

Tracking the Spider

The flickering glow of the fire cast ominous shadows across the front of the library, but also gave him enough light to see by. Sliding the key into the lock, Darren let himself in, closing the massive door behind him.

It was only a minute later that he heard the wail of sirens, and another police cruiser showed up, followed by the fire department. Their efforts were valiant, but Darren knew there were no survivors to be found. Moving deep into the library, he dug around, looking for maps in the reference section.

It didn't take him long to find the one he needed. Pulling the slip of paper out of his pocket, he found a spot by one of the large bay windows and used the light of the fire to navigate. The coordinates went to some place in Oregon, so he ran back to the reference section to find a state map, then came back. Looking back outside, he saw that Louise now stood on the sidewalk, clutching tightly to her brother as the world burned down before them, the steeple now collapsing into the building. A crowd was gathering, and he hoped nobody got the bright idea to use the library as a command center or anything similar.

Tracing his finger along the state map, he frowned. The coordinates were in the middle of a large state park, Deschutes National Forest. In the middle of nowhere. It made sense, from a certain standpoint. Wherever this was, it was remote, and people would be unlikely to go there. He folded it up and slid it into his back pocket, then picked up the US map and looked over it.

"Not the roads, not the roads." It would make more sense for Ana to take a car, but she had left on foot, and he doubted she even knew how to drive one. If anything, she would be hitching a ride. But how and where? Train maybe? The nearest tracks were north of here, and they went into Washington. No, hitching a ride on a train made little sense.

Moving his finger along the map, he left to grab a pen, and then came back. If she stuck to wilderness, there were a couple of paths that made sense if she knew they might follow her. He drew a few possible routes, then looked at the map again. She was likely headed to Interstate 84, so where would she get on?

He tapped his fingers. There were two possibilities, but how quickly could he get there?

"If it was me, I would go here." Dwayne leaned over and tapped one of the towns just outside the forest. "Keep to the woods and then catch a ride."

"Nah, fuck that. She's got the advantage of terrain if she sticks to the woods." Hayden sat across from Darren, his feet up on a chair. "Think about it. How quickly can she move, anyway? Bet she can jump straight up in the air, maybe twenty feet."

"She'd be vulnerable along the highway though. Lots of open land for her to traverse. I bet she hitches a ride here." Dwayne took the pen from Darren and circled the town again.

"Fuck that. Straight line." Hayden leaned forward and took the pen from Dwayne and scrawled a path along the topography.

"Not a straight line," Little Mike added. He stood at the window, the eerie light of the fire illuminating the books behind him, but not Little Mike himself.

"It's a metaphor, you dick." Hayden made to throw the pen, but Dwayne took it and gave it back to his brother.

“Looks like you got some choices little brother.”

“Yes.” Darren stared at the map, feeling the minutes go by. The front door of the library opened, and heavy footsteps echoed through the library. He knelt down, hiding beneath a table.

“Darren?” It was Sheriff Walters. Darren stood and saw the sheriff searching for him, his body illuminated by the flames outside. “Where are you, son?”

“Here.” He waved, and Walters joined him. “She’s headed to Oregon.”

“But why?”

“Um... family, I think.”

“That aunt of hers. You never saw a woman so fine.” Walters grinned for a second, then went blank. “So what’s the plan?”

“Find her first. Protect her from the men who did that.”

“And then?”

“Depends on what she wants.” He doubted the men worked alone, and there would be others. “She’s headed somewhere safe.” It wasn’t a lie, but Darren didn’t know if it was the truth either. He had no idea where they were going.

“Well that tears it.” Walters looked at Darren. “How you gettin there?”

“I, uh...” Darren scowled. “I can hitch a ride.”

“Nonsense.” Walters pulled a key from his pocket and handed it over. “You know where my house is, yeah?”

Darren took the key and looked at it. “A motorcycle?”

“Can’t give you my cruiser, that’d be too obvious, and everyone knows my truck.”

“But not the cycle?”

Walters frowned and then let out a sigh. “Bike’s not mine, it’s my son’s. He... I can’t bear to look at it, and I ain’t ever gonna ride it. He bought it before he shipped out, kept telling me he was gonna come home from the war and use it to cruise across America, maybe find himself a lady and put some grandbabies in her. I... uh...” He cleared his throat. “I think you’re gonna need every advantage you can get, and you need to go soon. This whole town is gonna be lit up with Lookie Lous, and I want you out of here before dawn.”

“Yes, sir.” Darren pocketed the key.

“Also...” Walters swallowed, his eyes on the fire. “There’s a bag with the bike, some of my son’s things. I don’t want them, so feel free to help yourself.”

“Your son’s things?”

“From the war. They couldn’t bring his body back, but a squadmate of his brought them when he came home, poor kid was only nineteen and left an arm behind in Albany. I suppose that arm is still lying there, somewhere in the mud with my son. He thought he was doing me a kindness, but...” Walters suddenly looked older, the spirit sucked from him. “You can take those too.”

“Thank you, sheriff.” Darren took the man’s hand and shook it. “I had better go.”

“Yes. I suppose you should.” Walters looked out the window. “Give em hell, son.”

“Yes, sir.” Darren made to move, but Walters grabbed him by the arm.

“Take care of yourself. You bring that girl back to us, you hear?”

Darren nodded, unsure if he could keep that promise.

He snuck out the back and followed the river for to avoid the streetlights. He wasn’t sure who might be looking for him, or even what story Walters had given, but he couldn’t afford to be seen. With every step, he could feel that feeling in his gut, the one that was both hot and cold at the same time.

It was rage. The last time he had experienced it was in a bar in Alabama. He had put at least three drunks in the hospital using skills he had honed on the battlefield to knock out a guy who had slapped a girl in a bar. The night had been hot and muggy, and the patrons of the bar had cheered on the local boys when they had dog piled Darren, but they were all soft, college boys who dodged the draft with money that they now wasted on beer and hotrods, fat college fucks who felt they were entitled to whatever life offered them, and he had made them pay before skipping town.

Jeffrey and Cyrus had tried to kill him and were now after Ana. He wouldn’t abide by it. His fists clenched, but Dwayne’s hand squeezed his shoulder.

“Easy brother, save it for the mat.” It was an old reference to their wrestling days, when Darren used to let his opponent’s shit talking get to him. It had been an awful habit back then, and he couldn’t afford to let it get the better of him now.

He relaxed, letting the anger go. Cutting across a few roads, he was finally out where he could run, and he headed for the edge of town, where Walters lived. The sheriff had a long driveway hidden from his neighbors by trees and shrubs, and he stood on the sheriff’s front porch, listening to the night around him. The insects were singing, the air full of their lullaby as he lifted the door to the garage.

There was a large tool bench in the back of the garage, surrounded by cardboard boxes. In front of it was a large object covered by a tarp.

Darren ripped the tarp off and heard Little Mike whistle appreciatively. It was a Harley, and still looked new, other than some dust on the seat. He put the key in the ignition and mounted it, his heart slamming against his chest. He twisted the key, but another hand covered his.

“Check the bag first,” Dwayne reminded him, pointing to a dark green lump in the corner. It was a duffel bag, much like Darren’s. He dismounted and went over to it, kneeling down to see what was inside.

“Shit,” Hayden said, then chuckled. “It’s nearly a full kit. Looks like it was hardly used.”

Darren swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He was touching the belongings of a dead man, one who had died before Darren himself had set foot on Vietnamese soil. Digging through the contents, he pulled a canteen, a knife with a compass, and then a military jacket. He put the jacket on. It was a little too big, but it chased away the chill.

He stuck a few rations in his pocket and then found a few bucks at the bottom of the bag. Leaving behind what he didn’t need, he got back on the bike and wheeled it out of the garage. Darren pushed it down the driveway, waiting until he was out on the road before starting the engine. It started

without a problem, as if it had been carefully maintained. Walters said he had no use for it, but Darren wondered if the old man had been keeping it ready to go on the off chance its owner came home after all.

He kept it slow at first, getting a feel for the chopper beneath him. Picking up speed, he enjoyed the sensation of wind rushing through his hair, his heart pounding in his chest. He hadn't been on a bike since before the war, when his buddy Eddie had bought one and they had taken turns on it all summer, cruising through town and trying to impress local girls.

"Eddie was a huge fuckwad though," Dwayne whispered in his ear.

"Yeah, he was." Darren caught a brief glimpse of the city limits sign, then narrowed his eyes and hit the throttle. He needed to make up for lost time, to get to Ana before the others did. He could feel it in his blood, a longing with no explanation, a strong desire to put his life on the line for her. In their final moments together, she had spared him, proof that she was human enough.

And she deserved to survive.

"Where to?" Hayden asked, his voice a whisper in the wind.

Darren thought back to the map. There was a little town on the other side of the forest, not far from the highway. Hayden was probably right about Ana going straight through the woods, but even if she was, he could still check the town just in case. It was a hunch, a feeble whisper in the back of his mind, but he knew he should listen.

He blew onto the highway going nearly eighty, his eyes squinting against the wind.

"Jesus H. Christ." Jeffrey's voice was little more than a whisper, but at least he could speak.

Cyrus, on the other hand, was absolutely gob smacked. They had used the pocket watch to follow Darren's timeline, taking turns on the trail while the other lagged behind. Jeffrey had puked twice, but Cyrus had held on, his stomach doing flip flops all the way through the long and twisted trail into the woods. Now, after climbing over large rocks in the dark, they were using flashlights to watch the mating habits of an arachne in reverse.

"I don't... I just..." Cyrus shook his head. They had expected to see the arachne meeting up with the soldier, but nothing like this. He leaned over and retched, his last meal too long ago to give him much substance. Jeffrey knelt by his side to support him.

"Easy brother, easy." Jeffrey patted him on the back. "Just breathe, you got this."

Though the sight was sickening, what bothered Cyrus most were the implications. "She mated, Jeffrey. There will be more of them if we don't—"

"Easy." Jeffrey pulled Cyrus back up on his feet. "We're here now, we can track her. Turn that fucking thing off."

"Right." Cyrus snapped the watch closed, and the vision of the arachne mounting Darren faded from view. The nausea faded instantly, and he took a deep breath, the cool, night air soothing his throat. "We need to get to her, before she can lay her eggs."

"How long until that happens?"

“About three days, if I remember correctly.” He thought back to the massive file he had gone over a dozen times before setting out to hunt the arachne. “After mating, an arachne typically eats her mate, not out of spite, but hunger. If she didn’t eat the soldier, it means she either has food nearby, or she will have to hunt. That will slow her down and give us time to catch up.” Pulling a cylindrical rod from his coat, Cyrus knelt on the ground. “See if you can find anything of hers. Fluid, chitin, spit, and we can use this.”

“On it.” Jeffrey swept his beam across the clearing and Cyrus joined in. Several tense minutes passed, and eventually Cyrus caught a glimmer of light reflecting on the ground. He knelt down and drew a dagger from his boot.

“What do you have?”

“Um...” Cyrus used the tip of the blade to lift the fluid from the ground. It was a rosy, opalescent substance that stretched several inches before snapping free of the hard ground. “No idea, but I’m sure it didn’t come from our boy.” He slid open a notch in the tube and scraped the fluid inside, then flipped it over to turn a dial. The tube emitted no beam, but the area lit up with odd footprints that crawled all over the stone.

“Look around the edges, see if we can find an exit point,” Cyrus told his partner. Jeffrey circled around, then pointed up. A series of prints went up and over the stone.

“This is going to be frustrating.” Grabbing a handful of stone, Jeffrey scrambled up wall and pulled himself to the top. “Bitch can climb.”

“Help me up.” Cyrus waited for Jeffrey to undo his belt. It was wrapped around the man’s waist almost three times and easily covered the distance into the cave. Jeffrey lowered it buckle first, and Cyrus made a quick loop out of it and put it around his wrist. Jeffrey pulled, and Cyrus held on, walking his feet up the wall. Once at the top, he handed the buckle back, and Jeffrey slid it back through his pants. Pointing the cylinder forward, they followed the tracks until they disappeared over the edge of a large boulder. Tilting the beam upward, Cyrus spotted a handprint in the tree above.

“This is going to be a pain in the ass.” He turned to Jeffrey, a large grin on his face. “But doable.”

“Too bad we can’t use the truck.” Jeffrey knelt down and tightened the laces on his boots. “But I’m always up for a hunt on foot.”

They wandered into the wilderness, ready for a fight.

Ana cracked her eyes open, letting out a quiet yawn before flipping over and tumbling down through the forest canopy onto the ground below. Her legs splayed over the carcass of the deer she had eaten the night before, its shriveled husk twisted and barely recognizable. Beneath the deer was a pair of raccoons and a wrinkled fox. Yawning again, she rubbed her belly, feeling the muscles stretch uncomfortably beneath her skin.

The quickening had already begun. Her organs were shifting about to make room for the clutch she would produce, her unfertilized eggs now swelling inside of her.

After leaving Darren behind, she had moved through the forest, doing her best to avoid the roads. The Order would be after her, and she had picked the rockiest terrain she could find. Even if they tracked her, no man could move across the rocks like she could. Deviating into the forest whenever

possible, she weaved a pattern through the trees and rocks that would be nearly impossible to track, knowing that they would somehow find a way. They had magic on their side, after all, and she would need every advantage she could get.

However, the act of mating had made her ravenous, and she finally stopped to hunt, draining several animals before nodding off up in a tree.

She yawned again, her jaw cracking. She had been asleep for only three hours and was already hungry again. Extending her senses outward, the movement of a large animal could be felt across the ground, nearly a quarter of a mile out. Leaving the wheelchair behind, she took to the trees and tracked it down.

Excited that it could be a deer, she was extremely happy to discover the beast was a roaming black bear. The bear sniffed the air, sensing the danger but unable to place it. Ana waited for it to move beneath her, weaving the start of a large net. While comparable in strength to the bear, its claws and teeth could easily tear through her skin, and she didn't dare waste any energy on growing armor on her skin. She needed to remain hydrated and mobile, especially with the Order on her back.

The Order. Was that a problem that would resolve itself once she was on Emily's land, or would they wait her out, either finding a way in or luring her from her new home?

The bear let its guard down, sniffing at the ground in search of a snack. Ana dropped from above, catching the bear off guard and slinging the net over its head. Its thick fur prevented her from biting it right away, but her webbing had already tangled up the beast, its upper body now tangled up in the sticky web. It let out a roar of surprise, then growled in anger when Ana pinned it down with her legs and ripped out a hunk of fur by its neck.

She sank her teeth in, injecting it with the paralytic and digestive enzymes. The bear went limp, and she lifted it onto her shoulders and scrambled back into the tree and toward her campsite. Once back, she gathered up all of her gear, making sure that all the parts of her wheelchair were still there. She had nearly lost one of the front wheels while dangling from a cliff face and needed to keep her disguise intact.

Ready to go, she strapped the collapsed wheelchair to her back and then sank her teeth into the bear, sucking it dry while squeezing it with her arms and front legs. The sweet, buttery taste of bear fat filled her belly, and when she was finally done, she tossed its shriveled carcass on top of the others. Licking her fingers off, she went back into the trees, absently rubbing her stomach.

Even now, less than twenty-four hours after mating, she could feel the small lumps that were forming in her abdomen. Her clutch wouldn't be very large, she had been far too malnourished when she had finally given in to her urges.

Her stomach twinged, and she winced, rubbing the spot with a couple of fingers. Once the eggs came, then what? There was a strong instinctual drive to protect them, but did she really want to be the one to restore the arachne race to the world? Her own sisters had been monsters in their own right, abducting travelers and vagrants to feed on them even at a young age. With her desire to mate finally quenched, she had been bathed in the ice-cold waters of clarity.

Logically, she should destroy them, but could she bring herself to do it? Rubbing her belly once more, she thought about the life that was developing within. Each egg was a potential lifeline, the

answer to her own brand of loneliness. As a mother, could she instill her own values on her children, or would they be driven by instinct instead?

These questions and more ran through her head as she moved through the trees, listening for signs of humans or wildlife. Small animals became victims to her hunger as she ate her way across the forest, finally emerging on the edges of a small town. Surrounded by prairie along the edges, she figured it would be best to sneak a ride. Sticking to the shadows where nobody would see her, she reassembled the chair and reluctantly backed her abdomen into it, her legs folding up. The fit was a bit tighter already, the result of a slightly swollen belly.

With a sigh, she put her glasses on, feeling her senses dull. Pulling her secret stash out of the chair, she realized that the slip of paper with Emily's coordinates was gone. The good news was that she had the numbers memorized, and she could only hope she had lost it somewhere it couldn't be found by her pursuers.

She was getting sloppy.

Pushing the faux joystick, she rolled through the middle of town, keeping an eye out for larger vehicles that she could sneak a ride on. This town wasn't too far from Interstate 84, and if she could hitch a ride on an unsuspecting semi truck, she could cover ground much faster and get off somewhere in Oregon.

The wheelchair was a bit of an eyesore for the locals who eyed her with suspicion, but they were quick to look away when she met their gaze. While she felt fairly suspicious, this was still far preferable to strolling through town on eight legs.

Traffic seemed to pick up on the south side of town, and she slipped between a pair of buildings and watched the road. There was a large gas station near the edge of town with an attached diner. Looking at the sun, she figured it was at least a couple of hours until sunset. Rolling her eyes, she went back into town, trying to find somewhere to hide comfortably. There was an assortment of small shops with crisscrossing alleyways, and she wondered if she needed to just hunker down behind some boxes or a dumpster and pretend to be a vagrant. It had worked before, but this town was small enough that someone might realize that she was new here.

Her face broke into a smile at the sight of a bookstore on the corner. Grateful that the door was large enough for her chair, she rolled inside, the bell above her dingling, and immediately began browsing through a stack of books by the entrance.

Would she be able to read, once in Oregon? Was there any way for her to connect to the human world, or would she spend the rest of her days in isolation from the humans that fascinated her so? Frowning, it occurred to her that she had underestimated just how much her life would change. How often would Emily come to visit her? Would she bring gifts, such as books, to help Ana pass the time?

In safety lie isolation. In community, danger. Scowling, she wondered how hard it would be to lay a trap for the Order, maybe snap their heads off and leave their bodies in the woods somewhere. She could go back to her regular life, working at the library.

Then again, what about Darren? She rubbed her eyes and sniffed. What would have happened if she had let him come with her? For certain, they wouldn't have traveled nearly as far, and she also wondered if she would have consumed him in the night, desperate with hunger. Then again, if he had

come with her to Oregon, then he could have been her link to the world, a constant reminder of the humanity that she strived for.

No. He deserved better than a life of solitude, away from his own kind. With the Order sniffing around her nest, they would likely question him, but he didn't know anything, not really. If anything, they would probably find him as much the victim as anybody else and just let him go with a tall tale that nobody would believe.. If nothing else, humans were fairly predictable, and she would rest easier at night knowing that Darren was out there somewhere.

Picking up a romance novel, she traced her fingers across the body of the man on the front. He stood in the background, little more than a shadow, watching a woman in a black dress weep near the shore's edge. With her instinctive sex drive diminished, new feelings had come to the front. How did she feel about Darren now that she carried his brood? Clearly she had been using him, but now that she looked back on it, she couldn't help but miss his presence. Their faux dates had felt nice, giving her a strange sense of belonging that she had never encountered before.

She missed him. It was a difficult admission to make, but now that he knew the truth about her, and seemed to accept it, her previous trepidation at his presence was gone and she could view him in a new light, a light that now cast him similarly to the man on the cover of the book she held. Romance novels had never held much appeal for her, but now she was curious. Looking at the stack, she wondered how many she could safely carry with her.

Distracted, she unrolled some of her cash, her eyes flicking to the stack of books and back to her hand. Was this what she should be spending her money on? It wasn't like she could simply make more, that ship had clearly sailed. Later on, she would buy some human food from the diner to stall for additional time, waiting for the right truck to come along while munching on a burger or something else juicy. At the thought of burgers, her mind briefly flicked to Hannah at Mattie's.

Shaking her head, she collected a few of the more promising books and moved through the store. Her chair was too wide for a couple of the more stuffed aisles, and she let out a sigh of annoyance. Behind her, the bell over the door dinged, and she peered through a gap in the books to watch a young man in a hoodie step outside. Through the front window, she caught a glimpse of his face. It was pocked with scars, and he didn't appear to be either of the men who hunted her.

She let out a sigh of relief and resumed her shopping. She figured six books would be safe, then grabbed one more. Lucky number seven. She rolled through the shop some more, the squeak of her wheel her only companion. Satisfied that she had passed enough time, she paid for her books and left the store, and turned her attention to the diner.

It was still far too light out. Packing up the chair would take a couple of minutes, and she would need to make sure that her truck was parked away from the streetlights. She also needed to make sure it was going the right direction. Ending up in Wyoming would be bad news, especially if they got out on the plains.

Darren probably could have rented a truck or something, and let her sit comfortably in the cab. Or the bed. That wad of cash she had saved up would have easily purchased a used car or a van, and the two of them could have traveled in relative safety and comfort.

That was wishful thinking. Dreaming up alternatives to her current situation didn't change her reality, but in hindsight, it felt like she actually had some options. The truth of the matter was that she

had no way of knowing how Darren would react to her true nature, but now that he knew, she was fantasizing about what could have been, squeezing the bag of books in her lap.

A figure stepped out of the alley, a gun held casually in one hand. Her pulse raced at his appearance, and she turned her head to look up and down the road. Nobody was out, and not a single car could be seen. It was the man she had seen leaving the bookstore. What did he want with her?

“Go,” he told her, making his voice gruff on purpose. He waved the gun towards the alley and she saw that a wheeled dumpster was only a few feet away from them, and seemed to be where he wanted her to go. She had been so caught up in her own head that she hadn’t been paying attention, and she dutifully wheeled around the corner, her nose wrinkling. This man didn’t smell right. He was filthy, and likely hadn’t had a shower in weeks. Maneuvering her chair around the corner, she saw that the building actually had a depression where the dumpster was usually stored. The greasy tracks on the ground told her that the man had pushed it to create a private alcove, and she was more than a little impressed. The thing looked heavy.

She was less impressed when she saw a second man step out from behind the alcove, a knife in his hand. They had set a simple, but effective trap for her. The second man moved behind her where she couldn’t see him.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she said, letting her voice tremble.

Though Stinky was the one with the gun, his hands shook, and he pointed the gun roughly at her head. When he lifted his arm, the loose sleeves of his shirt slid back to reveal track marks all along the inner edge. He was a junkie. “Give me your money and I won’t.”

“My money?” She couldn’t believe it. He must have seen her pull the cash out of her pocket. Reluctantly, she held it out, and he snatched it from her.

“We could get some good money for the chair, too,” the second man said.

“I can’t walk without the chair.” Ana looked over her shoulder. The second man was bald, with tattoos up his neck. “Please don’t take it from me.”

“We don’t need the chair man, this is plenty.” Stinky pocketed the cash and lowered the gun. “She’s just a cripple.”

“Please, I need it to—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Baldy stepped in and punched her across the face, her glasses flying across the alley.

That was a mistake.

Her senses came alive, and she could smell the blood traveling through their veins and smell the warmth of their breath. Logic and reason were replaced by the rage of instinct, and when Baldie grabbed her chair and tried to lift it to tilt her out, her abdomen expanded and blew the chair apart, scattering it into pieces across the alley. Rising up on all eight legs, she kicked Stinky in the chest, sending him flying across the alleyway, then spun around to face Baldy.

Baldy had gone white, but was still very much in the fight. He swung his knife at her, but his movements were too slow, and it was a simple matter to grab him by his temples and twist his head until it faced the wrong direction. Baldy went limp in her arms, and her fangs were out and ready to

feed. However, when she drew close, she could smell the stink of drugs in his system, poison that she didn't dare imbibe. Disgusted, she dropped him.

A whimper from behind reminded her that Stinky was still there, and she grabbed one of his legs to drag him behind the alcove before anyone could see her. Holding him upside down, his shirt flipped inside out, revealing a gaunt frame covered in scars. He cried for his mother and she was about to break his neck too when a flash of silver caught her eyes.

A pair of dog tags fell from the junkie and landed on the cement with a clatter. Was the junkie in her arms a vet? She hesitated, her thoughts flipping back to Darren. Was this how he could have ended up? An addict, stealing from women in wheelchairs? The man dangling from her arms was openly weeping now, his face hidden by his jacket, so she swung him into the dumpster, his head smacking into the metal with a dull thud. He went limp, but was still breathing.

Her fangs retracted, and she looked around. She stuffed Stinky in the dumpster after retrieving her cash, then threw Baldy on top of him. With any luck, he would be too scared to say anything for fear of being accused of his friend's murder. Even if he did report that a spider woman had killed his buddy, the track marks on his arms would immediately discredit him.

Gathering up the pieces of her chair, she frowned. A few of the connecting pins had been bent, those she could fix quickly. However, more than a few had snapped in half entirely, meaning she had no good way to keep her chair together.

"Fuck." She threw one of the broken pins across the alley and did her best to push the chair back together. The pins were interchangeable, but there was now a weak seam on one side of the chair that threatened to pop open. Using some webbing, she lashed it into place before squeezing back inside. The webbing stretched, the wheel on that side tilting for a second before settling back in place.

Ana would have to be extra careful until she could replace the pins. A smirk crossed her face at the thought of trying to fix her chair. Once she was in Oregon, would she even need it again?

Distant thunder boomed overhead, and she looked into the sky. She could smell rain in the air and nearly taste the electricity. With a sigh, she slid her glasses back on, her world closing in around her. Maybe she needed to start thinking about what her life would be like if she could just be herself.

She crossed the road, her wheel squeaking even worse now. A car turned the corner, its lights briefly blinding her, then pulled into the diner parking lot.

It definitely wasn't Mattie's. Rolling up to the door, she was aware of eyes on her, and nobody bothered to hold the door open for her, so she pushed it with her free hand, then let it swing shut behind her. A disinterested woman in her forties led Ana to a free table, then picked up one of the chairs to let her in. It was a few minutes later before the same woman came back and set a glass of water in front of Ana.

"Know what you want?" She asked.

"I... haven't seen a menu yet."

The waitress rolled her eyes and peeled one off of a nearby table, pausing long enough to scrape food off of it using the back of a nearby chair, then tossed it onto the table. "Specials are on the back."

"Thank you." Ana shrunk down in her chair, holding her menu up. When the waitress was otherwise occupied, Ana traded places with one of the chairs so that she could keep her eye on the

parking lot and the front door. She picked out a large steak, then skimmed over the menu some more. It was a long time before her waitress returned, but Ana was fine with it. She put in her order, the waitress lifting an eyebrow when Ana ordered the steak extra rare.

Ana drained the glass at her table and had it refilled a few minutes later. The diner was only a third full, but the occasional truck wandered off of the highway and parked in the lot. Ana made a note of what direction they came from. A couple of good candidates arrived, but it was still far too bright out to make a dash for it.

That, and her steak hadn't come yet. Her stomach growled, and she realized that the steak might be the only thing she got to eat for a while. It wasn't like she could knock on the roof of the truck and just ask the trucker to pull over so she could catch a deer. She was thirsty too, and the waitress was now actively avoiding Ana's table.

Nearly thirty minutes passed before her steak arrived. The service was lacking, but Ana was hungry enough that she didn't care. She cut large pieces off and tried to avoid stuffing her mouth full, watchful eyes on the parking lot. Dusk was settling in, and a large white tractor trailer had just pulled into the lot. The driver was an older man who took off his hat and greeted the waitress warmly. Ana was glad to see that the waitress was an equal opportunity bitch, and was even more grateful when the man was seated at a booth that didn't look out the front windows.

Polishing off the last of her steak, she scanned the lot, planning her move, when two men walked toward the front door, their long faces painted in exhaustion. Ana quickly threw some money on the table and wheeled toward the bathroom, desperate to remain unseen. Chancing a quick look over her shoulder, she saw that one had stopped to scrape something off his boots using the curb, and they hadn't seen her yet.

She pushed her way into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

"Hold up." Cyrus paused to scrape dog shit off his boot. He hadn't been watching where he was going, his eyes scanning the area for tracks, only to step in a giant pile of shit.

They had lost her tracks on the edge of town, and Jeffrey surmised that she had changed back into her wheelchair. Luckily, it was a small town, and anybody who had been outside had seen the wheelchair woman rolling through. They had tracked her to the bookstore and decided that the diner would be a good place to stop and get some food. Though their task was urgent, Cyrus knew that neither of them could go for much longer without something to eat and drink. It had been a long night, and they were both exhausted.

Jeffrey watched Cyrus scrape most of the shit off his shoe before opening the door and holding it for him. The diner was full of truck drivers and a few locals. They took an empty table by the front door and waited for someone to bring them menus. After a few minutes, Jeffrey looked around and grabbed a menu off of an empty table nearby.

"Don't feel like waiting forever for our fucking food," he grumbled. When the waitress finally swung by, she didn't say a word and just looked at the two of them expectantly.

"Some waters, a salad for me, and a burger for him." Cyrus grabbed the woman's wrist before she could take off. "Oh, and something else. Have you seen a woman in an electric wheelchair today? She's a friend of ours, and we were supposed to pick her up but I think she gave us the wrong address."

The waitress looked at the two of them for several seconds as if making up her mind. "She's in the bathroom." The woman snapped up the menus and disappeared, leaving Jeffrey and Cyrus to turn toward the rear of the restaurant.

Out in the parking lot, the loud roar of a motorcycle passing by shook the windows.

"You've got to be shitting me." Jeffrey looked around. "If she's really back there, then..."

"Keep your voice down." Cyrus caught his partner's eyes. "We can't start a fight here, there are too many people."

"No kidding. Someone could get hurt." Jeffrey set his blade up on the table. "However, if she doesn't know we're here, we can wait, maybe get a bite to eat, and then follow her."

"Get a bite to... how long do you think she's going to be in there?"

"I don't know. She probably has to get out of that chair to shit, right?" Jeffrey drummed his fingers impatiently, casting glances toward the bathroom. "How do you suppose she fits in that damned thing anyway?"

"You should ask her before you..." Cyrus dropped his voice, noticing that the trucker behind Jeffrey seemed to be paying attention. "We need a plan."

"Do you think she spotted us?"

"Maybe. Even if she did, what is she going to do? Wait us out?"

"Wouldn't mind that. Could eat our meal in peace, then go hang out outside until she decides the coast is clear." Jeffrey picked up the knife again and slid it into his sleeve.

"Seems a little silly to just hide in the bathroom. At some point, someone is going to notice..." Cyrus stood up, a thought suddenly occurring to him. How did she fit in her wheelchair? Her body seemed a lot larger than the chair itself, yet she made it work.

"Wait here." Cyrus crossed the restaurant, trying not to run, then pushed open the door to the men's bathroom. Turning the corner, he faced a row of urinals and a doorless stall. Looking above the urinals, he saw a small window had been opened for ventilation.

"Shit, shit, shit..." he muttered under his breath, exiting the bathroom and casting a look at Jeffrey. Jeffrey stood up and came toward him as Cyrus pushed open the door to the women's bathroom. Some patrons turned their heads to see what was going on, but it no longer mattered what they thought.

The women's bathroom stank of cigarette smoke and ammonia. There were three stalls along the wall, and a small window just above them. Cyrus squatted down, his eyes on the pair of wheels in the final stall.

He signaled to Jeffrey, who pulled the knife free. Cyrus readied his wand, swallowing the lump in his throat as he approached the last stall door and gave it a push. It was locked. With a hard kick, he dislodged the door to reveal the empty wheelchair, sagging against the wall. There was a giant hole in the back that was surrounded with little bits of webbing and some fabric.

"Fuck!" He screamed, running past Jeffrey and nearly pushing down their waitress who had come to see why two grown men had walked into the women's bathroom. Both of them were outside of

the restaurant in moments, circling around to the back. Cyrus pulled the metal tube from his jacket and held it up as they turned the corner of the building.

There was no sign of the arachne, but her prints were everywhere. She had crawled up to the roof of the building. Running around the outside, they found where she had descended, her prints moving toward the far side of the parking lot and then abruptly vanishing. They looked around, scanning the area, before Cyrus yanked open the panel on the tube.

“What are you doing?” Jeffrey asked.

“Figuring out what happened.” If she had left the area not too long ago, the watch would play it out. He scooped what was left of the fluid out of the tube and stuck it in the watch and activated the time piece. His stomach flipped instantly, and he crouched down on the ground to watch.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Jeffrey shouted when he saw what happened in reverse.

Cyrus said nothing, afraid that he would throw up.

Darren stuck to back roads for most of the night, stopping only occasionally to check his map. A small headache was forming behind his eyes, and he pulled in to a gas station to grab a drink and fill the canteen. He topped off the bike before setting off, using the map to find his way to the other side of the forest.

His squadmates were largely silent, their voices floating on the breeze. The sun was coming up when he finally turned on to the main road, heading north along Interstate 84. He nearly passed out, the steady roar of the engine lulling him to sleep. Pulling over onto the side of the road, he found a small ditch hidden from view by thick bushes. Moving the bike out of sight, he found a comfortable spot in the shade and lay down, wadding up the jacket to use as a pillow. He closed his eyes, determined to take just a quick nap so that he could set out once more.

Somehow, he could feel her touch, even from so far away, and his mind quickly drifted to the jungle, and then back. Like a pendulum, his consciousness swung back and forth, eventually settling on a dock in Texas, several years back. Puzzled by the change in scenery, he walked along the old planks of Grand Mill Pond, his childhood fishing hole.

A dark figure coalesced on the edge of the dock, a fishing pole in the water.

“Susie Miller showed me her tits yesterday.” It was a fifteen-year-old Dwayne, his face hidden beneath the wide brim of a red Ford hat.

“Liar.” Darren sat next to his brother. Taking off his boots, he put his feet in the pond, sighing at the phantom chill that traveled up his legs.

“No, it’s true!” Susie Miller had been a longtime crush for both of the boys. “I helped her find her dog, and she showed them to me afterwards for helping.”

“Bullshit.” Darren couldn’t help but smile, his dream now in charge of the dialogue. A few moments passed before he spoke up again. “So... what did they look like?”

“Fucking perfect.” Dwayne turned to face him, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He was always stealing cigarettes from their dad, but was too much of a pussy to actually smoke them, so just burned the tip to look cool. “They were like... just, round and beautiful.”

“What about her nips?”

“Silver dollar sized.” Dwayne made a circle with the thumb and index finger of his free hand. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Did she let you touch them?”

“Hell yeah!” Dwayne’s face darkened. “No, not really. I didn’t even think to ask.”

“Did you ask her out?”

“Nah. I mean, if she showed them to me, then who else is she showing them to?”

Darren wanted to point out that Susie Miller was probably trying to impress his brother, or that maybe he was the only person she was showing her boobies to, but his lips were like mud, unable to move.

“Nice.” He looked out across the pond. “Anything bitin?”

“Nah.” Dwayne reeled in his line, tugging just hard enough to reveal the bloodied arm of a Vietnamese soldier. “There’s nothing good out here to catch anyway.”

“Then why do you keep coming here?”

“Cause anything is better than being over there.” Dwayne’s body expanded, his shirt splitting up the back and revealing the olive green fabric beneath. His brother was an adult once more, but he still wore that Ford baseball cap and held onto his fishing rod. “Nobody likes it over there.”

“Ah.” He looked across the pond and saw that, instead of thistle and an old farmhouse on the other side, it was a dense jungle swarming with shadows.

“So what’s next?” Dwayne dropped the fishing pole into the pond. It vanished quickly beneath the murky depths. “After you find Ana.”

“I’ll probably go with her. Wherever that is.”

“Not really a plan.” Dwayne pulled the Snickers bar from his pocket and offered Darren half. Darren wanted to decline, but he wasn’t in full control of his body. “After you go... wherever. What then?”

“I don’t fucking know.” He took a bite of the Snickers. It tasted like sand inside of the dream, but he swallowed every grain. “I just... I don’t know that I can be without her.”

“Do you love her?”

“Sort of.” He couldn’t lie to his brother. “I’m in love with the idea of her.”

“You into bugs?”

“It’s not that. You said it best. Anything is better than being over there.”

Dwayne grinned. “As long as we’re being honest... did she show you her boobies?”

“Fuck yeah. And they were perfect.” He could see them in his mind, those milky white orbs with pale blue nipples.

“You’ve got some strange tastes these days.” Dwayne pulled the Snickers bar in half and gave some to Darren. This chunk tasted like sand too. It made his gut heavy, like lead.

“I like how she makes me feel. If I had to pick a drug, I could do a lot worse.”

“She’s half a spider, man.” Dwayne handed him another half of a Snickers bar, and Dwayne ate it. His whole body was inexplicably heavy now. “Do you think you could be happy with a girl like that?”

“I’m happier than I was.” He looked at the water. The shadows had parted beneath the surface enough to reveal a bunch of mottled, gray hands that opened and closed beneath the surface. He wanted to pull his feet free, but couldn’t move.

“That you are.” Dwayne smiled, handing Darren another bite of Snickers. “And alive, don’t forget that. You might be tempted to toss it away, but I promise that you aren’t winning any prizes. Me? I’m not one to judge. Just want to sit here and fish.”

“You aren’t fishing.” Darren looked up at the sky. Dark clouds had gathered on the horizon.

“But you are.” Dwayne pointed at Darren’s feet. Icy cold hands grabbed him by the ankles and pulled, yanking him off the dock. Darren raised his hands to cry for help, but his body was now full of sand, and he sank beneath the water where the shadows were waiting to pull him apart.

He opened his eyes with a start, staring at the sky up above. The clouds in the real world were dark as well, and it was impossible to tell how long he had been asleep. Taking a deep breath, he stood up and grabbed the Harley by the handlebars to walk it back to the road. He didn’t see any traffic, and was back on the road pretty quickly.

An hour later, he turned off the interstate and headed north. There were a couple of small towns on the perimeter of the forest that were worth checking, and the first one was an immediate dud. It was a small community with very little traffic, and Darren figured that Ana would be looking to hitch a ride.

No, that wasn’t quite right. He knew that she would be looking to hitch a ride. She needed to remain unseen, which meant something large enough to sneak in. The largest car he saw on his trip through town was a station wagon, and while it would be large enough, he doubted she could sneak into the back without being spotted.

Leaving town, he stopped on the side of the road to check his map once more. The others huddled over him, scrutinizing the map with him.

“I’m still thinking she’ll skip through,” Hayden said.

“I don’t know.” Little Mike tapped the town Darren had left. “If she had found a ride, this idea makes a lot of sense.”

“So how do we tell which town she went to?” Dwayne looked up at Darren. “Think.”

“She’s lived here long enough to have at least heard of these places.” Darren squinted at the names on the map. “But I doubt anyone would just casually mention a town as a great place to hitchhike.”

“So then she might have just used a map like you did. Maybe even this one.” Dwayne pointed at the map again. “If you weren’t sure where you were going, but wanted to hitch a ride, what would you do?”

Darren read the town names again. "I would probably aim for one of the larger towns to increase the odds. Bigger towns have bigger names." He tapped the next town over. "Hopefully she will swing through here."

"She could actually swing, you know." Little Mike held up his hands when the others glared at him. "No, seriously. She's a spider, so she probably... nevermind."

The Harley roared under Darren as he drove north, the wind ripping through his hair. He squinted, keeping his eye on the road, and found himself following a semi into town. Smiling in spite of himself, he took a quick trip through town, hoping he might spot Ana. The main street had a couple of small shops, so he pulled over at Hardy's Hardware and walked inside.

The old man behind the counter was busy sorting saw blades into a box when Darren walked up. The man looked up, a ratchet in each hand.

"Help you, son?"

"Yes. I'm trying to find a friend of mine, a woman in a wheelchair. She's pale, and—"

"Ain't seen her. Told your friends the same." The man stuck a pair of blades in the box and then folded it up. "But I've been doing inventory, so wasn't paying attention."

"I... I see." Darren opened his mouth and then closed it. The owner looked at him, waiting to be asked something else. There were only two people who could be asking about Ana. "So, about my friends. We split up a bit ago and lost track of each other." If he couldn't find Ana, then the next best thing would be to find the men tracking her. "Any chance you remember how long ago were they in here?"

"Dunno, been maybe an hour? They were headed down to 3rd last I saw." The man pointed over Darren's shoulder. "Took a right at the bookstore, last I saw. Looked like law men maybe. You don't look like a law man though."

"Of course not. I'm a family member, just trying to help. Thank you, sir." He gave the man a wave and backed out of the store. A quick trip down to the bookstore revealed that a woman in a wheelchair had been there earlier, as well as two men looking for her. He assured the cashier that it was just a case of a misplaced friend who needed to be picked up, and then went on his way. Stepping outside, he looked up and down the street, wondering where she could have gone.

"Stay focused," Dwayne cautioned him as Darren paced the sidewalk. "Remember why you're here."

"I'm here to find Ana."

"Yes, but why? Why is she here?"

Darren looked around to make sure that nobody was watching him. "Because she is trying to catch a ride."

"What kind of ride?"

"Dunno. Truck, trailer, something big."

"And where could you find those?"

"Gas station."

“True.” Dwayne crossed his arms. “But wouldn’t it look suspicious for her to just sit around a gas station?”

“I guess.”

“So where could she sit and wait? Where could she go that allowed her to watch traffic and hitch a ride, but not draw attention to herself?”

“Maybe...” Darren looked over Dwayne’s shoulder. There was a large diner on the corner, the lot already full.

“There ya go.” Dwayne grinned and vanished into the shadows as Darren ran back for his bike. He hopped on and rode the bike down the road, his eyes on the front window of the diner. There wasn’t much to see, but his eyes locked on a man with a large grey trench coat sitting just inside the bay window. Across from him was his partner, Jeffrey.

“Assholes,” he muttered, pulling into the parking lot. Now that he had found them, he needed to follow them, figure out where they were going and then stop them if he could. Looking around the parking lot, he tried to figure out where a good place to hide would be when he saw a dark shadow move across the top of the diner and then drop down behind a parked sedan.

“Ana?” He whispered her name, his heart pounding in his chest. Giving up on hiding, he dismounted, and took the knife out of the saddlebag and strapped it to his belt. Running across the lot, he knelt down behind the cars. “Ana, are you there?”

“Darren?” Her voice was quiet and loaded with disbelief. Turning around, he spotted her huddling underneath a van. “Is that really you?”

“We need to get you out of here. Now.”

“How did you find me?”

“I found that slip of paper you dropped. Listen, those assholes tried to kill me and they’re inside right now.”

“I know. Darren, please. Just walk away.” She was moving back into the shadows.

“Never.” He stood up and looked at the van. It was locked. He ran around to the other side, skipping the sports car, and then settled on a station wagon. The driver’s door was locked, but the passenger door wasn’t. He let himself inside.

“What are you doing?” Ana hissed. Darren popped the trunk and unlocked the driver’s side door, freezing momentarily when he heard someone coughing near the entrance. It was a pair of men headed for a work truck, and he let out a sigh of relief.

“Get in.” He left the back open, and Ana moved surprisingly fast, her body squeezing into the back of the wagon. Behind the steering column, he used the tip of his knife to bust off the steering column cover. In the dim light, it was hard to see the wires.

“Brown to white,” hissed Little Mike.

Darren found the correct wires and twisted them together. The lights on the dash came on.

“Now sparky sparky.” Little Mike pointed at another wire farther in and Darren touched the wires together. The starter kicked in, and the wagon turned over, the car rumbling pleasantly as Darren shut the door.

“You know how to hotwire a car?”

Darren shrugged and put the car in reverse. “A friend taught me. Just in case I lost my keys in the jungle and Charlie was up my ass.” He backed out of the spot, put the car in first gear, and eased out of the parking lot, keeping his headlights off. Once out of the lot, he headed for the edge of town as quickly as he could, casting one last sorrowful look at the bike Walters had given him.

They were back on the highway in just minutes, and there was plenty of gas to get them to the Interstate. They rode together in silence, Darren not entirely certain what to say. It was almost an hour after they had left the diner when Ana spoke up.

“Why did you come for me?”

Darren looked in the rearview mirror. Ana was leaning over the back seat, her hair draped over the headrests and her long, black legs sprawled across the wood paneling of the wagon. When she blinked her many eyes, it was like a ripple across her forehead, starting at the top left and working its way down and across.

“If I’m being truthful... I don’t know.” It was miserable to say out loud, but there it was, but he refused to lie to her. “I just feel like, I don’t know, maybe I can’t live without you.”

“That’s the venom talking. When I bite you, it makes you susceptible to—”

“Oh, I know. And frankly, I don’t give a shit.” He met her gaze in the mirror. “If nothing else, the main reason I came was because you were in trouble and I thought you could use a friend.” He turned his eyes back to the road. “What happened to your wheelchair?”

Ana slumped against her seat. “Wouldn’t fit through the bathroom window.”

“Oh.” Another minute passed. “It’s weird seeing you without your glasses.”

“I still have them.” She pulled them out of a pocket and slid them on. Her extra eyes disappeared. “Might be better to wear them in case someone looks in here.”

“What do I hear rustling around back there?”

“Just some books I bought. They’re in a bag.”

“I see.”

“Hey Darren?”

“Yes, Ana?”

“... thank you.” She moved backward, vanishing in the shadows, her legs curling into the darkness. He wondered if she would speak some more, but a soft sigh was followed by the sound of gentle snoring.

With a big grin on his face, he drove onward. The miles were easily gobbled up by the station wagon, and he pulled over just past the Oregon state line to put some gas in the tank. He opened the

back long enough to toss his jacket over Ana as a blanket, and she pulled it over her torso, smiling before falling back asleep.

The station wagon pounded through even more miles, and the only company he had was the stars in the sky. He couldn't help but gaze in wonder at the celestial canvas that had been painted above, his heart full of hope and promise.

It had been over an hour since he had seen another car, and he wasn't paying attention when he passed a sign announcing that Buchanan was up ahead. It must be a small town, because he didn't remember it from the map. Fatigue was creeping across his shoulders, and he wondered if he should pull over.

Behind him, a car with only one headlight appeared, then disappeared behind a hill. Darren rolled down his window, hoping the cool air of the night would revive him. The headlight appeared again, then vanished. Whoever was driving it was certainly in a hurry, and his eyes flicked to the rearview mirror again.

"I'm getting a bad feeling," Dwayne told him from the passenger seat. "Maybe you can pull over somewhere?"

Darren pushed his foot down on the accelerator, the speed limit no longer a concern. "There's no way it could be them."

"Why not? They found her before."

"What?" Ana sat up in the back, her glasses askew. She pulled them off to wipe them clean, then turned her head to look out the back of the car. "Oh shit!"

The Harley Davidson came roaring up behind them, and Darren's palms broke into a sweat. Licking his lips, he focused on the road ahead, then gazed in the mirrors. The Harley swerved into the left lane and sped up, so Darren slowed down and swerved toward them, trying to knock them off the road.

The Harley dashed forward, both of its riders regarding Darren with absolute hatred as his bumper missed by inches. Fire was coming out of the tailpipe of the Harley, a stream of blue light streaming from the wand in Cyrus's hand into the engine proper. The cycle moved back and forth, easily able to outpace the station wagon, and Darren scowled, unable to ram them from behind.

Cyrus lifted his arm, and the blue light faded, causing the cycle to slow. Seeing his chance, Darren floored it, aiming for the back of their bike. Cyrus turned around and winked just as Darren hit them.

The Harley blew apart into motes of light that washed over the station wagon, and Ana was crawling over the back seat of the car.

"On your left!" She screamed, and Darren turned to see that Cyrus and Jeffrey were in the lane next to him.

"How?" Darren yanked the wheel to the left as Cyrus pointed his wand at the car. A flash of blue light blinded him, and Ana cried out behind him.

An invisible fist struck the station wagon, crumpling the driver's door and pushing the car off the road. The station wagon bumped over several rocks, tossing Ana around the backseat, and then the wagon tumbled end over end down the embankment. Darren was tossed from his seat, and he heard

the loud crunching of metal around him, followed by Ana's screams. Powerful hands grabbed his shoulders, and the last thing he saw was the night sky above, with all of its stars gazing down at him with blazing judgement.
