

**No Realm of Man...**

My Dearest Phaeros,

It is only human arrogance which demands that all places were built by Man, for Man, and about Man. Moreover, what of Gods and Goddesses? Can the Beasts of the ocean not have their own Gods? What of the Creatures which crawl and dwell in the deepest reaches of the earth?

It is my understanding that the greatest events this World has seen have had naught to do with man, for he is but one beast among many in this World. Other creatures outnumber us by far, and outlast us even farther. Even during the brief epoch of our existence, great tides have come and gone among the creatures that we share this World with. Kingdoms have been built and fallen. Wars have been waged. Gods and Kings and Tyrants have come and gone, and not a whisper of it is known to the ignorant beast known as Man.

One may easily imagine this to be so, but will still succumb to blindness. This is how. It is easy to imagine time of ages past, before the reign of Man, when Thinking Beasts and Gods ruled The World. It is far too easy to imagine a present-day World of docile and wild Beasts which toil about in the vast wilderness that surrounds us; idle and stupid. Nay, I believe that little has changed. Just as Man attempts to build its legacy, so is the legacy of countless other Peoples and Races and Beings plays out day by day—some unimaginably distant, some present and yet invisible.

The greatest error we can make is to immediately assume that we have any Part in any Thing. Most have nothing to do with us whatsoever. The greatest triumph is to realize our insignificance in the grand scheme of The World.

—Tempia

# **Chapter 15**

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## **Underworld**

## — Nightfall: Underworld —

Day 6: 11:00 pm

We marched into unknown depths, led by a cantankerous fool. In the woodlands above, the clumsiness could be afforded through our sheer numbers. Those numbers had been reduced to a petty few, and yet still the same audacity that one affected an army was still abundant in a mere gang. Miles of corridor had been traversed without incident, but as the ground steadily slope downwards and the fabrication of the walls become more strange and ancient, I felt certain that incident would be ahead.

I was trailing behind the rest of the group by a narrow margin. Before me were the rangers and engineers, and before them, after a sizeable gap, were Ivan's troops with the man himself centered amongst them, as if they were a human shield protecting their precious soft interior. Neither Thurm nor Sarievo had spoken of Thurm's revelation that the Hammerite runners were imposters, but I felt as if it simply was not an issue. The Engineers had worked side by side with the rangers, and had done good work. This, beyond anything else, made them brothers. If Ivan had only arrived earlier, and he and his men taken part in the work, would things now be different?

The corridor began to grow wider, and the group flattened, the gaps between us closing so that Thurm and Sarievo were now at my sides. As time wore on I could feel that audacity fading and trepidation taking hold. Signs of life, and death, were beginning to appear; spider webs. First they clung to the walls and corners, but more and more frequently they spanned the entire passage. There were remains; bones of large rodents, and empty shells of insects of all shape and size. The Hammerites marched forward without a second glance, pausing only to clear the webbing ahead. The rangers were taking in everything.

"Ah!" one of Ivan's Hammerites suddenly shouted, stopping in his march for an instant as he slammed his hand onto his neck. The rest of the group paused at the outburst. "Naught but a spider," he said, inspecting the remains on his open hand, before resuming.

"Let me see that," said one of the rangers, moving up ahead to the man who had possibly been bitten.

"Keep thy place Brother," was the reply. It was too late anyway; he had already scraped the remains off of his hand.

"Then I fear that I will be forced to observe you, and your decay," the ranger said quietly once he was back in his place in the formation; so that only us in the back could hear him.

"I fear I have led us astray," I said just as quietly. "This tunnel is ancient; it has not held a living soul since before this age. What use could following it be to our mission?"

"Do not doubt thyself," Brother Thurm whispered to me. "I can feel The Master Builder's hand upon us even now. There is something within the pagans did not wish for us to discover. This is the correct path."

Yes, but was it because it was dangerous to them, or dangerous to the

entire world? I wanted to smile, but found I could not. I could admire his faith, even though I knew he was speaking nonsense.

We were coming to a chamber, one again filled with columns, but these were much larger and closer together. The ceiling was truly out of sight above our heads. Ivan hadn't even seemed to notice, and his men would not stop their march without his command. We began passing between them, the pillars wide and etched with a familiar pattern over their surface. I found that I had stopped, staring, and Thurm and Sarievo stopped with me.

"Brother Ivan," I called out, seeing the troop moving on without us. "We must stop, I believe this is important."

The group did stop, and soon Ivan revealed himself from within the pack. "What?" he just said.

"These columns are covered in writing. I believe I may be able to understand it."

He approached, staring at the column and at the etchings which no doubt seemed like random decoration to him. "So thou art a sorcerer just as Brother Oberon hath told me."

"Hardly," I said back, almost a snap. "Though I do have an interest in ancient glyphs." It was a lie.

It was difficult. The look of the writing was familiar, but not immediately comprehensible. I studied it, lifting my gloved hand to the stone in order to clear webs away that obscured it, but I could feel Ivan growing impatient. "Takest thy time," he said with a grunt.

I tried to put myself back, to remember if I even knew this language, or if it was just some anomaly of my subconscious playing tricks on me. I waved for one of the torch bearers to come closer as I studied. "It is a warning," I finally said, a small piece falling into place in my mind. "This is a prison."

"A prison? For what?" Ivan scoffed.

"Brother Ivan!" one of the Hammerites shouted. "Thou must see this!"

He left my side, heeding the urgent words. "No, not quite a prison...a sanctuary," I went on, more and more of it coming back to me. "These...these two words are names. Scina." The name was unknown to me, but it was referenced here as being very important. "And the other," the word etched there seemed to warp my mind, as if it had no business being spoken aloud. "Kith...no, Cth, keh, Kenew...knhu. Cth-knhu."

The others weren't listening; they had left to find the meaning of a commotion, and soon I found myself torn away from the inscription to see what was going on.

"Not human remains," Sarievo said as I approached. He wasn't kidding. It was the size and shape of a man, though possibly more ape-like, but with long spindly appendages beneath each arm, longer than the arms and ending in a single finger. The proper arms themselves, and even the legs, ended in two. The skull was incomprehensible. "Some type of human spider creature," he continued, looking it over before Ivan with far more expertise than a Hammerite should have.

"There are more, here, and there," said the Hammerites who had fanned

out to inspect the room, "mixed with other remains, smaller beasts of all kinds, many with bones that have been bitten through."

As I left the central passage created by the span of columns I saw that the spider webs grew incredibly thick towards the sides of the room, until I was confronted by walls of the stuff.

"Ah!" another one shouted. "I too have been bitten!" This time one of the rangers rushed to him before he could completely destroy the swatted spider.

"I do not recognize it," he said. "But I only know of spiders which dwell in the woodlands and The City, not of deep cave varieties."

"I didst not know that our Order had a woodlands bestiary division," Ivan said with ire.

"Brother Sariovo," I said, feeling like I was putting him in danger by even speaking his name. "From the bones, can you possibly discern if this is a creature capable of speech?"

He crouched beside it, pushing away some webs but careful to make sure that there were no little spiders ready to jump on him. "I can't be sure it would sound anything like human speech, but the neck and jaw still have a somewhat human quality to them. But that doesn't mean there will be a human intellect."

"That will do. If we encounter any living ones...I doubt conversation will be an option, but I suspect..." I let that trail off. Sariovo knew what I meant; we had not the numbers for a confrontation and not the qualities for stealth with our current company. Reason may be our only chance.

"I suspect that we shall be victorious," Thurm said to complete my statement. The look in his eyes did not match the optimism of his words.

The Hammerites had broken rank, and there didn't seem to be any attempt to get us back into formation. Conversation broke out among several small groups, one of which included Ivan. After a moment he began shouting orders again, and we resumed formation just as we were at the start of the journey. Again Ivan ordered me to the back, either because he trusted me to this important position, or he just wanted to separate this outsider from his brothers.

Beyond this hall was another corridor like the one we had been in previously, but this one sloped downwards so steeply many in the group occasionally lost footing and had to be caught by those around him. The corridor did not resemble a built passage nor was it a natural cavern, but something burrowed out. Here the webs nearly coated the surface of the rounded walls, and more and more of the men complained, or silently dealt with, living specimens finding their way onto our bodies. I found one crawling over my glove, and slowed my pace slightly as I held it up to examine it.

It was small. There could have easily been thousands of them crawling all over each of us and we would never know it. The light from the nearest torch bearer was insufficient to show me any details on the small creature, but I did not expect to recognize anything that the ranger didn't already. I had no problem with spiders, but that didn't mean I was an expert on them. I

watched as it traveled from knuckle to knuckle so quickly I couldn't turn my hand fast enough to keep up with it. Before I knew it, it had vanished; maybe it dropped off, or maybe it found its way up my sleeve. It seemed futile to worry about it; for all I knew a hundred had found their way up my legs already.

There was a commotion among the Hammerites at the head of the group, and I soon saw that it was because we had stumbled upon a striking new area. As we exited the corridor one by one, each man stopped in astonishment to take in the scene. It was a tremendous natural cavern, with the towering ceiling and depths illuminated by all sorts of glowing growths. Our own passageway jutted out into a narrow bridge which crossed over to the other side, where it continued as a narrow ridge that wrapped its way around the perimeter of the cavern. Ivan, who was unimpressed or hiding it very well, was the first to resume the march, striking out onto the rocky bridge as if it were unremarkable. We followed.

As we walked, I spent more time looking up and around. I noticed balls of gas hovering to and fro in the air; either air elementals or some other phenomena unknown to me. I had read that elementals possessed some strange intelligence of their own, and was anxious to experiment with this idea, but there was little I could do at this point but watch from afar. As I looked around I saw other rocky bridges such as this one cross the chasm, some at great distances, some broken. The spiders here were no less plentiful, and some had even spun webs across great distances. I thought I could see a few of the larger ones, some the size of dogs, lying in wait in those webs.

The narrow ridge eventually turned into corridor once more, but by then we had descended another several dozen feet downwards. From there on it was much of the same, quiet, dark, the occasional skeleton or empty carapace, and many small spiders. I did not know if my ears were playing tricks on me, but from time to time I thought I could hear a distant rumbling, and more often, a barely audible clicking and chirping.

My concentration was interrupted by one of the men stumbling ahead of me. It was an engineer. This seemed to bring the whole group to a stop as a few of his fellows worked to get him back on his feet, while he insisted that he was alright. Finally, Thurm spoke up.

"Brother Ivan, I am afraid my men and I are exhausted. Would it not be possible for us to stop and rest for a time?"

I expected him to simply say no at once, and be done with it, but he paused for a time before speaking up. "There is a large chamber ahead. We will enter it, survey it, and then make camp." He turned around and kept walking.

"How long do you think we've been down here?" I asked Sarievo, feeling deliriously tired myself, and far too disoriented to make the call.

"I say at least six hours. I would gnaw my own arm off for some rest."

"Let's hope it won't come to that. We may yet need that arm," I said, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

But the murmur of relief that went through the group quickly turned to hesitation as we discovered what the large chamber Ivan spoke of entailed. Whereas before the remains had been scattered; this room was flooded. I maneuvered to the front of the group in order to survey the scene of ancient carnage. Everything had been picked clean ages ago, but the mounds of bone and shell which carpeted the floor made for no less of a disturbing sight. Most of it had been blanketed by spider webs, perfecting the scene of macabre. The corpses had not simply been heaped here; this was a battlefield, left undisturbed since the day it was waged.

"We press on," was all Ivan said, and on we went. We zigzagged, this way and that, to find the path of least resistance through the debris, sometimes doubling back and choosing another way. By time we were clear and on the other side, most of us had forgotten about the promise of rest.

Yet more walking—it could have been another hour, or less—was as good a reminder as any. By the time we reached the next chamber, the Hammerites were far more amicable to the prospect of rest.

This room seemed to have been swept clean. Debris and webbing were rare. It was still quite large, and the columns that divided the room into a grid were the first sign of deliberate construction we had seen in hours—unless the crude rock bridges were considered. Hammerites had already begun setting down their gear when Sarievo came to me with caution in his voice. "I hate to suggest this, but we may want to keep looking. This room...I would not wish to defend ourselves in it if we were forced to. I noticed that there are many openings in the perimeter. We could be attacked from any side."

"Dost thou believe that we are not alone?" Thurm said who almost always came to listen when he saw Sarievo talking with me.

"I do not want to take the risk," he said, glancing to him.

"I am afraid that Ivan is in charge," I replied. "Brother Thurm, do you think you could sway him? At least we should position ourselves here so that we can better defend ourselves if we are ambushed."

"Nay, I do not, but I shalt try," at that he went.

"Keep your weapons handy..." I said to him, "Ready for anything."

Thurm came back quickly. Either he had not tried very hard, or Ivan was very firm in his denial. "We rest here or not at all," he said. I would have taken not at all, but most of us were now so tired, if we were attacked they would be tripping over their hammers.

Camp was made, nestled in between the columns, away from the walls. The torches were set into campfires, and thin, uncomfortable bedrolls were distributed. They were little more than a sheet of burlap to separate the sleeper from the stone floor. Still, lying down at all, even on the hard floor, was excuse enough for my body to remind me how completely exhausted I was. I let out a long breath as I tried to settle my strained muscles and twisted nerves. The Hammerites settled down remarkably quickly. In no time at all, all of the rangers and engineers had lain down and were silent.

I took another long breath. As tired as I was, I could not bring myself to close my eyes. When it seemed certain that some of Ivan's men were not

going to rest as well, I took my mind off their movements and tried to find another use for it.

I stared upwards. If I let my imagination take hold, I could almost believe that there was no ceiling at all. Such was the vast emptiness above us it may have been the sky, a tar black, starless sky, with no clouds to drift across it, nor sun to illuminate it as the night gave way to dawn. To those who might have dwelled here, this was the only sky the world offered.

I expected the dim light of our torches, now used as campfires, to allow at any moment my eyes to see the surface above; maybe monumental stone, maybe cracked and decayed and overgrown with roots, maybe bare earth, maybe, but all I had was speculation. From time to time I thought I caught sight of something; some form or movement, something that did not belong in the pure, perfect black above. I could not discount a simple trick of my vision however.

I got up. It was surprisingly easy, even though I had been lying there for what felt like an hour. Sleep, at this point, seemed like a stranger whom I had once been well acquainted with, but had fallen out of good graces.

The Hammerites paid me little mind. All of Sarievo and Thurm's men had long since passed out. I should have been just as tired as they were, but something (not that I didn't know what that could be, but that I had too many possibilities to choose from) had stirred my blood and filled me with such vitality that lying down, even in my bed at home, would have actually been less comfortable.

Even after all this time most of Ivan's men were standing guard. We were essentially in an undefendable position, so the guards could do little more than to shout everyone awake at the first sign of trouble.

The columns were what had stirred me. Before, what seemed like days ago, the glyphs etched into them were recognizable but eluded my memory with the exception of two names; names I had never seen before, and yet somehow could translate from markings in stone to words which I could say out loud. I was now away from the group, choosing a column far enough away from the encampment that I could walk around it without causing a disturbance. At first I was afraid that these would be blank, but after clearing away the thin layer of webbing, I saw that they were not.

The glyphs carved into the columns seemed to break free of the stone and burn themselves into the back of my skull. I could not recognize them, but they stirred within me memories so vague I could only associate feelings. It was like stumbling upon a memento of a past stage in one's life which had been long since been forgotten, and the brief moment that followed when one could not remember why it stirred up such deep feelings, but knew that it had to be very important. Usually, when this happened to me, the memories would come flooding back within a moment. Now, however, all I had was the haunting feeling that I not only should understand every glyph I was seeing, but that they were telling me something that it was imperative to know.

Scina. Cth-*knhu*. I found them here as well. Those were the names I knew—*nay*, wanted me to know them; but, what of them?

Words are nothing without an idea behind them. An idea cannot exist without words to express it: Scina; Enemy; Cth-knhu; Friend; no, not friend; Deal broker, Mercenary, Enemy of our enemy. But who are *we*?

More fragments became recognizable: Us; Them; Enemy; War. The words were there. I felt as if I were on the edge. One little push would send me over the brink, and all would become clear. Perhaps, if I simply distanced myself from it for an instant and thought about things logically...

I had assumed that because this was a language familiar to me, that it was some form or dialect of the Rivata. If I ignored that supposition, or even supposed the opposite, where did that leave me? What else could stir me up like this? This place was likely from a time after the Rivata had been banished, so whoever wrote this had to have learned it from what was left behind. All that was left behind was; excluding some unique cases, constructs of theirs built entirely of components native to this plane. That would have made them immune to the banishment. Most beings of this nature were undoubtedly hunted down and, in the absence of their masters, eventually destroyed. Some could have survived. They had control everywhere. They did so much...I could not exclude anything.

Cth-knhu. It was such a thing. I could see the glyph which represented it everywhere, repeated over and over. Yet, I had no memory of ever *knowing* this word, this sign, what it meant; what it implied...

Scina. It did not fit in with the rest. Wherever that glyph appeared, the glyphs around it seemed to recoil away from it. It didn't belong. The word was foreign here.

What if I was seeing as many as three different languages woven together as one? I imagined it like the character set of a familiar language, used to form words of a foreign one, but using grammar of still a third. It would be confounding, confusing to one who knew the characters but none of the rest. As far as I could discern, many of the glyphs were of Rivata origin, but were being used in a way that was completely different from how I understood them; either they had changed through the passage of time, or they had been adopted by some other race and distorted for their purposes. The third that came into play involved this Scina, as it represented something so equally alien that the language itself had to be altered substantially in order to contain it.

And yet, at the moment of admitting defeat, of accepting the fact that I would not be able to understand it, I somehow felt even closer to breaking the code.

A nearly absurd thought flashed into my mind. Humoring it, I lifted the hat off of my head and quickly removed the gold circlet, the thing that had revealed to me The Scroll of Phaeros. I could not be sure if I was simply observing what I expected or if I truly had discovered something extraordinary, but as soon as I set my eyes upon the glyphs once more, I found them to be little more than incomprehensible scratching; barely even recognizable as writing. To test this farther I sought out the glyphs for Cth-knhu, which I had previously noticed, were everywhere. Not only could I not

single them out, but I could not even remember what they looked like.

I placed the cirlet back on my head, and with a wave of euphoria it all came back to me. In fact, I wasn't sure if I could even remember not remembering...clearly this thing defied rational thought.

Now I felt as a man might who had been using a plow for years, but finally discovered that he had been using it backwards all this time. I would not be able to read the glyphs in the same way I could read written text on a page, but I could understand them all if the meanings behind them were powerful enough. After all was this not the nature of glyphs to begin with, never mere writing but symbols imbued with the power of their meaning in a far more literal sense?

Once my mind was open to this understanding, the effects were retroactive. What I had already seen was beginning to congeal into meaning. This was a tale of a great war, and of great betrayal. It was written here not as a message to outsiders, but as a kind of creed to those whom it involved. It was the tale of Scina, the enemy, a Goddess of the most horrible tyranny. The creed spoke of a people divided into two classes, separated by the most fundamental of distinctions; those that possessed the power of flight, and those that did not. The flighted ones were considered of the same heart and soul of the goddess herself, and those that crawled on the surface were said to be of flesh and shell to her opposite, a demon-like creature; Cth-knhu.

I was given pause, thinking it remarkable that a construct of the Rivata, left behind after the banishment, had integrated itself into a race's religious beliefs and way of life.

There was so much here, and I was hungry to take it all in. Soon another great name revealed itself to me, and it presented something far different than the reviled abomination of Scina, or the terrifying veneration of Cth-knhu. "Gin'Geen'Ginin," I said in a whisper, though I could not help but feel that the human tongue could not do the word justice. I found that it was in fact referenced more often than both of the other two combined, but always indirectly, usually hinted but rarely named. It was the adoration, devotion, and love of a mother. I soon realized that this was placing her higher than both the goddess and the demon.

Drunk with my discovery, my hands raced to keep pace with my mind. Column after column I examined and read, pushing away caked dust, webbing, and other decay as my eyes hunted out every glyph, allowing the magic of the cirlet to bring the meanings to me, and searched the recesses of my memory for how it related to the world I once knew. I saw more and more clearly my memories locking together with the account of the creed, forming images of an ancient, deadly racial war which the pagans wished to keep secret for all eternity. My hands were almost trembling as I noticed the dull pain in both of my ears; the familiar feeling I got whenever I had concentrated too hard and unwittingly clenched my jaw tighter and tighter.

"The mother awoke us from our naïf," I whispered, "taught us the beauty of our way and showed us that Scina is no goddess at all; showed us that Cth-knhu was a servant, no master. The mother brought us from the dirt, taught

us to be makers, weavers, goddesses ourselves. The people of Scina were not two, but three, but would again be two. We were of our own kind. Not subjects, but goddesses ourselves. We could not dwell in the air, but we did not have to dwell in the earth. We were closer to the beast called Man. We could create. Man builds; we build.—Weavers, we. This, the mother taught us, made us goddesses ourselves. Scina taught us that we were kin with the demon, Cth-knhu, but she was wrong. The mother taught us that we were its master. It served man, and would serve us. Scina taught us to fear it. Scina unknowingly taught us to know it. Cth-knhu was tamed. The Mother took it in, and made it Father. It taught us to be more like man. It gave us words. It gave us power. It gave us the way to be free of Scina and her chosen. Gin'Geen'Ginin, it called The Mother, and pledged itself to her. We would be free."

I gave a long breath of relief. There was more, so much more, but I felt that I understood at least this much. "*Gin'Geen'Ginin, it called the Mother, and pledged itself to her,*" I repeated to myself, but the words were alien to my ears. I had thought I was whispering out loud in the common tongue, but found that I had slipped somehow into Rivata. I had not heard anyone speak the language of the Rivata in...I was not even sure.

"But free we would not be. Scina was too strong, and too wicked. She tricked the mother into allowing Scina to face the father alone. Scina and Father battled. Mother and all felt he would prevail. And it was so. Scina surrendered, but it was a trick. Her magic encased the father in stone. Mother fought, but she was no match for the terrible Scina. All ways were blocked. A prison was made. Trees, great poison trees would be the sentry. None of us could go near, for they brought death to our kind. Scina banished us to the underworld. Scina was pleased to be free of us, we, children she had always hated. Free of us, her children in the sky flourished. Imprisoned below, we of the underworld, we weavers, were cursed. Spider is the name they called us by. Spider is our curse: The father still imprisoned in stone; The mother, immortal, yet cursed as well, lies in wait. The mother, our queen, Gin'Geen'Ginin, will not forget..."

A word from behind nearly made me shout out in surprise. "Brother Daelus, Brother Ivan wisheth to speak with thee."

It was just one of Ivan's men. I turned my head over my shoulder to see Ivan's encampment several yards away, but the man himself was missing. Then the Hammerite who he sent to fetch me pointed out that he had walked to the far end of the room, and I was expected to meet him there privately. I already knew that the topic was going to be Oberon. Ivan would have no other reason to keep his words from the ears of his men.

As I grew near, he said, "I suppose..." but then he stopped, and twisted around to look over his shoulder at me. His face lacked composure, malice, or anything of the sort. In fact, he seemed to just be making sure it was actually me before he began his monologue. "I suppose thou dost believe that because thou knowest Brother Oberon, thou knowest me. But I must remind thee; that is simply not the case."

He said it in a way which suggested it was a rhetorical statement, but before he could launch further into his statement I gave him the answer that he didn't want; though I suppose he didn't want any answer at all. "I don't suppose that at all."

"Well, I—" and then he stopped, maybe caught off guard by my reply. He cleared his throat and continued, probably unchanged in spite of my answer. "I simply must inform thee that this is not at all the case. Thou hast had an odd lot of us I fear, Brother Daelus. Thou hast made the acquaintance of very few Hammerites, and all of those few are extremely unique examples. Nay, some are hardly examples at all. I cannot speak for Markander, for I hardly knew him. Father Rafael is more monarch than Hammerite; never hath one so unlike the humble servant..." he trailed off, possibly stirred to anger and unable to complete his thought coherently. With another clearing of the throat he resumed. "And his servant, Chispin, is unworthy of the robes of priesthood. He is a cruel, brutal man who doth follow the commands of his tyrant lord without question. Oberon too presents a mockery of the priesthood—in the time of our forefathers, one such as he wouldst never ascend above the lowest ranks. I do serve him now out of only a sense of duty to the entire church."

I knew a point was coming, but I wasn't going to try to coax it out of him. All I could do was restrain myself from appearing too impatient, nor too distracted by the glyphs which implored me to return to them.

"I say this so that thou wilt understand how new a situation this is for thee. I am but a mere priest, Brother Daelus. I teach; I heal; I tend to my flock. I have no use for thee."

"I see," was all I said.

"We are the Order of the Hammer. We are a brotherhood of men who serve The Builder. All here are as I; men dedicated to our roles and to our tasks. We have no use for outsiders, nor any interest. It wouldst do all of us well if thou wert to turn around, and depart to the surface at once."

At least I knew that he was still unaware of the rangers. Other than that, this was an unexpected turn. I could simply agree, fall back, and then shadow them as they progressed. I would even be able to find a way around them and strike out ahead, or even in a new direction altogether.

"I have not forgotten our previous conversation, and thy profession of faith. Since then thou hast not given me reason to doubt. I am not suspicious of thee, as Chispin was. When I didst return to mine brethren I didst discover news of a new faith in thee that Father Rafael hath found; apparently thou hast past a test he set before thee. I know not of this test, but for mine own part I sense no allegiance with the enemy from you, nor any intent to deceive or betray. If thou dost leave now, I wilt vouch for this with Oberon. However, my word holds little sway with him."

For a simple priest he sure liked to talk. "We are many miles and hours from the surface. You would send me back now?"

"I have no fear that thou shalt make the journey without incident. I do not send thee away because I feel that thou art a fool, nor weak, nor a heretic, nor

a traitor. I do so because thou dost not belong. In spite of what faith thou mayest possess, thou art not a Hammerite. This is our path now, not thine. If thou dost wish, remain here and rest, and leave us when thou art stronger and more alert."

"Very well," I said. "I shalt go. I wish thee the builder's blessing."

A great triumphant smile came to his face, though he should have thought that it had been too easy. "Good. Thou dost see that thou hast no place amongst us. I hope—"

But then a scream interrupted him. I looked quickly, seeing a Hammerite—I had no idea who—being pulled upwards by an invisible force. This force did not stay invisible for long. I quickly noticed a thin, barely visible stream of *something* connecting him to his assailant above.

Those with crossbows reacted quickly, pulling themselves from their bedrolls and releasing bolts into the air, but not before the man was high enough to make the fall seriously dangerous. His scream as he hit the ground was a grunt of discomfort compared to his initial cry.

It was hardly over. More and more of the men were being struck by what I now understood to be streams of webbing, and lofted into the air. As they rose up the number of those left on the ground who still could loose a shot was quickly being reduced to nothing, but that didn't stop those being carried up from attempting to fight back. In my shock at the scene I found myself mentally paralyzed for a moment, unable to respond other than to look above myself in hopes of evading any attempt to seize me.

Ivan was not so sluggish. "By The Builder's hand!" he shouted, quickly summoning a glowing golden hammer into his palm, which he hurled effortlessly into the air. As it struck, the ceiling and our enemies were quickly illuminated. At first it was just a mass of motion, but as my eyes took in what the lingering glow revealed, I discovered that the ceiling was crawling with spiders of all shape and size; some so large their legs resembled tree trunks.

The revelation only made things worse. Now the men were stricken with panic; those who were being drawn up to the ceiling no longer had just an attacker to defend himself from, but an entire army ready to devour him. Though many spiders, having been pierced by the archers, now lay dead on the floor; the number of men left on the ground, even those that had already been released once, was growing fewer by the second.

As I took in the scene, barely able to remain calm myself, I did not feel the strand of webbing attach to me, but I did feel the tug of it as my feet left the ground. I could have very easily lost my senses at that point, but instead I seemed to finally gain them. I did what I should have done seconds before; I reached for my casting rod. It was already armed and ready.

Ivan was hurling one spiritual hammer after another into the mass of legs and bloated forms which were drawing his men to their deaths. For now, maybe because of his display of power, they seemed to be ignoring him. Even though his attacks only claimed one spider with each hit, he was doing a splendid job of illuminating the battlefield. I didn't have time to pick a target; in another second I'd be too far from the ground. I aimed the rod above my

head and squeezed the mechanism. It distorted satisfyingly in my grasp. The shock of the energy being released pushed me downwards before the strand had even been broken. The bolt of energy; the very same I had used to incinerate the scroll, burst into the mass of spiders. There was a great flash, a tremor, a chorus of inhuman screams, and then a tremendous pain as I struck the ground without having attempted to land properly at all. The explosion was much more substantial than the ones Ivan could produce, and had managed to not only rip apart a number of spiders, but shake an even greater number free from the shock of it. Now spider and Hammerite alike were back on the ground, though many were in no condition to get up.

I had not intended this result—only to get down. I scrambled to my feet, though I had a terrible back pain to now cope with, and tried to figure out where Thurm and Sarievo were.

Many Hammerites, no doubt made of sterner stuff than I, were quickly recovering from their falls and taking on the spiders—most of which were on their backs, twitching madly—with screams of hatred and hammers swung high over their heads. To my relief I found Thurm to be pitching glowing hammers much like Ivan was doing, though his seemed to lack the range and potency. Sarievo was at his back, being far more effective with a crossbow. Unfortunately, we were now cut off from one another by the spiders on the ground, some living and some dead, and in spite of the Hammerite's best efforts, the living were outnumbering the dead as more came crawling down the columns or simply dropping down from above.

One was almost on top of me before I was able to react, dodging to the side as a pair of legs swept out to meet me. "Sarievo!" I shouted in what I could now only guess was his general direction. "Take your men and Thurm's and get the hell out of here!" It would be very difficult to retreat, but this was a battle that could not be won. In fact, we had lost as soon as we had entered this place. I fumbled as I tried to locate another orb to load into the casting rod, and nearly let the spider, which was bigger than Suzy, get a grip on me. When I caught another glimpse of Sarievo, I saw him signaling to men around the room while simultaneously pleading with Thurm to give it up and follow him. I wasn't able to observe beyond that.

I was cornered. By the time I finally had the rod loaded with another shot, I realized that one of my attackers was not a mere spider, but one of the human-spider beasts we had seen remains of hours before. For a fleeting moment I remembered how I had aspired to try reason, just before I chose it as my target and squeezed the mechanism.

They parted to avoid it, having already learned what my rod could do, but not all were fast enough to get out of the way. It sent arcs of spider-bits, most glowing red from the impact, across the battlefield which further scattered the enemy, who now seemed to blanket the floor like they had previously done the ceiling. I took advantage of the gap and raced over to Ivan, who was holding off a perimeter with a group of five other Hammerites who had formed a small circle. I had not seen any bodies, but it was inescapable that these were the sole men left standing.

As I joined them, I expected to be shouted at by an enraged Ivan who had seen me order most of our force away; if they had indeed made it away, but he and his men were all far too occupied with fending off the slowly constricting circle around us, hammers swinging in wide arcs. The gap closed as soon as I joined them, and seemed to draw even tighter. The spiders had noticed me do something I had not even consciously been aware of myself; I never used my weapon when my targets were too close to me. They were making sure that never happened again. I drew my sword. There was to be no ceremony, no dramatic first stroke or pause for reverence. After pulling it from its sheath and before coming to a ready stance I had struck three legs from their bodies.

Then I realized why I had not seen any fallen Hammerites. One by one the remaining group was being hoisted back into the air. Of course, now that the battle had come to the floor, why would the original tactic be abandoned? But we were now too occupied with self preservation to do anything to help the ones being taken from us. Five more spiders fell, cut to pieces, before I realized that Ivan and one other were now my only company; their backs pressed to mine.

I was not the last to be taken. Once again, I felt the lift before I felt the tendril lifting me. I swept to cut the strand, thinking that my sharp blade would save me where the Hammerites had been helpless, but before I was free a half dozen or more strands of webbing hit me and held fast. I worked to cut those free as well, but I was now the center of attention, with more and more spiders joining in to capture their unrelenting prize. I saw Ivan and the other Hammerite being lifted up to join me, but the hammer could do nothing against the webs, and Ivan, once his arms had been restrained, could not summon a spiritual one to defend himself with.

I struggled, still managing somehow to cut line after line before I was entirely overwhelmed, while Ivan and his companion were already being spun up tight into man-shaped cocoons. They couldn't even struggle; the webbing was too strong, and too tight.

And very soon I could not either. They were too fast, and there were too many of them.

Unable to fathom any sane course of action, I shouted, in the language I felt they could potentially understand, "*To Gin'Gee'n'Ginin, I pledge myself!*"

Nothing stopped. Nothing changed. I was being bound tighter and tighter. All of the lights had gone out, so I had no idea what had become of anyone else. I felt dizzy, like I was now being spun up. I did not know what would come next. Maybe they would poison me, or maybe the wrapping would become so tight I would suffocate. I was spinning; that was all I knew. As it all now seemed to be coming to an end, I wondered why the circlet which had worked so well when I least expected it, had failed to warn me about the approaching danger. The answer, I feared, was simple; if it always worked exactly how the wearer needed it to, then why did the original owner ever part with it?

The spinning stopped. It was possible that I would die of thirst before I

was made use of; spiders did tend to store things away when food was in abundance, and today it certainly was. The time to escape may yet come, but for the time being I was blind and may as well have been paralyzed for the amount I could struggle. It was hard to imagine escape, but I had already brushed with death once today, so giving up didn't really seem reasonable.

Their touch was delicate and precise, so I was never sure if I was actually in the grasp of one of the beasts or if I was still being carried along by the silken tethers, but I was sure that I had stopped spinning and was now being moved, and quite quickly. A minute went by, then two, and then I could not be sure. Suddenly a sickly glow penetrated the wrapping which covered my face, and shortly after I felt myself come to a stop. All around me I could hear the faintest of clicking and chirping, rough sounds like large forms moving this way and that, and otherwise a deafening silence as the cries and moans of the Hammerites vanished from my ears.

This time I was sure I was being handled by the large, strong legs of one of the towering specimens, but just as surprised as I was by the sturdy grasp, I was even more surprised by the way I began to tumble once more, and how the light seemed to increase and the sensation of every leg moving against me became more tactile with each passing moment. When I suddenly became free, I found the glow of the surroundings blinding. I attempted to right myself, blinking from the strange light, and very dizzy from my unraveling ceremony. I did not feel the need to defend myself or take an aggressive stance; if they meant me harm they would not have released me. Of course, I wasn't ready to assume that I was out of danger either, for all this meant was that they didn't mean me harm *right now*.

When my vision cleared, I was almost fooled into believing that I was alone. In truth, my company filled so completely the gaps between the luminous fungi that I mistook them for the bare cavern walls. There were clearly thousands of them, though all I could see were legs and eyes bunched together so tightly into an intimate amphitheater that I could have been in a wide chasm and mistook it for a tiny cell. All was silent and still. Inspecting myself for injuries, I was astonished at how not a single trace of the webbing remained, nor residue or any other tokens of my treatment at the hands of these beasts.

I did not know what to say, or do. The words I shouted out early were the result of mad desperation. I had no idea if they had any effect, or if this was the spiders' plans all along. For now, they seemed content to simply observe me, corralling me in a prison formed by their own bodies, the light from the mushrooms reflecting off tens of thousands of blank, black, domed eyes.

"Can you understand me?" I ventured, seeing nothing better to do. If they did, they made no show of it.

"*Do you understand?*" I tried again, but this time in what I hoped was the spoken form of the glyphs on the columns. Again, I was given nothing.

Then, the same faint clicking and chirping, the brushing sounds which I now knew to be their friction against one another, began once more, and one side of my living cell enlarged, and slowly opened up into a corridor. The

final two creatures opposite me parted, and revealed the expansive chamber, lit by a sea of glow, they clearly wished for me to proceed into. As if I needed any more invitation, the spiders nearest to me began to move as well, constricting the space so that I had no choice.

I moved. I found myself in the wide open space, barely able to step without crushing and snuffing out spore-filled bulbs under my boot, each emanating a putrid odor which made my throat constrict. I barely paid it mind however, for before me was a tremendous creature.

It was a spider, as pure and simple as one could be. There was no alteration, no distortion or the slightest trace of being a monstrous creation; as if a spider itself that spanned twenty feet from toe to toe was not already monstrous. When I first laid eyes on it, it was nearly upside down, clinging to a web so vast that could have easily spanned from Hightowne to Dayport. Effortlessly, it turned itself over and on a single thread, so thin it barely caught the light, it lowered itself to the ground. As it touched down, one enormous leg at a time, I did not see a single frill or bulb of fungus crush, push away, or even tremble from the impact. She, for I now know that this could be none other than their queen, came before me with the same quickness that one would expect from the smallest of her species, as if she were weightless, but then did not draw any nearer. Her subjects drew even farther away from me, and when I could tear my eyes off of this remarkable sight to observe their departure, I could barely see them as they tucked and bowed and prostrated themselves amongst the garden, showing respect to her as only spiders could.

The queen was now still, and silent. Eight reflective eyes were before me, lidless, impossible to discern what they beheld. With a startling burst of movement, she leapt upwards, flipped around in mid-air, and caught hold of the ceiling. The gust of air from the sudden movement nearly pushed me to my back. She was working now, weaving just as I had watched garden spiders weave a web, but it was not web making that engaged her. For the first moment I could only see that she was crafting a solid form of some kind. An instant later is struck me as figure-like. As I watched, my astonishment growing with every second, I saw a construct of human shape take form, dancing madly as she constructed it. But the most amazing thing was still yet to come, for with no apparent slowing and with a deliberation only common in acts that had been preformed countless times, the thing was finished, and standing before me.

If I had not seen it being made before my eyes, I never would have guessed that it was woven from spider silk. She had made a perfect human form; female of course, and of a quality that showed a definite insight into what a human female *should* look like. It was not poised before me as a puppet hanging from threads, but seemed to be standing on the ground, standing under its own power; just as weighted as its creator seemed weightless. The strands of silk were gone, replaced by an eerily smooth surface that only betrayed its nature when the light hit it at the right angle. Only the hair, which was as light as any torn web caught in the breeze,

remained true to the material of its construction. Then it began to move; it took a breath. It was such a convincing facsimile that I longed to forget that I had just observed it be created, and believe that I was seeing a true living creature before me. Her fingers, for I could no longer think of her as an 'it', unfolded from her palms, and her body assumed a relaxed posture. From the way her toes moved I felt as if she now enjoyed the sensation of ground beneath her feet. It did not at all appear like a puppeteer taking control of an instrument, but like a spirit moving to possess a new body. But my perception was still far short of the entirety, and I realized this as soon as the eyelids, silk sheets far more delicate than any true human eyelid, opened slowly to reveal two white orbs that were as much eyes as any I had made contact with. Her face bore an expression of majesty, and to my great relief, charity. I felt as if I was truly in the presence of a queen.

Still, I could not begin to imagine what would come next. I was not sure if my perception was correct, that the weaver queen had taken this body as her own, or if the spider hanging from the ceiling was the master of this shockingly life-like puppet. I decided it was about time I spoke, in what I stilled hoped would be their language. *"I am told that of all the Goddesses, that the Queen Gin'Geen'Ginin was the most beautiful. I now understand the true scope of this thought."*

She spoke, with a voice like wind through drapes. *"My beauty is a gift to you. It is the first gift, and maybe the only gift."* It was indeed that language, but when she used it, it sounded like the ebb and flow of a great ocean tide, whereas I was a mere ripple across the surface of a pool.

*"And I accept it."* I bowed before her. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do.

*"My children told me that you spoke to them in the tongue of Cth-knhu, and I see that this is true. They also told me that you pledged yourself to me."*

I did not rise, and said something potentially very dangerous for the world above. *"My Queen, I, and those who traveled with me, have undone your prison. You are no longer captives of Scina and the fae. I beg of you, please release them as you have done to me, and allow us to escort you to freedom."* What I said was true. The fact that it couldn't have been farther from the plan was irrelevant. At the moment, it also seemed to be the only way out of this.

*"Freedom," was all she said for a time. "A word: This, we have never known. We have been told it is a thing that the man-beasts cherish."*

I ventured to raise my head slowly, not because it seemed like the right thing to do, but that I couldn't stand to go another moment without looking at her. *"You fought for this before, along with Cth-knhu. The tree has been pulled from its roots. The way is open."*

Again, she was silent for a long time. I did not mind. For every moment of her silence it gave me time to think, and I needed as much of it as I could get, for no matter how hard I thought, nothing seemed to manifest.

*"Scina is dead," I said, "long, long ago. But she has an heir. There has not been a Faery Queen in ages, but a new one seeks to be crowned. I believe she has forgotten about you; forgotten about her ancestor's crimes against you. She*

*did not know what this great tree which imprisoned you was for. She does not know about Cth-knhu. But she will know soon...*" I knew none of this to be true, but why else would Delphine have used the stump as a mere power source to fuel the villa's magic? She clearly thought of it as no more than a powerful artifact worth protecting, with no clue as to its true purpose.

"I know," she said almost at once. *"We felt her passing, and waited for the tree to wither, and wither it did, and yet the barrier remained strong; just as the father is still imprisoned..."*

Cth-knhu. As the Hammerites would say, thank the Builder; he is still imprisoned. Hopefully, he would also be dead. Living things did not easily return to life from stone.

*"You will revive him."*

It seemed unwise to refuse her now, even though every fiber of my being screamed out that this must not be, and it should not be, and it was not possible, and if it was possible, it must not be. *"I will try,"* I said, feeling my skin crawl, and flashing back to that chamber with the statues, the five, wondering how it was that they pushed and prodded and tricked me into this place, on the verge of awakening one of their relics and unleashing it upon the world.

*"I know who you are."* The chills only worsened. As I gazed at her, my eyes locked on those pure white orbs, it never occurred to me that she could be mistaken. Anyone who called that unspeakable creature Father to her children would have to be able to see it. *"You are like him. More, you are like his makers. And that is why I know you can revive him. It is in you."*

I felt myself backing away. She had to be able to sense how I was feeling about this—she had understood so much else already.

*"Why does this frighten you?"*

I did not want to curtail one ancient goddess's dark-age only to bring about an apocalypse at the hands of a demon. That was not the answer I gave her. *"Does he not frighten you?"*

*"Yes..."*

It was not the answer I expected, but if that was so, why did I ask?

She continued. *"He horrifies me. But with him imprisoned, we are all still cursed. If we go to the surface, only the smallest of us will survive. Our minds will shrink and our strength will diminish. We will become simple animals, not unlike the spiders you know from your world. Only here, in our sanctuary, which became our prison, are we a **people**. He can change that."*

*"How; how do I revive him?"* As if I wanted to know.

*"You are of the Rivata. The mysteria is within your grasp."*

*"The—"*

*"Have you forgotten?"*

*"I have..."* Or have I?

*"But you do know, and a forgotten memory can be remembered. I am the last of the old Goddesses. I come from a time when your people ruled the upper world. Your people learned to control the basic laws of life and reality. The mysteria are the backbone of the language we now speak. They are*

*incantations which can make and unmake the world."*

I had not forgotten, but using the incantations in the way she described was beyond my grasp. Still, all I needed for her to believe was that I would try. I had no way to awaken Cth-knhu, and I appreciated this fact. Still, a weight of ash in a small pouch at my belt suddenly pushed its way into my mind. Phaeros had used the mysteria to craft the writing on the scroll. The mysteria held sway over the Rivata's avatar, but Cth-knhu was a different creature entirely. But, I had to think about other things. *"The men that were with me, that your children took. Are they still alive? I wish to see them."*

*"They live. They were taken for food."*

*"They are my people. I do not wish for them to die at your hands."*

*"They will not die at our hands. They are meant to be our food. This is not the same. Do your people not take beasts for food?"*

*"I do not wish for you to take my people for food."*

*"I do not understand how you can see them as your people. You are of the Rivata. They are but simple man-beasts."*

*"I am a simple man-beast!"*

*"You do not know what you say. But sometimes our true nature is the most hidden from ourselves. I do not wish for you to take my people's food from us."*

*"If I awaken Cth-knhu and you are freed from this curse, you can get more food."*

*"What difference will it make? You will simply wish for us to release those as well, as you would still consider them your people. Why are these man-beasts special to you?"*

*"Why must you eat them? Why not the minions of the Faery Queen?"*

*"Some would do, certainly, but the fae themselves are not sustenance to us. Their flesh passes through our bodies undigested and leaves us weaker than before. This was part of the Faery Queen's intent, I am sure."*

I could see that there was going to be trouble. Still, they had managed to sustain themselves for this long underground, so there was little reason to suspect that they would rampage over The City and devour everyone once they were free. I wasn't sure if I was really intending to free them anyway; if what she said was true, and awakening Cth-knhu was the only way, I most certainly did not intend to free them.

*"He can free you as well," she uttered.*

Had she read my mind? *"What?"*

*"He broke the shackles of his Rivata masters. When they were banished from this world, he was spared. He is not the creature from this time that you remember, not savage, nor abominable. He became our king. He can break your shackles as well. I do not know how, but I believe it. You will be free of their domination, and then he can help you defeat them, after we have defeated the Faery Queen together. It will be right. I was slave to her, and freed, and now I am a goddess and she is not. He was a slave to your masters, and became free. They were banished, and he remains, but imprisoned. You are a slave to his former masters, but you will free him from my former master, and then he will free you. Together, freed beings will prosper. We are three of a kind,*

*impossibly unique, and yet all of one."*

How could I trust something so completely foreign to me? How could I not? And yet, somehow, I found myself actually anxious to meet this creature. What would such a thing be like? What would it have to say for itself? How would this world change if such a thing was unleashed into it? Morbid curiosity crept into me. *"You say the mysteria can awaken it. How can you help me to remember?"*

*"I cannot, but he can. Even imprisoned in stone, he can. I can still feel his mind, even at this great distance. You will too."*

I didn't know if I should push again for the release of the Hammerites or not. She did have a point, as much as I didn't like it. If they didn't eat these men, they would just eat others once they were freed. The Hammerites had already made their sacrifice in the line of duty. Why should innocents be ransomed in their stead? *"Take me to him then, and I will do what I can."*

*"We will go now. But we must bring another. Cth-knhu will be hungry when he awakens. He takes on the traits of what he ingests. We will bring one of the man-beasts, which once eaten, will allow you to better relate. He cannot summon a form like this, as I can."*

It was a good thing I had resigned myself to their fate, because now I was going to have to have a hand in it. "Very well," I responded slowly.

There was a flurry of movement among the spiders, and in a short order one of the Hammerites, bound so that all I could see was the white silk he was wrapped in, was lain on the ground between the queen and me. I got a strange feeling from the size of the bundle. *"Is he alive? Conscious?"*

*"Alive, but asleep."*

*"I wish to see his face."*

She was quiet first, simply looking at me. I couldn't tell if she was thinking it over or simply puzzled. Clearly the spiders did not understand that just because I was a delegate—she probably didn't understand who the delegates were—it made me no less human. Finally, she nodded.

One of them took the man up and began to unbind him quickly. They stopped as soon as the face was uncovered enough for me to see, and lay him back on the ground. It was Brother Ivan.

*"This is the one you chose to feed to Cth-knhu."* It wasn't really a question.

*"His display of power in the battle made him the clear choice. Our Father will gain much strength from this one."*

*"But it is Hammerite magic. Would that not be dangerous to him?"*

*"I do not see why."*

I supposed we would all find out. *"Do we carry him or do we revive him?"*

*"Carry. Come."*

Instantly I was ensnared by an invisible strand of silk, pulled up off my feet, and the figure who I had completely accepted as a woman disintegrated into a cloud of unraveling webbing. I could not have protested if I wanted to. Completely disoriented, I was unsure how I had managed to become tethered to the queen spider's back, and in what direction she and a great host of her children sped off. Twisting around, I could see the bundled up Ivan, his face

still visible, being carried along in a much less ceremonious fashion. It seemed no time was to be wasted.

I found myself holding my breath as the queen leapt into a deep ravine and plummeted downwards. Holding on was no use—she had essentially glued me to her abdomen with her silk—but I held on anyway. With almost no shock at all she caught hold of something, I couldn't see enough to be able to tell, bounded off, and dropped again for another ten or twelve seconds before again she caught hold of something and began to move in a more...horizontal direction. On and on this went. Sometimes she leapt upwards, her many companions following along and not falling behind by the slightest, catching hold of something, crawling with her back (and me) pointed downwards before suddenly letting go, flipping around in mid air to catch hold of something new. I found that if I watched her companions I could keep my sense about me, as it was much easier to observe what they were doing and I realized it must be exactly what she was.

Then, to some surprise, I noticed that I was not actually sure how many companions the queen had. At first it seemed to be only a handful, and them possibly a dozen. As we entered a large chamber, once again filled with glowing mushrooms to an extent that resembled moonlight, I saw that it could have been fifty or more. Even that guess seemed to be faulty, as more and more of her subjects crawled out of burrows and joined the caravan every moment. They were of all shapes and sizes, many were human-spider hybrids, some were normal looking giant spiders, and others were monstrous creatures resembling spiders only in that they seemed to have eight legs, but there the resemblance ended in a grotesque display of spines, twists, and eye-like protrusions.

It was also becoming incredibly hot. Down below, illuminated by the mushrooms, I could see thermal vents issuing billows of hot gas into the air. We had to be quite deep by now. Just a moment after I noticed it, the queen actually leapt right into one of the jets of gas. I only felt the scorch of the infernal stuff for an instant as we were blasted upwards by the current of air. The queen somehow managed to change direction but not lose momentum, propelling us along much faster than we had before.

We landed, and she stopped. Dozens of other spiders landed all around us, chattering and chirping with what I could have easily mistaken for glee. One of the man-like specimens leapt onto the top of the queen's abdomen with me, and cut me loose with a twist of its forearms. I slid to the ground, out of breath—because I had been holding it.

*"Have we arrived?"* I asked, observing the spider with Ivan in its grasp landing a few feet away from me.

Hearing no answer, I turned around. Of course, why would there be an answer among spiders? But to my surprise the queen had already summoned her woven avatar, and I had my reply. *"Close, but not yet."*

*"Why did we stop here?"*

She turned away from me. I looked her over in the dim, fungal light as she slowly walked away. Strangely, she seemed more alive than even before.

*"This is a sacred place. We do not rush."*

"Brother Daelus," I heard in the faintest of raspy whispers.

Eyes wide, I turned to Ivan, who had been taken up by one of the larger spiders and was now being carried with two of its legs while the remaining six walked. His face was ghostly white, and his eyes barely open.

"Daelus, it is thee...what has happened?"

"We are prisoners, Brother Ivan," I said. Somehow, returning to the common tongue seemed stranger now than speaking Rivata.

"Please, come save me...come...I am sorry for sending thee away. Please..."

"I cannot, Brother Ivan."

I looked up to see the queen's avatar staring back at me. Her back slowly became straighter, and head held higher. She was waiting for me.

"If I canst but free my hands, I couldst..."

"Be still, Brother. It will be done soon." I walked from him, to the queen. She turned as I approached, and proceeded. I had almost forgotten that above her clinging upside down to the corridor's ceiling was the queen herself, four legs hooked into the rocky surface to crawl along, and four legs free to manipulate her avatar with quick, precise, effortless twitches.

Ivan spoke again, and this time he sounded much more awake. "You...you are in league with them."

I said nothing, nor did I turn to face him.

"Markander was a fool. Rafael and Chispin were right. You are The Trickster's devil."

"No," I said, against my better judgment.

"Then come to me and cut me free at this instant," he hissed.

"Does it look like I have any power to do so?"

"Thou must act, or thou art a traitor!"

"Please, Brother, be still. As I said, it will be done soon." He was wrong. I had nothing to do with The Trickster. My affiliations were far worse. He was about to meet something far worse.

Even petrified, the presence of the Rivata's creation was being channeled through the circlet into my brain. It was hard to tell how much it was affecting me; if I took the circlet off, I wouldn't be able to remember the effects. If I put it back on, I wouldn't be able to remember not feeling it. I stopped thinking about it. The mushrooms here were few and far between, and if it wasn't for the fact that the queen's avatar was pure white, I wouldn't have been able to see her just a few feet in front of me; close enough to touch. For a fleeting instant I wondered how it would be to reach out and run my fingers over her back. Would it feel like the body of a living being, or would it just be cold and empty, like a thing? Would she be able to feel it, or notice it at all? Could I stand the disappointment?

Ivan was not silent, but he was not speaking to me either. He was praying.

At once the corridor opened wide to a grand chamber. Much like the first few rooms of the underworld, this one seemed to be deliberately built. We could not walk into it, as the mouth of our corridor opened up many feet above the floor. When I got to the edge, I saw that the floor didn't even come

up to meet the wall. There was a wide gap that surrounded the perimeter of the room. In fact, what I had mistaken for the floor was a platform suspended high above the true floor, deep, deep below, and glowing red with a distant rumble.

But all of these observations were fleeting as I took in the sight of the monster posed in solid stone near the center of the platform. It seemed to be a cross between a serpent, one that would raise its head high off the ground, and a spider, with many long segmented legs sprawling out to claim the floor beneath it. Other than the shape, there was little spider-like about those legs, which seemed to be sculpted from raw muscle and tendon, rather than shelled and hairy. The head itself also bore no resemblance to a snake, as it seemed to split into hundreds of fibrous strands which could have resembled hair, if not for the way they were frozen in motion. There was nothing about the head, if it was indeed a head, which resembled a face. It was completely incomprehensible. Where the legs joined the body it looked more like they had broken free of some festering growth, rather than occurring naturally. The entire beast seemed to be at war with itself, with parts growing out of that that seemed to split and tear through its flesh rather than belonging there. It was what I had come to expect from the Rivata's handiwork.

She turned to me, so close her face was almost touching my ear. *"This was the old communal alter. It is where the portal to the realm of the old gods would be opened, and Scina would call for tribute amongst us. It is where, after she surrendered, she betrayed us with her offerings of submission. Two gifts, individually harmless, but together fatal; one, a creature who wore a mane of serpents, as a meal for Cth-knhu. The other, a tall thin stone polished smooth to reflect the world. Had I been here, I could have stopped the father from this mistake, but he did not know. Scina opened her portal, and sent the offerings through. The father ate this meal, and then took its powers—a petrifying gaze. When it beheld its own reflection, the betrayal was complete. We have long since dismantled this reflecting stone, and scattered its pieces into the molten rock below. But the magic was not in the stone. It was in Cth-knhu himself. Now only the mysteria can revive him, just as it made him."*

*"What must I do?"* I asked her.

*"Go to him. You will know...or you will not. If you do not, then today will be a day like any other."*

If I did not, then the Faery Queen would likely have her way, unabated by rival gods and demons that would stop her. If I did, then a force far worse than Delphine would be awakened and I would be its herald.

As usual, the spiders acted without warning. I was whisked away by one of them, and soon found myself sailing through the air, tethered to its belly. It landed on the platform uncomfortably close to Cth-knhu, with me tucked under it so that if it had been less precise, my face would have been planted into the floor. Much more delicately than I expected I was righted and placed on my feet, and then the spider backed away. To my surprise the wrapped up Ivan had been deposited before me. Two spiders then picked him back up, moved him directly before the petrified monster, and worked with their silk

to glue him to the ground in a kneeling position. He was still praying out loud. They then backed away, and I knew that thousands of inhuman eyes were now expectantly upon me.

It was unspeakingly hot. The platform dipped slightly to the center and one side, like a shallow tipped bowl. At the opposite end, past the monster, I could see a stone archway that was suspended off the ground by several feet, though I could not see how. On the ground, where the two feet of the arch would touch, were pedestals which looked ready to receive it. This must have been the receptacle of the portal to the realm of the old gods. Deep below the platform, molten earth produced a dull red glow which spilled up the edges of the outer wall, letting in enough light so that I could still see the silken female form of the queen's avatar looking down at me. High up on the chamber's ceiling a sea of mushrooms added a sickly green glow to the redness, illuminating the stone monster from above. Other openings in the walls, many, many openings, had spiders of all shapes and sizes peering down at me, as still as Cth-knhu, as attentive as the queen.

"The mysteria," I said to myself in a whisper. I looked up at the frozen monster, at the texture of the stone mixed with the impossible mire of flesh, all the way up to that writing crown which reached up to the sky.

The circlet on my head had grown in weight. I could sense it still struggling against its prison. Deep inside, some concoction of leathery muscle was throbbing out heartbeats. I thought of the scroll of Phaeros, the ash of it in a pouch at my belt. It was imbued with a mysteria of its own. It was a simple poem, and yet it could summon the Rivata's avatar from nothingness into reality. What I needed to do was far less powerful.

*"What lies in the deepest reaches...of one's memory?"* I said, maybe to myself, maybe to the spider queen who gazed expectantly down at me. How could I remember something if I did not know it? Had I ever used them before? I knew they existed, but what did they have to do with me? Maybe I had used them, and never knew it? I did, after all, summon my tower in defiance of space and time. Had I used the Mysteria then?

*"What lies in the furthest reaches...of the skies?"* What would happen if I didn't go through with it? Maybe James would see Delphine foiled on his own. Maybe the Hammerites would. Maybe some other factor I hadn't thought of. Why must the spider queen and her demonic consort be brought to bear on an unsuspecting world, long safe and sound from the presence of such horrible things?

*"What lies in the singular point...of one's soul?"* How was it that I had come here? What foolish errand led to this point? Who was I serving? What was I trying to do? What am I ever trying to do, anyway? What was the point of any of this? What did the Rivata want? Why did they create this monster? Why was it left behind? Why was I sent here now? How did I come to be standing in this room, speaking this monster back to life, pushed and prodded and pulled along every step of the way by unseen puppeteers, manipulating me just as the spider queen manipulated her silk avatar? How was it that they now spoke through me, pushing the Mysteria from my lips, words I did

not even know, a poem made from incantations that are not words at all, but sounds of power around which an entire language was derived, for the simple purpose of beings such as myself forced into the correct place and time to say them?

I felt a stern tugging at my back and then a great rush as the ground left my feet. I was completely disoriented for a moment as I was pulled up and back by, I could only assume, a litany of silk threads that had been attached to me without my knowing. I was up, clear off the platform, over the expanse, and into the 'arms' of several spiders which caught me with grace, but then held me tightly. I would not have tried to break free of their grasp anyway; I was far too concerned with the scene they had just pulled me away from.

Cth-knhu stirred from its slumber. That was it. That was all that needed to be done. Three simple sentences which came to my lips without me even, having to think about them. I never had any choice in the matter; I was a key placed into a lock, nothing more. Now all I could do was watch.

True to its fashion, it did not break free from the stone prison, but absorbed it. The creature simply began to move; slowly at first, stretching its joints one at a time. The thought struck me that it did not seem to be waking up at all, but rather acting out a well rehearsed moment that it had been eagerly anticipating.

Ivan was still where the spiders had left him, kneeling before the creature, completely immobilized by the silk, gazing upwards with barely conscious eyes. Cth-knhu made no indication that it was aware of Ivan at its feet, or that it simply did not care. I could not hear him at this distance, but I was certain that he was still chanting his Hammer-prayers. I knew that The Builder would not come down and save him. I hoped that he would know soon if all his prayers were in vain or not.

The head twisted around to aim at him. I could see now that at the center of the tendrils was a cluster of black reflective domes, which seemed to distort and swell as they took in its surroundings. Again, it did not seem disoriented or confused, but moved with very deliberate, knowing actions. It seemed to be focused completely on Ivan, and had not yet made any indication that it was aware of its thousands of spectators. I did not know if they felt emotions the way I could, or what kind of emotions they would be feeling, but it was hard to imagine any living, conscious thing not being struck into a state of dumbfounded pandemonium by the sight of the fully awakened Cth-knhu.

Yet, Ivan showed no fear. If his eyes were open, he would be unable to not see it. I did not want him to be lost in delirium. If he was going to die a proud, brave Hammerite, unflinching in the face of unspeakable horror, then he deserved to do so with his wits about him, and his silence and stillness his own choice. He was right in what he had said earlier about how the other Hammerite priests who I had become acquainted with were all unique examples. I could not imagine any of them, not even Brother Thurm, acting this way now. Yet, he acted as I fully expected a completely devout and pure of heart Hammerite would.

The creature drew itself back just for an instant before the head stalk lunged for Ivan in a smooth precise stroke. It parted down the middle along a seam that had been invisible among its rutted texture to claim him whole. It lifted him off the ground, the stalk now bulging with his body gorged into it, steams of the silk leaving a trail as it traveled upwards. As it undulated to crush his body I could see him within; no sign of a struggle, no cries as he was eaten alive. Bit by bit, with the sound of cracking bone, the bulge at the top of the stalk grew smaller and smaller as pieces of him were sent down the gullet one by one. I could not count to mark the passage of time, but it could not have taken more than a few seconds before he was completely gone.

"*You must act now,*" The queen said. I had almost forgotten she was even here with me.

I could no longer feel the draw of the mysteria forming words for me. I spoke anyway. "*Cth-knhu,*" I cried out as loud as I could muster, and then continued in the old tongue of the Rivata, not the evolved form I had picked up from the columns, "*Take the gifts of this powerful feast, for the powers of man are greater than any beast; thought, reason, speech. Your parent-race commands you!*"

The stalk flexed to orient itself towards me, and just as I knew it would, it began to change. The stalk shortened slightly and budged at the end. The reflective domes vanished, save two, which moved across its surface to form a line across the middle. The long seam which split the entire stalk in two sealed up, so that only the very end remained open. The surfaced flexed and bulged, broadening, growing more angular to the bottom with a protrusion in the center. A face, horrific in its semblance to humanity with its composition of such alien materials, now looked on towards me. Above the face a cranium inflated; far larger than proper for a man, with its surface pulsing and trembling. The brain of the beast was already a tremendous thing; but now the powers of human thought had been granted to it.

The face contorted briefly, and then with the lower edge finally resembling a jaw, it flexed and exuded a terrible noise which, for all its alien quality, was unmistakable for a single word. "*Why?*"

It was fitting though completely unexpected that the first thing the creature would do when finally gifted with the mind and speech of mankind was react in such a way. The spiders erupted into a chorus. It was jubilation, I could only conceive.

I watched as they all leapt from their various hiding places in droves, racing across the platform to the monster and dancing around it. Many skipped the dancing and simply went to it, crawling up its legs and spiraling around its body. The sound of them grew louder and louder with every passing moment, as more and more gushed out of every opening and joined the others on the platform. Soon there were so many I could barely see the stone at all, and Cth-knhu himself was bathed in them. He barely reacted at first, maybe not even noticing, but as their numbers doubled and tripled he began to move along with them, somehow attuned to the lower creature's celebration.

The Queen, beside me, had not moved. I looked to her avatar, thinking only; what now? I was not able to voice my mental paralysis, as the avatar dissolved just like she had done before. The Queen herself leapt out to join her kin, leaving me alone. I now watched from the empty cave as she took part in the celebration. Her children parted to make way for her, and Cth-knhu gave her his full attention as soon as she had landed. They encircled one another over and over. I could not tell if they were communicating, as there were no recognizable physical signs of it I could fathom and the chorus of spiders crying out was too loud to pick out the spider-voice of the queen. Still, I felt that if Cth-knhu spoke, even to the spiders, I would know it.

And yet I was sure that they were convening somehow. They had to be; wouldn't she want to tell him what had happened over all these years? If spiders felt the passage of time differently, and immortal spiders differently still, maybe it wouldn't seem as dramatic to her as it did to me.

I contemplated escape. But how? I had no idea where I was and no idea if it was even possible to get back the way I came after the ride here. I was most likely trapped. Besides, how could I leave now after releasing a demon from its sleep? I had much to atone for. And yet, somehow, I was glad that it had been done. Strangely, the world now seemed a bit more familiar now that something like Cth-knhu was back in it. The people of this place would know it a little more like I used to know it. It was a grim, sadistic satisfaction, like a secret joy at a friend falling upon a hardship you have had to deal with, only because they would now understand you just a little better.

It went on. For a time, I was distracted by a sight deep below the platform. It seemed that the activity of the spiders and Cth-knhu was upsetting the peace below; for fire elementals, awakened by trembling of the platform, were starting to mill about restlessly. Like the air elementals I had seen before, they sometimes reacted to the world in ways similar to how a living thing might. I tried to remember things James had told me about the elementals, wondering if I could use any of it to my advantage.

*"She has told me 'Why'."* The booming voice of Cth-knhu snapped me out of my contemplation. The voice sounded as if the whole world had been drawn into a string, and then plucked. It drowned out the chatter of the spiders and shook the room more than the dance of jubilee just had. In its wake they all became still, and silent, even the Queen, who now seemed small and unremarkable next to the great monster who addressed me. *"And of you, I have explained much. I know who you are."*

I felt it impossible to answer. I felt as if there were a wall to my back and my mouth somehow separated from my throat. How could it know who I am?

*"You are Kt-ith-rhk. Only one such as he could free me from this pagan magic. Tell me, oh great old one, how does this human form contain you?"*

It was wrong, all around. How could it be so sure, and be so wrong? Was it trying to trick me? No, of course not; it knew nothing of Phaeros's Scroll, and the pouch of ash I kept with me, for such things came into being only after centuries of its imprisonment. That is what the scroll contained, after all; the avatar of the Rivata, called Kt-ith-rhk. It knew that its presence was

near, and was confusing me with it. But, it was right—someone like me should never have been able to use the Mysteria to free him. Was Kt-ith-rhk somehow communicating with me through the circlet? The scroll was an imperfect prison, but such direct contact was possible with such a mysterious and powerful artifact on my brow. *"It has been many years since your imprisonment. Since then, our ways have advanced to allow this. I now walk among the people of this world, unseen."*

*"My Queen tells me I could **free** you from servitude to my old masters, and you could join us in a **trinity**. Why should I do this?"* He seemed to get louder with every word; but not a loudness that my ears could fathom, but more that my bones ached with the feel of it.

*"Because if this is so, I may aid you in the deposition of a tyrant."*

*"Scina. She is dead. I felt this even while imprisoned."*

If I had known from the start that he would mistake me, I would have had the upper hand, but I had presented myself timidly and now things were going in a poor direction and I did not see a way to recover. I needed to behave as if I were Cth-knhu's better. *"It was a kind gesture of your queen to offer me this freedom, but it is of little use to me right now. I have come here to free you that you might serve me in my battle. Scina's contemporary, Delphine, must be stopped."*

*"Stopped from doing what?"*

*"From restoring things to the old ways. From..."*

*"Her old ways are newer still than the ones you know. Maybe they are better."*

I didn't know what I was talking about, and it probably showed. *"In truth, I do not know what she is planning. I only know that my masters do not wish it to be so."* I also didn't know if anything I said right now would make a difference. What is a pebble in the path of an avalanche?

*"You are like all servants of the Rivata; confused. You do not know why anything you are asked to do should even be. This is why I so love my Queen Gin'Geen'Ginin. All is clear."*

He had a point. The two rules were designed to keep us...confused, after all.

*It resumed its speech. "You too can know an end to your confusion. But there is a price. You must give up everything. You must cast aside all they have given you. Their temples must be destroyed. Their servants must be hunted down, and killed."*

I saw this future before me; James, dead at my hands, my home, destroyed, and Em...what of Em? It was not true. She had become free of them without having to do anything like this monster described. It was a lie.

The demon continued. *"It will be so. Just as I did after the banishment, after Rivata-kind were defeated and cast from this world. I was not free until all others that had been left behind were destroyed. Then I was the last. But now this is no longer. There are many of you; more than you know. But they are merely foot soldiers. They will be nothing to sweep away."*

He would do it, too. After Delphine was contended with, the delegates

were next. If he could sense Kt-ith-rhk from the ash of the scroll, he would be able to track them down...and then what? Would he go away? I doubted that very much. I had to speak up, against my better judgment. *"If what you say is true; then how, can there be room in this world for us both?"*

*"We will settle this in time. Join us now, to make our victory over Scina complete. Delphine is weak. We can go to her now. Her end is at hand. The curse on my people—my Queen's people—will be broken."*

Right; change the subject when you get a question you don't want to answer. Of course, he would use my help to track down the other delegates, and then get rid of me. That budding brain it inherited from Ivan maybe was not as useful as it looked. It was still just a stupid monster. But that gave me hope; it had revealed itself twice now to be a simpleton. Possibly a third time was all I needed.

It had turned from me, and a commotion had once again stirred on the platform. Cth-knhu was regarding what I had previously believed to be a mechanism for generating a portal. Most of the spiders which had clung to its surface were now backing away.

*"Tell me, Cth-knhu, greatest of the constructs, what will you do with this world once the gods and goddesses are all slain, once every trace of your masters has been erased, and after you are unquestionably the most powerful thing in this realm?"*

He did not turn back to answer. *"Whatever my Queen wishes of me,"* he said as the two foremost legs lifted up to rest on top of the archway which was suspended off the ground. The ends of the legs had changed as well, and now resembled something more like hands. It pushed down. As tremendous and horrifying as the monster was, it was even more remarkable to see something that it could not do. It pushed, clearly straining against whatever it was that held the arch impossibly off the ground, unable to make it budge.

*"Queen, what is it you wish of him?"* Even before I spoke, several spiders had jumped to the opening where I had stood alone, and in their usual manner of webbing and leaping, carried me down to the platform just as they had before. I found myself face to face with the queen again.

*"I do not command the Father. His will is his own."* I could have sworn that the avatar had begun speaking before she was even fully formed.

*"And what if his will is not the best for your children?"*

*"Then he will no longer be Father. But why think of an event which will not happen?"*

*"What if once the Faery Queen is dead, and all of the other pagan gods and goddesses are dead, he turns on you next?"*

*"Why think of an event which will not happen? I am not a pagan goddess. Why would I be included?"*

*"But you are included! There is no such thing as a true pagan god or goddess; only beings of great power—no two even remotely alike. You cannot group them together and say, yes, this is they, and look at others and say, nay, these are not. How do you know that once the Faery Queen falls, the Spider Queen will not be next?"*

Of course, Cth-knhu could hear me, so I was not surprised when he said, *"You are a true puppet of your masters, Kt-ith-rhk. You breed confusion and doubt wherever you go."* As I looked to him, still fighting with that portal, he was beginning to seem less and less the all powerful demon, and more like a simply monstrous animal. How would it be for him to meet the true Kt-ith-rhk? Cth-knhu was impudent; he had no inkling. He was merely a construct; the Avatar of the Rivata could devour him whole. She seemed to ignore his comment. *"Why would he wish to bring war upon anyone other than the Faery Queen, the one who I first called to him to save us from?"*

*"Think of it,"* I said, pleading with her. *"What will happen once she falls? She is not the only pagan goddess. Won't the Woodsie Queen feel threatened, and strike out against the killers of her sister? And after her, what others would come? Do you expect them to stand by?"*

*"But you do not know our ways. This may be the ways of the man-beasts, but it is not ours."*

*"Queen, the pagans **are** man-beasts. The Faery Queen is not like you; her subjects include many of these pagans. They will wage war long after she is gone. And their fellow pagans, followers of every cult and creed known to the man-beasts...they will see only two demons to vanquish. Do you truly wish to have the entire world against you? You could win this war. Now that I have seen Cth-knhu with my own eyes, I have no doubt of this. So you will inherit a world where he must kill every other race and people who discovers you. You keep saying that it is freedom you crave. Is this any kind of freedom? To have to destroy everyone you meet, before they destroy you?"*

She did not answer. Instead, she, meaning her avatar, turned to look at Cth-knhu and the archway. I was not certain, but it seemed to actually be lower now than it was. Four of its eight legs were now on top of it, along with a great bulk of its weight, pushing downwards. Many of the spiders were attempting to help, using all fashion of silk lassos to tether the arch and pull it down, but compared to Cth-knhu's great strength I doubted that they were making any difference. I suspected that the portal was meant to be one way, operating by command from the other side, which would lower it into possession as part of its magical working. I was not sure if breaking the workings that lowered it down and forcing it into place would actually open the portal, but the monster was working at it with such steadfast determination that he clearly thought this was the method of choice. Finally, the queen's avatar turned back to me. *"Help him,"* she commanded.

*"How?"* I asked, as uncalculated and honest as I had ever been. In fact, I almost said it with a laugh.

*"The Father said you are Kt-ith-rhk, Avatar of Rivata itself. If this is so, you are even greater than he. Shed your human form at once and help him. I beg of you."*

I looked at her. The expression of pleadingly helplessness on her face seemed so sincere, if I ever had any doubt that this was her true body, and the spider was an unnatural prison, they were erased. For an instant, I longed to take Cth-knhu's place by her side, free her from this prison, help her defeat

the Faery Queen's legacy, and then...and then what? And then *nothing*. Just as I had been trying to explain to her, there was no future for her in this world as long as it remained this world. Could I choose between her and this world?

Of course I could. "*I will help,*" was all I said.

I did not approach the arch or Cth-knhu. There was another force at work in this chamber, one all but I seemed oblivious to. I went to the edge of the platform, and looked down. I could still see the elementals hovering below, irritated, but not to the point of aggression. I lifted the casting rod from its place at my side, and considered my cache of orbs carefully. I selected a blue one that was cool to the touch, and slid it into its place inside the rod. I had chosen, and the answer was *neither*. I chose *death*. Without taking another instant to consider what I was doing, I aimed it down over the ledge, and released the spell.

The feeling of this projectile was completely different from the others. A chill passed through me, and the rod seemed to stretch out along its axis rather than compress. The soft blue projectile flew downward with a high-pitched whine, and after a count of three, struck the surface of the lava with a violent plume of steam. Now the elementals were not merely irritated, but enraged. The ones already airborne began to spin about erratically, while still more, many, many more, broke the surface of the lava a joined the whirlwind. I wasn't finished. I loaded one of the familiar red orbs into the rod, leaving only two remaining. It was a good surplus; I would only need one more after this. Once loaded, I released it as quickly I could manage, before a very troubled, "*What are you doing?*" came from the Spider Queen behind me.

"*Helping,*" I said as the fireball exploded into the molten rock. It may have been just a droplet to the ocean of lava, but it gave a tremendous boost to the elementals, which were now spinning upwards like an inverted funnel cloud. James' lectures on the behavior of elementals were not wasted breath.

As I watched this, I felt a change of heart come over me like a splash of cold water to the face. Even if I had chosen death, it didn't mean I couldn't fight to the last breath. "*Get us out of here. Up! Up!*" I said as I turned to her, taking the avatar about the shoulders with my hands without even thinking. I was instantly repulsed as the figure dissolved in my grasp, but did not have time to stand over her remains before the Queen did as I had requested, gathering me up onto her back and leaping skyward, catching hold of the wall a moment later.

I twisted around to look at the scene below. The fire elementals spilled out around the edge of the platform as if it had been dropped into the lava itself. I was in awe of this display, reminded once again that the raw power of the elements themselves effortlessly dwarfed any rivals, no matter how ancient or sinister. They surged mindlessly in a spiral motion, sweeping across the surface and catching every spider in their path in their fiery embrace. Many of them leapt away just as the queen had done, but most were not fast enough. Cth-knhu, still struggling over the portal, was caught in the middle.

The queen pushed me from her back and slammed my body against the

rocky wall, holding me in place with two of her legs under my arms. She quickly wove her avatar, which hung unnaturally in midair, just to say, "*What have you done?*" with an expression of rage.

I didn't answer, because I wasn't quite sure yet. Cth-knhu had given up on the arch, and was now reeling in pain and confusion over the sudden flood of fire all around him. Just as he had inherited a weakness to his own petrifying gaze from the gorgon Scina fed him, he was now just as vulnerable to fire as any human being after Ivan was his last meal. It was spinning around, flailing helplessly, but could do nothing to protect itself from the flames. The elementals, growing even angrier by the second with the monster's futile thrashes, were now beginning to hurl pieces of themselves at it, intensifying the inferno.

*"They're killing him!"* She screamed.

I looked at her. *"This is the only way."*

This time the avatar did not dissolve like usual, but was pushed away by another leg of the queen. The third leg thrust against my chest, not stabbing me, but threatening to break my bones at any second. The avatar, still half formed, ragged, and nearly monstrous herself, demanded, *"It is not the only way. Be rid of them! Undo this!"*

My answer was to aim my casting rod over the avatar's shoulder at the head of the queen. *"You've seen what this can do."*

But both of our attentions were diverted by a new sound, louder than even Cth-knhu's booming voice—cracking stone. Cth-knhu was now on the opposite side of the platform from the arch, and in the most violent throws of agony as the elementals seemed to be taking out all of their aggression on him. The entire platform was now tipping in his direction, loosened from its place possibly by the fury of the unseen elementals beneath it. I watched in disbelief as the two pedestals, which Cth-knhu had fought to lower the arch onto, were now being raised up to meet the arch by the tipping of the entire platform. With a crack as loud as the initial one, contact was made, the platform stopped tipping, and a deep red, shimmering fog sprung up in the enclosure made by the arch and the pedestals. The way was open. This was not at all what I expected.

The queen's avatar turned back to look at me, seeming to be horribly conflicted. *"You have done as I asked, but I will not allow the Father to die for it."* Then the queen removed her leg from my chest only to have the avatar collide with me, exploding on impact into a shower of sticky silk that glued me to the wall. The queen leapt away, down to the platform.

I struggled and found that my bonds were hastily made and incomplete. I could draw my sword just enough to get a cutting edge. Then, second by second, I worked it entirely free, and myself as well, though I had to be careful to not break loose every bond, since there was only air beneath my feet. As I did this I watched her below, flying and leaping about the platform with balls of webbing which could not kill the elementals, but made them burn less hot, and slowed them considerably. She was also rushing around Cth-knhu to form a net around him, weaving this way and that, taking a few seconds to

fend off more elementals, and then a few more seconds to continue her work to save the monster. Other spiders were now, back on the platform, spinning layer after layer of webbing around the arch and the pedestals to make sure that they would not lose contact.

I had two options; find a corridor and run back the way I came to possibly face countless hostile spiders and potentially no way out; or, try to find a way down there and take my chances with the portal. Feeling unquestionably like an utter fool, I took hold of a few strands of silk which led from the walls to the platform, and began to make the short but harrowing trip down, all while the air was still filled with elementals and the platform still dominated by an angry king and queen and dozens of spiders.

I kept track of her progress. She was now working to create a web which spanned the entire chamber, but was high enough above the platform that the elementals did not venture. She worked with steadfast urgency but precision, taking no shortcuts, cutting no corners; making as perfect a web as she ever had before with the single-minded determination to save her king.

I was on the platform. It was tipped enough to make travel to the portal an uphill fight; but not so much as to make it a vertical one. I kept low, moving from one smoldering corpse to the next as I zigzagged across the battlefield. Far too close by was the flailing body of Cth-knhu, partially constrained by the net around him, but still very dangerous. An explosion of fire to one side pushed me away from my cover. An angry spider leapt for me, but was cut down the center with a quick stroke. I found another large spider corpse, still burning, and moved along the edge just as one of Cth-knhu's struggling legs came crashing down in front of me. I ducked away and made a dash forward, but was caught in the net of another spider. I cut myself free, but was again ensnared from the other direction. A fire elemental spun past, catching everything in its wake in flames, including the webs. I managed to break free of them before the fire took me too, but had to hit the floor and roll to put out the flames on my cloak.

But I was almost there. The floor here was cratered and glowing hot, as it was the location of the elementals' first attack. Almost crawling, and with hands and legs burning, I closed the gap between myself and the portal one foot at a time. Just when it seemed I could reach out and touch it, I felt the ground beneath me lurch, and the webbing which had intended to keep the arch glued to the pedestals stretched out. The shimmering red surface vanished. I twisted around to see the Queen, and several dozen other spiders, successfully hoisting Cth-knhu off the platform, and away from the angry elementals. It still struggled in the confines of the net, half of it on fire, half of it oozing thick, dark red blood, the head twisting about with an expression of utterly mindless agony on that still too human face.

I had intended to use the second shot on the queen in the corridor, though I did not want to, but now I was being given a second chance. It was a farther target than I was used to aiming for, but she was stationary, in the center of her web, pulling up on his many tethers one leg at a time. I released the orb into the air, sending it forth with a roar that harmonized perfectly with the

elementals.

She was hit. The explosion knocked her clear of her web, broke the tethers on Cth-knhu, and worse, sent two of her legs and many other pieces flying in every direction. I did not have a chance to decide if she was dead or not, because Cth-knhu struck the platform again with all of its weight, tipping my side of the platform back up to crash into the arch.

It sounded like it would split in two from the impact, but held fast. Knowing no other plan, I picked myself up, and lunged through its shimmering surface.

It was like walking through a doorway. Once on the other side, I saw that the destination wasn't *hidden* beneath a veil of red mists, but *was* a place veiled with red mists. The other side of the portal was still as adjacent as it had been a second ago, with the screams of Cth-knhu burrowing into the core of my brain. I pushed and crawled away from the portal, feeling that up wasn't still quite up and forward was a direction I wasn't familiar with, making every inch away from the portal a battle. I was quickly reminded of far too many nightmares where escape should have been trivial only that the ground did not seem to behave as it should to my fleeing legs. This wasn't the escape I had in mind.

Cth-knhu saw what I had done, and possibly fueled to a new state of rage by the attack on his queen, suddenly found the strength to push itself up and aim his abominable eyes at me. He then lowered his head, and began to scoop up and devour every spider between himself and the portal. As it ate, it began to change; slowly at first, but with every spider the changes grew more rapid. Its body hardened and neck shortened. The mockery of a human face vanished, and the eyes split into many. It worked its way closer and closer to the portal, much faster than I had done, and within seconds it was ready to push its head through and devour me. I expected at any moment for the platform to tip away, for the portal to vanish as the arch lost contact with the pedestals like it had for me, but it didn't seem to be happening. I remembered the way it impacted the arch, cracking it, and thought that maybe somehow it had become wedged in place.

Before I felt I had a surplus of orbs. This was not so at all. As the reality that the portal was not about to close dawned on me, I readied the final spell into the casting rod and took aim. It was far too close to me to keep myself out of the blast, but the alternative was even worse. I squeezed the mechanism.

The blast pushed me farther away from the portal than I had managed to go under my own power. It made my ears ring and all other sound go mute. My eyes stung worse than my flesh did from the searing heat, but I forced them back open to observe the effects on the monster.

The head was split into many pieces; its tar-like blood gushed in all directions as it writhed in agony; yet, it would not die. Once more I willed myself to get up, determined to orient myself to this strange place and get a grip on my movements. No spiders or elementals had come through yet, but I felt it only a matter of time before any of them decided to try it. There had to

be a way to close the gate!

I looked around frantically, begging my eyes to adjust to the strange light and let me see how the gate was operated on this side. I saw symbols on the ground before me, glowing faintly along with the perimeter of the gate. I begged the circler that if I was truly worth anything, if I wasn't to pull it from my head and toss it back through the gate, it would allow me to understand these glyphs and tell me how to close the portal.

It was no use. I couldn't rationalize anything. My head was spinning with fear and panic, and all I could do was hammer my palm senselessly at the glyphs. Then I noticed that one though I had never seen it before and certainly did not recognize it, was an obvious pictogram of two hands closing. I touched it, scratched at it; hammered it with my fist repeatedly, even shouting "Close! Close!" with all that remained of my strength.

The mutilated monster was far from ready to give up. Still it came for the portal, considering its destroyed head no more of an injury than I might have considered a broken arm, bearing down on me to—do what? I didn't even want to imagine. Undoubtedly it would still find some way to force me into its throat, and then repair itself.

As my time seemed to be running out, inspiration hit me. As far as the mechanism on this side knew, the gate was closed. Dizzy with this revelation, I spun around to the pictogram of the hands opening, and slammed my palm down onto it.

My view through the portal lurched, and if I didn't know better, the room I was in seemed to lurch with it. The arch, which had the pedestals rammed up under it and wedged there, was attempting to lower down. The force doing this was at least as strong as the one keeping the arch up, so the results were tremulous. I watched as Cth-knhu slid and tripped, being shaken violently by the sudden shift of the ground, blind and unable to see what was happening. Finally he began to fall away from me. It took me a second to realize what was happening. Somehow the lowering of the arch had broken the platform free of its foundations, and it was now tipping even farther than it had before, with the arch still wedged into place. With the portal filling my view and nowhere to escape, I may as well have been along for the ride.

The platform was now nearly vertical, with Cth-knhu somehow hanging on to the far edge, roaring out curses only it knew the meaning of. With a lurch that almost overcame me with vertigo, the platform broke completely free of its bonds, and began to fall down to the fiery pit below. Unable to break my gaze, I watched as the monster, now in freefall, made one last effort to crawl up the sheer length of the platform and into the portal. Scaling the length in seconds, the gory remains of its neck pushed through the arch, nearly engulfing me in its hot tar-like blood. But as the platform struck the molten rock below, its grasp on the arch was shaken, and with it bouncing this way and that, Cth-knhu fell back out of the portal, down the length of the platform, into the sea of lava.

It did not stop screaming. The portal did not close. I could almost make out what it was saying, in its distorted, panicked, headless amalgamation of

the spider language and the Rivata tongue, but I feared that the words were too horrible to grasp. It now quickly sank into the fiery liquid, the elementals dancing around it with glee, unconcerned with the portal, unconcerned about anything now. As Cth-knhu was engulfed in flame and sank inch by inch away, I realized with an audible cry of my own that when the portal itself went into the lava, the lava would come through it first, and I would share the monster's fate.

I could not believe that, mere minutes ago, I was ready to die. With a renewed urgency and an unquestionable determination to live, I forced myself to reorient; I knew which way was up, regardless of what the portal told me. I forced my legs to work; I knew they could, in spite of my exhaustion and wounds. I forced myself to be able to see; light was light, no matter how alien or otherworldly, I would be able to see. Slowly, slower than the sinking of the platform and the approach of the lava, I got up, and turned my back to the portal.

Once eye contact with it was broken, I felt sense return to me. There was very little light, but I could see steep steps going up and away from the portal. One by one I climbed. By the time I had gotten eight steps up, the lava now filled the portal. I was ten steps up, and the lava was starting to pour through. I was twenty steps up; the heat of it pushed me harder than I thought I could go and the lava now was almost to the top edge of the portal, just a few steps from my heels. I wasn't going to be able to make it much farther before it caught up.

Two more steps, my body feeling heavier than lead, my stomach ready to empty itself, and the light faded. The rumbling stopped. The heat dissipated. I looked over my shoulder. The lava had completely taken the portal, and filled the pit I was climbing out of to its entirety. The portal had been destroyed. Away from the superheated inferno on the other side, the lava cooled and was returning to stone. It would rise no more. I had escaped.

I fell to my face. The stairs still wound up ahead for some distance. I let out a long sigh of relief, and then another, and then laughed faintly, though I did not know why. Whatever it was that awaited me here, could wait a little longer. I passed out.