boxes, and haphazard webs. Votes are usually called immediately whenever anyone grudgingly steps out to acquiesce to the call of nature. (The subcommittee has made, and vigorously self-enforced, a rule against piss bottles.)

But right now MALLS has seen fit to suffuse the city with a dim glow approximating pre-dawn twilight. The bulb of each ceiling light is a glowing halo in their colossal plastic shrouds, floating like perfectly ordered bioluminescent jellyfish in a vast ocean of air, forming dotted gridlines across the roof of the city. Not enough light to read by, but enough to navigate these side streets, enough to see a lover's face a few feet away...when Emily looks up at Ketta it's these dots that reflect in her perfect black eyes, and her fanged smile reflecting Emily's goofy grin.

"So where are we going?"

Ketta looks down at the human. “Tunno,” she admits with a shrug and a laugh.

Emily laughs back. It doesn’t matter—she’s going back to where she really should be. She seeks out Ketta’s hand and finds it, intertwining her digits with the spider’s claw, pressing on Ketta’s soft, padded palm.

Hand-in-hand they head north on Lower Arch Street, walking away from downtown. The street slopes nearly imperceptibly upward according to Midway’s bowl-shaped geometry. Looking over her shoulder off in the distance a glass-steel cavescraper—the very same one with the elevator she used to get back down from the surface world mere hours ago—is framed perfectly by the canyon of townhouses and low-rise apartment buildings leading back downtown.

Emily swings their tethered arms with exaggerated joy as they walk, energy rushing back into her now that she’s with her spider again, so much that it feels like her heart’s going to bubble over. She looks around and there’s so much depth to everything. Every time she catches Ketta’s eyes, any of them, she can’t help giggling. There’s an always-open diner at the north corner of the block where a shaggy spider’s sitting at a sidewalk table, watching a melting bowl of ice cream in front of him with puzzlement as a joint smolders down to nothing between the digits of one claw, stoned into total torpor. But so obviously in love is this couple that as Emily and Ketta walk by he snaps out of it, his eight eyes go wide and he exclaims “Like, I can see your *auras!*” They look at each other and laugh. Well, of course he can.

“So what’s been going on while I was gone?”

“Mmm. . .not a lot. It’s boring without you here. I’ve mostly just been picking up extra shifts at the bakery. Everyone’s been coming in cause we’re doing those peanut butter fudge things again. Lireka and Zaycie were both there tonight, it was awful.”

“Oh god, are they back together again already?”

“Well, they were for like a day,” begins Ketta as they cross the street against the light. Traffic has fallen off by now, and there are no scooters except for the ones owned by the street’s residents, parked and arranged in diagonal file. “But then I guess they went out dancing to this club where Lireka spent all night trying to get some human that showed up instead of paying any attention to Zaycie, so Zaycie won’t talk to Lireka, which would not be my problem if I wasn’t trying to get three trays of chocolate claws done, and I ask Zaycie if the oven’s free and she’s like I don’t know ask *her*. . .”

Emily has to snicker. She’s used to observing the soap opera of Ketta’s circle of friends from hip height (and from time to time being inserted rather directly into the drama herself). “Well, I’m sorry you had to put up with that.”

“They’ll be all over each other by next week.”

“Yeah, probably.” They pass a brightly-painted house on the corner the resident has converted into an art exhibition; it overflows with found objects,

garishly colored statuary, and dense hand-lettered signs. “What about Zandi? You said she was hitting on you?”

Now it’s Ketta’s turn to snicker. “Of course you want to know about Zandi.”

“Can you blame me?” Just thinking about the tall, slender spider with the coppery red fur makes Emily’s posture noticeably improve. Zandi worked at the bakery for a while about a year ago before deciding baking wasn’t her bag and that she’d rather attempt a career in music, but she clicked with their crew well enough to become a regular in their scene. She’d show up at their parties and open mic nights, and every time they crossed paths Emily made no secret to Ketta that she would very much like a piece of that, thank you. Ketta tried to feel out her interest, and while at times she seemed receptive things never happened for one reason or another—at one point Zandi had just started dating a spider boy she “wanted to focus on”, at another she was leaving on a six-month trip out west to a colony under the Rockies to find inspiration for her music.

“Of course she picks the week I’m out of town to hit on you,” says Emily, dismayed. “Maybe she’s just not into cocks?”

“That wasn’t the vibe I got. She asked about you specifically.”

“Ooh, she noticed me?” This delights Emily. She likes to show off, though of course there’s not much she can physically do—try to plump up at the right time, maybe twitch a little when she catches an eye. She does have Ketta moisturize her regularly, and she’s even experimented with various lip balms for a glossy, sparkly glans. “What’d she say?”

“Asked where my cock was, made a pouty little face when I told her you were topside. Said her band’s playing at some bar out in Sunkfield and we should come when you’re back in town. Oh, and she was all up on me like this—” here Ketta sidles up close to Emily while they walk, keeping the human’s hand in her claw but putting another claw around her waist, and her hips, and her shoulders, and coyly dragging yet another down her shoulder, even fluttering her lashes over those big black eyes for the full effect. “I’m pretty sure we’re in, E.”

Emily can’t help the big grin on her face—nor can she help the brief full-body jerk that seems to start around her waist and moves up like a wave to her shoulders and head.

“Did you really just twitch?” cackles Ketta. “You’re *such* a cock.”

Past here the city starts to thin out a bit. The contiguous walls of townhouses give way to empty gravel lots and standalone houses with a few feet of setback from the street, some even made from brick and masonry rather than the stone the city’s monolithic higher-density buildings tend to be hewn from. They come to the northern end of Lower Arch Street, where a wider thoroughfare runs perpendicular in both directions. “Which way?” Emily asks her spider.

“Mmm. . . that way,” she says, no destination in mind.

While Lower Arch is a ray extending outwards from downtown, this minor highway subtends an arc within Midway's irregular circumference, so it's flatter here. They walk along the sidewalk for a while. There's a little more traffic here but it's still light; only every couple of minutes a scooter buzzes by. A long, low rumbling builds from somewhere down the street until finally a garbage truck rounds a curve at speed, a member of Midway's dedicated sanitation crews hanging off the back with three arms, knees bent like he's surfing. Emily's black hair flies around in the truck's wake as it passes, and once it's out of sight the road returns to its early morning dormancy.

"C'mon," says Ketta, yanking Emily off the sidewalk. Still holding hands, the girls dash across the empty highway until they make it to the far sidewalk and continue on their way. They walk for a while next to a high wall of moss-covered rock, which gives way to a set of tuck-under garage rowhouses so new they seem out of place here compared to the older buildings they've been passing.

"You sure you don't have somewhere in mind?" asks Emily.

Ketta looks down at her human with an impish smile. "So impatient!"

"Yeah, that's what cocks are known for, patience..."

"I think we'll know the right place when we see it. This looks promising," says Ketta, pointing a claw at a little alley on the other side of those rowhouses. They turn and head up the alley, which is bounded on one side by a wooden fence and the other by the exterior wall of one of those houses. It's narrow to the point where Emily finds herself looking in the windows without really meaning to, and surprisingly steep—they're heading away from the city center, climbing again. They go right by a second story window into some spider boy's bedroom, and he happens to be lounging on his bed, a laptop on his chest and his cock lying on his stomach. He looks up at the two as they pass, making eye contact through the window with Emily for a moment. Not my fault, my dude, she thinks. Buy some curtains.

The alley terminates in a narrow staircase cut into the rock, which they take, and at the top they find themselves on another radial highway facing another terraced stone wall. Ketta picks a direction and on they go... "So how are your sisters doing? Is Taylor alright? Is Lindsey happy with her mate? Husband, I mean."

"Oh, yeah, over the moon," replies Emily, rolled eyes implicit in the tone of her voice. "Taylor's good too. It was really nice to get to spend some time with her again. I missed her."

Emily does love both her sisters but it's her younger one she's always gotten along better with. It was Taylor that giggled with Emily in couch cushion forts while Lindsey huffed at having to babysit. Growing up Lindsey was always off in her own world of teenage drama, and while of course Emily would later strain for independence her own way her youngest memories of her older sister are all aloofness and distance. Or maybe it was the very different things they wanted out of life—Lindsey'd always been laser-focused on getting that nuclear

family, house n' husband and two kids at least, a concept which appealed to Emily only slightly more than outright enslavement. Not a lot of common ground on which to relate. They'd taken their separate paths and now there she was and, well, here Emily is.

"Aw, I'm glad you got to see her. She started that new job you told me about, right? With the...games club? Does she like it?"

"Game *commission*," corrects Emily. "Yeah, she loves it. They have her going around to rivers and lakes and stuff, checking the water quality, making sure they're not being over-fished illegally, things like that. She was telling me about it for like an hour, which was good, cause it took her a while to ask about *me*," the human says with a bitter little almost-laugh. "I hate having to lie to her."

"What'd you tell her?"

"Same thing I tell everyone topside. Still doing remote work at night for that company in Japan. She wanted to hear more about it and I had to make stuff up on the spot. I think I'm getting worse at lying. I'm sure she knows *something's* up but she didn't call me out on it."

The girls pause their conversation as they pass under elevated rails high above while a Tube train rumbles by. Its windows are bright little squares against the twilight ceiling lights, no one aboard this early. Emily thinks about her younger sister and the distance that separates them now. And not just Taylor, but that's the one that hurts the most. Ever since she's been with Ketta—*really* been with Ketta, been part of her—it's like there's this interposing psychic layer between herself and everyone from her old life. Talking with her parents across the dinner table, it might as well have been one of those plexiglass booths they let prisoners talk to visitors through. Too much of her now that she can't explain to any of them. Can you have a conversation that does more than scratch the surface when one party's life is lived mostly below it?

"Maybe we could try showing her Midway," the spider says tentatively once the train has passed.

Emily shakes her head. "Wouldn't work." Flat dismissal.

"How do you know?"

"Cause I know Taylor. I thought it might work with Miles, and wow, was I wrong about that. It definitely wouldn't work with Taylor." The human makes a resigned little sigh. "Just how it is."

The girls have been walking for almost two hours, and by now they've left the residential areas of Midway far behind. They're getting close to the city's edge, and out here it's all light industry, truckyards, wide open fields of rock, cinder-block garages with windows dimmed by grease and dust over years.

It is not actually clear that they are still on a public Midway road *per se*; they have passed just now under a wide metal gantry that spans the road like a magic door. The sidewalk dispensed with tiles long ago and is now just a smoothed rut in the rock. Here and there are lichens and adventitious in the

cracks in the stone, nothing growing right anymore under the city's artificial light. Electric trucks and workers on scooters buzz by every minute, probably wondering where these two girls are headed.

Things seem bigger out here. Closer to the ceiling, for one thing, so the ceiling lights loom even larger than normal. It's disconcerting for someone who spends all their time downtown, like the sun suddenly doubled in size. And normally the cavern wall enclosing Midway is an indistinct gray-blown blur on the horizon but now it's all Emily can see when she looks ahead, individual crags and rocks the size of houses clearly visible. Three-phase power lines run off a terminal somewhere around the ceiling down to a series of transmission pylons that follow the curve of Midway's edge like skeletal alien soldiers marching in formation, bringing electricity to a line of beige concrete factories and warehouses going on for miles.

"Okay, *where* are you taking me," Emily finally has to ask.

"I figured we'd know it when we saw it, but maybe I shouldn't have trusted Eris on that one," says Ketta. "Getting sick of walking?"

"Kinda, yeah. More sick of not being your dick."

"Then...why not right here?"

"Here? What, just...on the side of the road?" Emily lets out a mock-shocked huff. Dump trucks with loads of crushed rock are rumbling past them just now, and right on the other side of the road there's a warehouse with doors open wide, filled with junk and workers in six-armed hi-vis vests moving it around.

"Thought you wanted to get back to being my cock, huh?"

"You... Emily presses into the side of her spider, affronted. "Alright, you come with me..." Now the human takes the lead, dragging her spider off the main road by her arm.

They go alongside that warehouse, between it and a chain-link fence where an accumulation of litter at the edges suggests a path. Behind the warehouse they come out at the high side of a long embankment—a segment of a vast circle. The further you go from Midway's center the less subtle its bowled shape is, until out here near the rim where any pretense at a smooth gradient is abandoned in favor of stepped terraces. On their right is an earthen wall separating them from the next level up. On their left the next few levels down are mostly empty lots, and below that it's a mass of factories, warehouses, and manufacturing plants. The separation creates a sort of wide industrial panorama playing out below them.

They walk a bit further on before Emily sits down on the rocky ground. "Alright, fuck it. Here."

"What, didn't want me to change you in front of all those workers?"

Emily's face reddens. "God, and on the side of the road like that? That's just dirty."

Ketta looks around, taking in the view. "This is kinda picturesque, in a way. I like it. Though you know, if you don't want an audience, pretty sure

everyone in all those buildings down there can see us too...”

Emily gulps. “Whatever,” she says. That much is obvious—if anything she’ll have a far wider audience now, sitting in the middle of a barren terrace overlooking walls of opaque factory windows and football-field sized parking lots with hundreds of scooters, yet the distance creates a kind of comforting anonymity. There’s lights at some of those windows, a light under a warehouse door, but it’s too far away to see the details. And it’s all strangely quiescent, no movement down there, as though production’s stopped at this particular site. Maybe everything’s between shifts. She can lie to herself and think that nobody’s watching, that nobody looking out a window will notice two figures on the mostly-empty surface wriggling around together, merging into one. “I don’t care. Let’s do it here,” says Emily.

“If this is where you want me to turn you back into my cock, then here it is,” says Ketta. She scoops Emily up effortlessly and sits on the rocky ground with the human placed in her lap.

“Here it is,” agrees Emily. She stretches up to Ketta the way she always does when she wants a kiss. A multitude of arms encloses Emily, claws lining up at the base of her neck to cradle her head, and the spider presses her lips to the human’s.

As they kiss Emily has this vision of herself and Ketta at a ceremony not entirely unlike Lindsey’s wedding, but for her and Ketta, to celebrate the fact that that she’s her penis once and for all, forever. No more need to go back and forth. Ketta’s in a beautiful white silk dress that opens in the front to accommodate where Emily will go, and Emily’s wearing these stretchy lacy things that will mold to her new form as she’s being changed—stockings that are supposed to turn into a kind of scrotum-garter, a frilly elastic corset that will end up around her shaft. It’s a bit revealing, especially with all her friends and family here to watch Ketta make an honest cock out of her, but then she’s going to be turned into a big throbbing penis in front of everyone soon so why should she care? She imagines everyone clapping for them as they kiss, sisters, parents, cousins, people she went to high school with all applauding and cheering as the change works its way up her body.

The girls break the kiss and pull back for a moment. “Change me,” she whispers.

“Gotta get these off,” breathes Ketta. Her upper two arms remain in place providing a comfortable net to hold Emily in while her lower pair has gone to work tugging at the waistband of her jeans. Emily obliges, shifting her hips so Ketta can tug them down. Her heart rate jumps when her pale thighs are exposed immediately—oh right, left the underwear back at the house.

Ketta’s claws start to take a more active role, leathery pads and chitin carefully invading her hoodie from underneath and roaming over her smooth thighs. The spider gives her breast a little squeeze and she jumps. “*Change me,*” Emily moans, more insistently this time.

The spider makes a pleased hum that ends in a wicked little giggle. “Mmmm, I love hearing you beg for it. Tell me what you are, E.”

“I’m your cock,” she replies without even a second of hesitation. “I’m just my spider’s cock and that’s all I am.”

“That’s everything you are,” says Ketta, who likes to phrase it that way.

“Just your cock,” Emily says again, her voice low and unsteady with need, but not uncertainty. Dots of reflected ceiling light move in Ketta’s short, glossy black fur as Emily slides her hand up to cup her breast. “Your penis. I-I’m just *fuckmeat*. Just my spider’s dumb little cock.”

Ketta giggles. “Listen to the mouth on my cock. I thought you said you weren’t little?”

“Big dumb cock,” corrects Emily.

“And you’re not dumb. You’re better at being a penis than anyone I know.”

“Then let me do my job and change me,” pleads Emily. “Make me what I should be.” A clawed digit has found its way between Emily’s thighs, sliding over her clit and slick lips, teasing. Emily whines and curls her head into the spider’s chest. “F-fuck you, *change me*,” she moans.

“Tell me how bad you want it,” teases Ketta, squeaky and almost singsong.

“Ketta, I need it! You know I need to be your cock. I can’t fucking take this anymore! Two weeks and I’m going crazy. I can’t take it, any of it, having arms, and feet, and hair and teeth I gotta brush, and all this stuff I gotta take care of that I don’t even want, and having to talk to a million people every day like I’m one of them. And the whole time I can barely feel anything even though there’s all this *stuff* all over me every! fucking! second!” Those last few words of Emily’s outburst are punctuated with energetic attempts finish taking her jeans off—they’ve only made it just past her thighs and gotten hung up on the bend of her knees.

“Okay, okay,” laughs Ketta—a raspy, chittering sound like wood blocks rubbing. “No more waiting.” She picks Emily up in her lap, moving the human around like a doll with all her arms. She removes her jeans easily, leaving the human in her baggy hoodie and quite bottomless, before plopping her into her lap again, back to Ketta with her legs folded, facing out towards the overlook above the industrialized landscape.

“There,” the spider says.

“There?”

“*There*,” confirms Ketta. Paired claws on either side of Emily grasp her shoulders, flank, and hips, holding her not just in place in Ketta’s lap, but firm against the spider—the way you’d hold something you were trying to glue to another surface to make sure it sets properly. One wants a good, fixed, permanent bond, after all.

“D-did you staaa—aah! Oh my god, Ketta.” Trembling Emily doesn’t need to finish her question. That familiar pins-and-needles sensation starts creeping up her spine like a Tube train and her sense of balance goes all out of whack

as though she just dropped off a very high cliff. She falls dizzily backwards into her spider.

Ketta wraps her arms around Emily from behind. “That’s right,” she says, bringing her face down low next to Emily’s ear. “You’re gonna be my cock again, E.”

“H-high fuckin’ time,” Emily says. She looks down at her bare thighs to confirm what she’s feeling and there it is, incipient blackness spreading from Ketta to the surface of her buttocks. She lifts her hips up and feels a strange, stretching pull that keeps her from getting any further away, not that she wants to—she’s just testing their bond, eagerly proving it’s really there. The adrenaline has her shaking. Finally, after so long, she’s going to be the penis she *is* again, feel the things a penis feels. Emily turns around in the spider’s lap, reaching backward awkwardly to get her arm around Ketta and pull her close for another kiss, a worthy last act for these arms she’s dying to be unburdened of.

The human and the spider press their mouths to one another’s, lips molding around the hard smooth surface of Ketta’s fangs. Ketta cradles Emily’s head, smooth plush clawpads on the side of her face as claws alight on her head. Ketta’s other claws rub her back, and two more push their way up her chest and then back down again over the surface of her sweatshirt. This elicits a sharp intake of breath in the human and a helpless little moan, air huffed over fangs.

Ketta’s lips smile into hers. “You’ve always been such a twitchy cock,” she whispers.

“Mmmm,” purrs Emily, happily nuzzling into the spider’s neck. “You’ve always known how to handle me.”

Emily looks down at herself where her legs are folded feet-to-butt in Ketta’s lap and sees the seam between her upper and lower legs is closing up starting from her knees, and her kneecaps have lost their bony definition. She tries to give her toes an exploratory wiggle and gets nothing back—this line has been disconnected.

“Get this offa me,” insists Emily, tugging at her sweatshirt. Ketta’s happy to help, and as she takes the human’s pullover hoodie off it’s as though her arms slide out a bit more easily than they should, elbows offering no resistance to the sleeves as Ketta pulls it up and over her head. Now the only thing Emily’s got left on is that sports bra, a horizontal black censor bar of a garment on her pale form. Ketta decides to go ahead and pull that off too and toss both items to the side, leaving Emily bare-breasted before what suddenly feels like a quarter of Midway’s industrial sector. Goosebumps all around coral pink nipples exposed to the chill subterranean air.

“Look at you, E. Changing for me so quick.” The girls both look down at their joined bodies where the change is making its way up Emily’s hips inch by inch. The surface of her skin changes just ahead of the color—the soft texture shifts to something tighter, glossier, and then tiny black blooms appear and

bleed into each other as her waistline is converted into the base of Ketta's cockshaft.

"Feels so good, Ketta. Feels so right." Emily looks up at her spider with vacant, blissed-out eyes. As their bodies connect the spider and human circulatory systems overspill into one another and bring along a soup of commingled chemicals and hormones each of them has grown accustomed to but hasn't enjoyed in almost two weeks; their return is the sublime relief of eased withdrawal.

"You make such a beautiful cock." The spider's eight eyes are all fixed on Emily's shifting body with the kind of look sweet, amiable Ketta doesn't often have. There's something hungry, even predatory in it.

"You're...you're already looking at me like that. I love it."

"Like what?"

"When you...when you stroke me, and I get so big and hard, and...and you just sit there *looking* at me, admiring your own cock. It's like...like you forget about me."

"I'd never *forget* about you—" squeaks Ketta.

"No, in a *good* way." It's tough to explain, especially for someone becoming a penis. "It's like you forget about everything I don't want, so I can, too. You let me just...be a cock."

Ketta kisses down Emily's neck, fur and fangs brushing against the delicate topography of her collarbone, enjoying the human's sharp little sucked-in gasp. It's one of her most sensitive areas in both her forms, now and minutes from now when this patch of throat under Emily's chin will be the ultra-sensitive area just below the ridge of Ketta's cockhead.

At some point Emily grabbed one of Ketta's claws and her grip is starting to melt away in their clasped hands. Her long, slender fingers are getting short and stubby, and it's hard to get her arms to go where she wants them to. They've become smoothly curving tubes, her elbows only indistinct bumps. This part is intense even for a seasoned, practiced cock like Emily. Losing her arms, her hands—the main way you interact with the whole world on two legs—is always a powerful reminder that she's really becoming a penis and that it'll be her spider that'll have to carry things, touch things, for both of them now. All she'll be able to do is hang there helplessly or throb with need.

Emily's heart races to the point where she can momentarily sense her own circulation over Ketta's. "Here, let me help..." Does the spider sense it too? There's something kind of chivalrous in the way Ketta takes Emily's arms and softly presses them to her sides with the same kind of tenderness as if she was opening a car door for her. The move is so smooth, almost reflexive in the way the spider's segmented arms symmetrically enclose the human's body, like something out of the deepest part of arachnid instinct—a way to calm a human partner and help the change along (or immobilize a struggling one, depending on how charitable one gets with the evo-psych interpretations...)

Contact immediately causes Emily's arms to stick to her sides like wet dough. "There we go," chirps Ketta.

Emily tests moving her limbs and feels the same sort of stretching pull she felt connecting her to Ketta when she started the transformation. "Cocks don't need arms," she whispers.

"No," agrees the grinning spider, "you don't."

Emily's totally naked and far along enough in her transformation to distort her human outline. To restore her phallic shape, as she sees it. No one looking wouldn't immediately know what's happening, and surely there must be someone looking in all the industrial sprawl around them. A city bus goes by on a street several levels below, too far away to read whatever public service ad's on the side but it must have passengers who, with one look to their left, would get to see a human girl turning into a penis. Maybe they are. Still no one anywhere she can see but perhaps a light under warehouse doors that isn't there anymore, implying people in there to watch. She imagines workers coming off their shift lining up at the cafeteria window to see Ketta remake her body while they eat lunch.

"Look, E! Your balls are almost done!"

"Mmm, lemme see..." Emily has some difficulty looking. Her body's getting stiff and her neck won't let her turn her head very far. "Still a while to go," she says. Her legs are still vaguely recognizable as legs, though they've merged into a round blobby mass in Ketta's lap.

"I think they're close," says Ketta. She pinches a bit of Emily's leg skin to demonstrate—not quite as stretchy as it will be once her legs are a scrotum, but getting there. "And look, you're getting all round and hard down here too, and you feel different. More like my cock." Ketta squeezes the base of what is now her shaft, where the sweep of Emily's waist and her jutting hipbones both have smoothed into cylindrical uniformity.

"Stroke your cock, Ketta. Get me big and hard." The spider does as she's asked, clasping Emily's torso in four claws and pumping. She's still too big, too human-shaped to be jerked off anything but awkwardly, but the idea of being treated like the cock she nearly is makes Emily moan all the same.

Ketta leans down close as she pumps Emily, fur and the side of her fang pressing into the human's cheek. She makes a whispered squeak into her ear. "I love watching you change, E... it looks so pretty. Seeing your hot little human body turning into cock. My cock."

All of Emily's skin above where her bellybutton used to be is still her familiar pale tone, but the alterations in the human's shape and texture far outpace her coloration. Everything under her chin is starting to shift now. Her neck is thickening while her shoulders are narrowing. Her breasts flatten, sinking backwards into her chest, at the same time as her chest as a whole is pushing forwards, barreling out.

"How's it feel?" Ketta's still giving the human long, slow strokes up and down her transforming shaft. "How's it feel to be turning into my dick?"

“Oh god, Ketta,” the human groans. “S-so amazing. . . I can’t even. . . Can’t. . .” Talking is getting harder now, not just more physically difficult to get the air out, but harder even to think about anything but the enormous pleasure from Ketta’s claws moving up and down her smoothing shaft of a body.

The whirling in Emily’s stomach has been replaced with a reassuring sense of solidity. Her whole long digestive tract is gradually unkinking and shrinking, becoming one straight, simple tube that in its final state will run from deep within Ketta to the edge of the piss slit that’s presently still a pair of human lips. But the surface of her face is buzzing, like an electric sunburn. Emily knows her face is starting to shift. This is when the feeling of becoming a penis comes over her most fully. Her own head, the seat of who she is, is becoming a glans. Her face, the very identity she presents to the world, will be replaced with featureless dickflesh, blank save a mute urethral opening. Yet it’s that glans that she now expects to see in the mirror; seeing her human face reflected at her these last weeks brought with it this split second of uncanniness, something she no longer fully recognizes as herself. . .

“Oh, your balls are *definitely* done now,” squeaks Ketta, stretching a big taffy-like clawful of sack skin away from the two big lumps in her lap. “Even starting to get some fur on them!”

“Mmm,” Emily moans. She’s too stiff to look down and see for herself now, but she can tell Ketta’s right. She feels so incredibly rigid and hard, like one muscle being flexed. Ketta’s strokes bring tectonic shifts in sensation as one nerve at a time goes over to the spider like an electrical grid being rewired to a new voltage. A network that used to carry instructions to limbs, reports from organs, even alerts of pain, retooled for nothing but messages of pleasure.

Ketta, who’s been hugging her cock-to-be closely as she changes, leans back to look at Emily as a whole. She stays upright and erect in her lap, supported only by a pair of the spider’s claws near her base. Emily looks backwards at Ketta, barely able to move her neck. “H-how do I look?” she asks, voice breathy and weak.

Emily’s torso has almost finished becoming a shaft up to her shrinking shoulders, her arms now only bumps on her sides. Her face is perhaps getting plumper at the same time her lips are thinning, and her curtain of glossy black hair is vanishing while a similar shiny blackness seeps now up to the middle of what was her chest.

The spider makes a pleased, chittering coo. “Amazing. I always forget how beautiful you look when you’re changing.”

“Take a picture,” Emily gasps.

“Good idea,” chirps Ketta. While still supporting Emily at her base, Ketta lurches to one side to get her phone from her shoulder bag where it is on the ground. The sudden motion has Emily pivoting lever-like in the spider’s lap, ceiling lights streaking into lines as she rigidly bounces back and forth. But she’s used to this kind of carnival ride, finds the wild motion perfectly natural.

“Frickin’ . . . what’d I do with my phone,” mutters Ketta while she’s leaned over, rummaging through her bag.

“H-hurry up,” says Emily. There’s a wet quality to her voice now. Is she . . . drooling? Yeah, she is. It’s welling up into her, filling her narrowing mouth with not spit but the spider’s precum, and without any way to swallow it back down it dribbles out at the corner. It’s hard to even talk—she’s not truly breathing anymore, lungs mostly gone and replaced with spongy-firm cockflesh to support her phallic body, to keep her as rigid as Ketta will need her to be. Better than the deepest breath of air is her spider’s blood rushing in to fill her and stiffen her. She can feel Ketta’s heartbeat so clearly. Every beat goes off like a bass drum in her head as it pumps a webwork of veins another few inches up her changing body.

Ketta finds her phone and holds it up for a high-angle shot, spinning around on her butt to put the factories below them in the background as though they were the local attraction. Come visit Midway’s industrial park, perfect place to make a human your penis. . . In fact, she gets down close to Emily, putting two of her arms around her as though she was hanging them over the human’s now non-existent shoulders. She flashes a peace sign with a claw on the opposite side and does a four-eyed wink. Perfectly cute selfie with her girlfriend, except her girlfriend is more cock than girl at this point.

Emily’s face is really changing now, the new shape of her head starting to become apparent. Her thickened neck has joined with her changing jawline, preventing her from moving her head. Her eyes seem to be spreading and sliding on her smoothing face, enough to let her still manage to look back at the camera as Ketta snaps several more pictures.

“How do I l-look?” Every syllable propels droplets of precum from Emily’s lips as she strains to speak.

“So hot,” replies Ketta. “Throb for the camera, E.”

Ketta makes duck lips in the next picture and Emily tries to match her, but her own lips have thinned to nearly nothing and she can barely control what’s left. She only manages to dribble a stream of fluid out of her mouth. It runs down her shaft-like body, trickling through the cleft forming in her chin as her jawline shifts into the coronal ridge encircling her head.

“Should I post these on Skitter? Let everyone know you’re back in town?” the spider asks, taking another picture. “Maybe I should send Zandi a dick pic.”

Emily only makes a small moan in response, spouting a bigger burst of precum that flows down over Ketta’s claws as she strokes her. Her retroussé nose is receding into her face and her ears are melting into the side of her head. The array of silvery piercings in her ears and lip morph right along with her face. This is special jewelry, the type you find in Midway piercing parlors and tattoo shops—telescoping posts, spring-loaded studs, etc., so that the wearer can easily turn into a penis and back without worrying about their accessories. Emily’s lip ring, for example, will soon be a fun little Prince Albert.

“Look at how *good* you look,” burbles Ketta. Still holding her phone up where Emily can see it, she wheels backwards through the photos with a flick of her claw. Even the short sequence of pictures Ketta just took is enough to display the progress of the change in a kind of reverse flipbook effect—her blunt head is a bit less rounded, nose a shade more defined in the first shot.

“Oh, god, Ketta,” Emily squeals. Something about the images sets her off in a way she wasn’t prepared for. Maybe it’s the sight of her own massively altered face, or perhaps it’s the look of dumb cock-brained pleasure in her half-lidded eyes in every shot, or it could just be the spider’s delighted grin as she poses next to her penis. A jolt of excitement surges through her and her thick shaft body stiffens in Ketta’s lap. “Oh fuck,” she moans, drooling copiously. It’s really happening now—she’s about to finish becoming Ketta’s cock.

“Nnngh,” grunts Ketta, who clearly felt that jolt too. She’s holding back; Emily can feel the spider tensing her pelvic floor muscles, those familiar old neighbors at her base, in order to delay their shared orgasm. The wave of pleasure passes and she eases up.

Emily’s currently leaking all over the place, precum smeared up and down her head and length. The only movement left to her is the ability to wiggle back and forth an inch or two. She’s just too rigid, too hard to move. Her puffy, bloated head now connects to her veiny rod of a body without any trace of neck visible.

“Goddess. . .look so. . .so freaking *good* as my cock,” moans Ketta, stroking Emily with big, hard strokes that bunch up the loose skin on her shaft, collecting it into a ruff of foreskin forming under the ridge of her head.

“K-Ketta. . .kiss. . .love. . .” Emily can barely talk, unable to move enough air to give the words any power or control her lips enough to form them. Her mouth hangs open in a loose ragged O, halfway between horizontal and its final vertical shape.

Ketta gets the message anyway. The spider happily mashes her face against what remains of the human’s, nose and fangs pressing into spongy flesh that easily gives way as she slides her long black tongue down into what is now more the spider’s own piss slit than Emily’s mouth. Ketta loves to kiss her own cock, and while she can fit her tongue inside Emily’s urethra any old time she can only really properly *make out* with her cock as she’s changing. During the change Emily’s still big enough to hold her unwieldy shaft body like one would a lover, to cradle her head as all those extra features, nose and lips and ears, adorable though they may be, melt away to reveal her true shape. Ketta swirls her tongue around without feeling the human’s own tongue or her teeth, only a delicious tingle as though the sensation was happening in her own body—since it is.

Emily throbs in Ketta’s arms, spilling yet more precum all over herself and Ketta’s face. She has a sudden vision again—the wedding, the one she imagined for her and Ketta when she sat down in the spider’s lap just a few

minutes ago. They are kissing as deeply as they are now, the minister having just pronounced them spider and penis. The applause is overwhelming, her mother and sisters are crying happy tears, even Lindsey, as the last traces of human-Emily's face fade away, replaced by the swollen cockhead she's meant to be. Her dad's there too, nodding his approval, and her bridesmaids throw rice as Ketta blasts a load through her and straight down the aisle.

But they're not cumming quite yet, and they're still here on this rocky patch of subterranean ground a thousand feet below anyone Emily might be related to, and the only people who might be watching are in those factories down there. Emily wants to cum, oh does she want to, but Ketta's deliberately holding back. She can feel muscles that are nearly but not quite part of her straining to prolong this exquisite torment. Emily is no longer capable of speech, or doing much at all. She tries to plead for release over their incipient mental connection but it's still too fuzzed for words; the only thing getting across is raw need.

Ketta retracts her tongue from her cock. The fur on her face is soaked. She leans back a little to look at her changing human, still continuing to stroke her energetically. Emily is now almost completely a penis; the last vestiges of her former shape are some indentations on the smooth, rounded cockhead where her ears and nose used to be and a pair of wide-set lidless eyes on either side of her urethral opening that look frantically at Ketta even as they start to shrink away.

"You—*unh*—you wanna cum, E?" asks Ketta, panting as she pumps Emily.

Ketta's penis responds the only way she can, with a sudden jerk and a spluttering burst of liquid.

"You ready to—*oh Eris*—be my cock?" The spider's eight eyes narrow and flutter, and she bites her lip with the exertion of delaying the orgasm that will complete Emily's transformation.

Emily throbs and bucks so strongly Ketta can hardly hold on to her own dick. Precum rolls down her shaft in streams. Emily's eyes are only disappearing lines on the upper side of her glans. She'd be begging to cum if she could still talk.

"Nngggggh—fuck!" Ketta groans, trying to hold back.

But at last Emily senses she has the upper hand. Overpowering Ketta's restraint, she forces open her inner channel, clearing the way for a surge of liquid to rocket up her length and shoot out of her tip. At last, they're cumming. Ketta's screaming as Emily jerks and squirts a good long pulse that totally blanks her mind. The spider's got a death grip on her huge new shaft, back arched like she's trying to press up against it. Another throb produces another rope of spider jizz that splatters onto the rocky ground twenty feet away. "EEEE!" Ketta squeals with each volley, loud long keening bat-like noises. Euphoria, ecstasy, Emily, E. What better name for a cock than the sound her owner makes when she cums?

Emily throbs and squirts even more, every wave of the spider's orgasm firing a slug of pure pleasure through her entire being. She can feel it moving through her, each surge of cum starting at her base and all the way through every hard inch of her, and she never wants it to stop. This is her purpose.

Ketta's just making strangled gasps now as she keeps cumming, over and over. With every pulse Emily gets a little smaller. The spider keeps on stroking her, urging the change along to completion. Ketta's cum so much that a good area of the ground in front of her is soaked; she's leaving long overlapping lashes of wet gravel where her jizz splashes down. This goes on for a solid half a minute, until her orgasm finally begins to subside. "Aaah!" the spider pants, her strokes and voice both weakening.

Ketta's cock strains to get everything out, all the old human things she doesn't want anymore. She pulses and throbs, pulses and throbs, each successive squirt weaker than the last until the flow reduces to a dribble running out of her and down her new body. The enormous pressure within her is slowly releasing. She slackens gently, like a deflating hot air balloon.

Ketta lets herself slump backwards, propping herself up on her elbows. "Oh...my...*goddess*," she mumbles, looking down at the two foot long penis that Emily is now. None of the human's pale skin remains. She's as black as Ketta's fur now, and the only remaining visible traces of the girl are the piercings that used to adorn Emily's lip and ears that now glitter along the ridge of her plump glans. The spider lets herself flop down flat on her back. "That was amazing. I have the best cock," she says, cupping one of her baseball-sized testicles and giving it a light, affectionate squeeze.

Ketta's dick is lying softened on her stomach, underside upward, her wet surface smearing the spider's short, velvety fur with cum. She feels pleasantly empty as she recovers from the mind-shattering pleasure of becoming a penis. She's gone from impossibly stiff and hard to totally relaxed, all tension gone from her body.

The rocky ground isn't very comfortable, but turning a human into your penis is a fairly draining thing to do. Ketta lays there exhausted, six arms all scattered around her. The ceiling lights seem so much brighter now than when they first set out; her eight eyes squint but she avoids closing them for fear of falling asleep. The rumble of distant vehicles and machinery coalesces into uniform background noise.

Eventually Ketta stretches and sits up, fanning out her arms. "You ready to head back, E?" She gives Emily another squeeze, and gets a feeling of loving warmth from her penis in return. "We really are a mess," Ketta mumbles. Her claws are sticky with her jizz and her fur's soaked.

Looking up, Ketta quickly notices those factories a few terrace levels down now seem rather active. Scooters flow in and out of parking lots, workers who look small as ants at this distance park and walk into buildings. Trucks depart loading bays and forklifts move pallets around, while here and there clusters

of spiders gather around. Are they watching? Ketta suddenly feels exposed. When *did* they all get down there?

Emily's sweatshirt is lying a few feet away. Ketta grabs it and wipes herself down as best she can, squeegeeing the cum out of her fur. She wraps it around Emily and squeezes to get her dry too, and detects a little note of indignation from her penis.

"What? I'm gonna wash it. Not walking all the way back with cum all over us."

They're perfectly capable of speaking to each other mentally—at this point it's harder, sometimes, for them to keep each other out when they want to—but Emily likes to eschew language for a while after the change is done. To give up that higher-order thinking and, as she once put it to Ketta, immerse herself in cockspace. There will be plenty of time in the days to come for chitchat; no doubt soon Ketta will be sitting on a Tube train on the way in to work, perfectly silent to the external world while having an animated mental back-and-forth with her own genitals about the latest episode of *All My Hatchlings*, but for now Emily just wants to be the penis she is. To think, or not think, like a penis.

Ketta doesn't manage to get herself perfectly clean, but it's an improvement. She rolls up the wet hoodie and wads it into her shoulder bag along with the rest of Emily's clothes—her shoes she'll have to carry separately, not enough room. People will draw the obvious conclusion about a spider walking around with still-damp fur, a two-foot penis, and a pair of human shoes in her claws, but then again she probably just gave the morning shift at the rock crushing plant a good show, so it hardly seems like a big deal now.

"Gotta be a Tube station out here, right?" Ketta says, standing up gingerly. She doesn't usually walk this far at once and she's not looking forward to the hike back.

The spider's penis bounces off each of her thighs in turn as she walks. It's a familiar rhythm to Emily, as comfortable as falling asleep in the back seat of the car. She tingles with a mixture of pride and embarrassment as they walk along the ridge in full view of the surrounding factories, mostly pride—those fussy human sensibilities are dwindling away already, replaced with purpose and fulfillment. She may be flaccid, but she's still a beautiful cock for her spider, hard or soft.

Ketta retraces her steps back around the warehouse where they left the main road, where no one seems to have been watching them or spares her more than a glance. Morning traffic is picking up now. She looks up, following the line of elevated rails to a station platform three stories up a few blocks away, and heads in that direction. Spiders in hardhats pass her on the sidewalk on the way to work; electric utility pickups buzz down the road on her other side.

*Hope that station has restrooms*, thinks Ketta, testing the mental connection between her and her penis. *Should have remembered to pee before we*

*left. . . sorry.*

Sorry? Ketta feels something like a psychic scoff coming back to her from her cock. That's what Emily is for now—and she's more than ready to jump back into her job.

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Eight in the morning. Skeila's phone flashes to life at this unaccustomed time and begins to blast a low-quality clip of that classic Dead End Blokes hit, "Front Door Shitter". Sid Greenstreet's eyes snap open.

"Skeila?" The huge brown spider is clutching the human against her chest like a toy as they lie in her web. Her morning wood pokes his leg. "Skeila, wake up."

Skeila, seemingly impervious to the racket, makes an unintelligible chittering noise and pulls him closer, restricting his movement even more.

"Skeila!" Sid begins to rock back and forth in the spider's embrace. He stands no chance of freeing himself—her arms draped over him may as well be those massive chains aircraft carriers use for their anchors—but maybe he can wake her.

"Mmmmmm." Skeila makes a low burble that trails off. "...Sid? Snooze. Hit snooze."

"Skeila, c'mon, we gotta get going." The phone blares on, repeating its tinny five-second loop of Spewbowl screaming *O'I'M GONNA HIT YA / 'COS I'M THE FRONT DOOR SHITTA* over and over.

"Mmmnnh." The noise is lower and unhappier this time. "Snooze," Skeila repeats insistently. When Sid continues to wriggle a few of her black eyes open in irritation. "Sid, what. . .aw, shit," she groans. She reaches a long arm out to the nightstand where her phone is and her claws fumble around until it goes quiet. "Fuck," declares the spider.

Sid uses the momentary distraction to climb out of her arms entirely. He hops out of the web, bare-ass naked except for the silk band still around his upper chest, and begins scurrying around the room to collect the pieces of his scattered clothing lying around the floor. "Come on, we gotta move. . .Skeila?"

He looks over and sees Skeila's fallen back asleep the instant she managed to shut the alarm off, one arm still stretched out to her web-side table. He sighs. "Skeila, I don't want to be late for my first day. . ." He grabs on to her outstretched arm and pulls, towing her upright and producing a long groan from the spider.

Skeila's now sitting up at the edge of her web, slouching and listing to one side. Her fur's a mess, sticking out in every direction, particularly the riot on her head. All of her eyes except one are closed, and the last is barely open—one black strip of glossy eyeball glaring at Sid, emanating sleep-deprived hostility. "This fuckin' *sucks*," she mumbles.

“It’s not great.” Sid’s one-legging it for a moment to get his boxer shorts back on. “Come on, up and at ’em”.

“Could still be asleep right now,” she mutters. With a groan, she hoists herself into a standing position, stumbling forward a couple of steps as she recovers her balance—she nearly runs into Sid but ends up just looming over him at her nearly nine foot height, swaying ominously, breath rattling in her nose, that morning erection settled down to a half-chub. “Instead I’m fuckin’ getting up at a human time. Cause my human went and got a new human job that runs on a fuckin’ human schedule.”

“We agreed on this, Skeila,” is Sid’s mild protest. “Wouldn’t have done it if you didn’t tell me you were cool with it.”

“I know, I know. Ain’t mad at *you*.” She wipes her face with her middle pair of claws, trying to push the sleep out of her eyes. “Mad at. . . I don’t know. Fuckin’ time itself? Or the whole fuckin’ MARC. Running that place on a nine to five, like we’re topside or something?” She shakes her head to wake up and immediately regrets it, stomach and her hair both whirling like palm tree fronds in a hurricane. “Holy Eris,” she groans. “Remind me to kick Ketta in the dick next time I see her. Shouldn’t have done that shot.”

A few minutes later they’re both running around Skeila’s webroom trying to get through their respective morning routines as fast as possible. Sid’s hopping around trying to get into a pair of jeans he put on both legs at once, and she’s standing in front of the full-length mirror with five brushes, trying to get her fur under control. “No time for a shower, never get dry in time—shit,” she grumbles, pulling a brush through a knot somewhere on her left hip. She throws one of the brushes at him. “C’mere and do my legs.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright. . .” He obediently scurries over and crouches to begin brushing her thigh, but as soon as he does she turns to him, puts a claw on the back of his head, and pulls his face into her crotch.

Skeila cackles, a high chattering noise, while she rubs her balls and the lower part of her cock against his face. Sid just lets her do it. He’s tired, and she *is* nice and warm and furry, and, well, even the scent of her balls has a kind of familiar comfort to it now. . . “Alright, now I’m happy. Well,” and here she grins, exposing not just her two long fangs but a whole mouthful of shiny white knives. She pushes her hips forward, pressing just a bit more. She’s not totally hard, but she’s certainly firming up against his face. “I could be happier. . .”

“I. . . don’t think we have time, Skeila. . .”

She heaves an exaggerated sigh. “Tonight. After my human’s done with his big important MARC job.”

“Tonight,” agrees Sid, sealing the agreement by planting a little smooch right where the smooth dark skin of her shaft meets the fur-line of her ballsack, eliciting a little squeak from the spider.

“Could just keep you right here, y’know. . .” Sid looks up at her from where he’s kneeling, and there’s a moment where Skeila just stares back down at him

with those eight black orbs—but instead she lets him up, the moment slips back into morning mundanity and the twosome continues hurrying to prepare themselves against the coming day.

They brush their teeth together in her attached bathroom, the spider dual-wielding toothbrushes to get all those teeth minty fresh faster, and they spit foam into the sink at the same time. Sid drags a comb through his own messy mop of wavy brown hair while Skeila pops an oblong azure pill and gulps it down with a swallow of sink water from one pair of cupped claws. She applies a small coat of lip gloss to get those black lips nice and shiny as he, leaning around her to look in the mirror, rubs his chin to judge how necessary a shave is—nah, not enough time and two days of growth is only some mildly unkempt stubble for him.

The last step for both of them is clothing. Sid, who already has his pants on, elects to go with a slate button-down, wrinkled to all hell but one of the few shirts in his wardrobe with a collar. Got to make a good impression on your first day at the office.

Skeila's lone item of apparel is her Arachnid Altercation Agency uniform, a sash and belt made out of rugged olive green canvas, connected at the hip with a steel buckle. The belt's decked out in the accessories of her job—radio, taser, a sturdy flashlight with a good heavy D cell in the end, and pouches aplenty with gloves and evidence bags and the zip-ties she favors over cuffs. The sash is a flat, wide strip with her lieutenant's stripe and assortment of medals. There's a recent addition there—a shiny silver commendation Superintendent Zartik pinned there himself in a little ceremony a few days after that whole *thing* with the human at the protest and the bomb, if that's what it was. . . She pulls the sash over her shoulder and situates the belt on her hips, cinching it tighter until the sash is tight against her breast.

Skeila appraises herself in the mirror. It'll do. "You ready?"

"Yeah," nods Sid, who stops fumbling with his shirt buttons to look up at her. "You look really nice."

Skeila waves a claw dismissively. "I'm a mess. Hair's everywhere, didn't even shower."

"No you're not," he says with this kind of earnest puppy smile. "You're beautiful, Skeila."

She fixes him with this *look* for a few seconds, but just sighs. "C'mon, little human," she says, hooking some arms around him and steering him to the door. "We gotta get downstairs before you talk yourself back into my web."

As they leave Skeila's room and trudge down the steps, Sid gets a twinge of a particular flavor of anxiety he hasn't felt on a daily basis since his last office job a few years ago, that acute sense of impending separation from one's *place*. He will not return to these comfortable stone walls until long hours have passed in unfamiliar rooms among unfamiliar people. He takes a breath and tells himself to sack up, old boy, *this is what you wanted*. . . Well, obviously not his immediate, experiential self, the one suffering from the kind of sleep

deprivation that washes out the world and adds an edge to every noise. That half of Sid wants to call this all off, grab Skeila by the claw and take her back upstairs, apologize by—anyway, it’s the other part of him that wants to grow and learn even on pain of moderate discomfort that’s propelling his tired body down the stairs and keeping it upright right now. The part of him that occasionally has to tell him that he can’t lie around all day getting stoned and sucking—or being—spider cock.

Downstairs, Skeila interprets Ketta’s scrap-metal clock with ease. “Got enough time to eat real quick. Takes about 20 minutes to walk to the MARC building from here.”

They rummage through the kitchen; Sid finds an opened box of purple-frosted Pop-Tarts. “Is it cool if I have some of these?”

“Yeah, ’course. Gotta wait if you wanna heat them up, though.” Skeila’s already using the toaster, having opted for two slices of toast and a cup of yogurt—she’s currently drawing a circle with her index claw on the disposable cup’s lid to slice it open.

Sid notices something while he’s waiting. Looking down at the floor, he nudges with his foot a small gray shape that turns out to be a . . . pair of panties.

He looks back up at Skeila quizzically. She shrugs all three pairs of arms with a smirk on her black lips. “They ain’t mine. Too small.”

“Spiders don’t even wear underwear.”

“Also true.” A little metal bang goes off and there’s Skeila’s toast.

Sid leans back against a counter while he waits for his Pop-Tarts. Skeila finishes off her yogurt by holding the cup to her face and licking it clean with her long black tongue while simultaneously scraping strawberry jelly onto her toast with her other arms. He’s just watching, trying to keep his eyes open.

“Hey, Skeila?”

“Hnn?” The spider pauses mid-bite and turns to look at him, leaving a piece of bread pierced through by one fang.

“I just wanted to say, uh, thanks. You know, for changing your shift and . . . supporting me and everything.” He’s presently mumbling in the direction of the sink, but hey, give him credit for at least talking loud enough for Skeila to hear. “I know this kind of sucks, and if it turns out you totally hate it I’ll quit the MARC thing. Promise. I just . . . wanted to try to do this, I guess. And I wouldn’t have been able to do it on my own.”

Skeila tilts her head at him before she tears off a chunk of toast. “Of course. You’re my human. And I’m your spider.” Her mouth expands into a big sharp smile. “And you’re still gonna come in with me the other two days a week, right? The Huntsmen are fucked if I’ve got your brain on the case.”

“Tomorrow I’m all yours.”

That smile gets a little more devious. “Gonna remind you you said that.”

When the toaster pops up Sid’s Pop-Tarts, Skeila waits until he’s safely collected them onto a paper towel—can’t have him burning himself—before

she strikes. Three brown-furred arms reach out, snatch him in a flash, and hold him tight against her.

“That’s better.”

Sid looks up and back at her, trying and failing not to return her smile. “Could just tell me to come here.”

“Could do a lotta things.”

Skeila keeps a couple arms around her human while they continue eating their hasty breakfast. A minute later there’s the noise of a key turning in the front door—for a second she’s on high alert, slouched to upright instantaneously, twisting Sid around to put herself between him and the door. Her middle-right arm’s reaching for the taser on her belt when the door opens and Ketta walks in.

“Ketta!” Skeila relaxes. “Shit, I thought you were asleep upstairs.”

“Hey Skeila! Hey Sid!” The lean black spider gives the pair a cheerful, if less than energetic, wave. “Nah, but I will be soon. I am *beat*.”

Skeila nods towards the limp asphalt-colored cock hanging between Ketta’s legs that wasn’t there a day ago. “Got back with Emily and couldn’t wait to use her, huh?”

“I actually just turned her back like an hour ago. You two were sleeping, so we went for a walk and changed her outside. Emily said you both had a big day today, so we figured you wouldn’t want to wake up to her screaming about how much she wants to be a cock,” snickers Ketta, taking off the shoulder bag jammed full of the clothes her penis was wearing a few hours ago.

“Thanks. Makes up for her making us drink shots of liquid ass five hours ago.”

Ketta giggles as she joins them in the kitchen and roots through the fridge for a bottled water. “She says that’s your fault. Didn’t make you do anything.” The spider cracks open the bottle and glugs it down to half-empty straight away.

Sid can’t help a glance down at Ketta’s cock while the spider’s got her chin tilted to the ceiling guzzling water. There she is. Emily, the girl he was talking to just hours earlier, now only a penis hanging between Ketta’s legs. Just like she wanted. God, even her lip ring’s still there, it just goes through her peehole now. Suddenly he remembers, based on his own experience, that even if Ketta’s not paying attention there’s nothing to say Emily herself isn’t watching him stare openly at her. He jerks his gaze away. Was only looking a second or two, really. . .

“Aah,” says Ketta, satisfied, wiping her mouth dry with the back of an arm. “So, Sid,” she says, looking down at him with a strange little smirk. “My dick says you’re starting that new job at the MARC today?”

“Uh, yeah,” he replies, doing his best to make eye contact with Ketta. He’s not quite as good as reading spiders in the general case as he is with Skeila, but he detects, he thinks, mischief.

“Well, that’s exciting. Guess you’ll be apart from Skeila all day, huh?”

Skeila makes an irritated squeak. “Yeah, my human’s off to go put in his eight hours.”

“Eight hours ago my cock *was* a human,” snickers Ketta. “You two should do something fun this weekend,” says Ketta, keeping that little smile fixed on him. “Make any exciting plans yet?”

“Uh, n-not really,” mumbles Sid.

“Really? Nothing?”

Skeila, either feeling the way he’s shrinking back into her or simply just being in tune enough with him by now to sense the need for conversational intercession, speaks. “Was gonna take him to see a *luta aranha* fight. Gotta get through the week first though.” He feels one of her claws give his flank a reassuring little squeeze.

“Oh, fun.” Ketta drains her bottle of water. “Emily says to be sure they have good seating. She hates when I go somewhere and you can’t see anything from cock height.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Skeila says.

“Sorry, sorry. I don’t need to tell you everything my cock thinks,” giggles Ketta, chucking her empty bottle into the trash. “So this is gonna be your first day on the Huntsmen squad, right?”

“Yeah,” says Skeila. Her chest expands against Sid’s back as she makes a sigh of apprehension. “Don’t know much about it yet. Don’t even know who else is on it or who’s gonna be in charge.”

“Well, I hope you get ’em all. I know it’s dumb, but I’m always worried when she goes up to the surface anymore.” A casual hip thrust from Ketta here makes it clear she’s referring to her penis. Emily jiggles back and forth a bit where she rests on Ketta’s balls. “Was a relief to get her back where she should be. Even more than usual.”

“I know what you mean,” says Skeila. Sid’s pretty sure he feels the spider’s arms get a little tighter around him. “We’ll get them sooner or later. Everyone fucks up eventually. I’ve already got a couple leads I want to check on.”

“Good.” Ketta stretches and yawns. “Alright, sorry guys, I’ve got to go crash. I just walked nearly out to the edge of town and turned my cock back. I’m about to fall over in like a minute.”

“Yeah, we gotta get going too. We’ll see you. . .tonight, I guess,” says Skeila. Sid, enclosed within her arms, throws in a nod and a wave too, though he isn’t sure if it’s for the spider or her penis. It’s still hard to connect the cock to the black-haired girl who was just standing in this kitchen a few feet away giving him thoughtful advice. But she had told him repeatedly that this is what she wanted to be. Who she *was*, on a fundamental level. A penis, now bouncing back and forth against furry legs as her owner ascends the staircase.

A few steps up Ketta pauses, stooping down with another of those little smirks on her face. “See you two later. We should all hang out this weekend!” she says, before vanishing upstairs.

The image of Emily's suggested manner of hangout—as two cocks in the grip of their owners—flashes through Sid's mind. He wonders what, exactly, she's been saying to Ketta, inaudible to him and Skeila. . .“Yeah, sounds good,” Skeila says, distracted by the buckle on her uniform; she's trying to tighten it at the point on her hip where the sash connects to the belt. “You ready, Sid?”

He's still so tired that his eyes feel like they're moving around in sockets made out of construction paper, but he's as ready as he'll ever be and Skeila's already shepherding him out of the kitchen. She opens the door but holds him back for a moment while she scans the outside world, and then pulls him across the threshold and on to her front stoop once she's satisfied it's clear. Sid takes in the street scene while Skeila locks the door, looking downhill towards downtown. He remembers standing here with her in this exact spot when she was interviewed about foiling the protest bombing—only he wasn't *standing*, really, since he'd been her cock at the time. And they'd asked Skeila about him, too. Lower Arch Street is far less busy now than it was when several hundred spiders and a couple news crews turned out to see them; the only other pedestrian is a spider halfway down the block getting on his street-parked scooter who isn't paying the pair any attention.

Is the light harsher than he remembers? There's an unpleasant edge to it, like a hospital parking garage. Or does it only seem that way because he wants to be back in the soothing darkness of Skeila's webroom, only barely able to make out the glint of her fangs as he lies on top of her. . .“Is it, like, brighter than normal?” he asks, squinting upwards.

“Probably. The lights have been fucked lately.”

They turn right out of Skeila's place, going downtown. Their difference in height makes it easy for the spider to keep him tucked under her left arms as they walk, one claw on his shoulder and two on his waist. There's little traffic now; the signal at the intersection is still blinking yellow in both directions. The intricate topside world may have roused hours ago, but in Midway most spiders are still in their webs.

“What was that thing you were talking about? Loota something?”

“*Luta aranha*,” says Skeila, holding him back before she looks both ways as they enter a crosswalk. “It's like, okay, think of boxing, but instead of humans punching each other it's spiders having a knife fight.”

“You use *knives*?”

“Well, fake knives. They put chalk dust on the edge, so you can see if the one fighter marks the other's fur. You gotta use your arms to block while you try and stick the other guy.” Skeila holds a couple of her own arms out in an imitation of a guard stance. “No closed-claw strikes, but slaps are allowed.”

“Huh. That sounds kind of interesting.”

“It's real fun to watch. And don't listen to what Emily was saying about seats, she's never been to one. They have this part of the stands where it's just, like, a railing and no seat, right? You lean on the railing so your dick can see. They always do crowd shots of the human section if you watch the

pay-per-views.” Skeila grins. “Y’know, just saying. In case you did want to cock up this weekend.”

“Uh. . .humans who *aren’t* cocks can get in too, right?”

“Oh, sure. They pick someone from the crowd for the winner-takes-human matches.”

“Winner does *what*, now?”

“Winner gets the human. Changes ’em right there in the ring. Usually it’s just the last match or two on the card.”

“Do they just. . .grab someone out of the crowd?”

Skeila snorts. “I’ve never been to one where there weren’t, like, dozens of volunteers trying to get picked.”

“ . . .oh.” It’s a reminder to Sid that there’s plenty of humans down here in Midway who, even if they don’t fully identify as a cock the way Emily does, still enjoy being a penis enough to seek the experience out. And why shouldn’t they? If he’s being honest with himself, Sid liked being Skeila’s cock. Yes, it was dehumanizing, objectifying, all of that, being reduced to an organ—but the sense of absolute *connection* with his spider, that and the mind-blowing pleasure. . .

The city blocks to the south of Skeila’s place are pretty similar to the one she lives on; townhouses and low-rises form the walls of a vertical stone valley while the cavescrapers reaching up to Midway’s ceiling loom in the near distance. As they approach the city’s center the buildings gradually become taller and residences give way to a greater proportion of commercial enterprises. A spider steps out of a corner deli carrying an enormous breakfast hoagie full of scrambled eggs, cheese, and peppers, and further on the proprietor of a fur salon puts a sandwich board out on the sidewalk announcing walk-ins are welcome and full-body shampoos are 20% off.

“So was it me,” says Skeila as they walk by an arachnoptician’s store selling standard two-lens glasses and more complicated eight-lens models that look something like wireframe honeycombs, “or was Ketta real interested in what we’re doing this weekend?”

“Uh, maybe,” mumbles Sid. “When I was talking to Emily last night, she, uh, was suggesting that we, um, you know.”

“I do? What is it I’m s’posed to know, little human?” Teeth all showing in a wolfish grin, Skeila yanks him closer, lifting him up off the ground for a couple steps.

“She said I should let you change me,” Sid admits, legs kicking briefly in the air. “A-and then you and Ketta would. . .do stuff with us.”

“There you go,” says Skeila, putting him down and snickering. “Thought it would be something like that. Emily’s such a cock. Even when she’s not changed she’s trying to get Ketta laid. Sure, we could do that if you want.”

He hesitates. He wasn’t expecting blasé acceptance, and when he actually considers the idea he isn’t sure how he feels about it either. “. . .would *you* want? I mean, I don’t want to make things weird between you and Ketta.”

Skeila produces an amused squeak. “Wouldn’t be *weird*, Sid. Me and her have played before.”

“Oh. Uh, I didn’t realize that. Were you and her, like. . .together?”

“Nah. Ketta’s a good friend and she’s easy to live with, but we ain’t really each other’s type.”

“What’s your type?” he asks jokingly.

The spider easily lifts him up again with her three left arms. “Like you don’t know it’s skinny little humans I can boss around,” she says, squeezing him against her and carrying him for a bit before setting him down. “Should I have told you about Ketta? Sorry. Figured spiders would just assume, but I know humans don’t always think the same way about that stuff. But I’m not messing around with anyone else now unless I’m usin’ *you* to do it.”

“No no, it’s fine,” says Sid. Given what he knows about spider proclivities he probably should have assumed, but either way there really is no jealousy there for him—either because he knows the occasional handy between friends is simple spider politeness, or because their physical connection had given him privileged access to her psyche that had let him feel for himself the almost frightening intensity of her affection for him. What room could be left for jealousy? “I, um, guess I wouldn’t mind. . .doing that.”

“Yeah?” Skeila’s smile gets bigger still, somehow. “So you *are* gonna let me turn you back into my dick this weekend?”

Sid’s face turns an amusing shade of pink in moments. “I, uh, well,” he stammers. “W-we could do that, if you wanted.”

Skeila flashes a fangy grin at him. “Sounds like we got our weekend all planned out.”

The pair turns onto Lower Grant Street, probably the biggest north-south arterial going into the downtown Midway core. Cement planters with verdant ferns are lined up in the median of the divided road, fronds waving in the draft of the scooters buzzing by in both directions even at this early hour. Cavescrapers now shade them from a third of Midway’s lit ceiling—the towers reaching up to the surface and beyond, where topsiders know the buildings only by the floors demarcated by the positive integers. They fix the city’s map in place like giant pins, requiring the streets conform closer to the surface layout the closer one is to downtown. Major thoroughfares can be laid right over top of their topside counterparts, but alleys and side roads are different—this creates an eerie similarity for first-time visitors, who often report *almost* knowing where they’re at.

They pass by St. Gulik’s Cathedral of the Fifth Church of Our Lady of Discord, a gothic edifice carved, in the customary spider style, from a single titanic mass of rock. One of Midway’s earliest constructions, it stands nestled among the newer, taller glass and steel office towers on Lower Grant, where its huge rose window and the glittering Golden Apple it depicts floats over pedestrians and motorists alike, fractured like a Picasso into a thousand aureate shards.

A nun from the Sisterhood of Perfect Confusion is out front by the sidewalk, setting some incense by a granite statue of Eris in her most commonly depicted aspect: a spider woman with wild fur, a broken right fang, a dagger between her breasts, and the most terrifying grin the sculptor can fashion. This sister's clad in the traditional garb of her priory, which from the shoulders up looks like any nun's habit you might find topside, and from the shoulders down consists entirely of shiny black cord in elaborate shibari-style patterns that wind around her six arms, breasts, hips, and thighs. She hums a happy little melody as she goes along and waves to Skeila and Sid as they pass. "Good morning, officer! Goddess bless you and your human," she says, tilting her head at Sid.

"Yeah, morning," says Skeila, giving her a polite nod.

Once they've gone a bit farther on Sid risks a quick look back over his shoulder. "Did she give me a weird look?"

"Did she? I'll kick a nun's ass if I gotta."

"Uh, I don't think that's necessary," he says quickly. "I just...they're not like the Huntsmen, right?"

"The Fifth Church? Nahhh," says Skeila. "They're just regular Erisians."

"So they don't think all humans should be cocks?"

"Didn't say *that*, but they're a lot nicer about it."

The MARC building's only a few blocks away now, past First Fifth Avenue, Second Fifth Avenue, etc., until you get to the Boulevard of Eyes, turn right, and there you are. Closer than that is the spot where Skeila almost got shot a couple weeks ago; Lower Grant also happens to be the street she chased that would-be human bomber. It *still* sticks in her teeth how that fucker got away...but there it is, a patch of sidewalk outside the entrance to an office building where for all she knows her brain would have been painted across the sandwich shop next door's window, had she been half a second late hitting the ground.

"Skeila?"

"Huh?" Skeila realizes she's stopped, and with how hard she's gripping Sid if she's not moving neither is he. "Sorry," she says, easing up. "Almost there."

"You okay?" he asks as they continue down the street.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm good. Tired, 'sall." They stop at a crosswalk where the light is a blinking red spider claw. Skeila checks her phone. "Just a couple more blocks. Should get there right on time."

"Oh, uh, cool." Sid only vaguely remembers the area. He doesn't exactly have Midway mapped out in his head yet, but he's been at the MARC building before—albeit in the midst of a citywide protest. Things are far more sedate now. He can nevertheless feel the increasing tension in Skeila as they walk, a stiffness in her arms and an insistence in the way she moves him along. "I'm, uh, gonna miss you today," he says to her.

"Yeah," she says. "Me too." She glances down at him while they walk with a strange, unhappy fortitude in her smooth black eyes.

“I can check in. Text you and stuff.”

“You *better*.”

“I will. It’ll only be eight hours.”

“Yeah.” Skeila takes a deep breath. Sid, up against her, can feel the unsteady way she inhales. “Eight fuckin’ hours. Better be ready when I come pick you up tonight.” Now there’s a far more legible expression of hunger on her face.

“I will,” he reassures her again. “I’m sure they don’t want you storming the building to come get me like last time.”

“Then they better have my human ready for me when I get there. Otherwise I’m kickin’ in the doors,” says Skeila without a trace of sarcasm. “And when I get you back. . .”

“We can do whatever you want tonight,” Sid says. “Just. . .let’s get back to your place first instead of doing it on the front steps of the MARC building.”

“Mmm. I kinda like that idea, actually. Show all those stuffy humans they’re in Midway. Make sure all your coworkers know you belong to a spider.” When he looks up to measure how serious she is about this her smirk indicates she’s *probably* kidding.

A few blocks on, there’s a spider woman with teal fur stepping out of the entrance to a condo tower just in front of them, and when she sees Skeila her iridescent green eyes go wide. “Lieutenant Skeila ohmiigawd it’s *you*—”

“Morning,” Skeila nods curtly without stopping.

“Is that your Sid?” The woman points and squeals. “He’s so cute!”

Now Sid’s the one freezing up, nearly stumbling over his own feet as he goes rigid next to Skeila in her arms. He’s profoundly grateful when she just carries him along without breaking stride. “Sorry, running late,” Skeila says flatly, hurrying past the woman.

“W-what the hell was that?” Sid hisses when they’re further down the street, his heart’s racing a bit less, and he’s regained the ability to walk.

“Sid, they put us on fuckin’ TV! We’re heroes, remember?” mutters Skeila. “Surprised we don’t get noticed more often.”

“...oh. Right,” he mumbles, remembering the press conference with the mayor, the interview with gal reporter and UDKA-TV star Moldywarp, the front-page story in the Midway Gazette-Below. . . They had not, at least, shown his face—his *human* face—which he’d thought of as a small blessing. When he appeared in the grainy halftone images on the front pages of all the city papers he did so as the penis hanging between Skeila’s legs. There was a kind of comfortable anonymity in that, but now he’s realizing that surely most if not all of the coworkers he’s about to meet have seen and read the same stories. That’ll be their first impression of him, the one thing they know him as. Lieutenant Skeila’s cock.

Lower Grant and the Boulevard of Eyes meet in a wide four-way intersection with a scramble crossing and a fountain on the far corner. Sid remembers

this place and knows they're just a minute or two away from the MARC building. He finds himself wishing for time to slow down. It's not just first day jitters, he hasn't been out of Skeila's sight for more than a few minutes at a time in weeks now, and while he may not have the arachnid instinct equating separation with the loss of a physical part of himself her impending absence still fills him with a sense of mounting dread. With every step he tries to record and preserve in his mind the feeling of the spider's arms around him.

They don't have to wait for the light at the crosswalk since they're turning right onto the Boulevard. "That's the place, right?" asks Sid.

"Yeah, that's it," she replies, but he didn't really need to ask. MARC headquarters, a few buildings down from the intersection, is one of the more architecturally jarring sights on the Boulevard even amidst a street full of spider innovations. For one thing, it's the only building around set back so far from the street, with a wide path through an artificial lawn up to the entrance. The entrance is a neoclassical portico done up in fake marble and bright white columns, wildly out of place attached to the rest of the building, which is just a uniform rectangle of black glass partitioned into rectangles by support beams.

They turn at the sign that reads Municipal Arachno-human Relations Commission above their logo (a stick figure holding hands with a much larger six-armed one) and join the small flow of workers heading up the long path to that faux-classical entrance. Skeila sticks out, being the only spider currently among them. She looks around remembering the protest and how this very lawn was packed with angry spiders and covered in detritus. . .they've done a remarkable job of cleaning it up since. The uniformly green turf is spotless. She can't shake the sense that she's walking towards doom. Every step down the path brings her closer to the point where she's going to have to drop Sid off and then *leave*. Without him. Separation from her human feels like a rupture, a discontinuity in the way things should be. It would be so easy to just pick him up, turn around, bring him with her. Yet she ascends the steps by his side nevertheless, carried forward inexorably as if caught in a current along with these other humans.

Standing on the portico as his fellow humans file in and out around him is a shorter-than-average young blond man of husky build, in an off-white button-down shirt and tan slacks, holding a brown paper tray of disposable coffee cups and a folder of documents under one arm. This is Anthony Waterproof, high-level MARC functionary and long-time friend of Skeila. He greets them with a sort of mild enthusiasm that, graded on his curve, represents a warm welcome. "Skeila, Sid, good morning. Precisely on time. Good to see you again, Sid. I've taken the liberty of getting us some coffee. There's creamer and sugar packets, so you can sweeten it to your preference."

"Hey, Tony," responds Skeila, lifting a couple claws in greeting. "Brought you your new big-shot math nerd."

"And we greatly appreciate it," says Waterproof. "We'll keep him safe for you."

“Fuckin’ right you will.” Skeila heaves an abrupt sigh, feigned annoyance papering over something cracking in her voice. “How’ve you been? How’s Zacts?”

“Excellent, thank you. He says to tell you that you and Sid still need to come over for pierogi.”

“Yeah. Yeah. We should do that, this week.” Another sigh. “Tony, you mind giving us a sec?”

“Of course. Take as long as you need.” Anthony politely steps over to the automatic sliding doors leading into the lobby and reviews his documents.

Skeila releases Sid and turns to face him. His back suddenly feels cold without her arms on it.

“Okay, so, I’m done at 5, so I should be here at like, ten after.” She speaks quietly, unable to hide the quiver in her squeaky voice now. “Might leave a little early. Don’t leave the building for anything, you know that. Any kind of problem you fuckin’ call me. You okay? You got everything you need?”

“Uh huh,” Sid confirms, feeling discomfited himself. “I got everything.”

“Okay. Okay. Shit.” Skeila’s standing there with her arms in triple akimbo, jaw set, taking deep breaths. She repeatedly looks down at Sid, turns to face the street, and looks down at Sid again, getting increasingly misty-eyed every time. Finally coming to some kind of internal conclusion, she suddenly squats down to get level with him, presses her black lips to his, and puts her six arms around him in a hug so crushing his back audibly pops. “I love you, I’ll miss you,” she says before letting him go and standing, all of Midway’s lights reflected like stars on black water in her damp eyes. “And I’ll see you at five.”

“Love you too, Skeila.” A shared nod, a wave of her claw, and the tall brown spider turns to make the long walk down the path to the street. He watches her go for several seconds, human MARC employees in their crisp outfits coming in to start the day diverting around the slumping spider like a river flowing around a rock.

Anthony Waterproof steps back over to Sid. “It’ll get easier for her,” he says. “Zacts had what I would think are similar concerns back when I first started working here myself.”

“Yeah. Hope so. She’s. . . I mean, you know Skeila. Don’t feel great myself.”

“Indeed. I do understand the difficulty. Without wishing to minimize her feelings or yours at all, we’ll have plenty to occupy you today with the onboarding process, and I imagine Skeila will be busy herself with that new detail she’s on. You might be surprised at how quickly the day goes by.”

“Probably.” There’s a pause before Sid adds “Well, uh, should we go in?”

“Let’s perhaps give it a moment. Skeila’s never heard about Lot’s wife, I imagine.”

“Huh?”

Waterproof nods back towards the street, where Skeila’s just about to reenter the sidewalk on the Boulevard. She stops and looks over her shoulder, and her eight eyes meet his two across the MARC’s front lawn. Skeila’s black

lips curl into a shaky smile, and they wave goodbye to each other across the distance one more time before she slips into the stream of pedestrians.

“Alright, now we can get started. Here’s a lanyard with your access key-card, and your MARCMeals card—that one’s separate, you’ll want it for the cafeteria. . . This sheet has your e-mail credentials, and this is your login to the network. . . if you have a scooter you’ll need to register it before parking in the lot. . .”

They step through the sliding doors into the atrium, and while Sid no longer has the warmth of Skeila’s arms around him, there’s a certain comfort in the silk band still wrapped around his chest underneath his shirt.

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Yeah, that fuckin’ sucked about as much as she thought it would. At least she didn’t lose her shit right there in front of him. She keeps having to look up at the city’s grid of lights to keep her eyes from spilling over, but fortunately the oncoming pedestrians have the sense to dodge the larger-than-average spider in the cop uniform not paying close attention to where she’s going. Skeila had been determined to hold it together while Sid was around, and while she doesn’t really want to burst into tears here in front of a random sampling of the Midway citizenry either, the important thing to her was to drop Sid off while only ever appearing to be slightly miffed, at most. He was excited about this job and she wasn’t going to let him call it off just cause she couldn’t handle being away from him for a few hours. If working at the MARC was what her human wanted then she was going to be supportive. She was going to be supportive as *fuck*.

But his absence hurts. It does actually feel like a part of her is missing. Yeah, sure, that’s what all spiders say when their human doesn’t feel like getting cocked up, but it’s different when you’ve at least got them beside you, even if they’re not *on* you. Even though he snaps into place in her mind when he’s her penis like puzzle pieces meant to be together, just having him there to talk to is better than nothing even if she can’t *think* to him. Maybe everything doesn’t get across with words, but something does. They might not feel, sense, touch together, but she can reach out and touch him. . . she can’t jerk him off, but she can fuck him, which is fun too. . .

Still, her instincts, desires, and heart all scream at her that Sid should be with her, should *complete* her. Anything less risks losing him. Only her brain reminds her that it’s completely fine to let him out of her sight for a few hours a day to work in Midway’s most secure office complex and she is being fairly insane right now, but Skeila is not a spider accustomed to letting her brain override the rest of her. Plus it’s not just humans in there—there’s Kiklori, and that creepy Doctor’s creepy assistant, and all the other spiders that work for the MARC. Something about that Kiklori chick still rubs Skeila the wrong

way, even if she's pretty sure Kiklori knows damn well who Sid belongs to ever since she stuck him up her ass that night at Blurred Vision. But Skeila doesn't trust her or any of the rest of them. Who'd want to work for the MARC unless you were fishing for humans?

Passing a store selling high-fashion arm warmers and leggings, merchandise displayed on headless six-armed mannequins, Skeila catches her own reflection in the display window and deflates a little further. There's a kind of confidence found in having a human with you in either configuration; for spiders there's little daylight between the feeling you get from having your human walking beside you and from having a two foot cock. Not that Skeila's ashamed in the least of what she's working with normally. But her cock's just her, not Sid.

These ruminations have brought her to the front gate of the Arachnid Altercation Agency's downtown office, a dark gray building squatting on the corner of the block behind concrete walls. The spider at the front guard post has his feet up on the desk while he watches an episode of *Human Safari* on his phone. He glances at Skeila and nods her in.

The atrium of AAA HQ is a wide open space with a series of square skylights that let in Midway's halogen daylight, creating an irregular waffle of bright patches on the polished stone floor. Things are quiet this early. The loudest sounds are the echoing clicks from the claws of Skeila and a few of her fellow officers coming and going in their matching green sashes.

There's a junior officer Skeila doesn't know at the front desk. "Hey, is Captain Klatz here?" she asks him.

The spider looks up from a monitor, his eyes getting a little bigger when he sees her. "Lieutenant Skeila! Uh, I can check but I think he's on afternoon shift..."

Dumb question. Klatz is rarely around at the start of his regular shift, let alone this early. "Yeah, never mind, sorry. Listen, did he leave any instructions or anything for me? Tell me where I'm supposed to go, at least?"

"Uh, hang on, let me look..." He turns around and digs through a bin full of internal mail, soon extracting a manila envelope. "Yeah, got something for you. Lieutenant Skeila, hash eaters."

"Scuse me?"

"That's what it says. Here."

She takes the envelope, and it's written in some precise spider's handwriting. To: LT SKEILA. Squad: HASHEATERS. And when she unclasps the envelope and looks inside, the only thing in it's a small keycard. What kind of video game-ass shit is this? The keycard's got her rank and that squad name again, plus the number of a room on the fourth floor. Alright, guess she's heading there. "Buzz me in, will you?"

In the elevator up, Skeila studies the keycard. Her own picture stares blankly back at her—the headshot they take every year at the annual AAA medical exam. When she puts it down, she's left facing the brown-green-black blur of her own reflection distorted in the elevator's uneven aluminum

wall, as though seen through a heat shimmer in the distance. She sighs and the reflection ripples. At this point she'd been on the Human Attitude Adjustment & Reeducation Project squad for nearly three years. She liked it and she was good at it. She doesn't know how the hell they expect her to help anyone track down the Huntsmen. Her thing's busting humans for shoplifting and breaking up drunken fights. Now they want her to uncover a secret society of kidnapping cultists? Deep breaths, Skeila.

The HAARPie pen is down on the ground floor and it's a loud, chaotic place, a big open room with spiders and humans constantly coming in and out, officers bringing in their latest arrest, complaints from the frequently intoxicated humans secured to the benches. The fourth floor is far more sedate. Stepping out of the elevator it looks more like an office to Skeila. She walks around the low-walled cubicles with stacks of standardized forms on the desks, nearly all of their occupants not in yet or out in the field, until she finds the room she's looking for: 40C, a plain door except for a plastic label maker printed strip reading HASHEATERS. There's an electronic lock, which beeps and flashes green when Skeila touches her keycard to its surface. Hopefully one of her new squadmates will be around to get her up to speed. . .

Inside, the room is empty. And not as though someone's just stepped out for a minute—this is the emptiness of an unused space. There are no chairs or desks or furniture except for a few long tables along the beige walls, and someone's left a couple of power strips plugged into some of the outlets, but no one's belongings are here, no bags left on the tables or computer monitors showing a login screen. No squadmates to tell her what the hell she should do now. Big windows on the opposite wall with the blinds pulled all the way up let in a view of the gleaming cavescraper across the street.

"The fuck," mutters Skeila, looking around like someone might be hiding somewhere. She lets out a resigned huff. "Alright, fine," she says to the empty room.

It's hours later when the door lock beeps again and in walks a husky, squat spider the color of bricks and rust, two captain's bars on his AAA sash in the spot where Skeila has her lieutenant's stripe, holding a steaming coffee cup with "CAP'N DADDY" on the side.

Skeila's startled out of her focus. "Captain Klatz!" she says, looking over her shoulder.

Klatz's orange eyes survey the room as he nods appreciatively. "You've been busy, girl," he announces. There's more furniture in here now—Skeila's rustled up two desks from somewhere, plus a filing cabinet, a sad little six-wheeled office chair sized for humans, a desk calendar and a computer tower she's got hooked up to a fourteen inch monitor and an inkjet printer, no attempt to disguise or organize the cables. But the most noticeable addition is the huge corkboard mounted on the center of the wall, which Skeila was pondering when Klatz came in. It's an old-school evidence web, or at least the beginning of one, with a half-dozen photos pinned up with thumbtacks and connected by

bits of string.

“Grabbed some shit no one was using,” says Skeila. “Thought I’d try and get started before everyone else came in. Didn’t really know what else to do.”

“I was gonna show you around, but it looks like you got it figured out well enough yourself, Lieutenant,” replies Klatz. “Didn’t realize you were coming in so early. You know I ain’t exactly a morning spider.”

“My human’s got a new job he’s gotta get up for, so...trying to match him.” She shrugs. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Who else?”

“Like, the whole rest of the fuckin’ squad? Am I supposed to catch the Huntsmen myself?”

“Well, topside said they’d send down a couple investigators from Metro PD, don’t ask me when.”

“Oh, shit. We’re getting humans?”

“If Metro PD ever gets around to it,” says Klatz.

“Okay, who else?”

“You tell me, Skeila. This is your detail, you can request whoever you want.”

Skeila stands there blinking her big dark eyes a couple times. “The fuck you mean it’s *mine*?” she asks, sincerely puzzled.

“Am I talking in deep spider? I mean this is your squad. You’re in charge.”

There’s a beat of silence. “I’m in *charge*!?” shouts Skeila.

“That’s what I said,” Klatz replies with exaggerated patience. “You, Lieutenant, are the commanding officer of the Huntsmen And Similar Hostile Erisians Anti-Terrorist Emergency Response Squad.”

Skeila lets a long, slow breath out of her nose, sits on a table, and squeezes her eyes shut while Klatz continues to talk.

“Can’t guarantee you can get everyone you want, but we should be able to pull anyone who’s on regular duty. You’re budgeted for six officers, that includes you, the humans are free under some mutual assistance program, if we ever get ’em. Unlimited OT. That’s real nice. I’d be living here if I was you. You can put in a request with the facilities department and get whatever other furniture you need. Get some chairs and shit, make ’em give you the nice ones with back support, not like that piece of junk. Superintendent’s gonna want a status report every week but other than that—”

“Captain, what the fuck?” Skeila yells, cutting him off. “It was one thing when I was just *on* the Huntsmen detail! No one told me I was running it! Why am I in charge?”

“Someone high up believes in you. Thinks you’ll be good for this. I didn’t say no.”

Skeila lets her head fall into a pair of her claws. “This is gonna be a disaster.”

“Chin up, Lieutenant. You got this.”

“I got this? That’s your fuckin’ pep talk?”

“I say that because you do, in fact, got this,” says Klatz, giving Skeila a flat look. “You’re a good cop, Skeila. You picked out that bomber and ran after him. You’ve been face to face with the Huntsmen and you kept your human safe. You’re one of the only spiders on the force who’s had contact with them. And isn’t that human of yours a genius or something? Bring him in and have him help out.”

“Two days,” mutters Skeila, picking her head up. “I can only bring Sid in two days a week. That’s his new job, some part time thing for the MARC.”

“The MARC? Huh. Well, better than nothing,” grunts Klatz.

“Yeah.” There’s a long silence while Skeila processes the burden of command that’s just been dropped so unceremoniously on her shoulders. Ranks in the AAA are pretty flexible; being a lieutenant has never meant much more for her than having to occasionally yell at junior officers stepping out of line. This would be the first time she’s ever been an actual leader, Eris help her. “Can I get Izlil?”

“For the squad? Yeah, no problem, we can pull Sergeant Izlil.”

“Great. It’ll be fun to have Izz around while I fuck this up, at least.”

“Skeila, you’re better than you give yourself credit for,” sighs Klatz. “And you’re motivated. You clearly want to catch them. Look at this shit,” he says, pointing at Skeila’s corkboard of pictures and intersecting strings. “You’ve only been here a couple hours and you already got all this going.”

Klatz walks over to more closely inspect the board; Skeila picks herself up and trudges over to join him. Most of the pictures are grainy printouts of low-resolution images; all she really had to work with are the security tapes from the Huntsmen’s raid on Melmon Bank, but it’d been enough to get started. She’s picked out every individual Huntsman she could find in the footage. Most of them are just anonymous, indistinct little six-armed figures. But there’s five in the middle that are connected to each other, and for these five Skeila’s reserved red pushpins to fix them to the board. These are the five Huntsmen she ran into the night she met Sid. The ones she saved him from.

Well, one’s actually just a scrap of paper with “BLUE GUY???” written on it. She’d pored over the Melmon Bank footage, but couldn’t find anyone she was certain matched the spider she remembered—a big, muscular blue-furred male with some presumably captured human already hanging between his legs. She was pretty sure the other male they had with them, a rangy brown-furred spider, was the one who’d actually gotten to change the human they kidnapped from the bank. A separate string on the corkboard ran from his picture to the one of the girl the AAA had gotten from the surface authorities, which itself had a zoomed-in shot of the penis she’d been turned into pinned on top of it.

The third red-pinned picture is a bit crumpled, like Skeila punched it into the board. It’s the chunky orange chick with black claws and eyes. Itkil, they’d called her. Pumpkin-looking bitch. Her, Skeila remembered, no question. She was the one that wanted Sid. If Skeila hadn’t changed him first—no. She won’t even think about it.

She'd had her choice of pictures for the next red pin, and opted to go with a publicity shot Saint Alaika's label had on their website. The spider's gray eyes stare coldly outward, perhaps the faintest uptick of a smirk on one side of her thin lips, strap of a bag slung across her shoulder visible just above the cutoff. Alaika hadn't said anything to Skeila the night she met Sid, but she remembered the messenger bag and that blank look on her face, somehow both dead-eyed and smug. She'd had the same bag and the same look the night Skeila caught her DJ set at Blurred Vision too.

The final red-pinned picture was the one in the middle. She wore a hooded robe and the lines around her purple eyes seemed to indicate a cruel sort of amusement. Skeila had to take her picture from the security footage but it was fairly clear, since she'd been trying to be seen when she delivered her speech declaring the Huntsmen's right to take any unchanged human. She was their ringleader and arch-priestess—Margreta. The one who hissed when she talked and who'd told her: *you don't have to change him back. He's yours now.* Well, Sid *is* hers. Regardless of where he is or whether he's attached to her, Sid's hers. Always. And she doesn't need this spider or anyone else to confirm that for her, even if she claims to be speaking for a goddess.

"So, these are your suspects?" Klatz asks.

Skeila remains grimly focused on the board. "They're my prey," she says.