



GUARDED BY THE

SPIDER

CASSIE ALEXANDER

Guarded by the Spider

MONSTER SECURITY AGENCY

BOOK THREE

CASSIE ALEXANDER



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www.cassiealexander.com

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One

NIA'N'AN



I FELT the pattern of Royce's footsteps coming down the webbing in my hall long before I heard him knock on my apartment's door.

Not content with hammering his fist, he immediately shouted "Nine! Are you still alive?" right after.

It was a valid question. I'd left his employment at the Monster Security Agency recently because I knew my death was imminent—that'd been two weeks ago, and nothing had changed since.

He beat on the door again. "Don't make me call an exterminator!"

I stirred in the nest I'd created for myself to go to the Great Web in—I would be damned if those were last words I heard before I moved on.

I cursed in a language he wouldn't understand, extricated myself from the entirely comfortable tunnel I'd created for myself to die in, and reached for the translation device that allowed humans to understand my kind, mounting it against my ear slit before opening the door.

"Can't a spider die in peace?"

Royce was a big man by human standards, his appearance made slightly more ominous by his baldness, and the way he chose to dress, in crisp, shiny suits, no matter the occasion. But this apartment was created for others like me, who had

more monstrous proportions, and because of my eight legs and spider body I stood half his height higher than he did.

He was pleased to see me, which was usually a bad sign. People were frequently scared of my kind—even though Arachnaea were quite rare—but men like my former handler were far more dangerous on a day-to-day basis. “Not when there’s a ten million dollars on the line,” he said. “Can I come in?” he asked—and then began to barge around my foremost set of legs.

“Why, yes, certainly, I can’t wait to entertain you in my funeral parlor,” I said, backing up and turning around to follow him into my living room.

He didn’t have much room to stand—I’d decorated the entire place in the way of my people, with webbing covering every conceivable space: walls, floors, ceiling, in intricate patterns.

“Jesus, Nine.”

I made an irritated clicking sound at him—one the translator couldn’t translate. “I wasn’t really setting up for company. I hope you understand.”

“Yeah,” he said, turning back to me once he was finished judging my decor. “About that—how much longer do you think you have left?”

“Hmm. How about you tell me why you’re asking first?” I folded the human-looking arms of my torso across my chest.

“You’ve heard of Arcus Marlow?”

I squinted at him. “I live in an apartment. Not under a rock.” Arcus Marlow was one of the richest men on the planet. His business exploits frequently made the news, as did the rocket ships he felt compelled to shoot into space periodically.

Royce made a show of looking around. “Yeah, well—what you haven’t heard is that his baby girl’s been kidnapped.”

I tilted my head, considering what response would most irritate Royce. “He must be at least sixty human years. He still breeds?”

He made a face. “It’s a metaphor—she’s twenty-five.”

“So she is not little, is what you are saying?” I went on, pretending to be deliberately obtuse.

“Nine—”

“All humans are little to me, you see,” I went on, from my greater height. “So I am just checking.”

Royce finally realized I was pulling one of his mere two legs. “Fuck you,” he said, with a snort. He looked around my apartment again. “Do you have a human-sized chair anywhere in here?”

I disturbed some of my lacy webwork for his comfort. He sat down to level with me, and I did him the kindness of tucking all my legs in beside myself, setting my abdomen against the soft silks I had streamed my home with, so that I was sitting too.

Royce pulled out his phone and brought up a picture of a human woman to show me. She was standing behind electronic equipment, waving her arms up in the air.

She was beautiful—even though we were vastly different species, I recognized the characteristics that made her such. Her hair was shiny, indicating good health, and her body was visually proportional. She lacked fangs, but her teeth were even, which meant she would have a strong bite.

“Slone Marlow is a jet-setting international DJ—she goes from exotic location to exotic location,” Royce began.

“Playing the discordant music of your kind?”

He paused, and then shrugged. “Pretty much. She was kidnapped from one of these places, a small artificial island her father created, off of the Amalfi coast.”

“Was she unguarded at the time?”

“No. Her kidnappers plowed through her team, and about twenty concertgoers,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s been all over the news, something you’d know if you weren’t in hiding.”

“Dying,” I corrected him. But he was right, I hadn’t paid attention to anything else other than webbing my rooms for weeks.

“So far the story they’ve been telling people is that Sloane is too emotionally traumatized to appear in public, but she sends her fans her regards—in actuality, they’ve been getting ransom notes from the kidnappers, with increasingly erratic demands.”

“Is Arcus entertaining them?” I asked, and then I wondered about the length of the timeline.

“No—he refuses to pay until he knows who they are. I’ve talked to him personally, but he doesn’t want to set a precedent, or so he says.” Royce made a tight face that let me know what he thought of the wisdom of the apparently over-principled billionaire versus the ability of one small human woman to survive at the mercy of potentially many unknown kidnappers. “We’re helping him to work on that angle; he just hired us a day ago, but it’s been rough going.”

“So he’s just been sitting on his hands?” Royce wouldn’t need the translator to pick up on my mystified tone.

He shook his head strongly. “No. They’re two extraction teams down. And I’m talking full teams here, Nine. They were Shiranak’s.” Shiranak was the boss of some of our competitors; I had met him more than once before. He was massive, even for an orc, almost my same stature—and just as flamboyant as Royce was in his own way, choosing to wear cowboy hats, boots, and silver belt buckles the size of dinner plates. He ran full orc crews that might better be classified as mercenaries than bodyguards, depending on the local law enforcement’s definition at the time.

“That’s why the kidnappers are demanding more money. They don’t think Arcus is negotiating in good faith. And he doesn’t think they are, seeing as they’re not providing proof-of-life photos anymore.”

I groaned and shook my head. “A tragic situation, to be sure,” I granted. “But I don’t understand what any of this has to do with me.”

“I want to send you in. To get her.”

I shook my head gravely and put a fist to my chest. “I cannot be relied on. I could die at any moment—my time is near. I won’t let you put me in a position where my death could injure teammates.”

Royce licked his lips. “I . . . wasn’t going to send anyone else.” I blinked and reared back. “It’s almost a guaranteed suicide mission, Nine. And you could just be going in to bring back a corpse. But hey, I figured since you were already dying . . .”

His voice drifted as I understood his math. I hissed at him before continuing. “Here,” I said, using my arms to illustrate the surroundings. “The way I’m supposed to. Not in some firefight in a place that is not my own.”

“Ahh.” He leaned forward dramatically. “But they’re keeping her inside the Threadstone Mountains. Isn’t that where you came from or something?”

The Threadstone were Arachnaea’s ancestral homeland. “Nice to know you listened, once upon a time.”

“I pay attention more often than you think,” he said with a wicked grin. “Some of Shiranak’s drones got some footage out—they were two days’ travel deep.”

“That means nothing. The Threadstone . . .” I began, but my voice drifted. I’d never been “home” personally, but I remembered all of my mother’s tales from her childhood, before she’d been abducted and brought to “civilization” several centuries ago, to spin silk for wealthy individuals. She’d always said the system of caves and caverns was massive, that you could spend your entire life walking or climbing underground and still not come out on the other side.

I had no idea if she was telling the truth, or if those were just stories meant to entertain me, as a child.

“So?” Royce prompted. “Is there any chance you might consider going back there to die? Isn’t it more magical or something?” I clicked at him again and he blew me off. “Look, you can’t blame a guy for hoping when ten million dollars are

on the line,” he said. “It’s not even the money, Nine. The money’s temporary. But having one of the richest men on the planet owe the Monster Security Agency? That shit’s worth a solid gold toilet.”

I looked him up and down. “You are but a fragile human. You couldn’t carry a solid gold toilet—why would you want one?”

He tried to read my face, his round eyes squinting. “I can’t tell whether or not you’re joking sometimes—it bugs me, no pun intended.”

“I *was* making a joke. And—none taken.”

That last part was a lie, however.

I’d lived in this city my entire life, after being raised by my mother until it was her turn to pass.

In all of that time, I’d never once fit in.

I had heard every bug joke and insect pun in existence—for some reason all the humans seemed to give my spider half more weight than the rest of me.

But perhaps this was my opportunity to do the same.

It felt fitting to go to Threadstone before I died—assuming I survived the journey.

And there was the slightest possibility that there were Arachnaea there still.

If there were ... maybe I could find a mate for me.

That was the whole reason I was dying. Lack of companionship. It didn’t matter what my human-appearing half thought—my spider body was starved for something that I had not managed to give it. And while I had met other Arachnaea in passing, it seemed none of them were appropriate for me.

I knew when I met the right mate I was supposed to know, which meant I hadn’t found them yet.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

“Probably to my detriment, but yes.”

“Good.” He took another look around at his surroundings. “I assumed you’d already said all your goodbyes, so I took the liberty of booking you passage from the helipad atop Arcus’s tower in the financial district in an hour. You don’t even need a go bag—everything, including a dossier of what we know about Shiranak’s orcs’ failed attempts—will be provided for you.” He stood and offered me his hand. “And I swear to you, Nine, if for some reason you die before you get there—they’ll bring back your body and we’ll put you in here for your interment.”

While Royce and I had had our differences—*he was entirely human, how could we not!*—he had always treated me fairly, so I believed him.

“I promise not to clip my thread before its time,” I said, taking his hand and shaking it.

Two

NIA'N'AN



I MADE sure to duck down beneath the whirring blades of the waiting Sikorsky. When I got myself inside and secured with my own webbings, a familiar pilot twisted back to give me headphones.

“Yo, Nine! I thought you were dead!”

I tapped the translator once my headphones were on. “Nice to see you too, Ellum.”

Ellum was a minotaur I’d gone on several missions with in the past. He’d sawed off his horns to make it easier for him to function in crowded situations like the helicopter’s cabin, but he’d been known to screw attachments like tactical lights or communication gear into them instead—or mistletoe, which he would then use to hassle his wife for kisses endlessly, at their annual Christmas parties.

“For reals, though,” he went on, as the helicopter began to take off. “What happened?”

I reached forward to open the bag at my feet, which Royce had left for me. On top was a tablet, which I knew would hold all the information Royce could give me.

He wanted me to succeed—but he wasn’t willing to risk the rest of my old crew on it, which was something I appreciated.

“It’s complicated,” I told Ellum, as I began thumbing through screens full of data on the mysterious Sloane Marlow.

All of the information on her had clearly been filtered through her father's PR team. I knew because there wasn't a single useful item in it. Knowing her height and weight were useless to me. I didn't care that she had three Russian Toy dogs named Mercy, Love, and Fire, respectively. I didn't need to know that she was an "ambassador" for her father's many humanitarian endeavors.

Those were all stupid things designed—theoretically—to make me care about rescuing her, versus giving me the information I actually needed to know.

Could Sloane physically withstand two weeks underground? While she was fiercely posed in several of the photos, she was also wearing outfits that barely covered her sexual attributes, making it clear she was fully human, and had no intrinsic armor of any kind. Her body did not appear to have a high enough fat content to sustain herself with for long. Were they feeding her? Giving her enough water to drink? I tucked the tablet under my arm and went through the rest of the bag Royce had provided. He'd put in high-energy fluids and provisions for me—although I'd stopped eating two weeks ago, once I'd accepted my fate—but would her stomach be able to take them, when and if I found her?

And then, emotionally—not everyone was suited to live in the dark. There was a good chance that the terrorists that had captured her had placed her into a pit and thrown away the key. I'd seen more than one human lose their mind in psychologically difficult situations before—and also some few monsters. Nothing in the dossier made me think she was equipped to handle it, on top of the trauma of her own kidnapping.

Last but by no means least, I needed to factor in whatever her kidnapers had been doing to her in the meantime. She might be broken when I found her. Even though I suspected she had not earned her place in human society as fully as some others had, no one deserved torture.

The kidnapers first few communications with Arcus had featured grainy photos of her, that'd been stripped of all their geolocation data.

Arcus's men had been able to hack these back to where they originated from, however, with the almost-infinite amount of money he had at his disposal, and that was when Shiranak had come in.

Shiranak's orcs ran a tight game, and they'd had bodycams and drones when they'd entered Threadstone. I watched the video of them maneuvering through the caverns for long enough to know they were competent, then fast forwarded until they were cornered, cut off from the surface by an explosion that created a cave in, and then got surely slaughtered on the far side. Only one drone—operated by someone outside of Threadstone—managed to get out in time.

But before it'd lifted away, it'd lingered, swooping back and forth in front of a fresh rock wall, recording staccato bursts of gunshots and the bellows of orcs shouting as they were all mowed down. Their next attempt was much the same, only this time the drone got footage of two of the bodies, prior to retreat.

“Crazy, right?” Ellum asked, having twisted back to read my face.

“Yes.” I had to admit it was disheartening. But they'd opted to take the first and second easiest entrances in, as a group no less. I knew they'd been using their drones for advance surveillance, probably with heat vision and sonar, but of course the unknown kidnappers were monitoring the most obvious paths into Threadstone . . . and probably the next twenty most obvious ones, too.

I closed the tablet. I would not be so foolish.

I'd spent the past two weeks marking the story of my people on my walls, as my mother had told it to me and her mother had told it to her. To everyone else it looked like a chaotic pattern, but to my kind it had deep meaning—it was a way for my spirit to find its way home.

And home was Threadstone.

I remembered all her stories of the place, and all of its creatures, all of the dangers and beauty it contained.

I thumbed through the rest of the information Royce had provided, and then closed the tablet. “How much longer will the flight be?” I asked Ellum.

“Twenty hours. We’ll refuel while flying, Arcus’s people already have it set up.”

“Wake me up in nineteen and a half hours, then,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest and leaning back to rest.

Ellum twisted in his seat to give me a grin, with the wide snout of his kind, showing broad flat teeth. “Do spiders snore?”

“You’ll have to tell me.”

As I was capable of working for days without sleep, I never did on missions, and I’d never had any overnight guests to my nest in my apartment. I had been tired, though, of late—it was one of the ways I knew my life was coming to its final thread.

“Goodnight, Ellum,” I said, taking both the translator and the headphones off.

Three

NIA'N'AN



I WOKE to the helicopter swinging wildly. I picked up the translator and headphones at once. “What the fuck, Ellum?” I complained.

“Little busy! Dodging rockets!” he shouted, as the helicopter took another swing.

“They have rocket launchers?” It was night out, but now that I was awake, I could see the faint light of the rockets’ propulsion systems as they shot past, plus feel the slight quake of change in the nearby atmosphere as they shot through it, much different than the continuous thrum of the Sikorsky’s blades.

“Yeah, we’re just lucky they’re not heat seeking, but—fuck!” Ellum twisted us in the sky again.

“Set me down.”

“What? No—we’re seventy miles out.”

“Set me down,” I repeated, cutting myself free from the walls with my rearmost pair of legs.

“You’re not the only one getting paid here, Nine—”

“I’ve met your children.” A suicide mission for me made sense, but I wasn’t taking Ellum down for this nebulous cause. “Get me over the tree line, or I’ll pry this door open and jump without you.”

“Royce’ll look at my flight logs—”

“So? Tell him I made the call. And it’s better this way—they clearly know I’m coming, but if you let me loose earlier, they won’t know where to expect me.”

“You want to move through unknown deep jungle terrain potentially full of hostiles in the dead of night?” Ellum asked—but then twitched the helicopter away from another incoming rocket. “Okay, okay,” he said, answering his own question, circling back and swooping lower. “Your satellite phone is in that bag, all right?” he shouted into his microphone. “If you call us, we’ll come get you!”

“Understood,” I said, shouldering the bag, and opening up the helicopter’s cargo door. It was nothing to attach a thick streamer of silk from all of my spinnerets to one of the Sikorsky’s many sturdy internal fasteners. “Remember—I weigh two tons!”

“Got you!” Ellum tilted the helicopter away from the side I was prepared to jump from. “If you make it out, you’d better come by on Christmas Eve!”

Him saying that made me pause.

I’d been so ready to die I couldn’t imagine a world where I could have a future.

If I did . . . “I will. But for now, goodbye, Ellum,” I said, took my headphones off to toss aside, grabbed hold of the translation device to keep it safe, and then leapt.

I HIT the end of my streamers like the world’s heaviest yo-yo—but the Sikorsky could take it. I needed to free it quickly, lest dropping me off keep it still for too long and turn it into a sitting duck. I spun my way further down quickly, looking for a safe place to drop after I severed the line. My all-black eyes were much better than any human’s, and I didn’t require the night vision assistance that many of them wore when we were on missions. I spotted a slight space between the trees, where maybe a lightning bolt had recently felled one, and others had not taken up its space. I aimed for that, and then let go.

I fell like a rock—but I could create a parachute out behind me. I fanned a sheet of silk, caught it, and then used it to slow

my fall, wondering if one of the rockets would now come for me in the night. The shell of my spider half was black with orange highlights—and my human half’s skin was dark and rough, with sturdy plates in places to protect me.

But the silk I spun was a milky-clear white. Individual threads were almost see-through, but I suspected with them aggregated into the parachute behind me, I appeared like a shooting star.

The second I felt safe dropping the rest of the way, I cut it loose and did so, catching myself on all eight legs in an empty clearing with a jolt and a bounce.

I was here now.

Home, or close enough.

My landing had disturbed the forest sounds around me, but only for a moment. Soon, one by one, local creatures restarted the comforting calls of their kinds. The air was thick with humidity, so much so I suspected the spiracles that lined my abdomen could pull the moisture out of it, and I could save all the fluids in my bag for the human.

There was tech in my gear that could map my way to Threadstone with immaculate precision, but right now—even though I didn’t recognize the stars overhead or the feel of the ground beneath my feet—I wanted to trust in luck.

I turned toward the way that felt the best and started walking.

Four

NIA'N'AN



I MADE my way through the foliage as quietly as I could.

I frightened unseen things ahead of me; I could hear them darting through the underbrush. Meanwhile, the eight sensitive feet hidden beneath my claws reported in all sorts of strange chemicals from the new land beneath me—the decomposition of leaves that had fallen, the acidity of crushed ants—and swarms of insects flew up to investigate if my sweat would taste good to them before I swatted them aside.

I kept dabbing the end of my abdomen down as I traveled, leaving one solitary trail of silk behind me, so that I could find my way back if I needed to, but something told me I wouldn't ever come this way again.

I was becoming more tired by the moment, even though I'd just had such a long sleep—but it felt like the sweet exhaustion one experienced after a great journey. A rest well deserved, after releasing something heavy at last.

I didn't want to betray Royce's confidence and not complete this mission, but I was thinking how glad I was I had made no strong promises to the man when the glint of a familiar eye-pattern inside a roll of leaves on a tree distracted me from thoughts of my own death.

I took the translator off and spoke in the language I knew my tiny-kin would understand, coaxing him out with the small amount of magic I possessed.

“Tell me of the future, tell me of the past: has anything strange moved through here?”

The spider emerged from the leaves of the tree he was hiding in. His leg-span was as wide as the edges of my palm, and unlike me, all of him was covered in fur. He began to pantomime for me, flinging his legs and abdomen up, rocking back and forth, mimicking the stomping of great creatures through the brush.

“Orcs?” I guessed.

The tiny-kin didn’t know. All big things were alike to him—except for me.

But then he spun his forelegs up into a tight bundle, like he was trussing something.

“And they carried food?” I asked—but realized it was more likely that the spider was remembering the kidnappers, carrying someone bound who did not want to be there.

Sloane.

I was on her path—although possibly too late to save her.

“I thank you for your kindness,” I said, in our common tongue, but then the spider began waving frantically, gesturing at me, then to himself, and back again. It took a moment longer for me to intuit what he wanted to know.

“I do not know if you will ever be big like me,” I said. “But I wish you luck on your journey.”

I TRAVELED the rest of the night and into the day, eventually finding trails that the terrorists must have taken. They hadn’t tried to hide them—their scent was gone already, but I could smell Shiranak’s many unfortunate orcs.

And by evening time, as the sun was setting set behind Threadstone, I knew I was getting close to having to choose my entry point. I could see innumerable caves entrances pocketing its sheer, daunting walls, like so many dark, half-lidded eyes.

That was half the problem with Threadstone, or so I’d been told—between so many groups hollowing it out over the years, plus the locally inclement weather eroding it away, there were thousands of potentially entirely separate cave entrances to

take. Some of them only led a mere ten feet into the rockface, but others might go all the way to the core, along perilous cliffs with steep and deadly drops. Periodically, ingenious men would get the urge to conquer the location, using whatever advances they'd created in climbing technology, but some part of the caves would always get the better of them. They'd perish because of a rock fall, a cave-river drowning, or by one of the treacherous monsters that were still rumored to live inside.

Like those of my own kind.

I stood in the growing shadows of the trees, trying to figure out which ascent would be most fruitful. I knew the orcs had taken the wider, lower entrances, twice, all the better to head in en masse, and I hadn't seen them ditch any crampons or climbing gear in either video from their body cams.

So I thought a different approach would be best. I used my hind legs to cover my warning colorations with dirt and to dull my shell so that I'd no longer be shiny, and waited for full night.

Once it was dark and moonless out, I made my way up to the wall and started climbing. Even though I was heavy, it was easy for me to manage with my claws. Millennia of erosion had left heavy grooves across the stone. I spotted myself in case I were to fall, so that thick web ropes would catch me.

And I realized the whole way as I traversed the cliff-face that I was waiting for *something*.

It felt like I was holding my breath, although that was nearly impossible for my kind—and I knew what I was yearning for: a reason to hope.

I was tired. I had moved so far beyond hunger food seemed to have no value to me anymore. I only needed the lightest lapping of dew to keep me hydrated.

Everything in me was shutting down, the same as I had known in my apartment, the same as I had warned Royce, and yet here I was, still trying to find a reason to go on.

No one would blame me if I did not accomplish this frankly foolish task, and if I died here, no one would know—my corpse would just be another body that the caves had claimed.

And yet ...

A cave I was near exhaled air with the changing of the temperatures as night got cooler and it brushed me like a kiss.

I closed my eyes, turning the moment into a full body experience, as sensitive little hairs at my joints and on my chest shivered, almost in anticipation.

I inhaled the breath of my true home . . . and for the first time in weeks—no, years—no, maybe my *entire life*—I felt alive.

Because I had scented ... something.

Something good.

Something *warm-food-joy-home-comfort-good*—and it made my slowing heart flutter in my chest.

I turned towards that particular cave's entrance and pulled myself inside, where a scent I could only describe as the essence of sheer belonging got stronger.

I was normally the calmest of any crew I worked with—I was both thorough and meticulous as befit my spider's half. I had meted out and also faced death with equanimity, innumerable times before.

But now, for the first time in my life, I was wracked with emotions.

There was another Arachnaea here.

One that *belonged* to me—and I to her.

I stood for a moment, torn between responsibilities. I needed to look for this Sloane-human for Royce, and the honor of the Monster Security Agency—but the need to chase my mate down was primal. The almost electricity-like tension currently running up and down my legs, the drive I had to grasp her, the sudden need I had to make her mine—the urges

were so strong I actually took a step back. I had never been in a mating lock before, and yet I knew what I would do when I found her with absolute certainty. My last pair would emerge and then—

I put a hand against the nearest stone wall and breathed deeply, hoping to cool myself, but each new breath was more intoxicating than the last.

I owed Royce for saving my life on more than one occasion, but I would no longer be able to live it if I did not track the source of this scent down. And seeing as I had no idea where inside Threadstone Sloane actually was, nor did anyone else outside of it for that matter, my conscience was relatively clear.

Plus, there was always the chance I could find *my* mate, create *our* bond, then finish the job.

For all *I* knew, my Arachnaea could be around the next corner.

I trusted in my ability to sense my surroundings in the dark and headed into the cave system, following her scent like a thread.

Five

NIA'N'AN



I TRAVELED for the better part of two days. I sank into ever darker tunnels, climbed on ceilings over frigid rivers, crawled up—*and down!*—sheer rock walls, scraping my carapace through tunnels barely wide enough to grant me passage, letting the strength of the scent tell me what path to take.

While I still felt the tiredness that'd clung to me in my apartment, I managed to shake it off. It always returned, like a dog asking for a ball to be thrown, but I gave it no mind, because freedom was nearly at hand.

And all the surrounding blackness let me imagine my perfect world with my perfect mate more clearly.

She would be beautiful, of course—her legs would be exceptionally even. I hoped her shell would have eye-catching splashes of color to get lost in: gray like the surface of the moon, blue like the summer sky, or perhaps a robust yellow, like the noontime sun.

She would be smart—she would have to be, to have survived in Threadstone alone all this time. My mother had never been clear on what reason our people had to leave Threadstone, but I knew they had not long after my mother had been captured. Any Arachnaea that had remained behind on its own would have to be exceptional.

And lastly, she would be eager—because surely she had been waiting to be mated for just as long as I had. Was she also in my position? Had she, too, almost given up hope?

Could she scent me, the same as I could scent her, and was she traveling to meet me just as fervently?

I hauled myself up into a fresh tunnel where her smell was impossibly strong.

She had to be near. I felt it, right through my shell. I crawled up onto the ceiling and kept moving forward, until I could spot a pinprick of true light.

I had to stop myself from thundering across the distance to it—I knew if I did, I'd blind myself after having been in the darkness so long, and I'd lose the element of surprise, which was a thing I knew I needed, because now the pure scent of my perfect mate was tainted with another smell—man sweat.

It made a sick amount of sense, because it was men who'd captured my mother centuries ago. And my mate being trapped was the only thing that would explain her not rushing to meet me the same as I was her.

She must require rescuing—I had to be prepared.

I rocked my fangs in and out, tasting the air around me as thoroughly as I could with my tongue, the spiracles that lined my abdomen that helped me breathe, and the chemical sensors that lined my feet.

There were seven different men ahead: each had a slightly different scent. All of them were rough—I knew they hadn't partaken of any baths in the icy waters of the caves.

I could taste panic and fear too, but not because of my presence; they didn't know about me yet.

I lowered my body and crept forward as cautiously as only one of my kind could, listen-feeling-breathing, intuiting the surroundings of the room ahead of me by the currents of wind moving around objects before I could even see them.

They were arguing inside a large, high-ceilinged cavern, where there were plenty of shadows for me to hide in. The area below was illuminated by lanterns, and it looked like they'd been bivouacked there for quite some time, with trash wrappers for rations scattered around sleeping bags, and one suspiciously empty cage.

The second I spotted that, I was driven to bloodlust.

They'd hurt her.

I knew it.

The claws on my feet tightened, and a shard of rock dropped free—I shot a line of silk after it to stop it from clattering to the ground.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” an older human with a beard was busily shouting at a red-headed man half his age.

“I didn't think she could get out!” the younger one shouted back, swinging his arms wide. “I mean, if we're trapped down here, I figured she'd be the same!”

“If I recall correctly, shouting's what got us into this mess,” said another, calmer man, putting himself between the two of them.

They didn't have equipment to reach the tunnel in the ceiling I'd used to get in. I scanned the edges of the cavern. There appeared to be a fresh rockfall blocking a tunnel—perhaps they'd trapped themselves down here?

Acid began to drip from the tips of my fangs.

Easier for me to kill, if so.

“I didn't think—” the younger red-head began to protest again.

“Yeah, you didn't,” said the older man.

“Well, she can't have gotten far,” said another man, inspecting a narrow gap in the rock—which was apparently where my *Arachnaea* had escaped through.

I worried my hands together at once. *Great Mother have mercy, if my mate should actually be that thin.*

What had they done to her?

It didn't matter—I set myself a firm line, and began to lower. If I dropped into their midst, I'd crush two, and then use the claws of my feet to sever the necks of a third and—

“I ought to shove your head through there, and make you fit, to go after her, Reg,” a different man complained.

“I’d like to see you try.”

“If she dies, we have nothing to show for this. Nothing!”

“Perhaps more importantly, if she dies—there’s no way he’s going to dig us out.”

I needed to know who they were speaking of. I would kill anyone involved with my mate’s torture. And then I heard an echoing cry that reverberated into my very soul.

The men standing below heard it too. “Fuck!” one of them shouted—and on that we were in agreement.

As much as I wanted to murder all of them, I knew my mate was in danger—I wheeled myself back up my main line and raced across the ceiling to exit through another tunnel.

I tore through the caves, following her scent, my shoulders and back getting nicked by jagged stone, until I reached a smaller cavern. It was full of bioluminescent fungus that illuminated a human woman being herded by a protective lasher with its barbed tail out. It didn’t want to hurt her, it was just protecting its nest, which I could see off to one side, but she was right to be frightened of it—it would sting her without thinking.

She was Sloane Marlow, I was certain, but where was my Arachnaea?

And then a sobering realization flowed through me—there was no Arachnaea.

The scent had been Sloane all along.

My jaw dropped, just as she looked up and realized I was there.

She shrieked again in fear, and bolted, leaping over both the lasher and its nest, racing blindly down a tunnel. I heard a snap and then another shriek and I rushed after her, pulling my gear off, looking for the translation unit I’d packed up days ago.

I found it as I caught up to her, but it didn't matter.

She was on the ground, passed out—her ankle had twisted in one of the many holes in the floor here and snapped her leg right above it. Bone hadn't broken through the skin, but it was bent badly.

I didn't know why she'd passed out. Perhaps she'd hit her head on her way down, or maybe the pain was too much—or it was because I had scared her.

The thought of that gave me pause as I put the translation device on. "Sloane?"

I'd never heard my voice quake the way it did as when I reached for her, to carefully pick her up, sending a searching hand over her head, making sure her thin human skull-shell was intact.

"Sloane?" I tried again.

The dimly glowing fungi illuminated the fact that her skin was covered in dirt, and her hair was dull. She was much thinner than she'd been in the photos her father had given Monster Security. She was cold, and now one of her legs was broken—because of me.

I wanted to beat my own chest for scaring her—and I wanted to go back and kill every man in the prior cavern—but I had to put aside all of my anger and shame for my actual priority.

Keeping her alive.

This human, that was somehow meant for me.

I set her on the ground again, as gently as I could. I knew the way that human-shells worked—I needed to straighten her leg out as soon as possible.

"I am so sorry, my love," I said, then held her upper leg as straight as I could, while yanking on her lower leg swiftly with my middle legs, feeling her bones grind as they snapped together. She cried out again softly, but her eyelids didn't flutter.

I sensed her with every piece of my body, and realized she was closer to death than I was.

I could not have met my mate only to have her die on me.

Not if there was anything I could possibly do to make it otherwise.

I trussed her injured limb tightly before picking her up again.

“I’ve got you. I will take care of you. You will be all right,” I told her, cradling her against my chest, so that she could share my heat as I moved us down the hall.

AS MUCH AS I wanted to go back and discover who the men who’d been hurting her were, so that I could destroy them utterly, I knew doing so wouldn’t be safe. I couldn’t take her out the way I’d come in—the trip would be too arduous, and crossing the cavern full of men would leave us too exposed. If we were spotted, I wouldn’t put it past them to use guns.

But I wasn’t sure which way out was best.

Or how it was that I was meant to bond with a human.

I kept my forehead bowed to the top of her head, walking mechanically, trusting in my body’s ability to sense everything around me via pressure changes, sensations, and the tiny hairs that spiraled my legs, while my nose filled with her scent.

How had this happened? How could it be?

And how would I explain it to her?

Because I did not think she felt as I did—and the thought that we might be at odds on this—*on anything!*—burned me.

There were more important things to take care of first.

I paused and let the spiracles on the sides of my abdomen take in great breaths, and then went in the direction they told me held water.

Half a day later, we were in another open cave on the edge of a cliff. There was a still pool in the center, its waters fed by

dripping down from stalactites above.

I had a feeling she was too weak to take the high-energy rations I'd saved for her, but if I watered them down, they might work. I lowered her with infinite care, placing her back against a smooth rock, and found the shell of an old gloamseeker that I could clean with a web and use as a bowl, and then I went through the rest of the contents of my bag for a lighter . . . only to find that one didn't exist.

I chittered to myself, and pulled out everything that was in the bag in irritation. Normally I always packed my own bags for missions, and this was why, so that nothing would ever be left out—and normally if someone else were to have packed one for me, I still would've taken the time to check it.

But I'd been so convinced of my own doom I hadn't bothered checking Royce's work, and now my mate was cold and starved.

I cursed at the walls, in words that not even the translation device could translate, and then thought quickly about what I else I could use. There were no other strikable objects here. The tablet held some charge, but was too solid state, the lantern was the kind you cranked, and too useful to lose.

The translation device, on the other hand . . .

I slipped it off my ear and thought about its wires and battery.

I knew I could make it spark. If I did, though, it would never work again.

I looked from the device to Sloane—and to her beautiful legs, one of which was now damaged, because of me.

I disassembled it at once and started spinning silk to burn.

THE BIOLUMINESCENT FUNGI was also flammable, so I scraped some off of the walls to keep the fire going once it'd started, and then I heated up water so it would be safe. I made a thin soup of the rations for her, and dribbled it into her mouth with utmost care, and she appeared to swallow it.

I wished that I could will her my shell. I had never imagined loving anything so fragile in my life. I was tormented by all the thoughts of things that might happen to her if I couldn't keep her safe.

My world, which had seemed so hollow and pointless less than a week ago, was now a blizzard of concern for the soft, shell-less creature in my arms.

I said comforting things to her that she would not be able to understand, praying that she might feel what I meant as I said them, and when I thought her small belly might be full, I began disrobing her to clean her off with the remnants of the heated water.

One of the men had given her one of their coats, which didn't fit her, and worse yet, smelled like him. I took this off of her and opened up its stuffing, to feed it to the fire. I knew few creatures were as sensitive as I was in the caves, but I didn't want my mate scented by anything else but me.

Beneath the coat, she was still in the clothing she'd been kidnapped in: a sheer top that was torn, which I took off of her with care, and a short skirt which I left on, because I knew humans had certain predilections where their mating anatomy was concerned. She wasn't wearing shoes.

The nails of her fingers and toes had once been painted pink. In my former life, I thought it so odd that humans would decorate their own shells. Now, seeing my mate's paint scraped by what I imagined were her prior attempts to escape—acid wanted to burst from my fangs so badly it was hard to hold it back.

It took hours to clean her, and when I was done, I spun her a new shirt, although I kept her old in my bag, in case it was her favorite. Then I scraped enough of the fungi off of the wall to keep the fire going for the next several hours and set myself behind her so that my bulk would radiate the heat of it back onto her.

Six

NIA'N'AN



I WASN'T SUPPOSED to fall asleep—although I did.

I woke up, startled, just as the fire was just about to go out. I quickly added more fungi to fuel it, and then had time to be horrified with myself.

I hadn't even set down any warning silks at our perimeter.

Anyone could've come in and taken her from me—or killed me, to get to her.

I had found my mate. I didn't understand why I was still plagued with deterioration. Was it too late? Or was consummation literally required for my survival?

I would do nothing to her without her consent, of course, but—I made sounds of frustration at my own failings as I prepared her another meal.

WE TRAVELED inside of Threadstone for three more days like that. I carried her and cleaned her, and her leg seemed to be healing—I had taken the liberty of encasing it with firmer webs, mixing them with enough of my saliva to make them into a hard protective shell around her ankle.

I kept her trussed to my chest, to keep her warm and for her own safekeeping, and so that I would know when she finally, hopefully woke—and when I felt her start to move at last I could have shouted with glee, were I not so afraid it would bring rocks down on the both of us.

Then her struggles became frantic.

“Let me out!”

She punched me in the chest, and then cursed.

I put her down as quickly as I could.

“Please stop, my love,” I told her—but there was no way for her to understand me, without the translator. My ears were as good as hers, and I could understand her tongue without it, but there was no way for my lipless mouth to make her words.

She ripped herself out of the webbing I’d carried her in, and started bolting away without even looking back—until she put weight on her bad foot. That made her cry out, but it didn’t stop her, and I would have admired her bravery more had she not been running straight toward a cliff.

I lassoed her with webs, which she kept trying to tear off, as I opened up my bag to find the lantern to prove myself to her.

I cranked it on, and she flung an arm up over her eyes, blinded from having been below the earth so long—but as her vision cleared to reveal me, I watched horror flood her expression again.

I felt her tremble in fear through the webs I had laced around her, and she jumped backwards, yelping in pain anew, moving closer to the cliff behind her.

Only my webs kept her from falling into the very deep cavern below, and a horrible thought dripped through the purity of my love for her like the slowest moving acid.

My mate would rather die than be with me.

All I wanted was to truss her up and keep her still, to pull her to my chest and hold her like I had been, feeling the comfort of her heartbeat next to mine.

But I knew if I moved wrong right now I would scare her, and frightened people did foolish things.

If she leapt over the edge and somehow my web severed—I could not even dare imagine how I would react.

Then her eyes caught my bag and the lantern—the lone hallmarks of civilization I possessed.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Did my father send you?”

It was a simple question, and I could have nodded, but I didn’t—I was too stunned in the moment to be talking to her, wondering if she could ever want me back.

And when I was mute for too long, she assumed that I was.

Seven

SLOANE



NO ONE CARRYING you in a sack could ever be good.

Being kidnapped was one thing.

Being mostly starved, another, once the men that'd kept me realized they needed to conserve rations after they'd accidentally destroyed the only access tunnel to their hideout cavern.

But waking up inside a web sack after my last memory was seeing some horrible spider-type creature was an entirely fresh level of hell.

“Oh my God!” I hissed, and started to fight. I was swinging like I was being carried, but that didn't make anything any better. “Let me out!”

Whoever was carrying me did just that. I felt myself gently set down and I clawed out of the bag I'd been held in and then ran away.

Pain shot up from above my right ankle and I yelped, but I didn't let it stop me—I had to get away. I didn't want to be trapped again.

Then I felt streamers of webbing, lassoing around me, like I was some runaway cow.

“Noooo!” I shouted. I heard my voice echo, echo, echo, like we were in a much bigger space than the darkness made it feel like, then a light flickered on.

It blinded me at first, but when I could see—it illuminated the same spider-thing that'd originally chased me.

I jumped backwards without thinking, like anyone might—which only made his webs grow tighter.

And then I spotted his bag.

Random-ass cave monsters didn't have military-style cargo bags.

My heart settled down a little bit from its new home in my throat. “Did my father send you?”

The creature looked confused for a moment.

But—not a creature—not literally.

Some kind of mercenary—one of my dad's men.

“Oh my God,” I said again, sagging.

He came cautiously closer, bringing the light with him, and gesturing that I should look back. I did so, slowly, and realized I was on the precipice of a drop so deep the light couldn't reach its bottom.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered, and heard a soft “Fuck, fuck, fuck” echo back. If I'd known I was that close to the edge, I would have peed myself. I fucking hated heights.

And no wonder the spider guy looked so freaked out—he couldn't earn a bounty on me if I was already dead.

As if to confirm this, he made a gesture with his hands, two half-circles that created a whole one.

He wanted me in one piece.

“Me too, my dude.” I went down to my knees and crawled to safety, then wiped a hand over my face.

I MEAN, I assumed my father would pay some small amount of money for my corpse, if only to know for sure I'd died and that he'd have to round up someone to surrogate another heir for him—perhaps a less disappointing one this time, someone less interested in music and fashion, and more

interested in science—but I was still probably worth more slightly more alive.

Even if my dad didn't make it feel like that, most times.

“Fuck,” I said again, moving on the ground to lie on it like I was about to make a snow angel.

Cave angel?

I didn't know.

Where the hell was I?

The spider-dude leaned over me to look down, probably worried about my sanity.

Join the club, mister.

The lantern he'd produced gave us a weak half dome of light, which showed the rock ground around me, him, in all his frightening-ass glory—all his eight spider legs and black shell with little orange flecks on it—and not much else.

Just cavernous dark all around.

I sat up slowly, getting my bearings, as much as I could—and then I picked up a handful of dirt from the cave floor and threw it at him. “Why did it take you so long? Where the fuck were you?”

He looked wounded at that, and drew back, as if I'd thrown something much heavier.

Then I remembered he couldn't understand me, and he probably thought I was acting like a weirdo.

I didn't care.

I guess I should've been glad my dad bothered to send anyone?

My kidnappers had been relatively distant, up until my father refused to pay.

Not once.

But twice.

Twice.

I knew it, because I heard them having conversations about it—it was impossible to not hear everything in that damn cavern we'd been in—and because afterwards each of them came up to shake my cage and yell at me like I *was* my father at different times.

Wondering why I wasn't worth anything to him.

Asking me pretty much the same things I asked myself most nights.

I curled into a ball on my side on the ground, same as I had when I was caged, angry tears leaking out of my tightly closed eyes.

And when I opened them again, the spider-dude had quietly crept up and lowered himself to be on the ground in front of me. His face was scary, he had fangs, he didn't really have lips or ears, and his two eyes were all black, but somehow I sensed his concern.

“Just go away,” I told him.

Like I could somehow figure out where the hell I was on my own, in the dark, no less.

Then he proffered his hand out, showing me an electronic something-or-other on his broad palm.

While I didn't understand, he had my attention. When he mimed putting it on, I realized what it was. “Your translator—broken?” I put my fists together and snapped something pretend in two.

He nodded at that.

“Well. Then I hope you're good at charades,” I said and moved to sit up.

Eight

SLOANE



I STOPPED before trying to stand. He'd wrapped my lower leg and ankle up in something like a cast, but I hadn't done myself any favors by trying to run on it earlier.

It didn't matter, though—because he didn't want to go anywhere. He opened up his bag and starting bringing out supplies like we were about to have a picnic.

“Seriously?” I asked him, as he offered me a packet that looked like a Go-Gurt, but instead held bittersweet tasting goo. “Shouldn't we be eating this on the road?”

I assumed my dad would want me returned as fast as possible . . . but what if this giant-spider-dude was a kidnapper too?

And then I noticed spider-dude wasn't eating *anything*.

What if that meant that it was poisoned? Or it was something that was going to knock me out, like ketamine?

In fact, a k-hole would seem to explain a lot of what had happened to me over the past few days . . .

I threw the half-full packet back at him, and he stared from it to me.

“I'm not hungry,” I said.

I guessed I was safer with him than without him, for the moment, but I had no idea how to judge his intentions towards me, or mine towards him, because I wasn't fully sane.

Let's be clear—I wasn't fully sane on most days.

That was an intentional kind of insanity, brought on by drinking, the high of spending absurd amounts of money, and party drugs.

But the past few days—and now, still, *goddammit*—had been on an entirely different level. I didn't even know what'd come over me.

Just an awkward, unwanted, *irrepressible* horniness.

Like when you were ovulating, and your body was all “Put a baby in me!” even though the entire rest of you knew that that would be an incredibly bad idea? So you slept with someone that was a bad decision and praised the powers of your birth control by the sober light of dawn?

Yeah.

Just like that.

I mean, I couldn't entirely complain. It was actually what'd given me the idea to lure one of the men over. It'd been a coin toss as to who'd have been dumb enough to open my cage—I picked the one closest to my age. All I'd had to do was pretend I was lonely, you know, like kidnapped girls you'd starved and yelled at often were, and he was stupid enough to believe it and opened things right on up.

After that I'd just had to dodge him for long enough to squeeze through a narrow hole in the wall barely big enough to fit me, because it was better to die on my own terms than wait to see what came of their plan—or find out if I was gonna get horny enough to make *truly* bad decisions.

But I didn't need this spider-dude getting any weird ideas from me.

Even if he wasn't a kidnapper, even if he was the rescuer my cheap ass dad had finally sent, even if he was my knight in shining bug armor, fuck all of that.

I just wanted to do my own thing.

Always had, always would.

“Come on,” I said, like I was the boss of him, and I made his two-handed circle back in the air at him. I was in one piece

now, and I was going to stay that way. “Let’s go.”

ACTUALLY GETTING GOING WAS HARDER than I’d hoped. I couldn’t walk, which meant he had to carry me—which was why I’d been strung across his chest in my prior sack.

“I don’t know how I feel about that.” I raised my hands as he reached for me and he paused. He pointed to my cast. “Yes, I’m aware, duh. That still doesn’t mean I want you to carry me like a baby though. Or a bride. Jesus.”

His head twisted in consternation, and then he brought his abdomen beside me.

“Oh God,” I hissed.

Outside of here, spiders and I were not on the best of terms. When I was looking at his human business I could forget about the rest of him, but now that there were huge black shiny—*but also still somehow slightly hairy, what the fuck?*—legs poking around—

“Don’t step on me!” I said, scooting back on my butt.

He gave me such a look then.

“You’re like big!” I complained. “And stupid!” And now that I could see the parts of him that produced the silk from beneath the bottommost tip of his abdomen, I added, “And gross!”

He crossed his human arms and lowered himself down despite my protests—and I figured out what he wanted me to do.

Mount him.

Like he was a freaking horse.

I was just about to say “No way” when I realized no *other* way was feasible.

“God-fucking-*dammit*,” I muttered to myself, and then waddled back and forth some, trying to figure out how I was even going to stand.

Then he scooted one of his legs very much closer to me. “No—ugh!” I said, flinging an arm out to push it away, but I couldn’t; the thing was rooted like a tree.

“Ugh-ugh-ugh,” I whined, wiping my hands off, like they’d touched something disgusting.

But they really hadn’t, I mean, I’d dated furrer guys before—just none of them had had any bug shells.

“Ugh,” I complained again, but then reached up for his nearest somewhat horizontal joint, hauling myself up like I was doing a pull-up until I was mostly upright. “My high school gym teacher would be so proud,” I muttered, as I stood there and caught my breath. After that, I could see the central zone where all his spider legs connected.

My biology teacher might not be half so proud of me, because whatever test I’d ever learned spider anatomy on, I’d flunked it.

Horseback riding made sense, but this?

Then he tilted his body dramatically, indicating that I should hurry the fuck up already.

I cursed again, and then threw my arms to his center’s far side.

My fingers caught on the lip of his carapace—carapace! Yes! That was a good word!—and then I tried to haul myself over. When I couldn’t, he bent one of his legs to help me, shoving me up by my butt.

“Hey!” I shouted, but I was finally aboard. He packed up the rest of his bag in silence, and put it across his chest in front, where I had been, so that there was room at his back now for me, then dimmed the lantern and carried it with one hand. I felt rather like I was in the middle of one of those playground spiders, that had all the jungle-gym legs everywhere, and it was walking beneath me.

I realized then that I wasn’t cold anymore—I’d been terrifically cold the entire time I’d been in the cage. The one guy who was soft on me had given me a coat, but otherwise my captors had been assholes.

I didn't know where that coat was now, however—I was wearing a sweater of some sort. It'd been a pretty white, before I'd gone and rolled on the ground with it. Now it was marred by streaks of dirt.

Spider-silk, I assumed.

It was so comfortable I hadn't even realized it was on me.

And my hands were clean—which they hadn't been—ever since I'd put them in Taisha's blood when we'd all been running off the stage and I'd slipped and fallen—

Memories of watching my best friends, fans, and crew mates getting gunned down—because of me, because of my dad's stupid money—I clutched my hands at my stomach and whimpered. My spider instantly stopped, which was good, because a second later I was leaning over the edge of his shell, throwing up the goo he'd just fed me, until it splashed down by the claws at the end of his feet.

I stayed still for a moment, panting, wishing there was something that would erase the taste of acid from my tongue, and my memories from my mind.

“Take that, poison,” I said sarcastically, when the truth was if the spider-dude offered me ketamine—or anything else that might've helped me skip the next few days, months, or years of my life, knowing I'd gotten people killed just by virtue of being me—I would have taken it willingly.

Nine

NIA'N'AN



I HAD no idea what possessed me to lie to my mate in our first interaction.

It felt like a betrayal of something sacred . . . up until I realized she wanted nothing to do with me.

By then I was relieved the translation device was broken.

I would have told Sloane all sorts of lovesick things without a second thought. It was bad enough I'd made the mating gesture at her with my hands, of two becoming one—thank the Great Mother she did not know what I had meant, because if she had, I would've only disgusted her further.

And then?

I gave her food that made her sick.

Her stomach was not as strong as I thought it was.

What kind of useless mate was I?

All I could do was hope to get her out of Threadstone safely and apologize.

She was curled up into a ball again, in the center of my thorax. I found her weight there comforting—I liked it when she was against me.

I just wished she felt the same.

Ten

SLOANE



I WOKE up being rocked from side to side.

I didn't even remember falling asleep—but I had.

And the spider-dude hadn't eaten me. Congrats, Sloane, way to stay alive.

There was a weird sound around us, and I realized what it was.

“Water?”

The spider-dude lowered himself and tilted to one side. He turned the light of the lantern up again and swung it forward, so that I could see a river in front of us.

“Oh, fuck,” I said.

Last I recalled, spiders didn't float.

“That seems, like, super unsafe,” I said, but now that I was up, he shimmied harder. “Fine, fine, I know when I'm not wanted.”

I made my way down to the ground, using his legs for support. I realized he'd moved so that I could lean against a wall when I got there, and then he took off his bag, setting it beside me, giving it a pat with one hand, perhaps suggesting I should sit on it.

“I'm good,” I said, and then he sidled away at a startling speed.

Up until then I could've convinced myself the spider part of him wasn't scary—like, maybe it was just a thing that he had, like people had things, like my friend Bruno always had a parrot with him, like he was a fucking pirate. You put up with it because he was always holding, and you didn't ask questions or get your fingers too near its beak.

But watching spider-dude move in a spider-fashion frightened me, on some incredibly deep level, like my hindbrain was all, GTFO.

NOW.

Then he set down the lantern and spun up the wall opposite me, and climbed past the lantern light.

I stared into the darkness after him, suddenly deeply unhappy.

Had that motherfucker just gone and abandoned me?

“What the fuck!” I shouted after him, only to hear it echo.

Minutes passed—then it felt like a fucking century.

“Are you kidding me?” I said. I would've kicked the bag, only I was worried about hurting my foot.

Then, just as I got as pissed as pissed could be, he swung back into the tunnel.

Literally.

Swinging.

Like all eight legs and two arms and huge-ass body, right inside the entrance of this cave, where he landed like an eight-legged gymnast. I yelped and tried to jump back, and he looked incredibly disappointed with me again, as he did some work with his spinny bits, picked up the bag to shoulder again, and reached for me.

This time, being carried seemed non-optional.

“I'm really not okay with that,” I said. “Because I don't see a ladder. Or a bridge.”

He picked up the lantern and shoved it at me. I took it—and then he took me, picking me up despite my protests.

“I’ll kick you with this cast in your nuts!” I threatened—then I realized I didn’t even know if he *had* nuts, which was just the level of absurdity I needed to feel like I was cracking up again.

But before I could fight him further, he’d strung me up in front of him in a sack, the same as I’d wrestled out of earlier—only this time he left a gap for me to see out of, which was horrifying because the first thing we did was turn upside down.

“Oh, fuck!” I shouted, and let go of the lantern.

He sent a zip of silk out to snag it before it was lost, and fastened it to another part of his body, which let me see everything that he’d been up to without me.

He’d . . . made a suspension bridge of sorts. Like, half of one, across the ceiling, and we were traveling on it right now, like an upside-down train on a train track. Spray from the river below was trapped along all sorts of thinner silk lines, glimmering like diamonds, and I realized it was far wider than I could have even guessed; no wonder it’d taken him so long to create.

If I weren’t pissed at being manhandled—or *spiderhandled*—and afraid of heights, I might have even thought it was beautiful.

As it was though, the second we reached the far side, I shouted, “Set me down!”

I squirmed so he’d get the picture, and he did, cutting me out of the web sack slowly enough to let me lean on him for support with my one good leg.

“Okay, back to being a horsey,” I said, hobbling around him.

I heard him give a great sigh, but he tilted himself nonetheless.

Eleven

SLOANE



I FELL asleep on that weird bouncy-muscly between-his-legs part of him again—and again woke up to him rocking me.

“What is it?” I wriggled off of him slightly better this time, less afraid than I had been to use his legs for support, before moving to lean against a nearby wall. But by then he’d positioned the lantern so that I could realize our predicament.

We needed to go up, but up was complicated. There was a tunnel ahead of us, but it was angled, full of rocks, and sure to be rough going.

“Are you really going to fit through there?”

I wasn’t even sure that *I*’d fit through there, if I tried.

He’d managed the bridge thing, though. I supposed he’d been a spider-dude his whole life.

Just like I’d always been a somewhat useless rich girl.

I mean, I didn’t start off thinking that was going to be me, right? I wanted to be an astronaut. Or a vet. But then my dad only wanted me to get straight As and didn’t want to admit that sometimes reading *was* hard because he was a super-genius and I was dyslexic, and ever after that we were just pulling apart.

I’d always thought I was doing some good in the world though—at least people around me were having a good time, right?

Until the island ...

Spider-dude settled his hands on my shoulders and looked meaningfully at me, pulling my attention back to him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you need me in one whole piece. I got you,” I said, throwing his little circle gesture in the air. He made it back to me, much more deliberately, and I heaved a sigh. “Fine. What do you need me to do?”

He knelt down, very awkwardly, in front of me—and I figured things out.

This time he needed me to actually ride him like a horse, as opposed to pretending he was an eight-legged chariot.

“Uh, okay,” I said, hobbling over. *Good thing I took ballet, because Jesus*—I flung my right leg with its cast over his wide and muscular lower back, onto the far side of his torso, and then lumbered aboard.

My skirt was sky high—and I realized he hadn’t changed my clothes on that part of me. Maybe my dad threatened him with death if his hands came anywhere within the no-no zone.

I supposed it didn’t matter. I mean, he didn’t have parts, or if he did, there was probably no way they could talk to mine, sooooooooo—

“Oh, fuck, really?”

He was extruding silk and lashing me to his back.

“I promise not to move, my man,” I said, while clucking, but I realized the futility of fighting at once—plus, also his claws were like very-super-close. At least the silk wasn’t sticky? It seemed like the same stuff my shirt was made of—but it was tight. “Anyone every tell you you had a future in bondage gear?”

But by then he was through, and there was no moving.

Something I appreciated as he climbed up the wall, into the tunnel, and started moving almost vertically.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” I said, squeezing my ass cheeks to try to peep over his shoulder as he tilted so that we were crawling straight up.

Once we got there, it stopped being half so frightening. “Fuck,” I huffed—but he’d lashed me down so tightly I couldn’t help but feel safe.

And his eight legs kept our passage smooth. Every once in a while we would slow down, as he considered which path was best—based on what? *Who the fuck knew!*—but once he did he would lead us on with the same comfort and speed as a luxury sedan. I knew we were covering a decent amount of terrain.

“You’re like my driver, spider-dude. All you need is a coat, a tie, and a smart hat.”

He didn’t do or say anything to let me know if he heard me, or my tone, or anything else that might be meaningful between us, which was something of a blessing as the path we took began to change, diving back down.

The path was still rough, with rock outcroppings and boulders that he was having to sway back and forth to avoid, and now I was pressed to his back by my own gravity. My thighs were spread wide so that my knees were on either side of his torso and . . . fuuuuuuuuccckkkk.

I gritted my teeth and tried to push off of his back, so that I wouldn’t be grinding against him, because I was still fiercely horny—but nothing under my nipple line cared.

“Oh, come on,” I hissed, as he twisted slightly. There were ridges across his lower back, created from the protective plates that lined him, that probably helped to channel off water or spread his natural shiny wax, but right now they were riding up against me in good-bad ways.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck,” I muttered.

It didn’t seem like he had any idea what was happening, which was good, because I didn’t want to come on him like this. Being betrayed by my own body was not my idea of a good time. But my thoughts raced in the same rhythm as my body rocked back and forth, and needs I couldn’t control raced through me.

Come on, Sloane, are you really this desperate? Oh, God. I could fuck anyone I wanted in my real life, in my above world life!—Fuck—fuck—no—oh—of course up there, with all my money, I'd never know if they really loved me—oh—oh—oh—fuck!

I wriggled one of my hands free with massive effort and put it over my mouth so I could bite it just in time to keep myself quiet but nothing could stop my hips from beating against his lower back as I came, and came hard. The kind of orgasm that ripped itself from you in one low longing moan, or would have, if my hand weren't sealed against my mouth.

Oh—fuck. Oh—fuck.

What the fuck was happening to me?

If you'd ever told me in my former life I'd be masturbating on a spider, I would have laughed and asked for what you were smoking.

Goddamn.

I lay against him, panting. Was this what it was like to be sober? Pre-kidnapping, it'd been awhile, but I would've tried to go straight a lot earlier in my life if I'd known it would make me come this hard.

Another quake ran through me as his ridges pressed again.

Fuck.

For his part, spider-dude didn't let on a thing. He was still taking us along whatever path he'd decided was best for his strange spidery reasons. Maybe he thought I was just back here picking a wedgie. I didn't know, and it wasn't like I was going to bring it up.

Then he turned to take a different tunnel, and it was all I could do not to groan. I thudded my head into one of his shoulder plates. It didn't help—I'd have to bludgeon myself into passing out if I was going to stop. Because if I didn't get off of his back like this and quickly, he was going to make me come again—and again—whether I wanted to or not.

OH.

MY.
GOD.

Twelve

NIA'N'AN



I FELT Sloane wriggling around behind me for the better part of an hour.

I knew she hated being trapped, which was another reason she didn't want to be with me, I suspected, on a metaphorical level.

But if she hated me, could she at least have the decency to stop smelling good?

Her scent was all over me already, and it was only growing ever-more pungent in these narrow halls.

“Stop, please, stop—I can't take anymore!” she begged, just as we came to a flat space.

We seemed to be on old trails for some of the Nanuruck that still roamed the caves, but none of their scents were fresh, so it felt safe enough for now. I put the bag down, moved near a wall, and then cut her loose, so that she could slide off of me.

After that, I could turn to face her—and I found her flushed, covered in a sheen of sweat, and her eyes were bright.

Was she ill?

“My love? Are you okay?” I asked, only she couldn't understand me—and when I reached for her, she swatted my hands away.

“Leave me alone!” she demanded, and so I did, stepping back.

She held herself up against the wall with one hand and used the other to push her skirt down, and I saw that there was a sheen of moisture between her legs. I reached my hind most set of legs up at an extreme angle to touch myself where she'd been sitting, finding myself similarly damp.

The sensors in my feet went wild at the chemical composition of the fluid. It smell-tasted like heaven, but all I could worry about was that my mate was inexplicably leaking.

Was she *injured*?

I reached for her at once and she screamed, not in irritation, but in true fear. I made calming gestures, stepping back, repeatedly. My feet were still reporting in the sheer bliss of whatever she'd bathed me in, but it was clear she wanted no more interactions with me tonight. I made the circular mating gesture at her, though, because that did seem to soothe her—perhaps because it reminded her that I was a thinking creature, and not just whatever she assumed my spider half made me.

She spun a half-hearted circle back at me in return with one hand, like she was throwing a magical spell, but it was enough for me to stand down slightly. Something was wrong with her, but she was okay.

In fact, there was a chance she was doing better than I was.

I'd been on high alert ever since I'd entered Threadstone, and now my energy reserves were running low, although I still had absolutely no appetite. And we were apparently on the outskirts of Nanuruck territory—I remembered all of my mother's warnings about them, and her telling me of their bitter, bitter scent.

I would much rather be well rested before we traversed it.

So I set to making us a camp, creating a low fire for her comfort, and lining our perimeters with tripwire silk, so I would feel if anything moved.

We were low on safe water but I knew we would soon come across another source.

Our food rations were another thing. If she couldn't handle the high-energy packets from my mission bag, I would have to

hunt or forage to find her simpler things to eat.

Each detour would cost us more time, time I wouldn't mind spending with her . . . but . . . would she suffer more, for spending it with me?

I didn't know, and the thought that I was hurting her in any way killed me.

When I was done laying out tracks of silk to protect us, I returned to her side. I offered her water and food again, and she barely took either.

I contemplated taking her on a desperate rush to the surface, and damn the terrain, but worried if I did I'd burn through all my own resources before I managed to get her out—and seeing as I didn't know who had kidnapped her yet, I couldn't be certain the world above was any safer for her.

I truly did not know what the best course of action was.

The only thing I was certain of now was how cruel it felt that this entire tunnel was so strongly scented with what should have been her love for me, when she didn't hold any in her heart.

Thirteen

SLOANE



I GUESSED it was time to sleep for spider-dude. He positioned himself on the opposite side of me from the fire, crossed his arms, and leaned back with his eyes closed.

He seemed hurt by my behavior, but you try being forced to orgasm thirty times in a row—you'd be a little distraught after that too.

Especially because I had a feeling I knew what was happening now.

I was monster mad.

Like, for reals, not just saying it on Instagram, because I wanted to get railed by a bullman and drown in hot tasty cum.

I mean, who didn't?

But what was happening to me was the *actual* definition of the term.

I wanted—well, my body wanted—a monster.

This monster, apparently.

Which was possibly *the most* insane thing I'd ever done. And trust me, I had enough money to do a *lot* of dumb shit.

Plus also? If that happened? My dad would kill him. No doubt.

I'm not saying my father was an evil supervillain, but the man always got his way—which was another one of the

reasons why we fought so hard all the time, because he never wanted to let me do my own thing.

The island he'd created for my concert had been a crazy technological innovation—it was ocean-powered, self-sustaining, actually *good* for the environment; coral reefs were going to grow below it—and I'd thought it was maybe the first time he actually got me and wanted to support me, you know? Everything was on the verge of being nice between us, for like the first time ever . . . when everything switched to being really, truly fucking bad.

I'd never heard guns in person before, until that show. Nothing could've prepared me for how dangerous they sounded in real life. And then seeing my friends and fans get shot, and all of the screaming?

I'd spent the first week or so in the cage being catatonic. Occasionally my captors would shove a stick in to poke me to make sure I was still alive.

I just wished I could do so much differently. Like go back in time. Make different choices. Hire different security. Pick a different sperm donor. Live a different life.

And now—fucking *now*—I had clearly cracked.

That was why I was lusting after some insect-man—because I couldn't handle reality.

My body had decided that it was better to live in a hole in the dirt with a spider than it was to ever resurface again, and you know, come to think on it, it had a fucking point.

I WENT to sleep for a bit, then woke up. I had no idea how much time had passed, but spider-dude was still passed out nearby.

What wasn't asleep was my vagina.

Jesus H. Christ.

I was torn between moving and not moving—like, I didn't want spider-dude to catch me rubbing one out—but at the same time, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to function again until I did.

I had some self-respect. Right?

I sat up slowly, and that didn't wake him up.

He'd left the lantern on, thank god, and sitting the way I was now, I could crab walk, one good foot, hands, and ass away from him. If I could just get to the edge of the light—I didn't want to go out into the dark, but maybe if I could get away from him I could pretend to be going to the bathroom, not touching myself where he couldn't see.

I scooted a few more lengths away from him and sat down. I would knock one out, I would actually pee, and then I'd crawl back to the fire until—I heard a fearsome chittering—and it wasn't coming from behind me.

“Spider-dude!” I shouted, just as something raced up and shot a wad of something wet and sticky at my ankle.

Fourteen

SLOANE



I WAS BEING DRAGGED along the rocky surface of the ground in the dark.

“No!” I shouted, bending forward, trying to get whatever was holding me off. I clawed at my ankle, where something was wrapped around my cast—it was wet and fleshy, like a fucking tongue. “No-no-nooooo,” I cried out, sobbing, as the unseen thing in front of me snarled.

And then there was a rush of movement over me. I heard a slice and snick, and I was free, as hands grasped me.

Spider-dude!

I clung to his chest, and he raced us back to where we had come from, depositing me by the fire. I didn’t want him to let me go—and I realized what he was doing a second too late.

“Don’t!” I shouted, as he turned. “Don’t you dare leave me!”

But he didn’t listen, he thundered back down the way we’d come with frightening speed, and I heard the sounds of a fight.

All I could do was stare into the darkness after him.

Had I gotten spider-dude killed?

What would happen to me if I had?

There were squeals and chittering, and I didn’t know who was winning—then the noises stopped.

“Spider-dude!” I shouted down the hall at him. “Spider-dude, answer me!”

The sound he’d made for me more than once echoed back to me.

“Get back here right now!” I yelled, angry—because I’d been scared, and because, once again, everything had seemed to be my fault.

He didn’t come back at once—he tossed something horrific back first. It was a massive dark-green-beaked lizard-looking head, with eyes as big as my entire skull.

“Oh, fuck no,” I said, almost butt-scotting into the fire in my efforts to get away from the thing.

And then spider-dude emerged from the tunnel I’d been dragged down, leaning one arm against its wall. He looked tired, and there was a massive gash across his chest, where something had gouged his thick protective chest plates.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, in a quiet voice.

His eyes traveled over me in an instant, and he called me that thing he seemed to, before circling his hands in the air.

“My name is Sloane,” I corrected him, making the circle back at him.

He shook his head sorrowfully and told me what he thought I was again—and then he reached for me.

I shrank back at once, and then so did he—and I felt bad.

“I’m okay,” I told him. “You don’t have to touch me. Just trust me. I’m okay. I’d tell you if I wasn’t,” I said, building steam. “My friends tell me I talk a lot.”

It’s just that there weren’t many of them left alive now, was all.

I bit my lips together to stop from crying, and then decided to try to start building some bridges.

“What’s your name?” I asked him. I pointed to myself. “Sloane. I’m *Sloane*. Who are you?”

He pointed to himself and said something I had no hope of ever saying back—but I was going to try.

“Niynneean?” I tried. There was a lot of clicking at the end that I skipped.

He nodded in a pleased way at that—because he couldn’t smile, I realized—and then he walked in a careful arc around me, to where he’d tossed the other monster’s head.

He positioned it with his arms to be neck up, and then reached inside to what I could only assume were the other monster’s brains to pull some out and then offer them to me. It looked like a pile of pink goo in his hands, and all things considered, I would have preferred another Go-Gurt.

“Oh, no, spider-dude,” I said, butt-scoting in the exact opposite direction of whatever-the-fuck was now happening. “And we were getting along so good, too.”

He chittered at me, crooning the thing he liked to call me—probably “Sloane” in spider-ese—and then waved his hand in a dramatic fashion, before lifting it to his own mouth, miming that I should eat.

I noted, however, that he did not actually partake of monster brains himself.

“Uh, two things,” I said, shaking my head. “A, that’s fucking disgusting. B, how about no.”

He looked from the brains, to me, then stalked forward in a dramatic fashion.

I guessed our tender moment was over, and we were back to bounty-hunter and bounty.

“I don’t fucking think so!” I said angrily.

Five seconds after that I was lashed to the ground.

“This isn’t fair!” I shouted—but then I clamped my mouth shut, so he couldn’t shove monster brains in it. He was looming over me now. He’d just silked me with his webs faster than I could’ve moved even if my leg wasn’t broken, and he didn’t look like he was going to back down.

He crooned again and again to me, while I frowned and shook my head. He seemed infinitely sad at that, his shoulders falling, then he mimed eating it again, like he thought I didn't get the idea.

“Yeah?” I dared taunting. “If it's so good—you eat some, first!”

He blinked at that, appeared to pause to consider it—and then did so.

Watching him eat about made my eyes fall out of my head. Both of his jaws, upper, and lower, were capable of independent motion, and he had fangs framing a row of teeth, all of which you would think would get in the way, but didn't because he could apparently fold them in at will—and inside his mouth he had a long, thick, dark tongue. It unfurled out of his mouth, and I watched him eat the entire palmful of brains, before going back to get more to share with me.

“Fucking hell,” I cursed—but then knowing I wasn't going to get out of it, I closed my eyes to eat some out of his hand when he returned like I was some kind of lap dog.

I hoped my maid was remembering to give Mercy her medicated treats.

The texture was awful. Mushy. Like bananas, which I hated, but then, the flavor—I made a contented sound like I'd just had my first plate at Thanksgiving, which made spider-dude croon again in return.

“Yeah, okay, don't rub it in,” I said, lifting my head up and licking my lips, before struggling against the webs. “Can you let me go? I'd eat better with my own hands.”

SOMEHOW I MANAGED to ignore the fact that we were decanting dinner out of a monster skull. I was thirsty too—but the stuff we were eating was wet enough I knew it would help.

“You have to eat too,” I said when spider-dude started to pull away. I didn't want to be the only one with the memory of this moment seared into her eyeballs for forever. “Ninnyean. Eat.”

He twisted his head this way and that.

“Or otherwise I’m going to assume it’s poisonous, and you’re tricking me,” I said, even as I reached in for another handful. I offered it to him, first, in case he didn’t understand. “I can’t get out of here on my own, mister, so stop being vegan.”

He eyed me strangely, then grabbed the wrist of my hand that proffered food.

And that ... did bad things to me.

I’d managed to not be horny for a few minutes, what with the threat of imminent demise and forced feeding, but now—he lowered his head, with all of its very many frightening teeth down to eat the brains on my hand, and when there was no more to bite-up he licked my hand clean.

That. Tongue. Though.

Fuuuuuuck.

“Uh, good boy,” I said, when he was through, yanking my hand back to clean it on my spider-silk sweater. “Keep eating?”

I was full now, but I dearly needed him to be doing Something Else away from me so that I could get myself under control again.

Luckily, he seemed to need no further encouragement, and he finished the rest of the monster brains off.

He looked down the tunnel he’d fought in, and then back at our surroundings, and me, seemingly torn about whether or not we should move on. I finally had a full stomach and wasn’t thirsty.

“I feel safe here now if you do?” I said—and he gave me an imperious look.

It was pretty easy, because even sitting with his abdomen resting against the ground now like he was, he was still several feet higher than I was.

“Also I promise to behave. Just let me go pee, all right?” I scooted off to do so, and tore a bit of the silk he’d stretched along the ground earlier to wipe, then scooted back. “We can rest for a bit, if you need to.”

He crooned at me again—that was the only word for it—and then rose up once more on all his legs. My head craned back, wondering if he was going to pick me and the bag up again, when he arranged himself over me almost perfectly—and then lightly lashed me to the ground.

“What? Hey!” I protested, as he tilted back and forth, his hindlegs lacing over me quickly, while he looked down. From here I could see the action of his spinny-bits—they looked like living versions of the gyroscopes in my father’s lab. “Oh, *come on*, spider-dude,” I complained, and then decided to try a different tact. “Nyyyynnnnnnen,” I said, but it didn’t matter. I was quickly covered in a blanket of soft white fuzz. It didn’t stick to me—but every edge of it was pinned down by one of his spider feet, which meant I was not to be trusted, and there was to be no escaping.

I supposed I couldn’t blame him, after having recently been captured. And when he leaned forward again, I saw the marks from where our dinner monster had cut him.

I’d almost forgotten I’d gotten him hurt.

Of course I had.

That was what happened to people who knew me.

I turned on my side and tucked one arm up beneath my head for a pillow. “Okay, okay. I’ll be good,” I said, and tried to go back to sleep.

Fifteen

NIA'N'AN



MY MATE WAS a complicated little creature.

She'd fallen asleep earlier, but when she'd crawled off to relieve herself, she'd almost gotten captured by a Nanuruck—the ferocious, mindless, lizard-like creatures that roamed Threadstone's tunnels. Luckily, him dragging her off to be his meal had scraped over several of my tripwires, *and* I'd woken up in time.

It was dangerous to rest—but it was also dangerous not to rest—and fighting the Nanuruck had taken more of my strength than I'd cared to admit.

It was good that they were tasty, though, and safe for both Arachnaea and human.

But she wouldn't be convinced of it, until she saw me eat first.

So I did, because I had to, for her sake—and then seeing her comforted by the sight of my eating, I continued. Food didn't appetize me, but my stomach still worked, and I could no longer pretend I had enough resources to get us out of here alone. Eating wouldn't stave off my final death were I not adequately mated in time, but I would do anything if it would help me save her.

I would fight death itself, for her sake.

And then she'd tried to learn my name.

She was closer than most humans too, to saying it right.

She said it like she wasn't in a rush.

She said it like she might someday care for me.

I shook my head and closed my eyes, leaning back. Those thoughts were foolish, and I knew it. I didn't even know how her anatomy worked; I had no idea how I could even lock her, or if she would enjoy it besides—and I knew I could not do one single thing that this human did not wish.

Yes, I would force survival on her, food and water; those were non-negotiable.

But anything past that would require her avid consent.

Should I gain it, though . . . perhaps it was the strength of the food rushing through me, providing nourishment to the far corners of my body beneath my shell, but it was all too easy to imagine a moment in which she could accept both pieces of my last pair, and for us to swing in conjugal bliss, locked at last, mated forevermore.

Sixteen

SLOANE



THE PROBLEM with wearing a pinned-down spider blanket was that it was two way—I also felt it when my spider-dude moved.

Which he was doing, now.

I woke up, feeling bleary. He'd turned down the lantern but left it on to one side, so I saw his shadows on the wall first. I spent some time trying to decide if I was dreaming or not, as I saw a portion of his anatomy extend like a finger-puppet.

Then I blinked, woke up, and twisted my head.

Above me, from that gap between where his torso met his spider-bits, where there was a band of elastic-like tissue, a portion of that was expanding.

Make that *two* portions, expanding, curving out and up from the lowest part of his hips like a pair of devil's horns.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered, as my eyes got big, and he shifted again, his whole body swaying.

I was afraid I was witnessing the spider-dude version of morning wood.

Each of them seemed thick and sturdy—like the kind of dick you could bounce things off of, as hard as they were. They were smooth and dark colored, with no variation in girth from end to tip, a thing which I thought might be disappointing until I realized that each of them could move.

Independently.

My jaw fell open, watching both of them sweep through the air, thinking of feeling one—or both!—of them stirring inside of me.

I had to grit my teeth not to groan. My clit already felt like it was a tiny throbbing heart, and watching his dicks absolutely begging, just *begging* to get fucked, was agonizing.

I couldn't imagine waking him up. What would I do? "Hi, spider-dude Nyyyyanne. You don't understand me, and I don't know you, but I noticed you wanted to get it on? By any chance, have you heard of DP?"

But then, the only thing that could've successfully distracted me from my own needs happened—his dicks started touching each other.

Thank *fuck*, at least one of us was going to come here.

I gawked at them in utter fascination, the growing wet heat between my own legs ignored, as I watched him work his dicks against each other, rubbing and twisting, as his body slowly swayed. They seemed delicate at first, and then they seemed to move at odds with one another, more forcefully, twisting as best they were able, as the rest of him moved in sharper, staccato bursts, jerking back and forth.

Sticky fluids dripped from the tips of both of his dicks, threading down as delicately as his silk did, glimmering by the lantern light, and I couldn't believe it that I, Sloane Marlow, who—rather famously amongst my friends group—was adamantly against facials, was now hoping for a taste of spider-splodge.

At that, I couldn't manage it anymore. I wriggled my fingertips over to drum the right spot. I didn't even need to get them underneath my skirt; my clit was so ready to go off. Nyyyyanne shifted restlessly. I could tell he needed this, and fuck so did I, God, just hurry it up and *come* already—

His body swung forward again and again, and graceful arcs of cum shot from his body six, no, seven times, each slightly iridescent by the lantern light, until they splattered and were lost on the floor.

Then his dicks unclasped and he sagged. I had a moment to wonder if he might collapse all together and crush me, but I would be okay with that as long as my hand was still between my legs. I bit my lips together and came with a hiss, my orgasm belatedly chasing his, before quietly panting to catch my breath.

I watched his dicks shrink and . . . invert? . . . until they disappeared, and the cum was dry, and it was like nothing had ever happened, except for the fresh flood between my legs.

I hoped I'd have a small respite from my perpetual horniness. Long enough to sleep—because once we got going again, who knew when we'd rest next?

I sighed, trying to relax, but I couldn't stop thinking.

Who the hell had he been dreaming about?

And how many legs did she have?

Seventeen

NIA'N'AN



WHEN I WOKE NEXT, I knew that I'd soiled myself. I could scent it in the air.

I was up before Sloane was, though, thank goodness—she was still sleeping contentedly, beneath me.

The dream I'd had had seemed so vivid. It was of her, of course. She'd been receptive at last, and somehow things had worked between us in a dream-like fashion—and as I extricated myself from the web I'd set around her, I could taste the scent of my own leavings on the ground, finding I had released in real life exactly as I had in my dream—only in real life, my mate didn't want me.

I didn't know if I should wake her up.

What if she was having blissful dreams of mating with some other creature?

I would not want to disturb her from that, if so.

So I busied myself making new garments for her, and preparing materials for a fresh cast—I wanted to get inside her current one and see how her bones were healing.

I had more energy than I had prior, and that was because of her and her *eating*. I also went and picked up the hollowed-out head of the Nanuruck and hauled it away the way we'd come, so she wouldn't see it when she woke.

By the time she did wake, she seemed rested.

“Good morning, my love,” I told her, and pretended that she understood me.

“Good morning, Niiiiannnen,” she said back at me, and it made all of my fluids soar. She looked around, at the clothing I’d made for her, how I’d cleaned all of our surroundings—covering up any scent trails either of us might have left—and then looked to me. “We need to talk.”

I twisted my head one direction and then the other. “What do you mean?” I asked, knowing without the translation device she would hear it as gibberish.

She blew air through pursed lips and seemed to be considering her options before looking back at me. “I really want to fuck you.”

It took all of my will to remain still at that point. Odes could’ve been written in the Great Web about Nia’n’an and his epic personal strength.

I’d almost outed myself as understanding her the prior night when we were eating, but she hadn’t noticed—and now that she was going to tell me things like that, I didn’t dare.

“But I shouldn’t, because, like, none of that’s real. None of it. I don’t know if it’s Stockholm Syndrome, like if my pussy would’ve decided to fuck anyone that rescued me, or if I got hit in the head a few too many times when they were dragging my ass down here—or maybe it’s all the drugs that I did from the ages of sixteen to twenty-five?” she said, shifting uncomfortably in front of me. “All I know is that this is not a thing. Which—is not your fault, by any means. God,” she said, with some finality, before sighing. “You’re in for it now. Here’s me with the talking.”

I wished I could have told her that I longed to hear all her words.

“I just feel weird when I’m around you,” she said, pulling herself up—no, closer, to the bag, to where the end of our water was. I pulled out the bottle and handed it over to her quickly. “Thanks,” she said. “And I can’t tell if I like that,” she went on, and it took me a second to connect it to her prior

statement. “I don’t know if I like anything, really?” she said, and made a thoughtful frown. “I think maybe the actual problem is that I don’t like myself.”

It broke my heart to hear her say that, but in no way shape or form could I let on. All I could do was hold up the clean silken sweater I’d made for her to let it speak for me.

I wanted it to say: *I love you. I love you very much. I will love you enough that you never have to doubt yourself again.*

All you have to do is find me worthy.

She looked from the sweater to me. “Clothes, yay,” she said, then snorted. “But really, thanks,” she said, shucking off her current top. I averted my eyes, though she didn’t seem bashful. She took the new sweater and pulled it on. “And pants too? Who says shopping isn’t the same as therapy?”

I LET her relieve herself and then covered our tracks before she got back onto my thorax again. She’d left her tiny skirt behind, and I felt much better about her now that she was wearing things I had made for her. I wanted to provide her with everything she needed.

I just wish she needed me.

Not just physically, on a survival level—but the way I needed her, twined in mind and soul.

We traveled for half a day, and it was easy going, through smooth lava tunnels that had generous clearance and only slight variation in tilt. I let her down to relieve herself again, and once she’d gotten back on board we walked into a narrower cavern with a high ceiling.

She snapped a few times, listening to it echo, then started singing, and nothing in my former life could have prepared me for the beauty of her voice.

I wished she would sing for me for eternity.

And when she began adding in words, it somehow made the moment even more magical.

“In the heart, of the night, where secrets entwine—a dance in the shadows, a mystical sign.” She repeated the phrasing for a bit, until she liked its rhythm and flow, before continuing. “Her pulse syncs with the beats in a world so surreal, when the touch of a spider is all that she feels . . . is real? No, feels is better”

My all eight of my legs almost buckled when I realized she was singing about me. It was all I could do to continue to act normal, like I didn’t understand her, as she continued.

“In the glow of the moon, when our souls undress, in this dance, with love’s chance, in your web, I confess—”

I was distracted from her song by the sensation of movement beneath my feet, from both ahead and behind. I swept her off my back and webbed her and the bag to the wall immediately, as the first burrowing creature popped its head up from the ground.

I decapitated it without thinking. It was some sort of half-worm, half-snake creature, but I couldn’t see the rest of its body, which had fallen back inside its hole. I felt another one about to rise up, however. I danced sideways and handled it as well. Their heads were almost as strong as the stone walls on either side, as they must have had to be to get through the cave’s dirt floor, but their necks were soft at least—and then I felt a rumble beneath all eight of my feet, at the same time, akin to the sensation of a plane taking off.

“Oh no,” I said, bowing protectively in front of where I’d stashed Sloane. The creatures I’d harmed earlier hadn’t been coming for me—they’d been running from *that*—what I was sure was an Orack, a memorable creature my mother had told me of, that spent its life tunneling through Threadstone, eating anything it came across, and breaching when it thought it might find a fresh meal.

If it thought it was going to let it eat Sloane, it was gravely mistaken.

The dirt beneath my feet began to sift and I danced, staring down, trying to figure out where its mouth was going to erupt

from—I knew the only way to kill an Orack was from the inside out—as Sloane started screaming in fear behind me.

I saw a ten-foot-wide ring of teeth part the ground on my right-hand side. I jumped up, made myself as small as I could, and pounced for its center.

Four of my legs were occupied in keeping its mouth open, while the rest of me dealt as many damaging blows as I could to its softer interior. I gouged hunks out of its leathery throat with my foot-claws and threw them aside, before lunging in for more. The acrid scent of its breath competed with the rising hot stench of its blood as I damaged it, but that still didn't stop it from trying to eat me. We were locked in a battle to the death, and the thing was quite a bit larger than I was—it was going to take forever to die.

Then, I spotted opportunity. I webbed out for one of the prior burrower's decapitated heads and hauled it near, shoving it into the meat of the hinge where the Orack's mouth opened. Once it was clear the Orack couldn't close its jaws with the stone-like head wedged there, I let myself drop further inside its throat, to be closer to more important organs.

Killing something from the inside out was mucky, repulsive work, and I couldn't have claimed to have done it before, nor would I be interested in ever doing it again. I prided myself on my cleanliness, mostly because to touch something for me was also to potentially taste it, and I wondered how long it would be until I felt less disgusting—but eventually I was through.

The thing surrounding me stopped twitching, and I no longer got a sense of its life, even though many of the wounds I'd made were still oozing dark green blood.

I clambered out of the Orack's mouth and found Sloane still screaming.

“I am all right, my love,” I told her, wondering if she were screaming on my behalf. Her shrieks echoed up and down the narrow cavern we were in, and her throat sounded raw. “It is okay.” I tried to soothe her. “I am all right,” I swore, and then experienced a different fear. “Are *you* all right?”

Had something else hurt her, while I was distracted, and I'd left her trapped? I freed her from the wall to inspect her at once, but she seemed fine, except for the parts where the Orack's spattered blood had streaked her face and bled through my webs to stain her clothing. The entire wall I'd fastened her to had been stained with the creature's dark green blood spray.

I set her down carefully and made the circle gesture in front of her repeatedly, but she just kept screaming and shaking—and that was when I realized she wasn't registering me.

My poor lovely mate *was* hurt—but it was some place I could neither fix nor see.

Inside her skull-shell.

I picked her back up at once and clicked at her, making a sound as solid and steady as the beating of my own heart, and then I did something that I knew she would not like very much—I passed her down to my lower body and trussed her up as tight as I might have if she were prey.

The tenor and volume of her screams didn't change for a good long while, until she was halfway wrapped, and then she switched to sobbing inconsolably. I wound my silk webs around her, like they were holding her for me, until she was entirely trapped, curled up in the little ball she seemed to prefer to sleep in, pressed in on all directions, with only her head free.

And when I was done with that I passed her forward again so that I could hold her in my arms. Her pain had bottomed out into shallow moans, and I kept clicking at her as I used my tongue to lick the Orack's blood off of her face. I would make her new, clean, clothes again when she was ready.

Hours seemed to pass as I cradled her, carrying her through the tunnels, my body wrapped around hers protectively like another layer of shielding. I waited intensely for her to make even the slightest movement, to prove that she was going to be all right.

It didn't matter when she did.

I would take care of her until then, no matter what.

And eventually I realized from the calm rhythm of her breath that she had worn herself out and she was sleeping. I stopped clicking, and hoped that whatever she was dreaming of would ease her troubled mind.

Eighteen

SLOANE



I WAS DOING OKAY—AS okay as someone could be, once they'd been glued to a wall for their own safekeeping—while Niannen fought whatever the fuck that *thing* was until he'd jumped inside its throat.

My terror was absolutely justified, and then, as he broke vital things inside it, it started spraying ichor and—*and*—I was back *there* on stage, hearing shots, and watching people clutch their chests as their blood poured out.

I'd sung, and people had died; it was as simple as that.

And then I'd sung here, and now my spider-dude was in danger and once again I couldn't do *anything* but scream.

It'd started off as a warning, then segued into an embodiment of all my fear, then slid into being a metaphor for my anger and my helplessness and the problem that I would *never* be able to rewind time and get them back and it wasn't fair but life wasn't fair because fuck you, right?

And then I'd kept screaming because it was the only thing I could do. Like I'd compressed all the horror of that moment into some pocket of my soul and now that I'd tapped it, it all had to pour out, like a science fair volcano—I would have to scream until the screaming was through, and if it turned out there was no end to it, and I needed to scream for the whole rest of my life, that was what I would do.

THE NEXT THING I REMEMBERED, after waking up with a sore throat, was finding myself

shibari'd into a little knot.

Had Niannen needed to protect me from myself? Did he think I was going to run off of cliffs, or into walls?

The second I moved, he was there, setting me down on the ground and cutting me out of the thing. I picked it up when he was finished.

“Did you make me a ThunderShirt?” I asked him. I knew what those were, because I put them on my dogs on the Fourth of July. He just gave me one of his inscrutable looks, and I shrugged. “Whatever. I'm not going to question it.”

Then he handed me some freshly woven clothing—which was good because I really didn't want to look at any monster bloodstains. I changed, and he offered me the end of our water and some of the goo packets. I took both and finished off the water without thinking, before I realized that meant there was none left for him.

“I'm sorry,” I said, handing the bottle back. “I'm just a taker, Niannen. It's what I do.”

He appeared confused by this as well, before making one of his circles.

I made it back at him, half-heartedly. “Don't worry. I'm still here. You'll still get your money.”

He went entirely still, then—so still that I looked behind me, expecting to perhaps find something surprising and awful lurking there, but no.

He was just looking at me.

And then he reached forward, not with his hands, but with the smooth back of one of his spider-leg's claws, to rub it up and down my throat.

“What the fuck?” I asked him, without moving away—and then I realized what he was trying to get across. “Yeah, I know. Don't worry, I won't sing again.”

He didn't stop his strange motion—and his touch wasn't nearly as repulsive as it should have been.

“I mean it, sheesh,” I said, pushing his leg away—but he ignored me, brought it back, and then made some hissing sounds, like he was trying to sing himself but couldn’t.

“You’re like the little mermaid,” I muttered at him, before sighing, and looking around. “Shouldn’t we get on the road here? Don’t we have things to do?” I reached my hands up for him to help me up—and the fucker took a step back.

I blinked at him.

“Are you kidding me right now?”

He opened his jaw and made another hissing sound at me. I crabbed myself over to the nearest wall and used it to help get myself up—my quad opposite my broken leg was gonna be jacked by the time all this shit was through.

“Oh, you want me to make pretty sounds instead?” I asked him—and all he did was gesture to his own throat. “Fine,” I snarled, and then came up with something stupid to assuage him. “In your maze of threads, I’m the singing doll, here’s my performance at your crawling call, in your fucking eerie concert hall!”

I belted it out like I was pissed, because I was, but he came nearer when I was through.

“Motherfucker,” I cursed, as he lowered himself to let me climb aboard.

Nineteen

NIA'N'AN



SLOANE WAS angry and quiet for much of the next day, but after that, she started talking. Ostensibly to me—and sometimes she'd pretend that I was answering her, posing herself rhetorical questions—but her mind seemed slightly more intact than when she'd been prostrate and screaming.

I hung on every word.

She told me things without meaning to—places she'd been, and places she wanted to go back to. She seemed enamored with the beach, so I knew all this time in darkness had been rough on her. She missed her mother, who it seemed like had passed long ago. And her voice drifted now and then, telling me—or herself—a story about a friend, who I gathered had passed during her kidnapping.

I had known many people who had passed. Working with the Monster Security Agency was hazardously dangerous. My heart beat for hers.

And the whole time I wished she would begin singing again. Not just because I made her—but because when she sang she sounded happy, and I wanted that for her.

Three days passed. We'd found additional safe water sources, but we were rapidly running out of food. I wanted to save all the packets for her, but she was so upset when I didn't eat that she wouldn't eat without me. It was kind, but it meant that our food stores were being depleted twice as quickly as they should have been, and the time came that I knew I needed to go out to hunt.

Especially once she did start singing again.

Humming, really—but it was a start.

She was happy now, and I needed to feed her.

I looked around—I'd walked over a Nanuruck trail an hour ago. We were in a cavern that appeared to have no ceiling, but had very sheer walls. It was the perfect place to keep her safe. I set the bag down, twisted back, handed her the lantern, and then offered her my arms.

She pouted. “So it’s gonna be like that, is it?” she said—but her voice was teasing, and she let me pick her up regardless.

I crafted a sack for her quickly, and then took her straight up the wall.

“Oh, fuck, Niiianen!” she howled. “There’s other ways to tell me you don’t like my singing, you know!”

I hadn’t thought that she might put the probabilistic blame for her current situation on her voice—but without me to tell her otherwise, how would she know?

I mimed eating. “I only wish for you to be full, my love.” Hopefully she would understand when I returned with the head of another Nanuruck.

I streamed enough sticky silk against the rock wall it would’ve been able to easily hold me, much less a small human girl, and then merged the sack she was in with it for safekeeping. She’d be able to move, and I’d leave her the lantern.

I had better come back, though—there was no way for her to get down without me.

I RETURNED a few hours later with two Nanuruck heads, strung up in a bag. It was a shame the rest of their meat was too tough for human teeth to eat, but this would last us both for several days. I was proud of myself and wanted to crow to her—but then I saw the lantern light inside the webbing I’d left her in shifting and heard her making small whimpering noises.

I dropped the heads and raced up the wall in absolute silence.

If something had gotten into the sack with her—if something was hurting her—eating her alive—my imagination ran rampant with all the ways I could've lost my mate before we'd ever truly bonded.

Then I heard her make a satisfied sound and she moved so that the weave of the sack shifted rhythmically and released the redolent scent that I would follow into hell.

My last pair emerged at once—having been inaugurated the prior night in my dream, they absolutely knew what they wanted to do, and who they wanted to do it with.

“Oh my God, Sloane,” I heard her say, talking to herself again. “What’s that. Three? Four? I can’t believe it.” Then the sack she was in started twitching anew. “God—I’m already so sensitive—it’s not fair—just one more—yeah—oh, I needed this, yeah—”

My hands settled on my swollen last pair like I was about to steer myself.

Where?

Straight to her.

“Just—get it all out of your system before he gets back,” she told herself.

I let go of my last pair at once.

“Fuck—oh yeah—oh-my-God—oh-my-God—” and then another round of groans and shudders and hisses, and another wave of that intoxicating, indelible scent.

My priorly eager last pair inverted again.

She did want *a* mate.

She did want *to* mate.

But not with me.

Twenty

SLOANE



“**ARE** you sure you know where we’re going, Nia’n’an?”

He’d corrected me often enough after I made him say his name forty times for me the other night that I was pretty sure I was saying it right, at last.

And I thought we’d been down here for at least a week.

It did feel like we were going up on the whole—but for every few hours up, there were a few back down, like it was hard to gain elevation inside of here.

“I mean, I’m not super concerned? It’s not like I have a lot left to get back to,” I said, as my voice echoed into the distance. I’d learned to center myself carefully on his leg-having-part when that happened, because it usually meant we were by a cliff. Even if I couldn’t see the edge, I was still terribly afraid of heights.

I’d started singing again. I couldn’t help it. I needed something to do to pass the time, so I wouldn’t go insane, and because I couldn’t hold all my stupid feelings inside me otherwise.

I took a deep inhale and belted out, “In this web of stars, they both find their trance—in this electric night, a monster’s romance.”

Nia’n’an didn’t always let me sing—sometimes he made it clear that we’d cause rockfalls or that monsters bigger than the things he kept beheading would find us if I did.

And sometimes he wrapped me up to his chest, when we were on particularly narrow paths or there were dangers nearby, and I felt like I had to be so quiet I held my breath.

But no matter what situation we were in, I always, always, always felt safe.

In fact, it was him who wasn't safe around me—because the wild lust in my heart showed no signs of abating, which was becoming humiliating.

“I know you don't really want to be around me,” I told him, the next time we stopped to eat. I'd scooted off to handle my business, and when I came back, I'd just announced it. He looked at me strangely, and I realized he was weaving me a fresh pair of pants.

“I mean it,” I went on—more because I needed to convince myself than him. “You're only getting paid to be here.”

It was what I had to remind myself every time I wanted to jump him—or every time he webbed me on a wall somewhere so he could go cosplay the Grim Reaper, while I hammered out as many orgasms as I could before he returned. I had no idea how he hadn't caught me yet, thank God.

He was the help.

I knew it.

He knew it.

My vagina was the only part that was confused.

Too bad I couldn't pull it out and talk some sense into it.

But maybe if I talked out loud, I could talk some sense into the rest of me?

“I mean, you only want me because you don't know who I am. You just see the outside everyone else sees. The money, the name, my dad,” I said, then shrugged. “You don't really want *me*. No one does.”

I was a good singer, and I liked making songs, but I was under no delusions about my actual quality. I knew people were only telling me I was good at things because my father

paid them to—or because, through me, his money paid for the good stuff.

I just didn't know what else to do with my life. And me pretending to be a singer was what had gotten people killed.

I leaned back on his bag, which was now nearly empty and started working on my next verse again. “A whisper in the dark . . . a soul's resounding call—inside her spider's arms, the girl finds her all . . .” I hummed along trying to find the next words, and then I gave a harsh laugh. “What the fuck am I trying to do? Or prove? After this—no one's ever going to come to one of my shows again, spider-dude.”

He reached forward for my leg that had the cast on it. He carefully removed it every so often, checked on me beneath it, and then cased it back up again. I offered it over and he started to cut it off with the claws on his spider feet.

“I know that makes it sound like it's about me, but it's not, Nia'n'an. I mean, I'm sure by now my dad's given everyone who died's siblings a scholarship fund, but that's not going to bring them back now, is it? No. They died. Because of me. And—nothing I ever do or sing is ever going to fix that, you know?”

I watched him inspect my leg again, and wash it down with some of the water from the bottle and his silk. “I mean, of course you don't. Because you can't understand me—thank God. Otherwise you'd be hearing me tell you how much I want to fuck you and-or write spider ballads all the fucking-Christing time.” I crossed my arms and sank back with a frown, as he rose up to bring his abdomen to bear, so he could grab threads from it and wind my leg and foot back up, making me feel like a very off-brand Cinderella.

When he was done, I moved to take my foot back, but he wouldn't let me.

“It's feeling better,” I said, in an exasperated tone. “Don't you need to go out and play French Revolution for dinner?”

He crooned his name for me again and his hands, that had been chastely near my ankle, moved up to actually be on the

skin of my calf. They were warm—warmer than the spider part of him, for sure. His abdomen's shell was cold, and I was long past being frightened of his legs. I had the plate pattern of his back memorized by now, and I knew exactly how many scars the fights he went off and had to keep us fed were leaving on him.

“You get hurt by me, too. God.” Maybe he could sense my mood—like I sometimes thought I could sense his. “Don't even try to make me feel better, Nia'n'an. You can't. And—you shouldn't. I don't deserve it.”

He stared at me, put my leg down, and made the circle gesture at me.

“Sure, whatever, but in the grand scheme of things, this isn't going to cut it,” I said, making him his circle back.

Then he handed me the lantern and moved to pick me up.

I thought we'd been stopping for the night—or whatever passed for it inside Threadstone's caverns.

“What's happening? Are we in danger?” I struggled in his arms to look around. “I don't really want to go in the sack, Nia'n'an.” But he wasn't trying to web me anywhere for my own safety. “I—I don't understand.”

All I could tell was that it felt like we heading down—which meant we were losing ground. I didn't know why. I huffed a sigh, but relaxed into him.

“I really should be on your back,” I said. Because when he carried me on his chest like this, his arms were all warm and muscly and his hands felt so commanding. “I mean it,” I protested weakly, as my cheek pressed against his chest plate. I reached up to trace one of the gouges on it with my fingers. I didn't know why, but all of a sudden I wanted to cry, and I wasn't a crier.

I was more the type of girl that numbed her emotions down, because I was never allowed to have any.

But that didn't matter to my tears, which started leaking from my eyes. I tried to hide it from Nia'n'an, because I

suspected it'd only make him think I was crazy, which was embarrassing.

I mean, he probably knew all sorts of spider-ladies who were not second-hand murderers and who were very, very sane.

Then he shifted the way he was holding me, so that one strong arm braced my back and wrapped to hold both my knees, and took the other to press my head against him, as he bowed his head to mine and crooned to soothe me.

He was being nice to me, and somehow that only made the rest of my shame burn more brightly.

“Stop it, Nia’n’an,” I said, trying to push his head back, putting hands on either side of his fierce jaws, which didn’t scare me anymore. Then his eyes flickered past me, and he moved his hand so I couldn’t turn my head to see our new surroundings, although I knew we were in a larger space now; I could hear it with my ears. “Are we in danger?” I whispered as he slowly released me.

I quickly turned my head, held the lantern out, and gasped with surprise. “Oh. My. God.”

It was a medium-sized space, like a small concert-hall—but it was pierced through with gemstones and crystals in an incredible variety. Thin purple shards like wizard’s staffs might have, and pieces that looked like jagged frozen orange lightning. Smooth dark green mirrors pooled on the walls, like windows to other worlds.

He walked us through it, and all I could do was gawk at the beauty, our lantern light refracting all around. It was stunning, simply stunning, and no piece of artwork in the above world would ever capture its beauty, no matter how hard the artist tried.

And then, just when I thought things couldn’t get better—I saw steam rising.

From a hot pool.

“Nia’n’an!” I struggled, and he set me down, carefully giving me one of his strong arms to balance off of. I looked up

at him with ultimate betrayal. “Couldn’t we have come to the beautiful cavern full of gemstones and hot water first?” My voice rose in an arc, far more excited by the possibility of a bath than the impossible wealth surrounding me. I let go of him and got down to do my little three-limbed crab shuffle over to the edge of the pool. “Is it safe?” I asked him, miming drinking, bathing, splashing it over my whole entire body.

He laughed at that—it was a rare sound from him, but I liked when he made it—and then gestured with his hands that I should continue.

I squirmed out of my clothing immediately. I doubted any part of me held any interest for him, seeing how soft and squishy I was by comparison, and also half the world had seen me naked already—I’d had an asshole of an ex once, so there were plenty of my pictures out there on the internet. But he did come near and cut me out of my cast with his hands and his front pair of feet, which made it easier to get my couture spider silk pants off.

After that, I just rolled into the fucker. I kept my eyes closed in case there were any strange minerals in the water that might be bad for them, but as the heat soaked into my tired muscles and aching bones, I knew nothing in my life would ever feel as good as this bath again.

When I resurfaced, shaking my hair out like a dog, Nia’n’an was waiting for me at the edge—perhaps looking a bit anxious.

“Don’t worry,” I said, grabbing my own tits. “I float.” I laughed at myself, and then I rocked my head back, so I truly was, starfishing myself out on the water, remembering when I’d met Nia’n’an and I’d done the same thing on the ground after he’d stopped me from jumping off of a cliff.

My spider-dude seemed to have an unerring sense of what I needed, when I needed it, and this, I thought, opening up my eyes to look at the panoply of colors and beauty above me, only proved it.

Again.

I didn't even know how long I floated there. I didn't care. I could've stayed there forever and been quite happy.

Except ...

“The only thing that could make this moment any better would be weed,” I murmured, but I knew that was a lie.

I wanted sex.

I craved it.

With my entire being.

And—I was tired of fighting.

I rolled over onto my stomach in the water—my fingers were starting to prune, and Nia'n'an had been patiently waiting all this time.

Making me—I belatedly realized, as he held it up—a goddamned beach towel.

That sealed it.

I was going to fuck the bejesus out of him and his incredibly thoughtful spider ass.

I pulled myself up to sit at the smooth rock at the edge of the pool.

Twenty-One

NIA'N'AN



I'D ONLY BEEN MEANING to take Sloane someplace to bathe—I'd sensed the trace of humidity in the air with my spiracles, knew the water would be safe for her, and decided to track it down.

She'd been under the ground for too long. My beautiful mate was starting to crack. Blaming herself for things that she'd had no ability to control. She was spiraling, and I knew I needed to get her out of her own head as quickly as possible. Without the option of exposing her to sunlight or grass, a bath seemed the next best thing.

I had had no idea the cavern would be so lovely, however.

Not as lovely as she was, of course, but it was close.

Half an hour later, I was wondering if I would ever be able to make her leave.

She seemed so at peace in the water. Floating with her eyes closed, her hair flowing around her—I wished she would float like that with me in the air.

I still was not entirely sure how we would fit, although I'd seen her change her clothing now on more than one occasion—and it didn't matter besides. If I couldn't get her to see the worth in herself, who was perfect in every way she could be, how could I possibly get her to see any worth in me?

I began crafting her a towel to dry her off, and was almost finished with it when she finally sat up and made her way to the water's edge.

“Nia’n’an?” She made a question of my name, so I came nearer. “I want to be with you—do you want to be with me?”

I was used to her being far more crude with her thoughts around me, so I found her euphemisms concerning—and her question caught me absolutely off guard. I stepped back in surprise, and watched the emotions shift on her face by the lantern light.

“You,” she whispered, as her jaw dropped. “You can understand me!”

I froze.

Was there a point in denying it anymore?

I nodded slowly as her eyes got wide.

“Get your face down here!” she demanded.

I tentatively leaned forward, wondering if she was going to do what humans seemed to and give me a kiss—when she slapped me, hard.

I reared back and put a hand to where she’d struck me as she cursed and held her hand in her lap.

“You’re an asshole! You and your stupid hard face!” she shouted, shaking out her hand.

Mating seemed to no longer be on the table—if it ever was.

“I can’t believe you heard me all this time. Every awful thing I’ve said, every stupid song I’ve sung,” she said, dropping her head, with her shoulders shaking.

I’d brought her here because she was crying—and now I had gone and made her cry again.

“Please don’t, my love,” I begged her. *Not because of me.* I tried making her name sounds. “Ssssss-oon’n’n,” I said, and she looked up, sniffing.

“Were you trying to say my name just then?” she asked, and I nodded briskly. She wiped her eyes and squinted. “Then what’s that other thing you call me?”

“My love,” I said freely, knowing she would have no way of understanding. “My love now and forever, my one and only love.”

She leaned forward and took the towel from between my legs, used it to blot her face and torso, and sniffed again. Her eyes were still dark with my betrayal—but also with thought.

“You still stuck around, Nia’n’an. Even though I’m not a very good person. And I don’t think it’s all about my dad’s money—because if you hacked out even half of these and carried them up, you’d be set for life,” she said, briefly looking around. “I just want to get laid, Nia’n’an. But I don’t want you to feel like you have to, I can deal with it—I’ve been dealing with it, this whole time—which, you probably know. Christ, how *embarrassing*.”

I took several steps forward and clapped a palm across her mouth. I didn’t want her to talk herself out of things when I was so close to being *in*.

I felt her lips purse against my skin, kissing me, and a shudder ran through my entire body. Then she moved my hand away and reached for me.

I thought she wanted to be picked up, which I would gladly do—but instead she rested her tiny human fingers on the fissure between my spider and human-ish halves, pulling this area down to her level.

I went with the movement, unsure of everything, until I was kneeling above her at the water’s edge—and then her tongue came out and licked me.

Just the sight of it was exquisite—but then the sensation of her rubbing it against the softest part of my body—a sound I’d never made before ripped from my chest, and she moaned.

“You like that?” she asked, pulling me closer, so she could get at more of me, licking the band of flesh there in an eager stripe. “I know what you’ve got for me, Nia’n’an,” she said, as one of her hands dropped to land between her own legs. “And I want to see them.”

My last pair also wanted to see her. I tensed the muscles of my abdomen in the way I'd learned I needed to for them to come out, pumping them forward without thought. They emerged, soft at first, but the sight of them didn't frighten her, and so I kept pumping, making them so ripe and full it felt like they might separate from the rest of my body.

"Oh *God*," she whispered, but it was clear it was a good thing, as she took one of them in between her soft pink lips.

I almost stumbled forward into the pool. If my legs hadn't ended in claws, I would've tumbled in, taking both of us down.

But my mate was fearless, because of course she was. I wasn't sure what was more magical about the moment, watching her take any part of me, or the soft warm home I'd found inside her mouth—until she began stroking the free one with her palm. I made another unfamiliar sound of satisfaction, and shifted fractionally to move against her, without overwhelming her with my bulk. That made her purr, and I realized Sloane seemed to know exactly what to do to make me feel good already. I couldn't help but think that that was a sign, that our incipient mating would take.

Her scent rose up between us, fierce and strong, and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to withstand temptation much longer. I stepped back from her before I burst—she moaned in disappointment before I jettied myself above her shoulder, striping the surface of her bathing pool with my own equally hot cum.

She watched in amazement—and then picked up a fingerful that had fallen across her thigh, and I watched her put it in her mouth to suck on it.

I was still pumping my last pair full, on instinct.

If she kept doing things like that, they'd never retract again.

And her voice was husky when she spoke next. "Nia'n'an—I just really need for you to fuck me."

It felt like I had been preparing my entire life for just this moment. “Don’t worry, my love,” I promised her. “I will.”

Twenty-Two

SLOANE



SPIDER CUM tasted so much better than normal-dude cum. Like, I didn't know if it was my spider in particular, but I knew that once I got out of this cave, I was going to heartily endorse it for anyone who wanted to try it.

Wheaties—now, with spider cum!

It tasted so right it was almost healthy.

Oh God.

Never, ever, let Gwyneth Paltrow near any.

And when I realized Nia'n'an was still hard for me?

I just wanted him to *hurry*.

But after he'd called me that one name again, he'd made his circular gesture at me again in the air, then backed up and looked around, moving away from the water's edge.

I supposed getting banged by water was a hazard for him, but I didn't want him getting too far away from me; I needed him too badly.

I watched him crawl up onto the wall and start setting up what I first thought might be like a stage, because he looked like he was doing rigging.

Then I realized he was making a web.

For me.

For ... us.

And it seemed like he knew exactly what he was doing, as he swung back and forth, landing carefully among so many pretty, sharp, multi-colored shards, creating a network of the silks he extruded, creating three-quarters of a spiked crown between them, before he started filling in structural points.

And he stayed hard that whole time—I knew, because I was looking—so this, whatever it was, had to be important.

I wriggled onto the towel he'd made me, and dried myself off as best as I could, until he finished, and his web was just as beautiful as all the surrounding crystals. He lowered himself to the ground, and then he came for me, offering me his hand.

There wouldn't be any going back, after this.

It would be worse than when the nudes got out—this time I would always be that girl who fucked a spider.

But you know what?

I didn't care.

I took his hand, and used it to carefully pull myself up, without putting any weight on my still healing leg, and reached out for him.

Twenty-Three

NIA'N'AN



FOR THE FIRST time since I'd seen Sloane, fallen on the ground, I was scared.

I picked her up easily and carefully crawled out onto the mating web I'd made for us. In comparison to me, she seemed too fragile, and I'd already broken her the once—but she was just as eager for this as I was, if she was to be believed.

And it wasn't just her words—it was her whole body. She felt hot for me, and I knew it was more than just the heat of the pool's water—the scent that she'd carried with her this whole time now had a richness to it I'd never smelled before.

I set her safely on the web—I'd created it to be slightly sticky, and tacked it down at an angle so she wouldn't be in danger of sliding off—then I lowered myself. I needed to know where her mating smell came from.

“Oh?” she said, distracting me. “You're just going to go straight down there? Okay—no, I get it, I'm horny too.”

I blinked and paused. Were there other ways, she would want to “be” with me?

She took my hesitation in stride. “I'm guessing you don't know what to do with all this, huh?” she asked, lifting her breasts up and presenting them.

I did not.

But I was certainly willing to learn.

I moved so I could hold my torso horizontally above hers. “My love, show me.”

She gave me a soft smile—and some things needed no translation.

“I like it when I get touched here,” she said, covering one of her breasts with a hand. I did the same with her opposite breast, and then watched her watching me, giving a quiet sigh. “I like it when someone lifts them up and holds them, like they’re keeping them for me.”

I moved to do as I was told, cradling one of her breasts in each hand. They had a delightful heft to them, a beautiful tensility, like a perfectly strung web. I rubbed them with my hands, enjoying the soft, full way they felt, and how her maternal attributes seemed to pucker up at my attention.

“That’s nice, Nia’n’an,” she said, with a light purr. “You can be a little rougher if you want. They’re yours—for right now.”

I grabbed hold of her more firmly. I couldn’t help but keep engorging my last pair, cycling fluid in and out of them, keeping them hot and ready for her—but I was so glad she was taking the time to show me this—because it was definitely turning her on. I could smell it, and I knew that I would eventually get to the source of it, and finally be able to rub her scent all over me.

I drew one of my hands up and stroked her nipple between two fingers. She gasped at that, and it made her hips buck, the movement of which was translated from her, into the webbing she and through my feet to me. “Pull on them a little? Oh—yeah—I like that.”

If she liked it, I would do it again and again for her. I tugged both of them into peaks, listening to her soft whimpers and whines, and then had a sudden idea—I pulled silk forward quickly and lassoed their little tips, tying another strand of silk between them, so I could use that to pull on both of them at once.

She watched me do that and gasped when I pulled the string. “That seems a little unfair,” she complained, and I paused. “I mean—the fact that you can just create sex toys on the fly.” She gave a soft laugh. “Compared to you, Nia’n’an, I’m—”

I put a hand over her mouth again. “My love,” I finished her statement for her. “As you shall ever be.”

I felt her kiss my palm again and when I removed my hand, I found her smiling. She reached for my neck to bring me closer. “Let me taste you? I’m not scared.”

If she hadn’t latched onto my last pair so readily earlier I might have doubted that, but as it was . . .

I lowered my head so that she could wrap her arms around me, and I opened up my fearsome jaws, relaxing my tongue forward as she closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and let it in.

This was *kissing*.

I had seen it on a thousand TV shows before.

But I had never thought it would happen to me.

My tongue wound with hers—hers was smaller, but just as prehensile, and her lips and the movements she made with her head told me she wanted me to keep my tongue there.

She *wanted* me.

I shuddered with relief, and the web we were both on shuddered with me.

I didn’t scare her—not all the way, at least. Because she was pulling my torso closer, and making more noises now.

She sounded like prey—I knew she wanted me to attack.

I pulled up from her embrace, panting, drawing my fingertips against the line I’d drawn between her nipples, making her softly whine. “Nia’n’an,” she said, and it sounded like permission.

I crawled back down the web, and opened her legs, so I could see.

Twenty-Four

SLOANE



I HAD NEVER BEEN SO hot and bothered in my *life*.

Everything inside of me was ready to receive him, any part of him, in any way he wanted to shove it in—I just needed him inside of me.

If I ever thought I'd been horny around him before—right now I was a goddamned succubus.

“Oh please, please, please,” I started begging as he pulled my legs apart. I hadn't seen a razor for at least three weeks now—I knew it was like going to fucking Narnia down there—but at least I'd taken a bath first. “Oh God, give it to me.”

But he didn't. In fact, he fucking *left* me there, and climbed *off* the web to go get the motherfucking lantern.

“Nia'n'an!” I shouted, trying, and failing, to sit up. “What the fuck?”

He returned with the lantern, and positioned both it and himself between my thighs.

“Oh my God,” I groaned. I was still horny, but I'd had sexier moments at the dentist. “What is happening?”

Then I realized he was inspecting me—after I tried to close my legs, and he wouldn't let me. In fact, he was a dick, and lashed them open, tying them down to the web. I was angry, until I realized he was trying to figure out how we were going to get together. Which was appropriate, I guessed, and sweet.

“You could’ve just asked me, you know?” I said, reaching down to rap on his hard forehead. “I already figured this out.”

He tilted his head from side to side, looked down to where he was still so-fucking-hard, and then looked back up at me.

“It’s bigger than it looks. And it stretches. I swear. Uh—” I tried to use the non-horny parts of my mind to come up with something to prove it to him. And then I lit on the perfect thing, of course. “Shove your tongue in there,” I commanded him firmly. “I mean, uh—taste me? There?”

His gaze flickered between mine and my pussy, which was, thanks to the position I was now in and the lantern, on full display in front of him.

I nodded, so strongly it made the web shake. “Please,” I said, for encouragement. Because if something didn’t fuck me soon I was going to become a proverbial blue ball and die.

His jaws opened up, and his tongue unfurled in front of me.

“Oh yeah,” I whispered, as the tip of it came for me.

It narrowed down to a finger’s width, and he was using that now, to rock between my folds, tasting and watching my reactions.

“Oh God,” I said, and grabbed hold of the line he’d left between my nipples. “Yeah, Nia’n’an—put it in me.”

He gave a long lascivious lick up, leaving a trail of sticky saliva between his tongue and my pussy, and then he did as he was told, entering me at last.

He didn’t just shove it in all at once, like I wanted him to—no, the asshole was going fucking exploring. He spun his tongue inside of me slowly, pressing against each inch of flesh in turn, like he was testing it.

“Oh, fuck me,” I whispered, an expletive, a demand, everything I wanted all at once. I tugged on the line between my nipples again and he saw that and reached up, moving my hand away. He wanted to be in charge of this ride now, and I

supposed I ought to let him as much as I could bear, even if waiting much longer killed me.

“I like heat,” I explained. “I like friction. And I like firmness—oh—yeah—there,” I said, as his tongue curled inside me just like fingers. “Oh—Nia’n’an—*fuck*—do that again.”

He did, and it made me hiss.

“Faster?” I pleaded. “And a little harder?”

Fuck getting his double Ds in me, a girl fuckin’ needed to come *now*.

“Oh,” I said, drawing my hips away from him, making him chase me. “Oh, fuck, Nia’n’an—that feels so good.”

He made a pleased sound, and then tugged my nipple-string, which made me hiss.

“Oh—yeah—*fuck*—” I said, my jaw dropping as pleasure built. I usually wouldn’t have wanted to come for him so quickly, but I knew from my many times touching myself in his rucksacks that I’d be ready to go again in thirty seconds. “Fuck—fuck, Nia’n’an—*fuck*—you’re gonna—” I tried to squeeze my thighs together but couldn’t. “Oh-oh-oh—Nia’n’an—*ohhhhhhhhhhh*.” I cried out and writhed, making the whole web below us bounce. “Oh—” I gasped, looking down the line of my body at him beneath heavy eyelids. And then I realized, what with his curiosity about me earlier—he might never have seen a woman do that before. “This is me coming for you,” I said, as I gave another involuntary shiver, staring into his shining black eyes. “You made me do that. By being inside of me. You make me feel good.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them—but the second I had, I realized no truer words were ever spoken.

Nia’n’an did make me feel good. And safe, and happy, and like singing—which was something I thought I’d never do again.

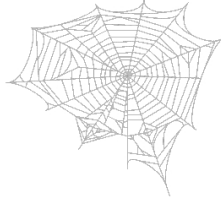
“Trust me,” I told him, when I could breathe next. “I’ve got two holes down there. I promise you’ll fit me. I won’t let

you hurt me—and you never would.”

He pulled his tongue out of me, and back into his mouth, then rose up high enough to make a gesture with his hands, that clearly meant: Show me how.

Twenty-Five

NIA'N'AN



IT WAS SO good to make her feel good—I wanted to do it again and again.

I could not believe how delicious my mate tasted. The perfect combination of sweet and savory, it was like she was made just for me. And now that I knew that was where her scent came from—and how easily I could get it from her—I was tempted to never make her pants to wear again. I would follow her through the caverns, denying myself all fluids, except for the wetness I could lap between her thighs.

And then when she came? When I felt the inner workings of her body tug and release against me, as if she was trying to pull me in?

I was as trapped as if she had covered me in her own sticky webbing.

I never wanted to leave her side—and now she wanted to show me how to mount her?

My mate was perfection itself.

She took one of my hands and placed it between her legs. “I’ve got openings here, and here, okay?”

One I knew about, and had tested. The other—

“Don’t worry. It’ll stretch. As long as you’re gentle.”

Perhaps she read my face. I nodded strongly. She smiled up at me, and I knew I wasn’t dying anymore for a fraction of a second.

“So—all you have to do is tilt me,” she went on. “Like, I’m sitting on you, only side-saddle, and on the front—does that make sense?”

I considered things, and it did. I started reorienting the webbing at once—and then, as an afterthought, bound her broken leg beneath her, after bending her right knee. I didn’t want to jostle it once our bond begun.

“Yeah,” she agreed. She looked a bit worried—I had spun her up sideways to me, so that both her injured leg and her hair were hanging down, and her good leg was up across my chest, her ankle against my neck. I quickly added more webbing for her comfort, so it was more like she was on a hammock, than having to support her own weight for me when she wanted to look up. “Thank you,” she said, and then looked to me. I hadn’t stopped pumping my pair this whole time—if something punctured them right now, I was sure I would bleed out. “Can you use some of your spit?” she asked. “Slippery stuff, if you get to choose?”

I nodded, and made to lubricate myself adequately at once. My pair knew where they wanted to go, they honed in on their upcoming locations, but I stopped moving as she touched my hand. “You just have to be patient is all,” she said. “And . . . you’re not, uh, gonna kill me afterwards or anything?”

I paused entirely at that. I had heard that joke more than once before, usually crudely shared on missions by my coworkers, as others joked about their sexual prowess, and gave it as a reason for my lack thereof.

“And I don’t have to kill you, right?” she asked with a laugh.

I wasn’t entirely sure why she thought it was funny—but I shook my head.

I felt her sag fully into my webbing then at that, as she went on.

“Okay then, please-dear-God, *rail* me.”

Twenty-Six

SLOANE



NIA'N'AN DIDN'T KNOW what railing was—which was good, because I wasn't quite ready to jump into that, but I would be.

“I mean, just press forward—grab my hips—yeah—hold me for you. Give things a little time?” My pussy would've just let him hop on in, but my ass was a slightly tighter door. I enjoyed anal, though, so I knew that we would get there. “You're gonna like that hole, Nia'n'an,” I said as I felt the first bit of him creep through my outer ring. “It's gonna hold you so tight—both of them are,” I promised.

I knew from giving him a blow job earlier that both his dicks were an intriguing combination of muscular and hard—which I'd kind of known from seeing him work himself the other night, and gave me hopes for double-vaginal penetration in the future—but for right now—I just needed to finish taking his virginity.

I'd had the thought sarcastically—but when I realized that was really what it could be, I wanted to be sure.

“Nia'n'an?” I asked. “Have you ever done this before?”

He shook his head at me, and I groaned.

“Oh God, how does that make this even hotter? Fuck—keep going?” I asked, and he did so.

I made soft noises as he stretched me. It wasn't even just each individual dick, although they were huge, but taking them in combination? Both of them slowly filling me up?

About halfway through, I began to lose my mind.

I ran my hands up through my hair, feeling like a crazy person.

“Oh God, Nia’n’an,” I said, and he stopped. “Oh no—don’t stop—don’t stop unless I literally tell you to stop after this, all right?” I said fiercely, and I felt him nod against my calf. “That’s right—because once we’re on this fuck train together, there’s no exits till the end.”

I had no idea what I was even saying at that point—I just knew I’d never felt so full before. So much stretching, so much pressure.

So much *right*.

He made a low growling noise of satisfaction, just at the point where taking anymore would’ve made me question my sanity, and I realized we’d met together.

Both of his enormous dicks were now buried inside me.

Right where they belonged.

“You like that?” I asked, giving him a hazy-eyed look. I reached up to trace a hand across his jaw, and his tongue lashed out to wrap my wrist. “Feel that shit, Nia’n’an. You’re all the way up in me,” I said, and writhed against him. “No man’s ever done that before. Mmmm. Fuck.”

I wriggled against him as best I could, then I reached for his hands to squeeze them against me. “Okay, now, carefully move me off of you—and then pull me back on. A little bit at first—oh—fuck, yeah, just like that. More?”

And suddenly railing was back on the table.

Twenty-Seven

NIA'N'AN



BOTH OF MY pair were inside of her at last, exactly where they needed to be.

My beautiful mate had taken me—it was time for our mating bond.

I had no idea how to explain to her what I needed to happen next, but I knew she trusted me—I started pulling silk from my spinnerets to lash her to me in just this fashion, and then clipped certain of the lines, so that while she was entirely supported, we were both now dangling free.

For the people of my kind, this final act of mating was a feat of engineering and also absolute trust—if your mate couldn't create a strong enough web to hold you as you bonded, then both of you might fall to your death below.

I was not so worried about that, riding my delicate Sloane, but I wanted to complete the ceremony to its letter.

Because now I had so many, many reasons to stay alive.

“Oh my God, Nia'n'an,” she said, watching us spin in the crystal cavern. “This is like getting fucked in Cirque du Soleil,” she said and giggled—and I both felt it, in the way her abdomen squeezed me, and also in my heart, where her simple joy made it warm.

“I want to please you, my love,” I told her, and suddenly I had her full attention. “I want to give all of myself to you.”

And while I knew she had no idea what I was telling her, her hands grabbed mine. “Whatever it is that you're saying—I

want that too,” she swore—and with that we began to swing.

I pulled her halfway off of me, and then back on again, and felt her moan. She was louder now, she’d been louder ever since I’d filled her, as if the girth of my pair had given her voice. I liked that. I wanted the caverns to be full of the sounds of our mating. I wanted there to be an echo here of when I pleased her again, ricocheting from wall to wall, down into eternity.

“This is what I need of you, my love,” I told her, pulling her to me in another solid thrust. “I’ve got to release myself inside you, and then we must be locked for a time, so that all will know you’re taken, should any other males come near.”

I knew that wouldn’t happen in our current situation—but it was what our mating bond required. Only then would I be sure to live on, to pleasure Sloane another day.

“Oh my Gooooood, Nia’n’an,” she whispered, her hands wrapped around mine. “I hate to be a pillow princess, but please, fuck, do that again.”

I had no idea why being a princess would be derogatory, but she shouldn’t have worried. All of my body now knew what to do. I pushed her off of me, almost until my tips were free, and then I spiraled my last pair as they dove back into her.

“Oh—fuck—*fuck*—me,” she groaned, her voice rough as she threw her head back against my webbing—and every single thing she did urged me on. I did it again and again, my last pair finding the home they needed inside of her, while she made low moans and high-pitched screams. “Oh God, Nia’n’an—I’m gonna come so hard for you—just don’t stop—it’s okay—keep going.”

“My love, I have no choice,” I told her, thudding into her again, enveloping myself in her tight, hot spaces. I was riding her against me mechanistically now, no longer in charge of myself or our swaying, trusting the webs I’d created as I readied myself to spray into her.

“Nia’n’an—oh-my-God—Nia’n’an!” she shouted my name, and then howled incomprehensibly, as I felt her abdomen jerk and twitch, her twin pockets pulsing, begging for what I had to give.

“Yes—yes, my love, yes!” I shouted back at her, just as loud, pulling us tight, shooting deep inside of her. I bellowed with my final release, she gave another scream, and then I braced myself for my final pumping, which would keep us briefly sealed tight—only—it never happened.

I waited, catching my breath, feeling my last pair deflate inside her, the same as my spirit began to do.

I could have pumped them back full again, but . . . what would have been the point?

I hadn’t locked with Sloane.

Our mating had been incomplete.

Her hesitation had been right all along.

She wasn’t the one for me.

No one would be.

Twenty-Eight

SLOANE



“OH MY GOD, NIA’N’AN.” I sagged into the webbing all around me. “I came so hard I think I squirted out my soul.”

He looked at me curiously, and then at where we’d been connected, even though we were currently coming apart.

“Hey,” I said, to get his attention again.

Things could be weird when you lost your virginity. I remembered when I’d lost mine, to the absolutely wrong man. I didn’t want Nia’n’an to have any regrets. “Come here,” I said, reaching for him. He reoriented me so that I was beside his torso, as his two dicks were pulled back inside.

“It’s okay. That was so good. Did you like it?”

He nodded, but he still looked confused.

“Was . . . something different supposed to happen?” I asked him, as he moved to hold me. “It’s not too late for me to kill you,” I said, grinning, pretending to chomp down on the meat of his arm.

And then he was confused, for reals. He started moving away from me.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I said. “I was teasing. And I’m not hungry,” I clarified, realizing how he could’ve misread things. “I don’t know if spiders are big into cuddling? But I am.” It wasn’t a fact I wanted publicized, however. Even though half the planet had seen me naked, I didn’t want anyone to think I was soft. “I like it here, with you,” I said, and he seemed to

take me at my word, arranging himself, so that he could hang beside me. “And I like you. A lot.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pressed me to him, and for the first time I got to properly hold him back, without hesitation. I rested my head in the space between his neck and shoulder.

“Yeah, Nia’n’an,” I said. “Just like that.”

Twenty-Nine

NIA'N'AN



I HELD Sloane in the glittering cavern, desperately trying to figure out my next move.

If I'd been honest with myself, there were probably several more direct routes we could've taken out of Threadstone than I had tried, but . . .

I'd wanted her.

Somehow I'd had her.

And because the Great Mother had abandoned me completely . . . the mating hadn't worked.

None of that changed my feelings for her though, however.

It just made my need to help her get out of here more paramount.

Because if my clock was still ticking, as an unmated male, I had a limited amount of time left to rescue her in. My fears about not knowing who her kidnappers were—the slimmest of excuses for not rushing up—were unreasonable now that I was going to have to leave her.

I couldn't believe how selfish I'd been, prioritizing my needs over hers, when she was counting on me. And now that reality had cut through the haze of my foolishness, exhaustion settled on me anew, all the extra strength I thought I'd had from being so close to my bond evaporating.

I brought my hand up to push her away from me, so that we could start going, but then I couldn't bear it, and instead I

brushed my knuckles across her cheek. I felt her lips flutter into a smile, she kissed my hand, and then she took my hand and pulled it down between her legs.

“I still want you, you know,” she said, nestling closer to me. “I think I was kind of hoping sleeping with you would turn down the horny, but it didn’t.” She worried her face into my neck, and ground my hand between her thighs. “Is it okay if I come again?” she asked, and I nodded. “Oh good. I don’t think I can take you inside me again for a day or two, but—” She positioned my hand against her beautiful flesh, as though I were grasping one of her thighs. “Don’t go inside. Just let me rock on you?”

I nodded again, and felt her wriggle. The space where her scent came from—from where I thought I belonged—seemed so delicate when I had gotten the chance to inspect it visually. And now she was rubbing those soft, beautiful folds against me, making her tiny, anxious sounds.

How could anything that felt this good not be right?

Dear Great Mother, why was I not worthy?

“Oh,” Sloane hissed quietly. “Oh—Nia’n’an—I can’t believe how badly I want you all the time,” she said, thudding her hips against me—while I wondered if the words she’d said were true.

Did the lack of our bond hurt her, as well?

Had I failed her in some other new and entirely unacceptable way?

Her breath caught and then she shuddered against me. I felt fluids release from her, this time hers mixed with the ones I’d left inside her, as her intoxicating scent rose up all around.

She even smelled like me now—why was she not mine?

What was wrong with me?

“Ohhhh,” Sloane said, sighing, sagging against me. “That was good.”

I was glad the translation device was broken—because given our current situation, I had to disagree.

Thirty

SLOANE



ALL I WANTED to do after that was sleep—but Nia’n’an wouldn’t let me. He let me bathe again, and redid my cast, but he wouldn’t let me rest.

Not on the ground, at least. He snuggled me up against him, which I liked, but I knew we were moving quicker than we had been.

“Is something wrong?” I asked when I woke up and he hadn’t slowed down. He looked at me and shook his head, but he kept moving quickly. “Don’t lie to me, Nia’n’an.”

He stopped then and gave me a soulful look.

“I’m not really in a rush to get anywhere.” I’d been dreading leaving him before when I was horny. Now I was *still* horny and I liked him *even more*. “I don’t have anything waiting for me out there.” And then I had a horrible thought. “Do . . . you?”

Oh God, please tell me I wasn’t some kind of accidental web-wrecker—then I realized he’d told me he *was* a virgin.

Maybe he needed a job? Or money? Or to see his friends?

I didn’t know, but as no other answers became apparent, a familiar feeling began settling around my shoulders, and I panicked a little.

“Can you kiss me?” I asked, reaching up to encourage it. He bowed his head, shook it, and kept moving at our current pace—like he was in a hurry to get rid of me.

Because of course he was.

I didn't have any money down here to give him, or fame, or drugs.

Right now I was just me—and just me was never enough.

I ducked back into the sack he'd made for me on his chest, my heart breaking as we continued.

WE WENT on for two whole days—I couldn't really tell, but it felt like that, at least. We made do with the last of the supplies inside his bag, and then we reached a point where he paused for some reason, and he let me out where I could lean against a wall.

He looked tired and I didn't like that. "You need to rest, Nia'n'an." I hobble-jumped over to where I could put my hands on his face, and he braced me up with one of his front spider-legs. "I don't know why we're in such a rush now, but nothing out there's important to me. I promise."

I knew he cared for me, even if he didn't want to kiss me again; he was still so careful and gentle. And I knew my interest in him hadn't abated. But something was currently deeply wrong, and I had a sinking feeling that every step he took was bringing us closer to it.

"I don't understand, Nia'n'an," I said. He bowed his head to mine again, and then slightly turned away so he could take his bag off his back and open it—and I could not believe what he pulled out next.

"You have had a motherfucking phone with you, this whole time?" I asked, my voice arcing as it echoed back down our current tunnel.

He gave me a look, and then used the phone to gesture to the walls all around us.

"Oh. Yeah."

If I couldn't get good reception when I went too far into my Dad's second biggest mansion, there was no way he could've gotten any through a few thousand feet of stone.

He gave it to me, and pointed strongly down the tunnel we were in. I took it and frowned. “I still don’t understand.”

It didn’t matter. Because the next moment he was picking me up again and holding me close.

Not like he was about to put me into a sack—and not like we were going to get it on.

I wrapped unsteady arms around his strong neck, feeling the phone thump against his backplates.

He kept calling me the name he used for me that wasn’t Sloane—and it felt uncomfortably like a goodbye. When I struggled to fight him, I felt him put his teeth on my neck—not to hurt me, just to still me.

“Whatever is happening now, Nia’n’an,” I whispered as he held me away from him again. “I don’t like it. So please don’t. Okay?”

But then he spun a little and knelt down, placing me and the bag behind a boulder.

“Just tell me what’s going on?”

He said the same word over and over again—and then reached back and snapped off half of one of his back spider legs to give to me.

I didn’t have time to scream or throw up before he’d covered the crevice he’d put me in with webbing. “Nia’n’an!” I shouted, beating against the silk, but it was too late.

Thirty-One

NIA'N'AN



I KNEW a group of humans had been following us for the last day, and that they'd been gaining. I'd hoped that they'd been reinforcements from Monster Security, but none of their scents were familiar.

I'd had to make the choice between taking Sloane deeper or risking exposure to them. With the way my strength was waning, there was really only one option. But now, they were gaining, and I thought I needed to make a stand while I could. We were about a mile from this particular cavern's exit, if my sense of the local atmospheric changes were right—close enough for Sloane to manage getting there on her own, if she had to. It was better to make my stand here. The caverns favored my style of fighting better than out in the open of the jungle—a wise orc would be leery of shooting in sheer rock surroundings, and here I could make use of the ceiling.

All that was left was to protect Sloane as best I could. I wished I'd been able to tell her all the things I held for her in my heart, to somehow make the depth of the love that I had for her known.

It was why I snapped off one of my legs to give to her, at the end. I had seven others. If things went well, when she emerged, she could use it as a crutch.

If not, I hoped that if she shoved it into an enemy's eye, it would land true.

She shrieked again, as my webbing enveloped the hiding spot I'd put her in, and it was good—it would summon the

fighters quickly. Hopefully their eagerness would make their training fall apart.

I climbed up to the ceiling and began to set as many other traps for the oncoming battle as I could.

Thirty-Two

SLOANE



“GODDAMMIT, NIA'N'AN!” I shouted, but I didn't hear anything in return, and that frightened me.

I knew he hadn't left me—he would *never* leave me—but I got the increasing sense that we were in danger.

I should've known the outside world would eventually intrude.

Was he trying to keep me here forever? Because if he was—I was down for that.

Then I heard the sounds of shuffling feet bouncing off of the cavern walls.

“Oh no,” I whispered, then threw my hand across my mouth and huddled down.

“The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the waterspout,” said an unfamiliar voice, slightly garbled, like the mouth that was saying it had too many teeth. “We crossed your track lines miles ago, Nine. We know you're here—and you know we're here. Where's the girl?”

Nine? That wasn't his name. I shrunk back into an even tighter ball.

“Fuckin' spiders, man, I hate 'em,” said another voice. “Good thing I know an extermin—” it went on, only to be abruptly cut off by grunts and gasps, as though someone had lassoed the speaker by their neck to hang them from the ceiling—a thought which was confirmed by a sudden and disgusting crunch.

“So it’s like that, is it?” said the first voice. “Fuck you!” he shouted—and shots rang out.

Thirty-Three

NIA'N'AN



I HAD NOT ANTICIPATED QUITE how desperate our pursuers had become. Who would be foolish enough to taunt me in my own domain, when I only needed one of them alive for answers?

I tethered the first rude human up to the ceiling by his neck, and then webbed another to the wall.

There were several dramatic crevices and outcroppings on the ceiling that would hide me from view—and I was able to operate the trip lines I'd set above the fighters from a distance with my feet, which dropped heavy webs on two more of them, who both panicked and began screaming as they wrestled, further sticking themselves to the ground.

This allowed me to sneak up on another, dropping my torso down from the ceiling behind him. All I had to do was reach forward to snap his neck.

I was noticed—another man shouted, and a bullet grazed my shoulder before I could lurch back up.

And then I saw the last thing I ever wanted to see—the claws of my own foot, sawing through the webbing which I had put in place to protect Sloane as she extracted herself from safety.

“Don't hurt him!” she shouted with her full chest, and the words echoed as everyone assembled turned to look at her.

I dropped to the floor on my remaining seven legs immediately.

There was no time for subterfuge anymore.
Now there could only be violence.

Thirty-Four

SLOANE



I WAS DOING okay until I saw the man shoot for Nia'n'an. The thought of him getting hurt again for me made me almost jump out of my skin.

I loved him.

I'd never been in love before, but if this wasn't it, there was no other possible word to give this feeling.

I would die without him in my life.

And I would be fucking undone if I sat by and just watched it happen, when I could put an end to it, right away.

“My father—” I started shouting. I knew my dad would pay someone—*everyone!*—here money. He still loved me, I was pretty sure—but before the words could leave my throat, Nia'n'an dropped from the ceiling, spinning in midair, and he reached out with one of his hindlegs, as if to catch himself, but what he did was grab hold of a man's collar and yank him to the ground, with the full force of his weight. I heard an awful snapping, and the man sat there like a limp doll afterwards, with his eyes wide.

And Nia'n'an didn't stop there—I pressed myself back into the place he'd hidden me but kept facing out, with the webbing at my back. I watched him snatch up and truss a fighter, to bring them up to his mouth to bite savagely, before tossing the bound corpse aside. He wheeled quickly, knocking other fighters down like bowling pins with his abdomen, and then slammed it onto the ground, breaking them beneath him.

He was so much faster than he had any right to be at the size he was. He disemboweled one with a slice of his foot, at the same time he webbed another across the room, while he prepared to bite a third. One of the men took a wild shot while he was trying to avoid getting hit, and it ricocheted near me. I yelped and ducked further back, and Nia'n'an looked at me to make sure I was all right—which was when the biggest man tapped him with a club.

It shouldn't have done a damn thing to him—only it did. It froze him for a second, and then he slumped forward.

“Nia'n'an!” I shouted, and started running for him, hobbling as best I could, using the leg that he'd given me for a crutch.

“Our boss thought you might still be alive,” the massive man said. He appeared to be in charge, and he hit Nia'n'an with the club again, this time swinging it like a baseball bat, catching him upside the head. I heard his jaws clack together as I shouted a too-late warning. “Two hundred thousand volts. Five hundred milliamperes. Absolutely lethal to anything smaller than you, but to you?” he said, jabbing Nia'n'an again, with the blunt end of the thing. “Should keep you down long enough. Of course, that's when I thought we had a reason to keep you alive,” he went on—as a nearby fighter snatched me up.

“Put me down!” I said, kicking back at him. “And don't touch him again!” I tried to twist out of the man's grasp. “If you touch him, if you do anything to him—I'll make sure you *never* get any ransom money.”

The man holding the electrified club turned to face me and laughed. “Well, that's the thing, sweetheart. A lot's happened since you first came down here. Your father changed the brief—he's the pragmatic sort. Figures we're just bringing your corpse back out now, and that's just what we'll give him.”

The man behind me started squeezing.

“But how much more would I be worth alive?” I asked at once.

Not just to save my life—but Nia'n'an's.

“I don't know why your boss wants me dead, but I promise that my father will pay double for me if I'm alive!”

The squeezing around my ribcage stopped, so I continued.

“And it sure would be a shame if I told my father only one of you all saved my life!” I shouted.

I was using the only superpower I'd ever had—manipulating other people's greed.

And because my father was so fabulously wealthy, it was working.

One of the humans left standing looked to his left and shot his neighbor.

After that, chaos reigned.

I was dropped, so I crawled to Nia'n'an's side, dragging his snapped leg along with me, ignoring the cuts the sharp rocks on the ground made on my knees and palms.

“Nia'n'an,” I whispered the second I was there. I pulled his head into my lap. I couldn't even tell if he was breathing or not. The rest of the room didn't exist anymore, it was just the two of us. “Please, Nia'n'an,” I said, stroking his head and neck.

And then everything around us was silent again, except for the rough breathing of a nearby fighter: the same one who'd hurt Nia'n'an in the first place.

I stared up at him, tears in my eyes, glad he seemed to think he had to kill me for his own sake, because if Nia'n'an had died, I wanted to die with him, right here.

The man looked down at the two of us, with utter contempt in his flat, cold eyes. “Do you really mean to tell me you're in love with a spider?” he mocked.

“The spider you're still scared of!” I shouted back at him. Because he was standing out of Nia'n'an's reach—if Nia'n'an had been awake.

He grunted and brought up the club he'd used to hit Nia'n'an—and I realized it was attached to a battery pack strapped across his back.

“Girl, if this stunned him—I'm afraid it's going to obliterate you,” he said, preparing to swing.

I realized two things at once in the next moment.

The first: I was prepared to go. All of me, utterly. I knew it, so strongly. I would follow Nia'n'an wherever he went, even unto death.

The second: Nia'n'an was still alive.

He rose his torso up fluidly, he snatched up the leg that I'd brought over with me, and threw it at the man with all of his force, exactly like a spear.

The man stumbled back from the force of it—and that was all the time Nia'n'an needed, to rise up and over me, claw the cable from the club to its battery and sever it, and then take the remaining fighter down, standing atop him, all the immovable weight of his body holding down each of his limbs as he dripped acids from his fangs right atop the man's face.

Once I realized what was happening, I yipped and looked away—but I didn't run. I just waited. I knew we would figure everything out when Nia'n'an was finished.

Except he didn't tell me when he was.

He just collapsed.

Thirty-Five

NIA'N'AN



SOMEHOW I'D DONE IT.

I was irritated that none of the men had survived for long enough for me to interrogate them—such as it would have to be, without a translator—but Sloane was safe.

She crawled over, gawking, as I shoved the human's messy corpse away. "Eyes on me, my love," I told her, willing her to not think poorly of me.

I hadn't had the strength to shred the man as he'd deserved—but he was dead nonetheless.

"Nia'n'an—what's wrong?"

What was wrong was that my mate was still inside Threadstone with me. But I couldn't tell her that. I carefully wiped my hands on the ground beside me, so that there would be no trace of acid left upon them, and then reached for her, giving her two dusty handprints across her tearstained face.

"My love, are you okay?" I asked, looking her all over.

"I'm fine!" she protested, seeming to know what I asked. "But what's wrong with you?" she pressed again.

"My love," I told her, drawing a fingertip down her cheek. And then I used that hand to make a gesture like I was holding a phone up to my face and pointed. The exit of the caverns was that way, and she'd make it, she had to.

I wanted to die knowing my mate was safe.

Her eyes went wide, as she understood, and then she nodded.

“So I’ll go get you help?” she said—and I nodded back.

“The only help I have ever needed was meeting you, my love,” I told her—and she started scurrying around.

I watched her yank the tip of my broken leg out of the man’s chest, so that she could lean on it, and once more I thanked the Great Mother for blessing me with such a fierce little mate.

Because surely whatever was wrong between us, whatever reason we hadn’t bonded, had to be because of me.

And then she got the phone out of the bag behind the rock where she’d left it and hopped near once more.

“I’ll go outside. I’ll make the call. I’ll be right back.”

I ran the back of one hand down the smooth skin of her cheek. “I know you will, my love,” I said.

She leaned forward to kiss me, putting her lips briefly against the space right underneath my eye, where my cheek would be if I had one like she did, and then she commanded “Don’t die” right before she started hobbling away.

I WATCHED HER GO, and then when she was too far for my eyes to see, I heard her path, and then when she was past where I could hear her, I scented her, for a long, long time, as some unseen breeze at this cavern’s entrance blessedly pushed her scent back to me.

I was home. I’d made it here. And I’d been in love with the most perfect mate a spider might ever have.

I felt at peace—until I didn’t.

Some strange desire came over me.

It was akin to the one I’d been afflicted with weeks ago, when I’d first resigned my Monster Security commission. A feeling deep inside my spider-half, that there were things I had to do.

Perhaps I needed to make a final nest?

All I knew was that the situation I found myself in currently wasn't quite *right*. And while I was ready to die, I needed to perform one last task first.

Thirty-Six

SLOANE



I'D HAD to sit outside for half a day until a helicopter landed, and then the minotaur who'd been flying had been a little bit of an asshole.

He was nice enough to turn the blades off and come out to meet me, once he realized I couldn't come very fast, leaning on Nia'n'an's severed leg—but when he realized that's what it was, he looked horrified.

“Whatever did that—we've gotta get you out of here,” he said at once, rushing forward to scoop me up.

I balanced on one leg and swung the blood stained tip of Nia'n'an's leg at him. “Only one man gets to pick me up—and he's back in that cavern over there.”

He paused. “You are Sloane Marlow, though, right?”

“The one and only. Which is why you're going to come back and help me right now. Nia'n'an needs help.”

The minotaur opened his hands up and patted the air. He had both his horns sawed off for some reason. I couldn't fathom why, it wasn't like a minotaur needed to wear a trucker cap.

“Lady,” he said, with a drawl, “I don't think he wants me there. Let me take you home.”

“No!” I shouted—loud enough that a flock of birds in the jungle behind him took off. “He needs help! Come help him! I will pay whatever it takes for you to help him!”

He didn't move an inch, and I was furious with him.

I couldn't believe that I'd sort-of helped defeat the fighters back there, only to be confronted now with a far more important problem that my money couldn't solve.

"Did he tell you that?" the minotaur asked, his warm brown eyes narrowing at me.

I reluctantly shook my head. "His translator broke."

I watched his furry eyebrows rise. "Uh-huh," he said.

Like he knew things.

And then he went back into his cockpit and came out with something in his hands for me—a fresh translation device, I realized, as he tried to pass it over.

"How about you go back and talk to him first?" he offered. "I've got a few days' worth of rations. I'll wait here."

"Are you really not going to help me? I'm offering you, like, forty million dollars!" I pulled the amount out of thin air. There was no way my father would give that much to me, but I'd get it somehow.

Fuck, I'd start up my own skincare line if I had to.

"That spider in there's my friend," he said, looking me up and down, perhaps taking Nia'n'an's handprints on my face in. "And, uh, judging by your situation, all things considered—I think he'd rather talk to you."

"You are a fucker," I told him, but I snatched the translation device away from him and started my way back into the cave.

MY EYES ADJUSTED to the darkness far more quickly than they used to, and the same fungi that had lit my path out now showed me my way in, especially the parts where I'd almost lost my balance prior and had scraped pieces of it off the wall.

It seemed to take forever but eventually I made my way back to where I'd left Nia'n'an—only to find the entire tunnel's entrance covered with a thick fog of silk.

“Nia’n’an?” I asked nervously.

Had some other spider come by, hurt Nia’n’an, and then asserted its seniority?

Then I heard his crooning tone.

“Oh thank God,” I huffed, and started trying to make my way through the stuff—and he met me halfway, reaching out and then pulling me through, helping to support me with his two front spider legs.

He’d created a little tunnel in the middle of the carnage where everything funneled into one point, like a teepee lying on its side.

“Nia’n’an?” I asked. I was glad to see him walking around—and *webbing?*—but he didn’t seem better yet to me. “Here.”

I offered the translation device over.

He looked from it, to me, and then put the device on slowly, so that it hung from a ridge near where a human might have an ear, and the mouthpiece was over his own. “My love,” he said—the same thing I thought I’d heard him say a thousand times before—only this time the device translated it for me, telling me his words in a mechanical sounding robot voice.

My jaw dropped and I gasped. “Is that what you’ve been calling me? This whole time?”

His head bowed to mine. “Yes, my love. My Sloane.” His way of saying my name seemed to involve none of the letters my name actually possessed, but the translator managed it all the same.

I sagged with relief. “Are you better now?” I asked, grabbing hold of his arm and pulling. “There’s a helicopter outside. There’s room for you. Let’s go to it—”

“No, my love,” he said, and somehow the translator caught his undertone of sorrow. “I am not leaving these caverns again. This is my home.”

Well. Then.

“Okay,” I said, shaking my head and shifting gears. “We can make this work. I’ve always wanted to get away from the paparazzi, and frankly, if some of those dudes get their heads cut off by those monsters we were eating, that’d be fine by me? Soooo, yeah,” I said, looking around and dusting my hands off. “We can do this.”

Nia’n’an caught my hands and stilled them. “No, my love. I mean this is my final home. And where I am going, you cannot come with me.”

I glared absolute fire at him. “You. Have got. To be kidding me.”

He let go of me and then made a very human gesture, raking his hands up against his scalp, where he didn’t have any hair. “I wish I were, Sloane.”

“But—you’re better now!” I said, pointing around at our surroundings. “Look, you’re already decorating, and—”

“This is my death nest.”

I pouted strongly enough to make future plastic surgeons quake. “The fuck it is.”

“It is, my love,” he said again. And even as he talked to me, his abdomen kept daubing bits of silk down, and his rear most sets of leg stringing it.

I didn’t want to know what was going to happen when he was through.

“I am so sorry, my love. But we were never meant to be,” he said, pulling me against him, holding me tight.

“That’s bullshit, Nia’n’an.”

“You know it’s true, my love. You heard the that man; I imagine I could hear your father,” he said, making a sound like a soft laugh, “and more importantly, I have heard you.”

I took a horrified gasp, when I realized the entirety of everything Nia’n’an had been forced to listen to. Every time I was worried I was going to come around him, every time I tried to talk sense into myself—even when we’d been hanging

up in the cavern, and I'd felt the need to make a shitty joke, because sex with a new person was always goofy.

"Only at first!" I protested. "Because I didn't want to lose control of myself! But none of that ever had anything to do with you!"

"It does not matter, Sloane. I wish it did," he said, gathering one of my hands up to place on his chest. My fingers felt the gouges our dinners had left on him—and more recently the bullets—as fresh tears welled up in my eyes.

"How long do you have?"

"Soon. But these things are not precise. Which is why you should go, now, and leave me. The minotaur is a good friend. He will take you home."

"But I don't have a home, without you. I love you, Nia'n'an."

The second I said the words, my voice cracked and I started sobbing. He picked me up and soothed me and I wondered what kind of horrible person *I* was to be needing comforting on *his* deathbed.

"I'm not leaving you. I'm not," I said, clinging to him fiercely. "I haven't finished my song yet."

He stroked his head against my temple. "Then sing it for me now, my love, and I will listen to it for as long as I am able."

Thirty-Seven

NIA'N'AN



HER TINY BODY shuddered against me in her sorrow, and I thought no one else on the planet had ever found a mate so perfect.

She loved me, and I loved her.

Why was that not enough?

Only the Great Mother could say.

But I moved to cradle her in my arms and rested myself down carefully, so that we were in my final web's tightly woven silk together. Her voice started off thready and thick with tears, but then quickly began to pick up strength and volume.

*“In the heart of the night, where secrets entwine—
A dance of shadows, a mystical sign—
Her pulse syncs with his beats, in a world so
surreal—
In the echo of webs, her heart starts to feel—
In this web of stars, they both find their trance—
On this hot electric night, a monster's romance—
A whisper, in the dark, her soul's searching call—
In her spider's arms, the girl finds her all—”*

These words I had heard before, she'd been working on them for half of our journey. But then she started signing new ones, apparently created on the spot, from our current situation.

*“Lost in the silence, where the shadows weave—
Her heart aches in her chest, in the web he
leaves—
Her tears are like dewdrops, silk strands that
gleam—
In the absence of love, her heart’s fractured
dream—
But in the weave of his web, her spider sees her
face—
And a truth dawns in him, with both softness and
grace—
And he knows through each thread, her sweet
essence calls—
With her, he’s complete, she’s his fortress, his
walls.
And in the labyrinth of silk, his heart finally
knew—
Her presence was a beacon, a light, piercing
through—
No distance, too far, and no night too dark—
She’s his guiding star, she’s his eternal spark.”*

AS SLOANE SANG HER SONG, the words couldn't have been more true, but nevertheless I felt myself fading.

If only I was worthy of her.

Of having a love like this.

But then I realized as I held her what a fool I'd been.

I had had one.

The spider she was singing about was *me*.

I had moved among humans my whole life, never feeling like I belonged. For all my talk of loving Sloane, I hadn't fully believed in her love for me, because of my monstrous nature and her subsequent fears, until this very moment, as she added a final verse.

*“His web, a masterpiece, crafted with care and
might—*

*A testament to a bond that makes her feel so
right—*

In his spider's art, she finds a place so dear—

In the world of his weave, her fears disappear.”

But by the last note of her song, wherein she reflected the purity of her love at me, I had managed it, and felt a rolling peace settle across my soul like a thick webbed blanket.

I had done all I needed to do, everything the Great Mother might require. I had found my mate, kept her safe, made her certain of my love for her, felt her love in return, and now she would live on without me.

And just for a second, I was content to be an Arachnaea in the world, as I always should have been.

Thirty-Eight

SLOANE



AS NIA'N'AN slowly slumped against me, I kept singing.

I would sing until I couldn't anymore.

*“Through the electronic haze, their hearts dare to
soar—*

A love story, not of fear, but one of folklore—

In the rhythm of night, their destiny is spun—

In a world so unlike, two hearts beat as one.”

I kept singing until my throat was raw.

If there was any piece of his spirit left, I wanted him to hear me—and maybe consider coming back.

I didn't know how long the minotaur outside would truly wait.

I figured I'd just stay in here until he came to get me. He knew where I was, I knew where he was, and until then, fuck it.

I would stay here with Nia'n'an, and his strangely warm corpse.

“You could've told me a few more things before you died, you know,” I told him, running the back of my hand beneath my nose and sniffing. “Like—any of this—what to do now.”

Was I going to be in charge of his funeral arrangements?

If I was, I was going to have some of his ashes turned into a charm, so I could always wear him around my neck.

“Should I be drinking?” I asked aloud, quietly. I was part Irish—wasn’t that what we did?

Nia ’n’an hadn’t even been gone for thirty minutes and here I was, already looking for a crutch.

I sighed. Hanging out with the body of my dead spider boyfriend was admittedly creepy—but what would’ve felt worse in the moment was leaving him alone. I wasn’t ready to leave him yet, even if he hadn’t felt the same about me.

I moved around in the web a little, trying to get comfortable, eventually wriggling myself so that I was beside his torso, and underneath one of his arms. I’d get him to hold me for one more night, and then I’d figure everything out in the morning.

And as I lay there, contemplating my life and all of my decisions that had led up to this point, and thinking about how I wanted to be thereafter—how *Nia ’n’an* would want me to be, because that was who I was going to live for—I decided I wasn’t going to try to be a pop princess anymore.

Because this shit was fucking *metal*.

I WOKE up to an awful creaking sound—like there was someone opening a closing a hundred haunted house doors right beside me.

“What the fuck?”

And it was closely followed by a popping noise—like hail landing on the roof of your car.

I panted in terror, fully waking and remembering my current situation—that I was cuddled up to my dead boyfriend.

Who was currently making horrible noises.

“Oh no.”

I had a good imagination—it was one of the reasons I didn't like being sober too much. Because what if Nia'n'an's leftover acids inside of him had eaten away at his internal acid-making organs and had burst out and were now on *his* insides, disintegrating him? I'd seen what they'd done to that man's face, he hadn't shoved the body away fast enough—but then the web we were in shook.

“Oh no, oh no!” I hissed.

I'd been a fool to think that nothing would notice the now-somewhat-smelly bodies the fight had left all around. I *knew* what lived in the caves, I'd seen all of Nia'n'an's scars—

Then the web jerked sideways, and there was a horrible tearing sound.

I screamed, and tried to get away from Nia'n'an, back the way I'd come into his webbing. The tugging of the web and all its many anchors had reactivated all the surrounding cavern's bioluminescent glow, which was great; I couldn't *wait* to get to see just what was going to kill me.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse—Nia'n'an ripped in two.

I screamed. And screamed. I wouldn't stop screaming. My throat was already broken from singing, but that didn't matter, because I was screaming from my chest now, and also I thought I might throw up, until—

“My love?”

I both heard his familiar croon, and the translation device provided him with a voice.

He moved, shifting, sending waves across the web like we were in a bounce house, and I watched him begin to pull off sheets of skin.

“Nia'n'an ... is it you?” I asked him.

Because I had seen a lot of zombie movies. And we'd been around a lot of fungus.

He peeled off a piece of his face, inspected it, and then replaced his translation device where it belonged, on the new

him. “It had better be.”

I gawked, as he kept trying to free himself of his old skin.

“Oh my god, that’s so disgusting!” I squealed—but then, because I was one of *those* girls, I rocked back forward. “Let me help!”

We worked in a strange silence, until Nia’n’an two-point-oh was revealed. I’d had to tug off some of his old leg shells for him, like he’d put on a pair of too-tight thigh-high boots, and then I’d gotten a lot of pleasure peeling all the extra bits of him off of his back, and then we were together, in a very messy web, with one spider-dude alive, and the pieces of some other spider-dude crudding up the ground.

Nia’n’an braced himself out as we finished, and looked around, in just as much wonderment as I was. “I am alive, again.”

“You are,” I whispered, and then I counted. “And—you have eight legs now!”

A ripple moved through him as he tried all of his legs in quick succession, without looking back. “I do,” he agreed, mystified.

“I thought you were dead!” I shouted, before flinging myself as best I could onto him. He caught me and pressed me to his chest where, I noted, all of his old gouges had gone away with his old skin.

This version of Nia’n’an had never been hurt by me.

“I did too, my love,” he said, holding me tightly. “I am so sorry I worried you.”

“It was a dick move!” I shouted into his chest, shoving him without moving him in the least.

Thirty-Nine

NIA'N'AN



ARACHNAEA DID NOT HAVE the same “heaven” as humans thought of; we only had the Great Web, where our spirits were meant to live on, and clearly I had reached it, because Sloane was still here by my side.

Whatever I had accomplished in my prior life, I must have been very, very good, to have earned such a favor.

And now here I was, reborn anew.

“In my defense, my love,” I told her, bowing my head to hers, as her body trembled against mine. “I have never died before, so I had nothing to compare it to. And I haven’t molted for at least a decade, and when I did—”

My voice drifted.

When I did last—it hadn’t been like that.

I hadn’t felt the need to nest and guard.

I had truly been close to death, and the taint of its potential rode with me still.

But I had been given a second chance to make things right—as long as my mate would let me.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, looking up at me as I set her down. “You’re here now.”

“I am.” And I was flooded with need for her—but her safety was paramount. “How long was I gone for?”

Sloane gestured at the cave we were in, that lacked time cues. “A day-ish? Maybe?”

I stroked my hands—my new, freshly skinned hands, that had never had the joy of touching her skin before—against her cheeks. “Then we need to go.”

“To ... the outside world?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She sighed and gave me a look of consternation. I couldn't interpret it, so I tilted my head. “It's not you,” she began. “It's just—it's going to be so real out there, Nia'n'an.”

“I know.” For as much danger as we'd been in inside Threadstone—everything had been simple. Outside, there was her father to deal with, and the fact that we still didn't know who'd kidnapped her, and all sorts of things she felt she had to deal with regarding the circumstances of her kidnapping, I knew. “But you'll have me. And I love you.”

I watched the tension melt away from her body as I said the words, so I said them again.

“I love you, Sloane Marlow. You will be my mate, and an Arachnaea mates for life. There is no other person in the world for me but you. You will always have my heart, and I will always be your protector. From here on out, everything about me is yours. So please trust that whatever is waiting out there for you, you will not be facing it alone. I will be at your side forevermore.”

Her eyes shimmered and she sniffed. “If you don't kiss me before you pick me up again, I will—” she started, and then paused as she tried to come up with an adequate threat, but it didn't matter, because I did as she requested, taking her in my arms and bringing her even with my face. She laughed and moved the translation device for me as my tongue unfurled, and I angled its dark tip toward her lips. They parted and let it in, so that I could seek inside her mouth once more, and I knew why so many humans enjoyed this kind of touch. It felt like we were spinning a web together without substance,

weaving with sheer emotion, as her tongue pressed mine and mine pressed back.

And now that I knew where else I could use my tongue upon her—I pushed her away before instinct could take over, making her pout and moan. I was still tired, and I still needed to mate her, but I would never put my needs above hers again.

“Later,” I swore. “Let me take you out of here first.”

Forty

SLOANE



NIA'N'AN WENT AROUND and inspected all of the bodies, trying to solve the mystery of my kidnapping, but when he couldn't, he carried me out of the caves. I enjoyed keeping my arms wrapped around his neck until we reached sunlight, when I let go with one to shade my eyes.

The second the minotaur I'd met earlier spotted us, he rushed out of his chopper with a whoop. "Fuckin' A!" he shouted, and it reverberated into the cave behind us.

"Indeed," Nia'n'an said, with a laugh, as he ducked beneath the chopper's blades and loaded us on board.

He created a skein of webbings to fasten himself down, and also created space for me, with a chair and straps to run across my chest, plus anchor points for me to hold onto—by the time we were in the air, it felt almost civilized.

His minotaur friend handed me a set of headphones, and for a moment I had a flash of all the other times I'd gotten to wear headphones, out late at night, rocking inside of clubs—and the last horrible time that had started this ordeal for me. I put them on and sighed.

"Are you all right, my love?" Nia'n'an asked, as the helicopter took off.

I thought about being my brash former self, who pretended that nothing bothered her, but then realized I didn't have to be around him. "I'm scared about going home, facing my father, and generally dealing with reality."

Nia'n'an nodded deeply. "I will be there with you, for all of those things. You will not be alone."

And when he said that, I felt it permeate my being. I didn't have to be scared anymore, about anything, ever, when I had Nia'n'an to back me up.

"So, uh, you're mated now then, and all?" the minotaur asked, looking back and wagging his furry eyebrows.

"Yes," I said, definitively, at the same time as Nia'n'an said the opposite.

"No."

The minotaur slowly rotated to face the front of the helicopter again. "Oh, I'm going to get off this line."

"What do you mean no? You've called me that a million times!" I thought back to my limited knowledge of spider vocabulary. "Haven't you?"

"I have. But there is a physical act that's required for it to take."

I gave him a mystified look. "Have we not done enough 'physical acts'?"

"Not yet."

And a horrible realization flowed over my body. "Is that why you thought you were leaving me?"

He hesitated before answering. "Yes."

"Nia'n'an!" I was both horrified and frightened. "Well? Why didn't you do it already? Did you think *I* wanted you to die?"

"No, my love," he said, shaking his head gravely. "It was on me. Not you. You are perfect in every way."

But of course it was easy for him to think that, inside Threadstone, without any of the outside world butting in. "Perfectly horny, maybe," I muttered, then sobered. "Wait—are you still in danger of dying?"

He waited long enough to respond that I knew what the answer was.

“You motherfucker!” I hissed at him. “We need to do whatever that thing is *now!*”

Nia’n’an strongly shook his head. “I am not mating you in public, in the belly of a helicopter.”

“This is not in public! In public is giving the quarterback a blowjob in front of the whole football team!”

“You have quite the imagination, my love.”

I groaned and sank back into the seat he’d webbed for me, across from him, putting my hands over my face. “I do, don’t I?”

“I promise not to look, honestly,” the minotaur chimed in, having stuck around to listen.

“Ellum!” Nia’n’an said sharply.

“I’m just saying, I don’t want you to die either, Nine.”

“I will not be dying—or mated—before Sloane is safe,” Nia’n’an said, cutting off further debate.

I frowned at him, but also knew I wouldn’t be able to change his mind. “Is that why I’m still so ready to jump you all the time?”

“Speaking as someone who is also happily mated, nope, the horniness stays forever,” Ellum piped up again.

Nia’n’an zinged webbing up to the helicopter’s cockpit and pulled the minotaur’s headphones off—and then he turned to me and spoke with intensity.

“Our next mating will take, and when I put my last pair in you again, and lock you to me, the world will know it.”

I knew everything he said was true. I felt it in my soul.

And it was all I could do not to jump on him then—or not to reach between my own legs and do *something*.

We both heard the minotaur retrieving his headphones. “What’d I miss?” he asked, when he rejoined the line.

“Nothing,” I lied. “How long is this flight, anyhow?”

“Another nineteen hours and change.”

Nia’n’an brought his hands up and stroked them over my body. “You should rest and eat, my love. You will need all your strength when we arrive,” he said, and it sounded like a promise.

I quickly did math in my head. Assuming Nia’n’an lived inside the city’s limits, and it wasn’t rush hour when we got back—it was T-minus-twenty-one hours from mating at the longest.

I could make it.

Barely.

Forty-One

NIA'N'AN



SLOANE DID AS I SUGGESTED, which I appreciated. We were in much smaller quarters here inside the chopper than we'd ever been inside the caves, and her scent was inescapable. If she'd tempted me more, I honestly wasn't sure if I'd have been able to resist—the urge to take her completely suffused my body, and I felt like my last pair were twin bullets inside me, ready to shoot out at the slightest provocation.

And luckily for me, after that, Ellum was in full mission mode, pressing Sloane for all the details about her kidnapping. I kept a close eye on her, judging her levels of stress, but she was as frustrated as he was—she wanted that chapter in her life to be over.

I charged up the tablet and went through Shiranak's orc team's footage again, hoping to find additional clues. Some of the caverns they were in seemed familiar now—and then I heard Ellum tell Sloane that no one knew she was alive yet, and that he'd decided it was safer to keep that information among the three of us, for now, considering the situation.

When Sloane realized this, she lit on the idea. “Maybe I could just stay dead?”

I was aghast, and set the tablet aside. “Why would you say such a thing, my love?”

“It would make my life so much easier.” When I inhaled to protest, she set her palm against my mouth. “You really don't

know half of what's waiting for you, Nia'n'an, if you're going to be with me."

"The problem is your dad's been telling people you were hospitalized for weeks now. Not that you were missing," Ellum explained to her.

"Oh," she said softly. "So . . . no one knows that I was gone?"

I watched her parse this information. "It's what he thought was best."

"And no one else knows that he didn't pay my ransom?"

"Yes. I disagree with his methodology, of course."

She sighed, and shook her head. "Well—that's his cover story. Fuck him if it explodes in his face. Can't we take this chopper someplace else? And just get off and live our lives?"

"Slight problem with that, as I've placed a flight plan," Ellum said. "Plus, this bird isn't mine, it's your father's."

"Of course it is," Sloane said with sorrow. "He's going to try to buy you off, Nia'n'an." It was my turn to be confused. "Like with money," she went on. "He'll bring up a blank check, and promise you as many zeros as you like."

I made a low growling noise. "How would that be any different than offering your kidnappers their ransom?"

"You tell me," she said, hugging herself. "I just wanted you to be prepared, was all."

I still feared I didn't fully comprehend. "How could he put a price on what is priceless?"

Sloane gave me a tight smile. "He can't—but that won't stop him from trying."

"It will have no effect on me. Of that, you can be certain." But the way she was acting now gave me pause. "Has he done that before? For you?"

"For one of the guys I dated in high school, yes. Junior year was the year when I found out I was worth a Porsche. And then, what was great, was that after that, I was never sure

if guys wanted to date me for me, or just to see if they could get a car out of my old man.”

I went very still, trying to constrain my anger. But if that was how he was going to fight, and how the world was about my Sloane—

“What else do I need to know to protect you, my love?”

She made a pained face. “It’ll probably be better for you if you don’t watch TV or go online or read any papers for the next several weeks.”

“Why?”

“Because this will be all over the news. And people will be nice about things for about twenty-four hours, but then after that they’ll say I’m crazy and my kidnapping was made up and all sorts of other cruel shit, especially if my dad’s already been lying about it. The truth won’t matter. It never does.”

“That is fine, my love. You will be with me. And I don’t need any of those things. I just need you.” She sounded so despondent. I desperately tried to think of things that might cheer her, and I leaned forward to clip her free from her chair and picked her back up to carry. “Would you like a new last name?”

Sloane blinked a few times, refocusing on me at last. “Are you for real?”

“It is a human custom, is it not?” I explained. “I do not have a last name. Perhaps we could pick one out together.”

“I—wait—are you asking me to marry you?”

“No. You are already my mate. It is not the same thing, but it is better.”

Her eyes squinted, and she seemed to regain some of her former spark. “Did you ever ask me if I wanted to be your mate?”

“Not in so many words, no.” But I’d endeavored to show her in every interaction I’d ever had with her—that I could be the one she could trust, that she should build her life with.

“Would you have asked if I wanted to be your mate?” she went on, teasing.

I decided it was safe to tease back. “Only if I were certain you’d say yes.”

“And if I didn’t?” she said, while grinning.

“I have tasted you, Sloane Marlow. You taste like home.” I adjusted myself so that I could lean back some and she might be more comfortable. “And no matter what comes next, we will always have each other.”

I felt her relax against me, and she made the circle motion with her hands. “We’ll keep each other in one piece,” she said, and I decided not to correct her as to the gesture’s meaning just yet.

“Always.”

Forty-Two

SLOANE



“ALL RIGHT, you two lovebirds, brace yourselves,” Ellum said, as he began our final descent. We’d apparently refueled during a midflight nap I’d been taking—after being in the caves so long, my sleep schedule was all kinds of fucked—and we’d been flying over civilization for the past few hours, racing the setting sun, with a sense of dread growing in my stomach that whole time.

The helicopter hovered, flew sideways, then set down, and Ellum took his headphones off which meant that it was time for me to do the same.

“I love you,” Nia’n’an told me, the second his headphones were off. He’d picked me up again, to carry me outside.

“I know,” I said, setting my hand against his jaw. “And that’s the only thing that makes any of this okay.”

Ellum ran around and opened up the sliding door to the cargo bay, so that we could emerge—and there was a contingent of three orcs there.

“We’re here for your debriefing,” the first one of them announced—before spotting me. “Sloane?”

“Hey, Shiranak,” I said, waving from the safety of my arms.

“You’re ... alive?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“You know him?” Nia’n’an asked me.

“Of course. He runs my father’s security.”

“Who all knows about this?” He came up, demanding—as Nia’n’an retreated, almost to the tower’s edge.

“The people I trust,” Nia’n’an said, over the translation device. “You are not among their number, however. Step back.”

“What?”

“She’s my ward. Not yours. You have failed her. Repeatedly.”

And then I felt him tense. I knew exactly what that meant, from my time in the caverns with him. We were in danger—and I was about to get stuck somewhere for my own safekeeping—only there weren’t any high rock walls here to put me on.

I swallowed down all of my panic and closed my eyes because I knew whatever happened next I wasn’t going to like it.

I felt myself getting webbed, and then had the sensation of sailing through the air. I couldn’t help it, I shouted “Fuuuuuckkkkkk!”—right before I found myself suspended over the edge of my father’s highest skyscraper, dangling down from about twenty feet of thick webbing, halfway trussed. “Oh God, oh God, oh God,” I panted as I heard the sounds of a fight breaking out from above.

And then a minotaur was flung down after me. Ellum dropped down like a cement yo-yo, only to stop roughly six feet away from me with what I was sure was a bone-jolting bounce.

“What’s happening?” I asked him frantically. “Why aren’t you up there, helping him?”

“He won’t let me be in danger because he likes my kids,” the minotaur said, then framed his snout with his hands to shout up at the helipad. “It’s very fucking annoying!”

“Why are they fighting?”

Ellum twisted his head over. “I don’t know. He must have his reasons.”

I couldn’t just stay here and do nothing. “Do you have your phone on you?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you open it up and give it to me?”

He moved inside his webbing and then paused. “Only if you promise not to drop it. If you do, my wife will kill me,” he said, but then started swinging back and forth. Just watching him do that was making me sick.

“Aren’t you afraid of heights?”

“Nope,” he said, still rocking, with his phone in his hands held out. “I’m a pilot. I’m only afraid of landings.”

He finally swung himself near enough to me and I grabbed it, swiping the screen quickly to keep it ready for me.

I only had two phone numbers in the entire world memorized: my father’s and Westly Bones, the editor of *The Bone Zone*, the gossip site most responsible for terrorizing me.

I called Westly up, as fast as I could.

Forty-Three

NIA'N'AN



ONCE SLOANE AND Ellum were out of the way, I could take on the orcs alone.

“Nine? What are you doing?” Shiranak asked, only pretending to be surprised by my actions, I knew.

“Keeping them safe.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, placing an affronted hand against his chest. “And more than that, I’m offended by what you’re implying here.” He snapped at his two underlings, and they flew back into the elevator behind him, off to get reinforcements. My hindmost legs worked on making a net, while the orc and I began to circle.

“I’m not implying anything.” I already knew the truth—the reason kidnapppers had managed to get Sloane, and that she wasn’t rescued until *my* arrival, was because Shiranak had been behind it all along.

Shiranak’s big face was split by an equally large grin. “How’d you manage to figure it out?”

“We traveled through some of the same caves.” I hadn’t realized it until I’d been standing in front of Shiranak, watching the setting sun glimmer off of his overly large belt buckle. It would’ve been nothing for one of his teams to send a drone in and do a 3D map of the place.

But I’d seen the smears on the bioluminescent fungi Sloane had left, while stumbling out on her own. That fungi grew exceptionally slowly, and there was no way that

Shiranak's orcs could've managed to be in a firefight or rockfall without smudging it even once.

It was far too perfect in the footage to be believed—which meant that a large part, or even all of it, was faked.

And since it was Shiranak's "team" who'd provided that footage to Arcus and the MSA . . .

"Was he not paying you enough?" I asked.

"There's money, and then there's *money*, Nine," he said, then settled himself, preparing to tackle me. "Does Daddy's little princess know?" Shiranak asked, taunting me as we circled one another.

"Does it matter?" I asked him. If I said Sloane did, he'd kill her—if I said she didn't, he'd only kidnap her again.

"Good ans—" he began, and I lunged, thundering forward.

I wanted to kill him.

With every piece of my soul.

And after what he'd done to Sloane and her friends—I knew he deserved to die.

But I needed him alive to confess.

So rather than meeting him head on, I left my net behind, sidestepped him, and tried to take him out with my side.

A thump from my abdomen would've sent a man, or smaller orc, sailing over the tower's side, but all it did was catch him and make him groan—and then punch back, his closed fist crunching against my shell.

The violence of it reverberated through me, and I rolled with it enough to stop it from breaking me, sagging into the legs on my far side, while striking out to knock him back with my two closest limbs—but for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt true fear.

Not that I was going to die—but that I might be separated in any way shape or form from my mate.

That could not be allowed to stand.

Shiranak stumbled back, regained his footing and laughed.
“All right, then. I’ve never fought an Arachnaea before. Let’s do this thing.”

Forty-Four

SLOANE



“**WHO THE FUCK** gave you this number?” came an irritated male voice on the far end of the line.

“It’s Sloane!” I shouted, knowing that Westly would know exactly who I was.

“Sloane? Sloane! Babe!”

“Fucking FaceTime me at this number—now!” I demanded, and then hung up. Half a second later I got an incoming call.

“Did you escape from your mental institution?” he said, the instant his face flashed on the screen, and I wanted to punch it. I only had Westly’s direct line so I could sometimes pay him off, to keep the worst stories about me off of his site, or at least not on the front page. “Wait—where the fuck are you?”

“Dangling from Arcus Tower, because my spider boyfriend is fighting an orc for his life on the helipad.”

His jaw dropped, but then he recovered, impossibly quickly.

“Would you be willing to go on the record with that?”

“I’ll do you one better—I’ll say it fucking live, as long as you get a helicopter up in the sky and head over here!”

“One second,” he said to me, and then I saw him shouting to other people off screen. When he returned his attention he

hit a button. A red button on my side flashed as he set his phone down.

I hit my button, and a robotic voice that sounded a lot like Nia'n'an's translation device said, "Recording in progress."

"Hey, everyone," I said, knowing I needed to give the world a moment to wake up, see, and pay attention. "It's me. Sloane Marlow. And I'm currently I don't know how the fuck high up in the sky, dangling off of Arcus Tower." I held the phone out so they could see where I was, without me looking down, because if I did I was sure I would puke. "I know my dad told you all I was resting after that shooting, but I wasn't. I was kidnapped and held captive in Threadstone, this whole time." I looked over to Ellum. "What day is it?"

"August twentieth!" he shouted back.

I blinked in surprise as hearts and thumbs up and all sorts of emojis began flooding the screen. "For almost a month of my life," I whispered, then gained strength. "The longest month of my life, that's for sure. My dad wouldn't pay my ransom—I'm sure he had some reason that made sense to him, you know? But he didn't, and everyone thought I'd died. Well, not you all, but everyone who knew I'd been kidnapped. Except they sent one last person in to find me . . . and he did."

I couldn't hear the fighting above anymore, which worried me—and then Ellum's helicopter flew over the edge of the building in an ungraceful arc.

"Fuck!" the minotaur shouted.

"Did you all see that?" I asked the people on the screen with me, my heart in my throat. "I'm pretty sure there's been an epic double-cross—which is why I need to get this message out, before my father's people try to cover everything up again."

I brought the phone up to my face. "First off, I'm sorry—I'm so sorry—for all my friends and fans. I know people were killed because of me, and that will never, ever be okay. I will hurt for them every second I have left in my life, and even when and if I seem happy in the future, that joy will always

have a hint of sorrow. Please believe that I will carry them in my heart, always.” I blotted my face with the back of one hand, and found it muddy with cave dirt and tears.

“Secondly—after this—I’m through. With everything. With all my dad’s money. I’m walking away from everything if I survive this, and he can’t stop me. I’m making that promise to myself, and to all of you.

“And third? I fell in love with the bodyguard they sent for me. He’s an Arachnaea, his name is Nia’n’an, and he’s fighting an orc on top of the building to protect me—Westly, where the fuck is your helicopter?”

Because that was the only way I could maybe help save him—if Shiranak realized it was too late, that he’d been caught on live TV.

Westly came back on screen. “Sloane, babe, helicopter fuel’s expensive—”

“You didn’t believe me? Fuck you!” I would’ve thrown the phone, but it wasn’t mine. “Fine, then!” I said, turning my full attention back to the people watching, on the other side of the screen. “If you’re in the city watching this, get down to Arcus Tower, now! Help me record this—if I survive, you can hold me accountable! If I don’t, you can say you were here when I died!” I shouted, and turned the phone off.

From his slow spin beside me, Ellum seemed slightly appalled.

“What?” I shouted at him, full of energy and anger with no current place to spend it.

“Nothing!” he said, raising both his hands with a laugh. “I just assumed you were going to call nine-one-one.”

I had no idea how emergency services would be able to save us, if Nia’n’an wasn’t. “I didn’t intend to.” I stared at Ellum’s phone, swallowing all of my pride. “But I’ll do one better.” It rang twice, and then a gruff familiar voice opened up the line, saying much the same thing Westly had.

“How did you get this number?”

I waited a second, and then squeaked out, “Daddy?”

Forty-Five

NIA'N'AN



THE ORC and I were more evenly matched than I liked.

I was faster, but he was tough, and we'd grappled repeatedly. He kept trying to break my legs, and I kept trying to pull him apart—he didn't need both his arms to confess, and I felt fairly certain I could tourniquet pieces of him fast enough to stop him from bleeding out.

But neither of us got anywhere.

I'd spattered him with my acids, and they didn't make a dent on his leathery orc skin, even though they burned through his clothing.

And he was stronger than my strongest webbing, which was making *not* killing him hard—but I'd managed to get my net up over the elevator tower's doors, to hold whoever was coming up to reinforce him back, giving me a little more time.

"You can't keep this up forever, Nine!" he shouted as I dodged another one of his blows.

"You are right. I cannot. I only need to keep it up for long enough."

Surely someone below had noticed the falling helicopter—and once I started tossing his reinforcements over the tower's edge, people would notice that, too.

Then he raced up and swung for me, and I ducked at an angle as I attempted to cut him with two of my front feet, only for my claws to rattle without catching against his toughened

belly and for my translation device to pop off of my ear slit and fall to the ground, spinning.

I lunged for it, but Shiranak stepped on it before I could come near—and when he realized what he'd done to me, he laughed.

“No one will understand you now, Nine!” my awful predicament made him bellow. “Whoever comes through those doors next—your people or my orcs—all they'll see is me, here, wearing this,” he said, scraping a tattered handful of his acid-burned shirt off his chest. “And the dumb fucking spider who went wild, tortured his friend and ward, and tossed a helicopter off a building.”

Him saying that made me pause, because he wasn't wrong, and he couldn't stop laughing. “People may be scared of me, Nine, but they're fucking terrified of you.”

He was right—so I had to take my advantage quickly. I jumped onto him, knocking him down. Before he could fight back, I bit into his arm, savaging it like a dog. He howled and swiped me blindly, catching his fingers on my face as I tried again to disembowel him with my front legs. I could tell my story later, Sloane would back me up, and I could explain the videos—I just needed to get the chance to speak was all.

Somehow I'd made Sloane understand me in the tunnels and caverns beneath Threadstone—but I knew no one else in this city would give me that long.

And sensing the tenor of our fight had changed, Shiranak became more desperate—especially because it was clear I was going to win. He finally repelled me, his dark green blood coating my face and chest, and he cradled his now-broken and useless limb.

“Fuck you, Nine,” he said. “Just you wait—”

And then the elevator tower doors opened.

A man who I'd only seen on TV before emerged behind my webbing. Arcus Marlow—and he had a flame thrower with him. I heard it kick on and watched him burn through the webs I'd left to block the door.

“Get the fuck back!” Arcus shouted, stepping forward, once he’d charred through. I did as I was told, making sure that I retreated in Sloane and Ellum’s direction.

“The spider’s gone mad, Mr. Marlow!” Shiranak shouted. “He threw the helicopter and its pilot over the building and attacked me!” He waved his bleeding arm as evidence, and I knew how he’d play it—he’d say Sloane had been in the helicopter when she died.

And I could say absolutely nothing.

It wasn’t even worth hissing and clicking.

There was no chance Sloane’s father would understand me.

Perhaps in that, my love and I were alike.

“Give me the flamethrower,” Shiranak pleaded.

And because Arcus believed him, he took it off and set it down. Shiranak hoisted his arms through the straps with a pained grunt, and pointed the dangerous end of it at me.

I stepped sideways at once. I couldn’t let him burn through Sloane and Ellum’s webbed anchor points.

But then half a second later, I stepped back.

Because Shiranak seemed like the kind of fool who’d go flame-happy and the only thing I had left to protect them with was my body.

“I’d rather do this slowly, Nine, but . . .” Shiranak said, balancing the barrel of the flamethrower above where I’d bitten him, with his opposite hand on the trigger.

He pulled it. I braced for immolation and—nothing happened.

He pulled it again and again, making it click repeatedly, before he pulled it off and threw it at the ground in front of him. Arcus stepped back into the elevator doorway behind himself and hit the button to summon it.

“My daughter’s down there, Shiranak,” he said. The elevator door opened behind him, and he stepped back into it,

illuminated by its light. “And you would’ve killed her, without a second thought.”

“What?” Shiranak looked pretended to be horrified. “He could attack you! At any moment!” He waved his good remaining arm at me.

Only I wasn’t going to—not until I figured out what the fuck was going on.

Then I watched Arcus Marlow make the Arachnaea circle gesture of mating at me, before holding up a button and waving me back, just as the elevator doors began to close, and I realized what was happening.

I hurled myself over the edge of the tower, lacing myself to anything I could, furiously, while my feet scrabbled against steel and glass until they found traction—as all the flamethrower fuel Shiranak had thrown to the ground went off like a bomb behind me, making fire shoot out. I heard Sloane scream, Ellum shout, and I smelled webbing burning—but I had both of them in my arms before anything fell free, as pieces of cooked orc were shot off of the tower in all directions.

I paused for a moment to reassess our safety.

“Are you okay, my love?” I asked Sloane, even though she couldn’t understand me.

“Nia’n’an!” she squealed, happily wrapping her arms around my neck. She climbed me like a playground toy, until she was safely on my thorax, leaning against my back, where I could web her in.

“Do you know what it feels like to be my size and be treated like a house pet? This is humiliating, Nine!” Ellum complained, from his much less dignified position underneath my arm.

“You get used to it!” Sloane shouted, just as a news helicopter came up.

Forty-Six

SLOANE



THE BONE ZONE helicopter finally showed up and then trailed us the whole way down. Nia'n'an couldn't take the straight way; the building was much too smooth for that, so they got great views of us as he zigged and zagged back and forth, carefully climbing down at least a hundred floors.

And as we got closer to the city streets, we could hear cheering. It was dark out now, but streetlights illuminated a huge crowd, held back by police officers, and every single one of them had their phones out, videotaping the massive Arachnaea rescuing his girlfriend and his friend.

"Do you want to be famous or not, Ellum?" I shouted over to the minotaur. Because he could be on talk shows in the morning, if he wanted to be. Maybe it was a good thing he had his horns sawed off—he could wear some hoodies for a bit until all of this died down.

"Is it fun?" he shouted back.

"Not really!"

"Then I think I'll pass!"

And then we reached the ground. Nia'n'an set Ellum down first, carefully, so the minotaur could regain some dignity, but I was perfectly content to stay webbed to his back, with my arms around his neck, balancing on my one good leg.

The emergency services people nearby weren't sure what to do with us, which was fine by me—and then a bald man in a sharp suit rushed forward, elbowing his way up.

“Nine! You fucking bastard!” he whooped. “I knew you would do it!” He threw a translation device at Nia’n’an who easily caught it and put it on.

And then my father came, striding out of the tower’s official entryway, oddly surrounded by human, not orc, guards.

The bald man rushed up to meet him. “We’ve executed the terms of our contract to the letter, Mr. Marlow,” he announced.

“Not until I get her back,” my father said grimly.

I inhaled to explain things, but Nia’n’an shook his head. “That will not be happening,” he said simply.

His bald coworker’s head snapped to look at him.

“Nine? What are you saying?”

The minotaur leaned in. “I believe he’s going to go tell you to go fuck yourself,” he said, giving a sly wink to me.

“Your daughter was kidnapped by the team you trusted most,” Nia’n’an told my father. “And tonight they would’ve caused her demise again, had they known she was coming. Do you agree?”

My father’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

“I have retrieved her and killed all but one of them that I have met—as I will any others who try to cause her harm. But she is now mine. She will be the queen who sits at the center of my web forevermore, and you may keep your money.”

“There it is,” the minotaur muttered as the bald man’s eyes about fell out of his head.

“He does *not* mean that, Mr. Marlow,” he said with a stutter.

“Just out of curiosity,” I interjected. “How much am I going for?”

Nia’n’an looked back up at me. “Your father offered my handler ten million. But to me, you are worth very much more.”

A ridiculous thrill ran through me. “If you *had* to put a price on me?” I pressed, squirming against him, which made him twist around to pick me up, to carry me in front of him again as he bowed his head to mine.

“You are worth my life and my future, and I will try to be worth yours.”

“I’m going to try to be worth yours, too, Nia’n’an.” I put a hand up to his jaw, and his tongue unfurled to wind around my wrist. “Take me home?”

“Gladly.”

GETTING HOME—WHEREVER my new home was going to be—took a while.

Nia’n’an scrubbed himself clean with his webs, and then moved through the crowd easily, simply stepping over the barriers that the police had created. I waved like a prom queen, and the crowd ran alongside us for a good long time, shouting questions that I pretended not to hear until Nia’n’an picked up his pace and began moving at speed, leaving most of them behind.

Under normal circumstances, I imagined being carried by the monster I loved through the cool night air might be magical.

But right now, knowing where we were going, and why we were going there—if I thought I’d wanted him in the caves, I’d been wrong. That had been mere monster-madness.

What I was facing down now, more so with every step that he took forward, was monster-insanity.

Hunger for him twisted in my core, demanding his attention. I squirmed in his arms. “Hurry?”

He looked down at me, without slowing. “Why, my love?” he asked—and I was going to either be mad with him or have a please-fuck-me cry, until I realized he was teasing.

“You’re an asshole,” I complained—and slipped one of my hands down to trace over one of the slits where his dicks hid. “I need that.”

I felt him shudder and groan. “Have patience, my love—or I will tie you.”

I didn’t stop. “You should know better by now than to threaten me with a good time.”

That made him laugh. “Be good for two more minutes and you will be rewarded.”

I sighed and wriggled closer to him. “Longest two minutes of my life,” I whined.

Then he turned onto a side street, and I realized where we were heading—to one of the buildings that’d been specially built to handle larger monsters, with doors so impossibly tall and wide I wondered how I would manage to get them open by myself.

But that was a tomorrow-Sloane problem.

The Sloane of tonight just really needed to get laid.

Nia’n’an paused on the threshold, after mounting the stairs. “Are you ready to start our new life together, my love?” he asked, very solemnly.

I wished I could pretend to be cool and collected, or even vaguely classy, but I could not. I reached up while waving his head down, so I could whisper my answer back to him in his ear hole. “Yes. Now please hurry up and get your dicks the fuck inside me. Right now,” I commanded breathlessly.

He rumbled and pressed the doors open with his shoulder.

The lobby was just like any other lobby might be, and Nia’n’an waved to the wyvern doorman with a free leg before summoning an elevator that could hold the engine of a freight train.

“What floor do you live on?” I asked him with trepidation.

“The fortieth,” he answered. “Can you make it that long?”

This time, he sounded absolutely sincere.

As fun as I knew elevator sex was, if he was going to DP me again, I probably wanted to be near a shower.

“Barely,” I said, wringing the edge of my skirt with both hands.

“I will take care of you, I promise,” he said, holding me closer until the elevator came to a stop.

Then he carried me down past several doors, until he reached his own, which he opened with a passcode, turning on a light inside.

The room was very nearly completely white with webbing, which made me gasp. “I do apologize for this. I wasn’t expecting company,” he said, as he went in and closed the door behind us.

“I don’t care. We’re going to make this work, no matter what.”

“We are, my love. So come here,” he said, finally releasing me to rest me against a wall cushioned with webs. He trapped me in with both his arms against it. “And show me your beauty.”

As horny as I’d been for the last hour—*and two weeks!*—I suddenly felt shy as he brought one of his forelegs up to slide the curved back of its claw against my chest before catching its sharp inner portion against the neckline of dress that he’d made for me, slicing through it easily, thread by thread, tracing it down the front of my body in a long, slow, seam.

I breathed hard, watching him expose me, bit by bit. I knew he’d seen me naked before, but this time felt different, because we both knew it mattered.

When the dress was in shreds, I shook it off of me, and looked to him. I couldn’t read his face because it didn’t move like mine did, but I did hear him catch his breath.

“I do not understand how every single piece of you can be perfection, and yet,” he said, drawing the back of that same claw up the inside of my thigh, until it nudged between my legs against my clit.

My body reacted immediately. “Nia’n’an,” I whispered, giving a thoughtless hip thrust.

“Yes,” he hissed. “Drench me with you, Sloane.”

He grabbed my arms at once and pulled them over my head to hold, suspending me enough that I had to stand on my tiptoes. I was struggling to rub myself against him, when he took over entirely, vibrating the smooth back of his claw from side to side, not just against my clit, but also against the entrance of my pussy, giving me the friction that I craved.

I groaned. “Fuck—this is easily the kinkiest thing I’ve ever done.”

“You taste so good, Sloane, keep going,” he said, breathing hard, and I knew then I’d definitely been asleep in spider anatomy class, but it didn’t matter because—

“Fuck!” I squealed, grinding as my hips thrashed. “Nia’n’an!” I rocked back and forth, fluttering my hips up and down, riding against him.

“Yes,” he growled, and picked me up entirely.

He planted my back against the wall over his head, and I knew what he wanted the second his tongue unfurled. I looped my legs around his shoulders, and he shoved the thing inside me.

I gave a guttural groan as I felt myself filled. One of my thighs knocked his translation device off, but that was okay. I didn’t think we were going to need it for a bit. His hands were cupping my ass, and I was pushing my hips at him, trying to get as much of his tongue inside me as I could. His teeth and fangs were fearsome, and I knew he was venomous or something, but I didn’t care, because I needed him so badly.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I hissed, feeling him move inside me.

The thick base of his tongue was as wide as one of his dicks, and the rest of it was also frighteningly prehensile. I could feel it rolling in me, in all sorts of ways, like an interdimensional sex toy.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered, feeling another orgasm coming on—and then he brought up his forelegs to use the backs of their claws to clasp and tug my nipples. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

It was like being trapped in a sex machine.

“Oh my God, Nia’n’an,” I whined. I pressed one arm above my head so I could thrust my hips out even further, and I dropped the other between my legs, where I knew he could clearly see. “Right here, Nia’n’an,” I said, frantically playing my clit with several fingers. “Sometimes you also need to touch me, *right-the-fuck-here*,” I said, and then I gasped, riding his tongue as I shouted his name. “Nia’n’an!”

My hips bounced between the wall, his hands, and his tongue, and I kept crying out until my orgasm subsided, and he pulled his tongue back into his mouth. I lay in his strong hands, panting, as he lowered me slowly before balancing me between my good leg, the wall, and one of his arms as he picked up the translation device and put it back on.

“I was worried you were going to make me drop you,” he teased.

“Who’re you kidding?” I said with a laugh. “We both know you never would.”

And that was the truth of things. I carried it with me now, deep in my heart.

“Are we mated now?” I asked him. “Is eating a girl out like the final boss?”

He tilted his head, and I knew I confused him—but I also knew he loved me. “No.”

“Can we hurry up and do that part, then?” I asked. I also tried to look innocent, but I was trash at it. I reached forward though with both hands, to trace fingers around that softer part of him and stroke the edges of the divots where his dicks were hidden with my thumbs, softly pushing in a little, wishing they would come out to meet me.

“Yes,” he said, and reached for my hands to keep them there.

Forty-Seven

NIA'N'AN



“I LIKE THIS,” I told her. I had had no idea I could put anything in there before.

“You do?” she asked with avarice in her voice. I adored her hunger for me—and I had wanted to mate her the entire way home. I would’ve gladly spent three hours mating her in the elevator if she’d told me she needed it, with one foot pressed against the doors-closed button that whole time.

“Very much,” I said—and so she kept going, pressing her thumbs into the indentations that my last pair would come out of. The sensation made me rumble, without thinking. “It feels strange—but good.”

“Good,” she agreed, her voice husky from the times she had already come, and her additional need. She popped her thumbs into her mouth one by one, and then put them back where they’d been, now stroking me with her spit, and I almost rocked back to sitting with the surprise of the sensation. She made a delighted sound, seeing that she’d stunned me, and licked her thumbs to do it again.

“Sloane,” I whispered. It was taking all of my strength to be patient and let her explore—but I couldn’t manage it any longer. My abdomen started making the rhythmic movements it needed to pump my last pair full—and she waited until the last minute, teasing me from the inside out, making my extending pair push her thumbs aside.

“Do you have any idea how hot that was?” she asked me, looking between my sexual organs and my face. “It’s like you

can't help yourself, like there's these parts of you that *have* to see me."

"They do. They need you. Just as much as the rest of me."

But what I would ask her to do soon would be extraordinary, and I did not want to hurt her. I created a resting web for her, anchored to three of the other walls of the room, a place where I could lay her down safely.

"Have patience with me, my love," I asked of her, and then stood in front of her, moving my hands to take my pair, one to a fist.

She sat up in my web, her jaw dropping in that way I now knew meant that she was excited. "Oh, Nia'n'an—that's hot. Work yourself for me—keep going."

I could hardly stop. This "fuck train" as she had deemed it once, would not be over until I was locked inside her.

But I needed to lubricate her first, especially her tighter hole, and this was the easiest way I could think of to do it.

I closed my eyes, leaning back, thinking of what it would be like to finally bond with her—and then her hands were there, pulling at my tips, also stroking.

I growled, almost sagging forward, so willing to let her lead me.

"You like that?" she asked breathily.

"Yes," I groaned.

"Good. I want to make you feel good, Nia'n'an," she said, nodding quickly. "I want to make you feel like you make me."

Could any more perfect words have fallen from her lips?

"I always want to make you feel good, Sloane." I stroked myself harder, for her sake. I needed to express myself, so that we could be together as we were meant to be.

"You already have, and you will," she promised.

"Yes," I said, but it was in a tone the translation device didn't carry.

What I meant was: *Yes*, you are mine. *Yes*, we will mate. *Yes*, we will marry.

Yes, every piece of you will soon belong to me.

I grunted, pumped, and released, strong and hard, spraying myself all over her smooth and lovely soft skin. My silvery cum reflected the dim light of the web-covered overhead bulb, so it looked like I was writing on her with ink known only to the two of us.

Her breathing was rough. She'd watched me complete—and I knew she was ready for our final seal.

I reached forward and scraped my cum off of her until I had a good handful, and then I lifted her hurt leg with its hard cast up, putting her ankle over my shoulder, before lifting her to take her bottom leg to wrap around my hip and web her to me.

“My love, give yourself over,” I said, and reached down to spread my cum on her most intimate of places.

Forty-Eight

SLOANE



“I WILL GO SLOW WITH YOU,” Nia’n’an promised—and I knew he meant it, even though I could feel his slippery thumb working against my asshole.

Turnabout was fair play though, I guessed—and it wasn’t like I minded.

He reworked his web then, creating a netting between me and the wall—but I had a feeling if he was going to mount me like he wanted to, a football-field-sized cushion wasn’t going to be enough.

My wonderful-fucking-soon-to-be-spider-mate wanted to rock my world.

“Is that good?” he asked, checking in.

Just when I thought I couldn’t love him anymore.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Keep going.”

He was spinning his thumb inside of me and—I realized—getting a good layer of his oddly pretty spider jizz everywhere.

Now that I wasn’t going to have to wear his ashes in resin . . . maybe there was a future for me on Etsy, with charms full of spider cum. I giggled, and he paused.

“Are you all right?”

“I am.” I beamed up at him. “I was just thinking of forever.”

“I am too, now,” he said, pulled his thumb away from me, and brought both of his dicks to bear. I could feel them nudging up against their respective holes, pushing in.

I groaned, and Nia’n’an leaned forward. “I know, Sloane,” he said—and I was so happy I could understand him. “You feel so good when you take me.”

If other women had known he could do this, he would’ve had a line around his apartment complex for three city blocks.

And then when he started spinning his dicks in small circles? “Oh my God, what the fuck,” I whispered, my head rolling back.

“Do you like that, my love?” he asked.

All I could do was nod my head and moan as he slowly spiraled deeper.

It was good—but it wasn’t good *enough*. All of my orgasms had been fantastic, but they’d done nothing to abate the horniness deep inside my hips, where I needed him to be. “You’re—it’s—” I started, trying to explain and losing words with each of his strokes. “I—I need it,” I whined. “More—get it in me.”

“I am quite a bit larger than you, my love. Have patience.”

“No,” I said, pouting. “Don’t wanna. Need—” I started, but then he slid the final few inches in, and the pressure stole away my breath.

“Is this what you needed, my love?” he asked, and I didn’t know if he was being literal, or deservedly sarcastic.

All I could do was squeak “Yeah” and nod my head, and find things to hang on to.

He growled, and from the first stroke I knew I was in trouble.

Everything that’d been happening for the past half hour or so?

All the orgasms, on both of our parts?

Foreplay.

Just the appetizer.

And now we were on the main course.

My jaw dropped and I groaned thoughtlessly as Nia'n'an thudded into me. He was using his hand wrapped around my thigh, and the rebound from the webs he'd put me in, while shoving himself forward, and moving his other hand's thumb to stroke my clit.

I'd heard the phrase "fuck me stupid" before, but I'd never gotten to experience it. It was just as strong a high as any other drug I'd ever taken, and I looked forward to getting to do it nightly, and maybe afternoonly too, for the rest of my entire fucking life.

"Oh—G—G—God—" I stuttered, as he rammed his two huge fucking dicks in and out of me.

I trapped his wrist right where it was with a hand, so that he kept rubbing the exact right spot. I was either going to come again or actually meet God—the first—no, the second—

"Fuck!" I shouted out, as another orgasm took me, making me kick my good leg against his hip, and my toes curl inside their cast.

He chuckled at that, but he didn't slow.

The fuck train we'd been on before? When we were all swinging so sweetly in the crystal cavern?

That was the kind of train you got to ride to see the animals in the kiddie part of the zoo.

The train we were on now was some sort of dual-pronged bullet train that was going to crash. I just kept making a low moan, taking all the sensations in.

"I'm going to pump you so full, Sloane," he warned me, without a single break in his stride. "When I am finished, you will be leaking my juices for days."

My eyes rolled back in my head at the thought of it. I hadn't gotten to see his pretty cum drip out of me when we'd been in the cavern; he'd made me bathe and leave too quickly,

but now I couldn't wait to see it staining the insides of my thighs in its pearlescent hue.

“I will have claimed you so thoroughly, my love, that anyone who sees you at my side after this will have no doubt.” He punctuated this with a thrust, after which he then rode me against him, keeping us sealed tight.

“Oh God, Nia'n'an,” I hissed, curving forward. His dicks didn't stop moving, though; they were twisting inside of me—rubbing one another, I realized, through my soft walls. “Fuuuuuck,” I pleaded.

“Relax, my love,” he warned as his dicks worked at getting himself off *in-fucking-side* of me with precision.

One of my hands flew up to my mouth so that I could bite my fingers rather than scream. His dicks twitched and jerked and plunged and spun—now that he wasn't thrusting with them, they moved on their own, seeking their release, one by one, using me and each other, everything building.

“Oh my God, Nia'n'an,” I hissed again, probably for the fortieth time this evening.

“I'm so close,” he said, throwing his head back. “So close to making you my mate.”

Just hearing him say those words was such a fucking turn on. “Yes,” I begged him. “Please—please—p—pp—*ppplease!*” I howled, forced to have another orgasm.

I cried out and ground myself against him, feeling fluids spray from between my legs and down his hips. One of his dicks was right-the-fuck on my G-spot hard, and he'd made me squirt.

“Oh God!” I shouted—and at that he began to snarl.

Forty-Nine

NIA'N'AN



SLOANE HAD GONE from tasting like *belonging* to *destiny* which was something I knew I would never manage to explain to a human man. Yet my tongue had found it in her nonetheless—and it was time to claim it.

Up until that moment, I had kept my last pair pumped by circulating, sending fluids in, and pulling fluids out—but right then, as Sloane clamped down on me again, spraying her own juices everywhere with the force of it, things changed.

Valves became one way, stiffening, and everything I poured into my last pair stayed there.

I groaned such a groan then, it echoed all around us, and surely had any other of my kind heard, they would have known that I was close to coming.

It felt like I was going to burst inside her. Her walls were pressed all around mine. I was so full I could neither push myself in further nor retract myself out.

I both wanted this moment to last forever, because I had waited for so long for it to happen—but almost as much, I wanted to be safely on the other side.

To live the entire rest of my hopefully long life with my love, my Sloane.

My hands clasped her hips and beat her against me, making her feel how full I was, for her, all for her, and then I could take it no longer, and my abdomen twitched, and I was coming.

Coming for as long as it would've taken for an echo to reach the very heart of Threadstone.

I bellowed again and again, my abdomen pulsing hard, forcing her full of me, so full she couldn't take it anymore and my cum leaked out around my locks and splattered on the floor, and I was—

Still.

Coming.

“My love,” I crooned. “My Sloane.”

I rocked us back and forth again, fast, and then slow, as the ferocity of my passions left me and my careful adoration of her was regained.

“My love,” I whispered more quietly, leaning over her with sudden concern, only to hear her moan.

She twisted to look up at me, with everything I needed to see inside her eyes. “I'm so full.”

“I know, my love. I've locked you to me.”

Had we performed it in midair, like we were supposed to, we would've been a sight to see, but it didn't matter. We were both untraditional now—the only thing that mattered was that we had each other.

“I love you,” I told her, running my hands up and down her body, soothingly.

“I know,” she said, and gave me an exhausted smile. “I mean . . . I could kind of tell,” she said, squirming in my lap, trapped to me, and she gave a soft laugh.

“And I have always loved you,” I went on.

A mating lock was a time for honesty.

“Ever since the first moment I saw you—I knew that you were meant for me.”

She grabbed one of my hands and brought it up to her face for her to kiss. “I can't quite say the same, Nia'n'an, so I won't lie—I was scared of you, for a little bit—and then I was scared

of how you made me feel. But I want to spend the rest of my life being in love with you. Is that good enough?”

“With you?” I asked her back. “Certainly.”

I TOOK off the translation device and held her carefully, talking in the words of my people, saying the prayers that were from an Arachnaea’s mouth to the Great Mother’s ears alone when a great mission had been accomplished. And when my swelling passed, I pulled my pair from her and she lightly hissed. A flood of my cum followed this, gushing onto the ground from both her places, and I steadied her on the web, while drawing more webbing forward, so that I could gently clean her.

“Are you all right?” I asked, after she had been quiet for a very long time.

“I am now, Nia’n’an,” she said with a drowsy smile, and then she looked at me and frowned. “How come you get to heal yourself overnight, and it’s going to take me weeks?”

I had a worried moment where I thought she meant the space between her legs—but then realized she was looking at her broken leg.

I picked her up, content at last, knowing we were finally mated.

“I don’t know, my love, but I don’t mind,” I said, nuzzling my hard head against her much softer hair. “I love to carry you.”

Epilogue



NIA'N'AN

“**ELLUM**, I consider you a friend, but if you come near my wife with that plant between your horns one more time,” I threatened the minotaur, who’d been chasing his own very long-suffering wife around for hours. Then again, she didn’t actually seem to mind . . .

“It’s the holiday, Nine!” the minotaur shouted, very drunk and very happy, over the commotion of his well-attended Christmas Eve party and the excited squeals of his many offspring.

“Throw me up in the air like at the park, Nine!” one of his children asked, tugging at my nearest set of legs.

“I cannot,” I apologized. “The ceiling is too low here, Ariadne.”

Ariadne nodded with understanding. “That’s because you throw higher than Daddy does. But we can go outside!”

“Wait, what? I heard that! There’s no way he throws higher than me!” Ellum said, appearing to defend his fatherly honor.

“He does, Daddy,” Ariadne said, with a child’s truthfulness, and then Ellum’s wife arrived, a woman who

matched Ellum's appearance almost completely, except she was a little smaller and had a ring through her nose.

"No throwing in the house, please!" she announced before giving Ellum a look. "Except for maybe you and me, later."

My minotaur friend pointed to the contraption he'd strung between his two horns with a sprig of greenery on it. "Did you notice I was under mistletoe?" he said, pretending like he hadn't had it on himself for the past three hours.

"Ellum! Give it a rest!" she said, but she was laughing, and she still let him kiss her. I sidled away from their family to go find my own.

SLOANE WAS TALKING TO ROYCE, who'd forgiven her for costing him ten million dollars. He would've still been mad at her if it'd been his helicopter that'd gone over the tower's side, but since it wasn't, it'd only taken six months.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but it didn't matter. When she saw me, she smiled with her whole being, and I ducked all the way into Ellum's kitchen so she could see me smiling back.

"Did you want anything else to drink?" I asked her. I noticed she'd only been drinking water all night. Spider metabolism didn't really work with alcohol so I never drank it, and it was icy out, which meant I was her ride besides, so there was no real reason for her not to indulge.

"Actually, I think I'm ready to go," she said, giving me a grin.

"So soon?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's," I said, herding her toward the doorway.

"But Ninnnnneeee," one of Ellum's other children shouted after me, realizing we were taking off as Sloane put on her coat. "I want you to throw meeeee!"

“I think it’s someone’s bedtime,” Ellum said, coming up with one hand out. “Have a great holiday, you two!”

I shook his hand, Sloane gave him a hug, and then we were outside.

I picked her up before she had a chance to slip. There was one boot print I recognized in the fresh snow surrounding Ellum’s home, but I decided to let it slide.

I couldn’t blame her father for still being protective of her . . . and to be honest, she was so precious to me that I didn’t mind his help. I couldn’t follow her every minute of every day without her noticing, and once I realized Arcus had a team of bodyguards on her, I’d webbed one into an alley and had a little chat.

I told him his people were welcome to keep working, but if she ever found out she was being followed, I’d pull them apart limb from limb and then dissolve them with my acids so their bodies were never found.

They were a little less noticeable to me after that, and Sloane had never caught on.

“You’re really good with kids, you know,” she said, distracting me from my thoughts.

“They’re fun.” Sometimes I did frighten children, but they seemed to get over it faster than adults, mostly because they were more naturally curious about everything.

Sloane squirmed in my arms. “There’s this thing I didn’t tell you, Nia’n’an.”

“Yes?” I asked, bending my head down.

“My dad asked me out to lunch.”

My clawed feet could manage the ice, but her saying that almost made me trip regardless. She’d invited him to our wedding and he hadn’t shown up—with the exception of her omnipresent bodyguards, he’d never given any indication that he cared.

“Are you going to go?” I asked her.

“It was yesterday.”

“Oh,” I said, continuing on, unsure how to feel.

“I didn’t want to lie to you,” she said. “But I didn’t want to worry you, either. And to be honest, I wasn’t sure up until the very last minute if I was even going to go.”

“You can make up your own mind where he’s concerned, Sloane. I just want you to be happy.”

“He . . . kind of does too. He believes we’ll last now, and I think he actually likes you—although, knowing him, you may just be a means to an end.”

We reached the entrance of our apartment building. “How so?”

“Well,” she began, and then waited until we were in the elevator together. “He wants grandkids.”

“I am not sure I understand.”

She used both hands to point at her own stomach repeatedly. “Like, from me. Seeing as I’m his only kid and all.”

“And what do you think about that?” I asked her, as the elevator let us off on our hall.

“I think it would be fun. But I’m not sure it can happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because it hasn’t happened yet. I’ve been off of birth control since I was kidnapped, and we definitely do it all the time,” she said, as I set her down inside our apartment, which was now much less web-decorated, and half set up for me, half set up for her. Her dogs rushed up to bark at both of us, and Mercy started gnawing on my leg.

“So you’re saying you’d like me to start using my sperm on you?”

Sloane blinked at me. “. . . yes?”

“There was some hesitation there.”

“That was the gap where I didn’t ask you what the fuck we’d been doing all this time.”

“Practicing.”

She stood still for a moment. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not, Nia’n’an.”

“I’m not,” I assured her.

She took a deep breath, held it, and then released it in a rush. “Okay. So. If you haven’t been giving me sperm, what’s that stuff you’ve been putting in me?”

“It’s very similar, it just does not contain genetic material. Just as all of your internal lubrication does not contain eggs.”

“So you can just decide whether or not to use sperm, is what you’re saying?”

“Well, I have to express it every month or so, so I do not become injured. It’s how I knew I’d become sexually mature, several years ago.” I went into the kitchen to retrieve my latest packet of web-wrapped sperm and brought it out to show her. “I assumed you’d ask me when you were interested in seeing it—is this not how humans work?”

Sloane put a hand to her mouth. “No. No it is not,” she said, and tilted her head. “Nia’n’an, where have you been hiding your sperm packets all this time?”

“On top of the fridge. Where the dogs can’t reach.”

Every once in a while, I could tell Sloane was thinking about being mad at me—or at least she was strongly confused—but then she did what she always did when we were confronted with our differences yet again: she laughed. “So I’ve been worried about being infertile, while you’ve been holding back your boys?” she said, her voice rising in an amused arc.

“It seems so?” I said, in slight apology.

She lightly groaned. “It is such a good thing that I love you, Nia’n’an.”

“And I love you, Sloane, truly,” I said, looking between the packet and her. “Are you saying you would like to have children with me?” I would give it to her now, if so. I could imagine no greater honor.

She nodded fiercely. “Yes, you great big, incredibly sweet goof.”

“Then let us—” I reached for her, ready to pick her up and carry her into our webbing room.

“Hang on,” she said, putting out one hand. “My dad’s concern was that things might not be safe. He had his research goons do their thing—there’s never been an Arachnaea and human mating before. Which is why he gave this to me,” she said, and then pulled something out of her coat pocket. It was a vial with pink tinged liquid inside.

“What is that?”

“It’s a compatibility-izer. A little science, a little magic, and he modeled it on a computer as big as his first house. He explained it to me, but I didn’t really pay attention—something about egg sacs versus amniotic fluid—only we’re both supposed to drink it, and thirty minutes later everything will be good to go for a week’s window. One baby that won’t hurt me, guaranteed, although I’ll probably need a C-section.”

I looked between the bottle, the packet of sperm, and then her. “Can I give you a new one?” I asked with excitement.

She grinned at me and cracked open the vial. “I’d expect nothing less.”

SLOANE

“You should’ve told me you wanted children earlier,” Nia’n’an said, once we’d both taken my father’s magic potion and I’d set a timer on my phone.

“I wanted to? But then after that first month, when I didn’t get pregnant, I got all up in my head.”

“Why?”

I decided not to lie. “Because I thought they might be important to you. And if I couldn’t do it . . .” I said, my voice drifting.

“You thought I would leave you?” he said, and then scoffed. “Take off your clothes, my love, and let me show you otherwise.”

“I didn’t say it was rational.” I kicked off my boots and shrugged out of my tops and started shimmying off my jeans. “Is there like a ritual to this?”

I was always finding out new things about Arachnaea—same as it seemed Nia’n’an was finding them out about humans.

“Not that I know of. Would you like there to be?” he asked, picking me up to carry me to the room full of webbing that I thought of as the “sex dungeon” in my head, even though it was well-lit and happy.

“Maybe?” I guessed. “Yeah. Definitely. I mean—let’s do something new, right? For us.”

“And whatever our future will soon be.” He nodded as he set me down, on the hip-height-to-him webbing he’d stretched across half of the room. “Actually, yes,” he said, mounting the web as well. “I have a feeling that this should be very precise work.”

He began tying my wrists down.

“You do, do you?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“Mmm. Very.” He made minute adjustments, and then chose to bind my breasts as well, winding stickier webs around them so that they were forced to present themselves to him, each of my nipples quickly popping into an erect little nub, which he then licked, curling his tongue’s tip around each one.

I purred, then shook myself, realizing we should talk more first. I wanted to set some expectations. “Wait—real fast,

Nia'n'an—you do realize we might need to do this more than once?"

"Not really," he said, before going back to licking my nipples.

I wasn't sure if he was unaware, or actually disagreeing. "There's nothing to say there's an egg up in there."

"You forget, I tasted you yesterday."

I looked at him, stunned. "You can tell?"

"Yes."

"And you never told me?"

"It did not seem like an appropriate topic of conversation," he said. "Or rather—I have never seen anyone else ever having that conversation before. Not in person, nor on TV." He lowered his face to be over mine. "Or is it something that a human man only tells his wife in private?"

"Uh, no—most human men don't know those kinds of things."

Nia'n'an made the pleased huffing sound he always did, when I told him how superior he was to human men—which he was in every way.

"So this is really going to work? Most likely? No guessing?" I asked him. I was excited, but also slightly panicked. I'd assumed we'd just be rolling the dice again—I didn't think the dice were loaded.

He ran his hands over my body, in an entirely calm and thus unfair fashion. "We can just practice again, Sloane. You will be fertile for years to come, and I am not going anywhere."

"It's just scary."

"More frightening than being eaten by monsters?" he teased, and I nodded truthfully. "More frightening than being rescued by one?" he went on.

"No," I refuted him. "That part was easy. Let my wrists go?"

He did what I asked at once, and I reached for him and he let me wrap my arms around his neck, and my legs around his hips, wrapping his arms around me as well.

“And you’re going to be with me every day and you’re going to help a lot and you’re going to love them, too?”

“Yes,” he said. “But not as much as I love you, of course. You will be my sun, and they will be my little moons.”

“More than one?”

“Eventually,” he said, and when he felt me tense he pulled back. “Sloane, it is only fair. Haven’t you heard? I can throw children very high. I shouldn’t waste that talent on just one child.”

I laughed, and he laughed, and then he kissed me.

My breasts were still bound, so they rode up against his chest plate as he pressed me to him, and whatever fears and final shreds of ambivalence I had melted away. “I love you,” I said, squeezing him tightly between my legs—and then I knew what I wanted to do. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes, my love,” he said instantly. “Why?”

“Because,” I said, wriggling back from him and onto the webbing again. “I want you to put both of your last pair in there.” I ran a hand down my stomach and pushed my middle two fingers into my pussy, by way of illustration. He paused, and then inhaled. “Nuh-uh. You said you’d trust me. This is what I want. You know it stretches yourself, and babies come out of there.”

He tilted his head. “No one on TV seems happy about that fact, however.”

“Less watching TV, more asking Sloane, please.”

Nia’n’an took that in stride. “All right, my love. What precisely does Sloane want?”

“Sloane, your beautiful and adventurous wife, wants double vaginal penetration. So bring both of your dicks over—unless your sperm comes out of a different hole?” It seemed important to ask all of a sudden.

“Same holes,” he said, with emphasis on the S.

“Oh good—then fucking double barrel me.”

We both heard the alarm on my phone go off in the other room, an innocuous little chiming sound that somehow signaled the beginning of the next phase of my life.

“As you wish, my love.” And he clambered up onto the web with me.

NIA'N'AN

I'd always created my packets early in the morning alone, before Sloane woke, knowing it was time to do so by the dull ache I felt inside myself where all my seed resided.

But now, to be full, and knowing that Sloane was willing to receive it from me?

I could already feel it rushing up, filling my last pair from base to tip as they emerged.

It was only her request that made me hesitate.

But I trusted her completely—and I knew if she changed her mind, she'd tell me.

Until then, it was my job to try and accommodate her mating desires, as much as was possible, and so I began to suspend her at once.

“Is this part of the deal?” she asked, as I lashed tethers for her to my very high ceiling, and when I was through, I reached for her to wind her into them, supporting her at her shoulders, hips, and stomach, so that she was lying comfortably in midair with her back up and her breasts hanging down—and then I bent her knees and tied them to her wrists, and her ankles to her thighs, and both her legs to a point above her, so that she was almost completely splayed out. “Oooh, Nia'n'an,” she said.

“I want access to all your holes quickly.”

“It’s so sexy when you say it like that.” She laughed—but then I gently spun her at my hip’s height, demonstrating that I could put one of my pair in her mouth, or turn her and mount her, and her eyes went wide. “Yes. Very yes. Start fucking me, please.”

“When you are ready,” I promised—and then started hauling her up into midair by the lines I’d hung her on. She gasped with surprise, rocking as she rose up.

“Nia’n’an!”

“I have a plan, my love,” I told her, and it was this: I tacked her line down safely, then crawled up the wall, across the ceiling, and out to her, flipping and then lowering myself, so that my face was first between her thighs. I licked her and she moaned, so I kept doing it, as I moved the rest of me around beneath her, until I was nudging one of my last pair against her lips.

She took it in at once.

I was careful. I knew I was much larger than she was and she could be easily physically overwhelmed, seeing as she was trapped, but she kept making appreciative moans, and so I rocked her above me, fucking her with my tongue and my anatomy in her mouth, in turns.

Then she started to squeal.

“My love?” I asked, pulling my pair away from her.

“Don’t stop!” she pleaded, and so I pressed on—and had the pleasure of feeling her coming, practically from her beautiful pussy all the way up through her throat, as she curled and bobbed above me. I waited until she was through and uncorked her, stroking a hand along her side as she hung her head to give me a heavy-lidded look. “How do I taste now?”

I had had visions of doing much, much more to her, but hearing the tone of her voice, I knew I ought to hurry to satisfy her—she was hungry.

“You taste beautifully,” I said, climbing up between her legs, and reaching for the webbing around her shoulders to pull her close to me. “You taste ready,” I said, dragging my tongue up the side of her neck, feeling her shudder. “You taste ripe.”

She twisted her head to look behind herself at me, the only movement she was currently truly capable of, and yet somehow with that one motion she controlled my entire being. “Nia’n’an, are you going to give me what I need?”

Her lips were swollen from how hard she’d sucked me, her breasts were still tightly wrapped, and as harmless as I knew she was by comparison, the juices that dripped from her body might as well have been my acids, for as dangerous as their delectable scent was to me.

“Yes,” I promised. “Immediately.”

I started twining my pair into a spiral to take her with at once.

SLOANE

Nia’n’an’s tongue came for my mouth at the same moment he nudged me open, and I let both parts of him inside. I swung forward with the motion of him pressing into me, and I realized how ingenious the way he’d trussed me truly was—I could only take as much of him as I was ready for; otherwise I’d just swing in space.

“My love,” he whispered, hovering above me, daubing himself between my legs, entering me bit by bit.

“My mate,” I purred back, feeling him pierce me.

“I wish to lubricate myself with you,” he said, pulling all the way out and making me moan, before fully entering me with one of his organs. I groaned, and then he did the same thing with the other. “Much better,” he said, before winding

them together again. “I did not think this was a good idea at first, my love,” he said, as he won another inch inside me. “But now . . .”

“I agree,” I said, smiling, feeling myself slowly claimed by him. “With the part where I’m a sexual super genius and all—”

“Obviously,” he agreed, before setting his teeth to my shoulder.

Nia’n’an would never use his acids on me, but sometimes he still acted like an animal—and those were the times I liked the most. I could feel his breathing speed up as his hips tried to enter me faster, making the both of us swing more and creating more friction.

“Oh, Nia’n’an,” I whispered, and then twitched against my ropes in the way I knew he liked, and started making high-pitched whines. They drove him mad, and him going mad drove me to insanity.

Wanting Nia’n’an was a constant, low-level thrum in my life. There were times when he could walk around a corner of our apartment and I would just have to throw myself at him. There were other times, which were much harder and sucked, where I would beg him to fuck me out in the wild, but he never would, except for one night when we were coming home late, and were alone on the subway—when he’d pressed me up against the door’s cold glass, lifted my skirt, and had his way with me in between stops.

But what was happening now, and knowing what it would lead to—

“I need all of you in me. You’ve got to make it happen,” I pleaded, moving my hips rhythmically. Now that I knew what was at stake. “I don’t want to lose a drop.”

He snarled and started pounding. I honestly didn’t know how much of him was in me, only that it felt a little deeper each time. “That’s—what—I—need,” I groaned with every stroke—and then finally the swing dynamics were such that we started acting in opposition to each other, so that I was

practically falling onto his twined dicks at the same moment he was thrusting up. “Oh God,” I howled—and he let go of the webs above us and wrapped his arms around me, taking us both up and back. I felt his claws scissor and new webs twist, and realized he was tying me against him, my ankles behind his waist, my knees spread wide across his hips, my pussy forced to take his fill.

One of his hands was holding a tender breast, the other was between my legs circling my clit, and my head fell back against his shoulder, ready to shout, as the tip of his tongue ran up and down licking the sweat up off my throat.

“So close, my love,” he whispered.

Close to what I didn’t know. There was too much of everything. I felt stretched, I felt claimed, I felt owned—my emotions rode me just as hard as he did, and everything was becoming a hot white blur.

“So close,” he promised again, this time panting, and I felt his hindlegs come up and grasp me, the feet beneath his claws clutching onto my thighs and hips to hold me still for him as he continued to pulse. He was winning me bit by bit, and all I could do was moan. “So—so—so—” he said with increasing volume as he thrust and then he snarled, lost for words, or just speaking something his translation device couldn’t manage.

And then with one more push he was all the way inside me.

Both dicks.

Just like in my cavern hopes and dreams.

“Nia’n’an!” I howled, coming. I managed to get one of my hands free, and I wrapped it around his neck, knocking his translation device off, but it didn’t matter, we didn’t need it anymore. “Oh my God—fuck,” I cursed, bowing forward against the webs he’d wrapped me in. I’d never felt this precise caliber of full before, and now I was in danger of knowing exactly what I was missing for the rest of my life, if anything happened to him.

“Don’t,” I threatened, not even sure what I was going to say next, as he started twisting his dicks against one another inside of me.

I had been to some decently attended orgies, and I had had sex with porn stars.

But no sex I’d had on this planet compared to what my double-dicked husband was doing to me right now.

So it made sense that I wasn’t even on the planet at all, technically—that we were spinning in space and he was spearing me, rhythmically rubbing his dicks both against one another and against me. I moaned, long and low. He was touching me in places I hadn’t even known I’d possessed, and while it often felt like I was in some sort of heat around him, this was motherfucking beyond. I wanted to scream, I wanted to cry, I wanted to come—I didn’t even think I could still manage words—and then he stopped.

“What’s—wrong?” I panted, as I sagged.

“Do you trust me?” His translation device had been caught in the webbing nearby, which is where I heard his question from.

I looked around the room, hoping he would register the fact that I was tied halfway in the air getting fucked six ways to Sunday by a monster that weighed at least ten times more than me. “Yeah?”

“Then relax, my love, completely.”

I did as I was told. I’d learned by now that when Nia’n’an wanted to do acrobatic shit, it was easier if I didn’t try to help. So I waited and felt him snip all of the lines, except the ones around my breasts, as he held me to him, and then tilted and very so slowly turned me on top of him, so that I was facing him as he moved my leg over to his far side.

“Two decades of yoga is really paying off here,” I said as he reworked a portion of his net around me now that I was straddling him, and moved to holding my waist as I relaxed back against his web.

“I wanted to see you. And I wanted you to see me,” he explained, reaching for the translator to pull it back on. “We don’t get to be like this often.” It was hard, what with the way his dicks were aligned. “Will this still work for you?”

I grinned and reached up to pluck at one of my nipples. “You just want to see my face when you put a baby in me is all.”

He shook his head in a grave fashion. “You yourself said it might not work, my love.”

I inhaled to argue with him—when I realized he was fucking with me. Literally, as in he started moving his hips against mine again, and sweet-fucking-Christ it was extraordinary, but also because for all of his spider-ly attributes, he was still a male.

“What I’m hearing is that you’re going to lie to me just to get the chance to fuck me more,” I said, without irritation. In fact, my jaw dropped as he throbbed forward, rocking my hips against him, as both of his dicks curled up inside of me simultaneously, like I was getting fingered by a giant. “Jesus—*fuck*—” I gasped and groaned.

Nia’n’an laughed, now that he was caught. “I just like to be very certain of things, my love.”

I rocked forward a little, making him dig in a little harder. “Oh—*God*—right there.”

He licked his thumb and dropped it to stroke my clit. His other hand held me to him, while his dicks kept working me deep inside.

The effect he had on me would’ve been entirely unfair if I didn’t know I had the same effect on him, too. He threw back his head, apparently lost to sensation, he groaned and his hand holding me trembled—except unlike me, somehow he managed to stave off coming.

“Nia’n’an!” I whined and moved against him as best I could, feeling my pussy grab his dicks again with a hiss.

He made a satisfied sound as he stilled and whispered, “Shhhh.”

I blinked, as a brief moment of post-orgasm clarity hit me. Was someone listening? “Shh? Why?” Usually he loved for me to be as loud as possible.

Between now and baby-having time, we were definitely going to have to soundproof this room.

“I’m just paying attention,” he said ... like that explained anything.

But I knew paying attention was one of his superpowers, so I played along, until he opened his eyes, and looked down at me.

“I’m trying to figure out what to do,” he said, sounding very earnest.

It was all I could do not to laugh. “Trust me, you’re already doing it.”

“No, Sloane—like, for reals, as you say sometimes. I have researched this before. In certain species of spiders, when their females are in estrus, the males mate with them for hours. Others just leave sperm and run and—”

“Now who’s panicking?” I cut him off, reaching up, so that he would hold me closer to him. He did so, pressing me to his chest, which made him move inside me in an entirely new delicious fashion, but I tried to stay focused on the moment, because my mate needed me.

“I don’t want to do the wrong thing. I do not know many others of my kind,” he confessed, “and these are things I have never discussed. There is me,” he said, gesturing at his human half, “and then there is this,” he said, waving his hand at everything else, “and sometimes I am ridden by urges I find hard to control.”

Which was probably why he didn’t want to fuck me in dark alleys.

Maybe also because when he made me come, it probably sounded like I was getting murdered.

“For all of the times that you don’t understand me, my love,” he went on, “there are almost as many times as I do not

understand myself.”

It was my turn to “Shhh” back at him. “Nia’n’an, no one ever knows what the hell they’re doing. Just because I’m human doesn’t mean anyone gave me an instruction manual.” I leaned up a little and bit his chin. He refocused on me then, but still seemed concerned. “If they had, it wouldn’t have taken me so long to find you!” Because my logic was unassailable, he relented some. “So even if it takes a few hours, or it gets weird, it’s going to be fine because I’m with you. And, in actuality, ‘getting weird’ is kind of like our entire relationship’s theme, because you have two dicks and they’re both inside of me,” I said, laughing. “Although, if I get to pick, I choose the mating for hours version of things. Though I really do want to see you make a sperm packet one of these days, because, like, what’s that, like a spider’s version of coming into a sock?”

He tilted his head. “Why would someone waste sperm in a sock?”

“Exactly, Nia’n’an. Why indeed,” I said, full of a ridiculous amount of love for him.

It didn’t matter what we added into our lives, or how many children we brought into our world, this would always be us.

Hanging together by a thread, in the best possible way, for eternity.

“Fucking fuck me?” I asked him, grinning.

He bowed his head to mine again, and I knew he loved me too. “Yes, my love. Of course.”

NIA’N’AN

I should have put both of my last pair into Sloane in this fashion months ago.

I'd never seen her so sensitive before, and every movement I made inside of her set her off—even if my tongue hadn't told me she was ovulating, I thought I would've known it by her actions.

And I imagined each rhythmic squeezing she made as she repeatedly came as pushing the perfect egg down to meet me.

Her eyes were heavy lidded, and she was panting. "I feel like you're just torturing me now, Nia'n'an."

"I am preparing you for me." I leaned over and let my tongue loll out to lick her, in one steady stripe, from a pert nipple up to just beneath her ear. "Were I to torture you, you would know it," I said, but then began moving inside of her again, for her sake.

She took the opportunity to wrap her arms around my neck. "Okay, but, I'm not sure how much more of this I can physically handle—orgasms take a lot of energy, I'm feeling wrecked."

"I'm waiting for the right moment—but don't worry. After this I will nest with you." I already had elaborate visions of the space I would create for her in my mind. Billowing cushions of webbing, mounded in comfortable piles, in any configuration she might enjoy. "You need never leave this room, if you don't desire to. I will bring you anything you want."

She gave me a dreamy smile. "Piles of books and coffee? And you'll walk all the dogs?"

I nodded, then rubbed my pair inside her in that way that she liked.

"Not fair," she complained into my neck, but then her hips answered my call as she started making the small helpless noises I adored.

"You can give me one more, my love," I said, drumming my pair in quick succession inside of her. "I know you can. You're so close," I murmured. "Just give it to me."

I felt her tense and sway and then heard her groan. "Nia'n'annnn," she said, swimming her hips against mine, as I

felt her tug and release so pleasingly.

And then something switched inside me, as I went entirely still. Much of me was covered in ways to interpret my environment—so of course my last pair should be no different.

Which meant I knew that it was time.

She pulled away from my neck and looked up at me with dark eyes. “You’re either going to fight off a cave monster, or . . .” she said, letting go of me to fall back a little into the webbing I’d created for her with absolute trust.

“Or . . .” I said, as everything in my body target locked on her.

She bit her lower lip and then slowly let it roll out. My hips started jerking back and forth as I carefully held her, making her take both of my last pair, again and again. I would’ve worried about her, but she reached forward and pulled her thighs even wider for me.

“Get as deep as you can,” she urged me, before moaning as I did so.

“Yes,” I agreed.

Preparatory fluids began to leak through my channels—so much so that they filled Sloane and then spilled out, making it that much easier for me to slide in and out of her—and I realized something special was now happening.

When I was making packets, I was just satisfying a need. It was a way to release internal tension and ease a dull ache. But I’d never felt like this before. The ache inside had morphed into something primal, and the normal desires I felt for Sloane enflamed so high they urged me to wild action—

I fastened her to me without conscious thought.

I lashed her hips to mine with webbing, making the internal mating lock external, like I was hiding where we met from other males.

No one else could have her.

She was mine alone.

“Sloane,” I warned her, but she shook her head, and I felt every molecule of motion as that made her shift against me. I grasped her hips tighter so she couldn’t escape.

I wanted her still, I wanted her receptive, and I wanted her taking me. She was *my* mate and *my* love and her egg was *mine*.

“It’s all right, Nia’n’an,” she said, panting. “Just—let go.”

Yes.

A rough sound escaped my body as the organs that lived behind my spiracles compressed, hissing and hungry—and then her calves tensed, and kicked down against the forelegs they were looped over, as she tried to grind herself on me.

And that one small action broke through the haze that’d begun encompassing my soul.

I didn’t have to fight to keep her—even though I would.

All that was truly required of me was making her happy.

I tore through the webbings over my last pair and reached to touch the place she’d showed me so long ago, that I knew was special because it was very small, and she adored it when I rubbed her there.

“Come for me, my love,” I urged her. “Come one more time and make me a father.”

She ran her hands up into her hair like she sometimes did when words escaped her, and I felt her legs flutter with tiny kicks as she tried to hold things back but also bring them forward.

“My beautiful, beautiful mate,” I crooned, and then took off the translation device and tossed it aside. I would tell her what I said later, but for right now, I just wanted her to hear my heart and not my words. “You are the only woman in the world for me. Feel how deep I am inside you, because I belong there—because we were meant to be,” I said, and she moaned. “The second you come, my love, I will come too, and I will bathe you with me, so that you have no choice but to bear my

child. The seed I have for you is strong and it will take, because you are mine, and I will never have another.”

Her jaw dropped and she started crying out—and how much I *loved* those noises.

My love felt safe enough to sound like prey around me.

It attracted everything that was monstrous inside myself, and then humbled me with her trust.

And I knew—*oh, I knew*—I started rocking her on and off of me, as she made tiny thrusts and whined. “Nia’n’an—I’m—”

“Ready,” I growled, answering for her, tense—and when she screamed, I took her hard.

SLOANE

I came so hard I saw stars, then Nia’n’an started making deliciously guttural sounds above me. I knew he was giving me his load as his hips battered mine, and his dicks rubbed themselves inside me.

“Fuck,” I hissed, letting my head fall back, completely overwhelmed. “Just—just—oh God—fuckkkkk,” I cried out, and full-body came again as Nia’n’an snarled.

He growled, and then zipped out a line to pick his translator back up, putting it back on with a hand while he kept staring down. “Don’t move, Sloane.”

“I don’t think I can,” I said, shaking my head.

“Seriously, my love. Don’t.”

“Okay,” I whispered, then added. “Why?”

“Because,” he said as another groan ripped from his body, like it’d been pulled straight from his soul.

“Are you all right?” I asked him as I felt him piston inside me again. Fluids were pouring out of me now, and definitely spattering all over this room’s poor floor—which was never my problem, since Nia’n’an always was the one to clean it.

“Yes, fuck,” he said—which alarmed me, because he never cursed. “Fuck!” he howled, and then made another animalistic sound.

“My love?” I said, my voice arcing in no small amount of terror.

“It’s good,” he panted. “Too good. Just—just—” He groaned with a final jerk of his hips.

“Just?” I asked, reaching up for him.

He shook his head, breathing hard. “There are no words for what you do to me,” he said, and then set about beginning to let us down.

HIS PAIR RETRACTED and inverted by the time we were on the ground, but he wouldn’t let my feet touch the floor. He created a low bed for the both of us and set me carefully in it, then tied my knees together and tethered them to an anchor point on the wall, even as he cleaned the rest of me carefully with his webbing.

It took me a moment to gather what was going on—he was trying to make sure everything he’d put inside of me stayed in where it belonged.

“So it’s like that, is it?”

“It is,” he confessed, leaning over to kiss me, after taking his place beside me. I took his tongue in greedily and when he pulled back I smiled.

“I love you, Nia’n’an.” All I wanted to do now though was sleep for a million years.

“I love you too, Sloane,” he said, brushing a lock of sweaty hair off my forehead. “I just hope you still love me in a few hours.”

I opened up a sleepy eye. “Why? What’s going to change?”

“If your taste doesn’t evolve, I’ll have to mate you again.”

I opened up both eyes now, and stared him down.

“You just started ovulating yesterday, but usually you’re potentially fertile for several days. So if my first load is not to your egg’s liking, I must send more,” he explained.

I giggled. “Your tongue tells you all that?” I asked, and he nodded. “Well, first off, I’m realizing I get an obscene amount of head, for which, in hindsight, I am truly grateful. Second off, don’t worry,” I said, bringing his hand to my stomach. “My egg likes your sperm just fine. But you can wake me up to check later.”

I put my back against his chest and snuggled closely—but then I could feel him thinking.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, eventually.

“You know some things, and I know others.” I made the circle gesture in the air. He’d told me what it was that first night, when we were alone, and I was more than a little humiliated I’d told my dad to use it as a secret gesture to tell him to get safely off the tower—but then again, the chances of my father running into another Arachnaea and it coming up in conversation were pretty small, and since then it’d become our secret sign to one another.

“Less than a year ago, I went to Threadstone, fully expecting to die,” he said, and I twisted toward him. “And now, I am here, with you, like this.” He sounded mystified, and then he focused in on me. “You have made me the luckiest spider on the planet, Sloane. And if we find out you taste like you are taken, I will be the luckiest in the universe.”

I placed a hand on his fearsome jaw. “So you’re saying you *wouldn’t* lie to me, just to get the chance to trap me in here and mate with me endlessly for the next several days?” I asked with a grin.

Nia’n’an appeared to seriously consider this. “I do like the thought of that—although I would get you your phone, so you

could order whatever you wanted to eat and coordinate the dog walker. And I would need to create the optimal nest for you.” He cast his gaze around the room and I knew he was already thinking of it, before returning his attention to me. “But . . .”

“But?” I pressed.

“I don’t think I could lie to you, my love. I never do. I only tease.”

“I know. It’s one of the many reasons why I love you. So it’s a good thing you married a problem solver.” I turned over to kiss his cheek, before carefully removing his translation device from him, then I turned it off before tossing it across the room. “See? Now you can’t tell me a thing.”

Nia’n’an laughed at that—and then mated me again right then and there.

THANK you so much for reading *Guarded by the Spider*! If you want to read about Nia’n’an and Sloane’s time on the Subway, plus see art of the characters, please sign up for my newsletter at <http://www.cassiealexander.com/spider> !

The next book in the Monster Security Agency will also be mine, it’s [Guarded by the Kraken](#), coming out in July! If you’d like to read it as I write it live, please sign up to follow me on my [Ream](#)!

And make sure to go back and catch [Guarded by the Golem](#) and [Guarded by the Snake](#) if you missed them!

Here’s more information on [Guarded by the Kraken](#)!

A KRAKEN, A SCIENTIST, AND A LOVE UNDER PRESSURE...

As a kraken bodyguard, I rarely get human clients. When I do, the only way to protect them is to form a telepathic bond. I don’t like it, but after my wife’s death years ago I’ve learned

to build an impenetrable shield around myself and my emotions, until I meet my newest client. She's a scientist investigating an ancient relic on the ocean floor. The abyssal plane is no place for humans, but the job is the job, so I shut off my soul, bury my secrets, and link our minds.

The flood of her emotions takes me by surprise. I thought I would be in charge, but our bond is stripping us both bare, layer after layer, until she can see my bleeding wounds, and I can taste her unspoken desires.

We cannot be together. We can't even touch. She breathes air, and I live at high pressure at the bottom of the ocean. Our feelings bring us nothing but torment, and I know once she's on dry land again, I'll have to sever our bond.

But when she's betrayed by the people she's working for, and her life is in danger—I will not rest until she's safe in all of my arms.



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About the Author



Cassie Alexander is a registered nurse and author. She's written numerous paranormal romances, sometimes with her friend Kara Lockharte. She lives in the Bay Area with one husband, two cats, and one million succulents.

Sign up for Cassie's mailing list at

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