

# **The Court of the Spider Queen**

**The Extraordinary Adventures  
of Captain Tripp Vaguely**

**Fascination Chronicles, #1**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Damn Newton.**

The Captain pushed boldly through the jungle's underbrush as if any beast there hidden would prefer flight over fight in the face of his awe-inspiring figure. And had there been one, he couldn't have blamed any such jungle cat or great ape for doing just that. Retreat before an adversary the likes of the Captain couldn't be considered cowardice but rather a sign of intelligence or even keen strategic insight. He was Captain Tripp Vaguely after all; Owner, President and CEO of Vague Enterprises, veteran of the Russo-Turkish War (and several more secret ones), well-traveled scholar, and one handsome well-to-do man-about-town. In this particular instance, one might say man-about-jungle but his vaulted status as a man among men could not be diminished by it. Even still, with a well-worn western hat above and a well-waxed mustache below a pair of *Transdimensional Aural-Sensitive Goggles™*, any fool could tell they were looking at a bona fide adventurer and not some pith-helmeted, khaki-clad tourist to these darkest regions of Africa. But if there just so happened to be such an extraordinary fool beyond the dense foliage and they could not recognize the charismatic grandeur of Captain Tripp Vaguely's legendary smile and strapping physique, then they had better notice quickly the dangerous cluster of spinning barrels surrounded by spouts, hoses, prongs and knobs that combined to form the one and only *Pan-Calamitous Portable Arsenal™*, otherwise known as, Marybelle.

"An ill-prepared man," Tripp often said, "is prepared to die."

His weapon was a respectable answer to that credo. With the squeeze of a trigger, the turn of a crank, the pull of a lever or the press of a button, Marybelle could bruise, burn, freeze, electrocute, poison, smoke out or just plain perforate almost any mortal foe in her sights. Given her para-scientific origins complete with Vague Enterprises' own *Quinta Essentia Power Source™*, one could suggest she might fell a few immortal ones as well. So it stood to reason that the gun went into the bush just ahead of the Captain and was already humming with expectant activity when the American-made duo stepped into the African unknown.

The native tribesman perhaps a dozen paces behind offered a warning but even if Tripp understood the fellow's language it would not have stopped him. The

delegation of a guide was more of a courtesy to the tribe upon whose land the Captain now trekked. Just as much as the steel knives and tin crockery that he gave them were but an obligatory gesture of goodwill to that very same tribe who, had the Captain believed the pulp rags back home, could very well be cannibals. But man-eaters or not, he had long since learned that indigenous peoples worldwide were hard pressed for the "better mouse trap." One just had to figure out what kind of mouse they were after. In this particular region it seemed weapons and dinnerware that didn't become waterlogged during the rainy season was all the rage. Nope, nothing too fancy for these folk; not like Paris or Moscow where only his most advanced and most favorite products would be required. The jungles of Africa could do with cutlery and that suited the Captain just fine. Any chance to keep his myriad machinations to himself was all the better. There was no need in equipping bone-clad tribesman with *Heliacal Ray Projectors*<sup>™</sup> if one didn't have to. Over the years he was convinced that such fortune and logic averted any number of possibly brutal if not outright genocidal events from ever occurring.

It did not however prevent gravity from playing its ever-present role as detractor of human flight. As such, the Captain was carried swiftly downwards into what had only moments before been a *hidden* swallow hole. Ghost-Tongue, his nearest, dearest and circumstantially longest surviving companion, who had only a moment before been marching just behind Tripp, looked down into the now *revealed* swallow hole. The Captain's standard abusive comment to such an event as his sudden plummet down a dark shaft came reverberating up from the inky blackness. "Damn Newton to Hell!" he cried. This made Ghost-Tongue smile, as it usually did, just before he leaped down after the Captain, as he usually did.

The air was instantly cooler and rushed by for what seemed minutes, but in truth was more like a single minute, as Ghost-Tongue slid the length of the amazingly smooth earthen chute. The occasional sprig of root or bug frightened into scurry did bump, jab or otherwise become crushed against his form but, compared to his vast experience at such subterranean traverses, this was practically one of the Captain's glass tubes back in the laboratory. Then, just as all of these thoughts and memories combined into a cohesive recognition of the facts, his feet met solid ground and forced from his belly a grunt. Always swift in reflex and resilient to shock, Ghost-Tongue stood from his involuntary crouch and found the Captain lighting a cigar.

"What luck," said the Captain, the stogie clenched between his teeth, his face lit by the yellow flames of a fagot of bunched matches. The flames were reflected in his goggles and gave him an almost sinister appearance.

Ghost-Tongue knew the man too well to be taken in by such appearances. Sinister was not his niche. Bravado? Why sure. Jocular? Certainly. Machismo? Of course. Bon vivant? You speak French do you? Well in that case, oui! The point being: the Captain could be pigeon holed, however briefly, into all such categorizations. But sinister, wicked or evil? Well anyone who suggested such deserved a good smack across their teeth. The Captain might be an occasionally obnoxious and permanently flamboyant thrill-seeker, but he knew what side he was on and treachery was a word he couldn't even spell. So the lanky Anasazi disregarded the devilish imagery and politely inquired, "Was that a lucky hole?"

The Captain pointed to a wall just beyond his shoulder, still alight in the glow of his matches. There engraved upon smoothly hewn stone, just below a curious vein of crystal running along the ceiling, were strangely angled columns of enigmatic hieroglyphs. Running top to bottom, bottom to top, side to side, and even at angles to converge at a central glyph, these pictograms depicted men, women, animals and at times figures of a combination of all three in the midst of a myriad of poses and tasks. Some of the peoples there etched were semi-Egyptian in appearance though the vast majority were obviously Sub-Saharan and thusly more tribal in feature and garb. This made perfect sense considering their location in the heart of the continent, though the use of hieroglyphs was certainly considered a very Egyptian practice. As much as they would have liked to, the pharaohs had never quite managed to conquer this dense land and peoples. People who, by the look of them, interacted, traded, and warred with one another amid the likes of gorilla-faced men and cat-women, or so the strands of glyphs seemed to say.

These “strands” of hieroglyphs were outlined by deep rivulets so that the eye might follow their course but were at times intersected by other columns where they would share a common glyph. But chief among them, several times larger and at the very center where they all converged was an intricately carved spider painted blue, black, and... could that be gold? Upon its abdomen, in white and black, was an amazingly hypnotic pattern of an obviously African origin and ingeniously designed so that the eye could endlessly roam its octagonal edges into and back up from a dazzlingly ambiguous spiral. It was a web within the larger web of symbols and proved to be the centerpiece of the artistic display. And as the eye traced these many columns and patterns, an illiterate of this language could certainly fall into the dismay of a dizzying headache. So the Captain looked away, his thoughts turning to passages and the unknown but Ghost-Tongue was not what you might call an illiterate of any language. In fact, his name might very well say it all. So Ghost-Tongue closed his eyes.

The Indian’s voice began in his chest, deep and wooden, reverberating outwards. Carried along by his very bones to the hairy limits of his skin, he maintained the sound through continuous circular breathing until his entire being took part in this basest of bass droning. It became a current of sound, washing across the dim, dank chamber. It was a bath of somber voice; a beacon to the unseen. Thus, with such tonality achieved, Ghost-Tongue then began to inflect it with peeps and swirls of a twangy falsetto ranging from throaty to nasal. Each chirp and hum a vowel to the deep consonant of undertone, a song unbound by rhythm began to form. And so Ghost-Tongue, earthbound Anasazi, spoke to the spirits of this place.

The intent of the artisans leaped into his mind and became understanding. The very spirit of the language itself, a living thing as it were, spoke to Ghost-Tongue of its wont and purpose. Of course it had to be decrypted from among the spiritual cacophony of lichen, insects and all that lived in the immediacy, but by virtue of its purpose the manufactured word was often shouted and easily picked from amid the white noise of unintended existence. That quiet thrum of spirit uttered by the will of those cosmic forces beyond comprehension was a universal sound so embedded into the background of reality that, to those able to hear, it became as commonplace as the blue of the sky. It was taken for granted. Thus the

phantasmal intent of the written word could be noticed and then discerned even amongst such a thriving chorus. Such was the Ghost-Tongue's world and that world was presently very loud. He looked to the Captain wryly and translated, "Praise to a spider god."

"Hu-llo!" the Captain exclaimed, pointing to a pair of the hieroglyphic people standing below lotus sprigs at the foot of an ebony-skinned, eight-eyed, eight-limbed overlord. "To *them* he's a spider god. Just another transdimensional entity to me." He gave the hieroglyph further consideration and added, "Quite the looker though." He smiled to Ghost-Tongue. "Get it? Eight-eyes? Likely legs? *Looker?*"

"Hilarious, Cap'n," the darker man coolly answered. "So what's your plan? Supposing of course, you have one."

Dropping the remnants of his matches to the ground and crushing them beneath his boot, the Captain spun a circular gear on Marybelle's side for a moment and soon a small light glowed to life. Aiming the gun towards the only passage from the chamber, he explained, "That away." His light shown on a dense curtain of spider webbing. Nothing beyond could be seen.

"What about the tribesmen?" Ghost-Tongue inquired, looking back up at the empty black of the shaft through which they had fallen.

"I'm sure they've left us for dead. You saw how they looked at us when I drew that spider in the dirt. I think they came along just to watch us die."

"They'll be disappointed."

"Attaboy! There's the can-do attitude I'm looking for!"

"I mean they'll be disappointed they won't be able to watch."

The Captain gave Ghost-Tongue the Bronx Cheer and replied, "There's nothing less certain than death at the hands of a spider god. There've been no studies."

"Tell that to the tribesmen."

"I would, but they're not here and if they were they wouldn't understand my English anyway."

"Do you think they knew about this pitfall?"

"Doubtful. Seemed to me, they'd never been this deep into these particular woods. Lots of conversation between them. Most of it sounded like argument. They said boogata a lot. And loud."

"They used it when looking at *you*," Ghost-Tongue smiled.

"Likely means white devil or some such nonsense."

"Or *fool*," the Anasazi replied dryly. He did not know the actual translation of course. But Ghost-Tongue had understood their intent. And he did not need to hear their spirits to understand. Empathy was translator enough.

Of course the Captain, through empathy or (more likely) the aural sensitivity of his goggles, likely knew this as well but far be it for him to point out the natives' inability to recognize true greatness. Instead the haughty man shrugged his broad shoulders. "Could be," he answered as he attempted to push through the dense webs shrouding the passage from the chamber. He was quickly entangled up to his shoulder. "They are just ignorant savages after all, Jobi."

Ghost-Tongue canted his head to one side and watched the Captain rip away a large shroud of web as he withdrew his arm. Immediately hundreds of tiny, long-legged, pale, almost translucent spiders scurried in to repair the damage. The

Captain eyed them through his paranormal spectacles and huffed. “Common *telemidae cangoderces*. Gnome cave spider. A local runt of a bug.”

Ghost-Tongue nodded at the Captain's observation but opted to continue the previous line of conversation. “Am I an ignorant savage, Tripp?”

The Captain looked away from the webbing cocooning his right arm and inspected Ghost-Tongue from head to foot and back up again. “You can ask me that when you stop carrying that spear.”

“We both know that's never going to happen.”

“You should at least let me put a scope on it. Give it a more... *formidable* look. The poor thing's just a long twig and a bit of bone.”

“I think it's formidable enough. It makes white men nervous.”

The Captain smiled. “It's nice you have goals, old boy.”

“So they've finished,” Ghost-Tongue noted, nodding to the now-repaired web. The tiny arachnids had vanished to the dark from whence they had come. “Plan on wearing all that as an overcoat?”

The never-ending smile of Captain Tripp Vaguely shifted to a smirk as he raked one of Marybelle's levers back and forth whilst depressing a button near one particularly ugly nozzle. The grating of the lever created a spark just below said nozzle and a pilot light burst to life, its hiss a furious, anticipatory tone. He took a few steps back as Ghost-Tongue moved fully to the other side of the chamber, his hair having just recently grown back from singed stubble. But then, with the squeeze of a trigger (one of several on his rifle), Marybelle's anxious hiss was replaced by a short roar as a fireball blossomed forth and set the webbing ablaze. When a properly sizable hole appeared, the Captain took the opportunity to hurl himself into the darkness beyond. There he rolled across the floor, gave a spirited “Hoo-ha!” and arose with Marybelle poised menacingly, still spewing a tiny, angry flame and shining forth a cone of light from her small electric torch.

Eight large black orbs reflected that light back at him.

## Chapter 2

### What Big Eyes.

The same dense, unyielding layer of webbing that bound his body to the earthen wall was the same sort of dense, unyielding webbing that held his gun-toting arm splayed out and pinned to one side. This meant the electric torch was all but muffled, and the spouts of flame he was still able to produce from the *Dragon Breather*<sup>™</sup> attachment mounted on Marybelle only managed to roll across the empty face of the wall and did little more than illuminate the room in strobe-like bursts.

It might seem an insignificant action until one considered, much like the Captain did, that otherwise Ghost-Tongue would be fighting the giant spider blind. So the Captain continued to squeeze the trigger in short bursts so as to not melt the already glowing nozzle but continuously enough that Ghost-Tongue and his flimsy spear could keep tabs on the monstrous arachnid.

It became sort of a dance. The Anasazi would poke, probe, and jab then shift a few steps in one direction. The spider, easily the size of a pony, would round the opposite way, also lashing out with its two front legs. Back and forth, side to side, this went on in the near darkness of what was proving to be a much larger chamber than the one from which they had just come. There were no hieroglyphs here but that vein of crystal still ran the length of the ceiling. This Tripp was able to notice in the spare moments he dared look away from the perilous duel in which his best friend was presently participating.

“Stay close to me,” Tripp demanded. “Stay near the light.”

“I’m trying,” Ghost-Tongue replied, arcing the bony spearhead up over his head and then down toward the spider’s many eyes. These, he thought, might prove its weakness.

“Watch out for those legs,” the Captain noted.

“Which ones?” Ghost-Tongue moaned.

“I think the ones in the front might be your biggest concern,” said the Captain, “but then again, he might not do very well without the ones near his arse. That’s how he got me.”

“He got you with his arse, sir?”

“Yes, that’s where the silk glands... Listen, there’s no time for a lesson in arachnid anatomy, old boy! Stay in the light and see if you can’t take a swipe or two at this webbing while you’re good and close to me.”

Ghost-Tongue took a stab and grimaced as the bone point of his spear glanced off the hard carapace of the spider’s head. The Captain might be on to something. Combined they would have eight limbs as well and at the present pace the spider would eventually strike the same sort of blow but would not find a dense exoskeleton to deflect its attack.

So when Ghost-Tongue took his three brisk steps to the right, expecting the spider to follow left, he also angled his steps slightly backward, nearer to the wall and the Captain behind him. He did so again, when he took two or three brisk steps to his left, moving the spider to the right and farther from the Captain. He choked down on the shaft of his spear in his right hand which he held forward, extending its length as it were and thus allowed even more distance between himself and the spider. Then with his left hand, he retrieved the small flint knife from his hair-woven belt. If he could time this right, they might have a chance.

To the right he danced again, each step angled slightly back until he was less than a yard from the wall. With a jab and a deflection swipe, Ghost-Tongue danced left again but without stepping backward this time. He couldn’t put his back to the wall or it wouldn’t work. So he stepped quickly and directly left, forcing the spider to skitter quickly to his right. With its legs pulled under itself in mid-sidestep, Ghost-Tongue took a chance, spun and slashed at the webbing holding the captain to the wall.

“Attaboy!” hollered the Captain.

A solid slash appeared across the face of the webbing but the brave Indian did not have time to examine his work before he turned to face the recovered monster. All eight eyes were on him, so he pounced forward, feigning attack and driving the spider back defensively, then quickly hopped back to stand just before the Captain Tripp.

He spun. Another slash ripped away at the thick cords of spider silk. He spun again and jabbed with the spear. But the spider was sick of it. It scrambled forward with its hind six legs. Its forward limbs were held up aggressively, prepared to come down on him so that its mighty mandibles could scissor his head from his neck.

Flinging his right arm back and loosening his grip but for half a second, Ghost-Tongue choked up on the shaft and then shoved the spear back up at the raised and exposed spider. The bone spearhead slid neatly between two plates in its undercarriage, just below its pincers. The slight inkling of wetness glistened as the weight of the thing came down on him. The shaft of the spear was bent and bowing, soon to snap even as Ghost-Tongue fell to his back, the giant spider heaving down on him.

Then the prone Indian thought, *how can I see this so clearly? I can see every feature of the spider and the walls behind it. I can even see that vein of crystal streaking out of sight. The electric torch!*

With the Captain's arms and a large swath of his torso free from the webs, Marybelle shined down on the monstrous arachnid like some heavenly beacon and then, not a second later, she unleashed pure Hell.

A barrage of Gatling fire ripped through the air and then the spider. Chunks of the beast vanished in rapid succession, as globs of transparent blood splattered in every direction. Perforated and shredded into a sudden demise, the Captain continued to fire long after it fell away to one side. It was Ghost-Tongue's passive voice saying, "He's done for, Cap'n," that finally silenced Marybelle.

Somewhere behind the yellow light of the electric torch, his smile gleamed like a crescent moon. "Good work, Jobi. Hope you didn't break your pig-sticker."

"All in one piece, Cap'n," Ghost-Tongue answered, rising to his feet. Amidst the rustling of an escape from webbing, the Indian could hear the slight whir of the Captain's goggles. He was certain this meant the unrelenting white man had already started assessing the situation and making plans to move onward.

"You know," said Ghost-Tongue, "this may be a nest. There could be many more."

"Your point?" Captain Tripp responded. Turning to face his friend and cohort, Ghost-Tongue could see that the Captain was not actually looking for the next door. He was instead very focused on the webbing he still held in his hand. "*This* is what we came here for."

"Think it will work?"

"I do," said the Captain. Then his head snapped toward the spider. "Quick!" he declared. "We need to get that gland out and into one of my pockets before it becomes necrotic."

The pockets to which the Captain was referring were Vague Enterprise's very own *Portable Transmundane Pockets of Quasi-Reality*™, which by all accounts were anything but pockets. They were more like small portals into their own miniature realm that Ghost-Tongue would call a Spirit World but which Captain Tripp was fond of calling an extra dimension or *Transmundane Realm* or *Confined Astral Zone* or really one of a hundred other bastardizations of the English language. Just so long as it sounded well-scientific and managed to confuse the average layperson, the Captain was satisfied.

“Awful convenient of the bugger to flip himself over when he died,” the Captain remarked, stepping over and stabbing into the creature’s abdomen. “Good thing Marybelle saw fit to aim true. Doesn’t look like I damaged the aft section at all.”

Ghost-Tongue looked around in the darkness left as the Captain focused on his prize. He chewed his lip a moment and then admitted to the Captain, “This doesn’t feel right.”

“What do you mean, old boy? More pessimism?”

“This is too easy,” the spindly Indian replied. “When have we ever gotten what we wanted with such little struggle?”

“Easy?” Tripp scoffed. “Look at the size of this damned bug!”

It was Ghost-Tongue’s turn to scoff. “It was just one of them. There would need to be hundreds of them for it to be one of your grand escapades.”

“Would you rather we were hovering near death?” asked the Captain.

He had just shoved the hideous mound of spider silk glands and spinnerets into one of the transmundane pockets when he got his reply. It did not come from Ghost-Tongue.

“Yes,” said the eight-eyed woman standing in the doorway. “Yes, we would.”

She was not alone.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Long Arms of the Law.**

She was easily eight feet tall and wore not a single stitch of clothing. It was this simple, latter fact that allowed her gender to be distinguished, though the details of her more feminine anatomy were missing. That is to say her sex was more akin to that of a weathered Greek statue of Venus; bearing all the hallmark traits of a female but none of the specifics. This was plainly visible as her glossy black flesh reflected the ambient light of thin, glowing, crystalline rivulets, which crisscrossed the surfaces of the chamber. Her exposed skin did not seem smooth per se but rather it was chatoyant and at times seemed to ripple unnaturally. In fact, her skin was textured in such a way that it almost seemed like an exoskeleton, yet there were no gaping joints like that of an insect. Instead, her flesh bent, flexed and stretched when she moved and when she talked just as it would on any human. Alas, she was not human and this was all too apparent. For eight reddish eyes lined either side of her vaulted forehead, separated by a wide African nose and full lips. A thick crop of white hair, like the gossamer spun by the giant spider, hung down her back and long, dangerous talons tipped her each of her thirty fingers and ten toes.

Indeed, he had counted them three times. The Captain saw six arms and two legs; five digits on each. The same number as the rest of the creatures that roamed in and out of his vision, to whom she spoke and seemed to command. Indeed, by her very air and posture, she seemed to be the one in charge.

Through his *Transdimensional Aural-Sensitive Goggles*™, the only item they did not remove from him as perhaps they believed these were his actual eyes, the

Captain could clearly see a powerful life force at work in the gargantuan woman. Her living aura rippled and wavered like her skin. It undulated, almost like a fire, whereas a common aura tended to have slowly shifting mottled colors that hovered just outside the form. He would almost say she seemed to have life *forces*; plural. Was this the aura of a goddess? Much to his relief, it also shined a very bright, solid, and trustworthy white. In his experience, this meant she was honorable. She was noble. She could possibly be reasoned with unless, as he suspected, he was now a very dastardly criminal in all eight of her eyes.

She seemed the sort to favor justice and be very permanent about exacting it. Her every step was calculated. When she spoke in that strange amalgam of chitters and clicks that were the language of these creatures, the Captain could not understand a word, but he did not need Ghost-Tongue's empathic senses to detect an air of command. That is to say, she behaved like a soldier and even more so like an officer; a proud, honorable officer who treated the enemy with respect, even when they were lined up against a wall. She was the sort to offer a blindfold and a cigarette. There may even be polite banter in the long walk to the last stand.

The Captain knew this was all speculation, but he would still cling to optimism. She had at least half a brain and as he had deduced from the more rounded features of her figure she was certainly all woman. She would take a shine to him, and who could blame the poor girl? She was in the presence of Captain Tripp Vaguely! The swooning would commence at any moment! He was sure of this even as he dangled from the ceiling, bound once again in spider silk but now fully cocooned save a thin wispy patch over his face. Alas, this silk had come from the spider people themselves. It did not seem different, at least not with the naked eye. A few hours in his lab might reveal otherwise but at the moment he would have to believe they were the same resilient fibers he had experienced when battling the giant spider.

"I suppose they'll eat us," said Ghost-Tongue

"Oh that's right," Tripp replied, "you're here too."

"So glad you noticed, Cap'n," the stilt Indian retorted dryly.

"Well since you brought it up, what makes you think they're cannibals, old boy?"

"They'd have to be human to be cannibals by eating us, sir."

The Captain harrumphed, "Yes, I suppose that's true."

"And I believe," said Ghost-Tongue, "spiders usually eat that which they wrap up in their silk."

"Again, I fear you are correct, Jobi," answered the Captain. "But if we are going to continue along this line of logic and assume these creatures are inclined to behave like their lesser web-crawling brethren, then we would already have been bitten and filled with enzymatic fluids that at this very moment would be digesting our innards; turning us into a sort of human slurry. You see, old friend, spiders do not eat so much as drink."

"Ah," said Ghost-Tongue. "Well then I suppose we've nothing to worry about then."

"Now, I wouldn't say that, Jobi."

"Oh wouldn't you, Cap'n?" Ghost-Tongue jeered sardonically.

“No indeed,” said the Captain. “While you were focusing on their arachnid bits, I would implore you to remember their more... human features. Sure, they have six arms, but they are arms after all. And they walk on two legs. They speak. They have tools and art.”

“They are... intelligent,” said Ghost-Tongue.

“Exactly!” said the Captain. “Which means they could be devising all manner of horrors that any spider would consider a waste of good protein.”

A slight rustling from Ghost-Tongue’s cocoon insinuated a nod. “But are you curious,” Ghost-Tongue wondered aloud, “as to how she came to speak English?”

“What’s that?”

“English, sir,” Ghost-Tongue replied. “When the tall female surprised us, she spoke English.”

“Ah, well,” the Captain sputtered. He contemplated for a moment, writing brief dramatic tales of possibility inside his mind until a one idea rang true. “Perhaps they’ve captured other white explorers before us! Perhaps, they kept them here for years and years, captive and bonded, all the while learning from their prisoners and becoming quite familiar.”

“Or perhaps, dear Captain, we ate their brains and took from them all their knowledge.”

The eyes of the cocooned prisoners darted to their captor. She was facing them from in front of a stone table where several strangely hewn blades were lined in a neat yet menacing row. Each knife, for lack of a better term, was slightly curved like a miniature scimitar or, as the Captain believed, like a mandible. Eating utensils?

“Well I believe your first assumption proved true, old boy,” the Captain noted. “Congratulations.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my mother,” the mordant Anasazi replied.

“Should have known, really,” said Tripp, “The notion of gaining power from devouring a foe is a common idea in savage races.”

“No, Captain,” the spider woman spoke, “Here you are the monsters with blood on your hands and theft in your hearts. *We* are the Anansesem, children of Anansi.”

“Spider god,” Tripp noted under his breath. Ghost-Tongue’s cocoon slightly rustled.

The spider woman continued, “We have existed since long before the monkeys fell from their trees and stood on their own two feet. In fact, our father was here when the great lizards were laid low. But here, beneath the world conquered by man, we have continued to exist. We have tunneled from the earth a continent of our own and have thrived for countless eons while your kind slowly crept into intelligence. Ah but once you discovered them, your minds that is, well it seems you have gotten quite carried away, haven’t you? You trample the ground, and sail the seas, and float through the skies, all the while believing you are superior to all other creatures. You think nothing of that which you cannot see. You despise anything of which you are ignorant.”

“Now hear me, my dear... girl,” the Captain bolstered.

“Baku,” she said. “My name is Baku.”

“Well then hear this, Baku! This fellow and I have traipsed up and down the coasts of Mu and dined on ambrosia in the Valley of Nysa! We’ve battled trolls, played chess with dragons, and danced waltzes with nymphs! Why I find your notion of ignorance and arrogance preposterous and I demand you set us free so that we might sit around a table and discuss this matter like rational, thinking beings!”

“But not at *that* table,” Ghost-Tongue added, his eyes still lingering on the mandible blades.

“No, Captain, you are no different,” she said. “Even as you wander into our world, and meet us on our own terms, inside you still believe you are the better. To you, there can be no equal. I know your kind.”

“I dare say you do not!” the Captain demanded.

“Oh but I do. As your companion noticed, I speak your tongue. You are my prisoner because I knew what to expect of you.” She began to pace before him, all of her arms folded across her long torso. “Do you want to know where I learned English, dear Captain? Do you want to know how I came to understand your kind of humanity?”

She stepped forward away from the table, empty-handed much to Ghost-Tongue’s relief. Then she pointed to her left with one of her six long arms and reached out with yet another to turn the Captain’s cocoon so that he could set eyes upon a third cocoon dangling from the ceiling. And in that cocoon, seemingly comatose and unaware, the Captain could see the pale narrow features and waxed white mustache of none other than Dr. Maximilian von Skaar!

“Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat!” the Captain yelped.

“Skaar,” Ghost-Tongue groaned.

“So indeed you are the dear Captain he spoke of,” Baku cooed, her lips bending ever so slightly into a wicked grin. “That is what he called you, by the way: the dear Captain. He said you would come.”

Tripp’s eyes darted between the comatose doctor and the spider woman. “I’m sure he did but you knew English long before you met him.”

“Is that right?” she asked.

“Indeed. Have you ever heard him speak English? He’s German, my dear. You can’t get a proper double-u out of him to save your life and you pronounce them just fine. That tells me you’ve been abroad. So then tell me, my well-educated friend, why is he here?”

“Come now, as if you do not know. He came for the same reason as you did, dear Captain. And we captured him for the same reason we have captured you.”

“What’s that? Of course you’re terribly misinformed, Baku, old girl. What would Max von Skaar want with *bombycis arachne gigantis*?”

Baku tilted her head to the ceiling a moment in contemplation and then looked back to the Captain. “Bombycis?”

“*Arachne gigantis*, you baffled bug! Product of the Glandula Aciniformes!” the Captain roared. “You should have picked up some Latin while you were out globetrotting!” Baku turned her eight eyes on the Captain in a display that could not be called approachable, causing him to explain, “Spider silk! Giant spider silk! That’s why we’re here!” The Captain slid his eyes in the direction of Doctor von

Skaar and added, "Who knows what nefarious scheme led that man here but I can promise you, he would have very little to do with spider silk."

"Nonsense! You would invade the realm of the Anasesem for our webs? I do not believe you!"

"Look in my belt, dear girl," the Captain told her. "There, in the corner beneath my gun."

After a moment of wary consideration, Baku turned her back on the cocooned men and stalked to the far corner of the room where their gear had been unceremoniously heaped. She dug through the stuff for a moment, aided by a "Not that! There! Yes, that!" from the Captain.

Once she retrieved the belt she walked back to the stone table and held it up. "The third pouch from the buckle. Open it up and reach in."

"Captain?" Ghost-Tongue warned.

"It's safe," the Captain remarked. "Nothing else is in there."

Ghost-Tongue hoped the Captain was certain of this. As he recalled, Tripp had once tricked a rather small but nasty Hollow Earth dinosaur into one of the pouches to avoid a bloody death. Whether or not Tripp ever set the thing free, he did not know. As such, he made a mental note to have the Captain drop a canister or two of chloroform into each and every pouch before emptying the thing when and if they ever got home.

Baku did as instructed and located the correct pouch. Setting the belt on the table she proceeded to open the pouch and with another wary glance to the Captain she poked inside with one of the knives. After a moment she felt resistance, opened the pouch and looked inside.

She froze. "It's empty," she said.

"It's alright," the Captain explained. "Any light is immediately captured and cannot escape so you can't see anything inside, but if you just reach in you'll soon discover your hand to be quite full."

It was a long moment before Baku would dare to reach inside. Almost immediately, her head snapped up; her eyes on the Captain. Slowly she pulled her arm back and soon her hand was revealed clutching the ichor-dripping cluster of glands and spinnerets the Captain had cut from the giant spider.

Unfortunately, this was not very pleasing to the spider woman. "Monster!" she hissed. "Butcher!"

"She has a point," Ghost-Tongue mentioned.

"Quiet, Jobi!" the Captain demanded. He then turned his attention quickly back to Baku. "I know what you must be thinking," he said. "If someone cut up my dog I would tend to get a bit testy as well but you have to understand..."

"I will cut your glands from you and we will see how well I understand," she hissed.

"Glands?" the Captain wondered but then realized what she meant. "See now—"

She spoke aloud in the strange clicking spider talk of the Anasesem and two guards immediately entered. They each grabbed a knife from the stone table and began to approach.

"Baku! Hear me out! We had no intention of killing such a creature when we came! We only meant to capture one and take from it enough silk to... well it's a

long story but we only needed a certain amount and then we would set it free! You have to believe me! We had no choice! It was going to kill us!”

“You are invaders,” she said. “Of course it was going to kill you. That was its duty!”

“Well then, I would have to say it was ill-prepared, old girl. It didn’t put up too great a threat. My friend here nearly felled it with a spindly twig.”

Baku shrieked; exposing long deadly black fangs and the two guards took hold of the Captain’s cocoon.

“Now this is counterproductive!” the Captain insisted.

“Cut off *his* glands and spinneret,” she ordered, in English of course, so her captives could understand.

“Surely, madam, you cannot blame us,” Ghost-Tongue calmly interrupted in a tone smooth and low like a bow being slowly drawn across a cello. Much like a bell to Pavlov’s dog, the Captain learned the proper response to Ghost-Tongue’s diplomatic voice was to fall completely silent. Let the man do his work.

And so it seemed everyone in the room was prepared to do so. Knives ceased slicing at the gossamer wrapping. Two dozen and two eyes had turned toward the Anasazi. With their attention properly turned from the Captain’s nethers to his words, Ghost-Tongue continued, “After all, it was the craftiness and guile of the Anasesem that created the ignorance that led us here. The guile and wit of your sire, the great and noble but all too wily Anansi had led us to believe there was only a kind of giant spider native to the jungles above. The tribesmen who guided us through those jungles even warned us that no one had tread into that place for fear of the giant spiders; not because it was the realm of the Anasesem. Had we known of you, we would have come with gifts and praise, for such is our way. The Captain, whose groin you now threaten, is known in many lands for his gentility. Alas, we knew no more of this place, this sprawling subterranean kingdom, than we knew your name, Baku. Unfortunate as it may have been, our encounter here was brought upon by the same secrecy and silence that has allowed your empire of tunnels to expand. Your success was our misfortune, madam. We came seeking a creature not its demise. We came seeking... silk. Just silk.”

Silence loomed for a long moment. The moment grew so long that Ghost-Tongue began to fear the Captain might speak before Baku had a chance to respond. That, he knew, would ruin everything. Giving the Captain every credit he was due, diplomacy ran a razor’s edge with audacity in his mind. Having just politely blamed the Anasesem for the death of their beloved giant spider, himself, Ghost-Tongue knew just one more push in the wrong direction and they would be immediately headless.

Oh how agonizing that silent moment! *Say something*, Ghost-Tongue wanted to scream to Baku! *Tell me I’m a fool and you’ll see my head at the end of a spear! Tell the Captain you’ll feed his gonads to your spider god! Just say something!* But when she did finally speak, she spoke no words. A thousand syllables but not a single word or phrase was spoken. It was said in no language but it was plainly understandable by any who heard it.

She laughed.

Loud and hard and haughty and long, she laughed. Eight hands poised in various points along her body, all displaying amusement emphasized her laughter.

Her minions joined her hilarity and soon so had the Captain. Even Ghost-Tongue managed to smile! This went on for quite some time; nearly as long as that agonizing silence, which it had broken. And then, it crested and began to wane and as the laughter softened to chuckles, the tall, proud, dark Anansesem leader spoke.

“How well you turn your words,” she told Ghost-Tongue. “You have the spirit of a trickster in you.”

“He is called, Coyote,” Ghost-Tongue smiled, “A kindred of your mighty Anansi.”

Baku ticked off a command in her native tongue and the guards released their hold on the Captain. Then, turning wholly upon Ghost-Tongue, she said, “While you have woven your words well, and in them I believe there is an acceptable truth, your intrusion into our land and the death of our brethren cannot go unpunished. You will be sacrificed to Anansi. Please send our regards to Coyote.”

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Good Doctor.**

It had been nearly four years since the Captain had crossed paths with Doctor Skaar and now he knew why. Baku had explained that the Doctor and several minions had come to steal a great treasure from the Anansesem and while his hirelings were cut down in short order, the Doctor had been captured and imprisoned here. If he had not ended up joining the Doctor in his imprisonment amongst the spider people, the Captain would have been pleased by Skaar's fate.

Former comrades in adventure, the Doctor's penchant for sinking knives into well-turned backs eventually turned the two down the path to adversity. One might call their parting of ways anything but, since it seemed the two always managed to find one another again. Whether in some gambit to collect the same mythical fortune or attending the same expensive soirée or even visiting Hong Kong to purchase tiger blood, the two could not seem to properly diverge their fates. Ultimately this created a direct and distinct manner of competition with one another.

Rivals, you could call them. Two sides of the same coin, you might say. Two rivers incessantly flowing and converging in the same valley as they rushed headlong toward the sea, the Doctor and the Captain seemed irrevocably fated to struggle against one another until one, the other, or both met their ends.

“Someone spin me around,” Captain Vaguely growled, “so I can spit on the bastard.”

Two Anansesem entered the chamber, disturbing the Captain's introspective frothing. Looking to them, along with Ghost-Tongue, he could see they were toting a stone cauldron between them. Heaving the thing up without so much as a grunt, it came down on the table with a grating crunch as some steaming grayish liquid spilled over the edges and splattered on the table. The two massive creatures immediately produced a sort of straight-handled ladle and two conical bowls made

from some sort of gourd. They scooped from the cauldron and filled the strange bowls and began to approach the prisoners.

Thinking back to the lesson in arachnid dietetics he had given Ghost-Tongue, and the story of Skaar's fallen minions, the Captain's eyes widened and bulged behind the lenses of his goggles.

"Bah!" he barked. "Keep that away from me, you beasts! I know what you're up to! Trying to dehumanize us! To make us a party to your devilry! But you've gone too far and you've underestimated my observational prowess! I'm on to you!"

The tall spider men held the bowls up to the mouths of their prisoners and tilted them ever so slightly. While Ghost-Tongue seemed to relent and accept his dietary destiny, the Captain struggled, sputtered, and clamped his lips shut. His Anansesem captor prodded, angled, and even jabbed with the lip of the bowl but to no avail. The Captain would not receive his meal.

Finally the bowl was taken away and Tripp sputtered, "Damn you! I will not dine on the half-digested remains of Skaar's peons or whomever else you lot have injected with your vile secretions and turned into so much liquefied buffoon! Jobi! What are you doing? Gadzooks, man! You've lost- No! You've rather regained your savage mind! You've turned cannibal!"

Ghost-Tongue gulped down a mouthful, licked his lips and replied, "Sir..."

"Yes? What is it, old friend? Do you have regrets? Do you seek penance? Oh lampooning lords of the hoary netherworlds, forgive this pitiful primitive! Blame his blood and not his soul! I, Captain Tripp Vaguely, owner, chairman and CEO of Vague Enterprises, Victor of the Battle of Bjarmaland, and Horseshoe Champion of Avalon, can vouch for the wholesomeness of his spirit!"

"It's soup," said Ghost-Tongue.

"Soup?"

"Cream of mushroom."

"Really?"

Ghost-Tongue nodded. "Needs salt."

\* \* \* \* \*

To have been drugged was something that any man in the room could have expected from their captors. Each and every one of them had been in this situation before and when they started coming to the most shocking thing was not the idea that their soup had been cooked up using one of Mickey Finn's recipes. Instead it was to find themselves free from the firm grip of webbing, and indeed free from bonds of any sort. Somewhere in the back of each of their minds, they expected to hear the rattle of chains when they moved sluggishly along the stony floor.

"Jobi?" the Captain groaned.

"Right here," the slender Anasazi replied from a nearby section of darkness.

"Where are we?" the Captain asked.

"Give me your goggles and I'll tell you," Ghost-Tongue hinted.

"Oh," replied the Captain, "that's right." A slight whir indicated he had switched his technical spectacles from the standard refraction setting to one of reflection. That is to say, instead of drawing in all the area's *quinta essentia* for visualization, the glasses instead projected it back out as a soft blue light. Nowhere near as

illuminating as his electric torch, or even an actual torch, this bit of candescence still managed to allow the Captain to make a brief but encompassing analysis.

“Oubliette,” he said.

Ghost-Tongue nodded. Again, this was nothing unexpected by the two.

However, what was unexpected was to hear the venom-dripping growl of Doc Skaar’s Germanic voice ooze, “Zere you are, dear Captain.”

The blue light of the *Transdimensional Aural-Sensitive Goggles*™ turned on the voice faster than a bottle fly can spin around a cow patty; beating the tension in the room to the finish line by only a nose.

“Skaar!” the Captain spat like so much vulgarity.

“Who else would it be?” the Doctor droned. His eyes were still closed and his head sagged over his chest as he was propped against one of the curved walls to this egg-shaped cell. “I can’t go anywhere wizout hearing zat awful American drawl; not efen here in Kese’Esum.”

Ghost-Tongue was perhaps the only one grateful for the drugging. This meant the Captain, in his present state, could not kill the Doctor, whose knowledge of the spider people was obviously greater than their own. At least he knew the name of this place. They could use this knowledge to their advantage.

The Captain was slow to respond but managed to hiss, “What were you after, Skaar? What brought you here and how did you learn about this place?”

“As if I’m going to explain myself to you,” Skaar chuckled. “I fear you’re under ze delusion I am obligated to inform you of my efery scheme. Ve may be joined at ze chi, dear Captain, but you are neizer my brozer nor my keeper.”

“You listen here,” the Captain demanded like so much sodden bar patron to the tender, “I aim to vacate this prison any minute now, and if you know something, you had better share because the only way you are ever going to see the light of day again is if I haul your cantankerous hide out with me.”

“A partnership?” the Doctor crooned. “Again? Zis never works out fery vell for eizer of us, as you might recall.”

“We must,” demanded the Captain.

But the Doctor only lifted his head until it fell back against the wall behind him. The resulting thud did not break his wicked grin. “Do you remember St. Petersburg?” he asked. “Tryink to find ze key to Babayaga’s hut in all zat snow while a hundred of ze tsar’s men swarmed up ze mountain after us? *Let’s make a pact*, you said. ‘Ve’ll find it faster!’”

The Captain growled.

“Oh ve found it alright. Right zere in ze snow and fery quickly just like you said. But maybe finding zat key vas not in your best interest, eh Captain?”

“I survived.”

“Sure you did,” the Doctor nodded. “After how many veeks in chains? After how many hours of brutality at ze hands of your jailers? Tell me, dear Captain, how badly vere *you* scarred?” When he smiled, the lengthy mensur fencing scar running down the left side of the Doctor’s face curled into a jagged crescent. “My own scars remind me of my follies; of when I hafe made mistakes. Like zis one on my face. I should have blocked left when my opponent feinted right. I will nefer forget zat one poorly made choice. How about you, Vaguely? Does zat

checkerboard of shredded flesh across your back remind you zat your decision in St. Petersburg vas a mistake?"

Again the Captain only growled.

The Doctor continued, "Of course ve might have seen ze Russians comink if our heads hadn't been buried in ze snow. Und maybe, if you vere not such an *arrogant American barbarian*, you would not hafe gotten such a sour reaction from ze Tsar. Perhaps if you had ze grace und charm of nobility, ze Tsar would hafe seen fit to let you go as he did me. But zen again, not many men can say zey held ze key to ze chicken-legged hut of a legendary Russian vitch und zen had ze key to zeir own cell zrown away. As such, I suppose in ze end, you are proud of ze denigration you suffered in St. Petersburg; much as I am proud of zis scar on my face. Zis scar tells eferyvone who sees it zat I vas brave enough to stand toe-to-toe viz an equal und take a vound like a man!" The Doctor sighed and chuckled, then said, "Alas, dear Captain, your scars are but the disgrace of a criminal."

"Damn you, Skaar, you Teutonic fool," Tripp roared, "This is not a Russian prison! This is not the past! This isn't St. Petersburg, nor is it Crow Mountain, or Shambhala, or Ys! This is a damned oubliette and it is very much right now! Understand? There are no doors here! No apparent escape! Beyond these walls stand only a kingdom of octopeds soon to sacrifice us to their trickster god!"

The Doctor groaned, stretched his neck, and flexed his hands before he seemed to acknowledge the Captain. "So ve are beink sacrificed zis time, eh?"

"That we are," said the Captain. This time it was Ghost-Tongue's turn to remain silent. Diplomacy might seem apropos to the situation, but whatever cosmic bond kept these two at each other's throat was best left to their own arbitration. So far it had seen both through several egresses from Hell.

"Ah Anansi," Skaar sighed. "He might play cute in ze folk tales from here to ze bayous of New Orleans, wiz all ze vit und cunnink of some harlequin imp. But in ze end, he's just as bloodzirsty as any of ze old gods." With a twist of his lips, as if he understood the inclination, the Doctor added, "It is zeir vay!"

"Well now that you are apprised of the situation, and understand the certitude of our demise in what I expect to be an extended education in disembowelment," the Captain urged, "you might be persuaded to tell us what you know and what you were after. Then maybe, just maybe, we might be able to devise a plan to get our doddered flesh back above ground."

## Chapter 5

### At the Queen's Pleasure.

Voluminous as a description for the throne room would be doing any dictionary a disservice. Mesmerizing would find itself severely lacking as well. Enormous, otherworldly, roomy, incredible, and capacious are all right out. Is *gargantutastic* a word? If not, it should be, and it should be immediately applied to the subterranean vastness that was the chamber that housed the Anansesem seat of power. Hewn from a gold so pure and brilliant it seemed to glow, gilded with gems

larger than fists, and set upon a black marble dais so tall it forced one to lift their head to see it, the throne somehow managed to absorb nearly all attention. The term “somehow” is included only because the massive crystalline web that converged upon the throne from every direction was also a matter of much curiosity among the three prisoners now bound in webbed manacles before that very same spectacular throne in the *gargantutastic* throne room.

The Captain was focused on the outlandish web structure. So clean and perfect it seemed more like ice than crystal; the webbing was as thick as a woman’s arm. It flowed out from hundreds of smaller corridors that opened up across the domed roof of the throne room and ran up towards its center. And where this intricate structure converged at the apex of the dome, the strands combined and wove together before running their collective way directly down in a sort of prismatic cone to the throne, itself. Upon that throne sat Baku, who was presently overseeing an elaborate ritual involving dozens of dancing Anansesem. At her feet sat Marybelle and the rest of the humans’ gear.

“And I thought she was some sort of arachnid constable. One thing you can say for her,” Captain noted, “she leads from the front. Right admirable. My kind of *g’hal*... the noble kind!” He turned his eyes, behind his goggles, to the web again and asked, “So how did you plan to pack that entire crystal web out of here, Skaar? And if you managed such an audacious feat, what were you going to do with it? Sell it to buy a new castle?”

“Castle Skaar needs no replacement, dear Captain,” Skaar grinned. “As you are vell aware, its laboratory could never be rebuilt or replaced. No, my interests were purely... self-indulgent.”

In the oubliette, it had taken hours of further prying to get even an inkling of the truth out of Max Skaar and they had firm doubts when he said he had come to steal the same sort of crystal they had seen streaked haphazardly through the tunnels. Alas, before they could make any further headway, the guards had appeared surreptitiously through a trap door in the floor and then hauled them through miles upon miles of tunnels to bring them here before their queen. In that time, they had been abused for speaking if they did, so the Captain knew that now, as whatever terrible ceremony was unfolding around them, was the only time they might get an actual answer from the Doctor.

“Acknowledge the corn, Skaar,” the Captain demanded, “What sort of magical mayhem did you have planned for the stuff?”

“Bah,” spat the Doctor, “It’s just a good conductor of magical properties. I zought it would make a fine addition to a staff or vand or efen just to keep around ze house. Imagine my chagrin when I was captured. Zat I would meet my end trying to collect a knick-knack! Ha! All zis trouble for some silly crystal.”

“I somehow doubt that,” the Captain glowered.

“Doubt what you will, dear Captain, but ze crystal’s true value appears to reside wiz zem.” The Doctor nodded toward the whirling spider folk whose ritualistic antics were verging upon an apparent crescendo.

Instead, the Captain looked to the crystal webbing again and watched the torrent of myriad hued *quinta essentia* flowing through it. Back in the tunnels, this power must have been only a trickle through those solitary veins of crystal, like a single rivulet of rainwater, for he could not spot it among the aura of the

lichen and insects. But here in the throne room, where all those thousands of rivulets merged to form a mighty river, the power was magnificent. While the doctor did not have the goggles for it, Tripp was certain Skaar knew what the crystal was doing. It was a bioelectric lightning rod combined with a crystalline telegraph wire coupled with a Leydon jar, or in this case, a Leydon throne, where all this living energy was collected. The radiance of it all was almost overwhelming and the potential power was absolutely intimidating.

Where did they get this crystal? Was it hewn? Was it naturally formed? No, certainly not. Looking closer at the nearest strand and the slight white striations, he would almost say it was woven. Is this the height to which the Anansesem webbing could be taken? To become a crystalline structure capable of conducting the very force of life?

This is what Skaar was after. The throne. The web. Everything. Just imagine, the Captain thought, what such a structure could do with millions, nay billions of living creatures adding to its energetic coffers. It could power the globe, he believed. In the right hands, agriculture and industry would be powered by the crops it harvested and the men that worked the machines; by life itself; creating a self-sustaining utopia where food, clothing, and homes would be available for all. Human minds could then turn to the heavens, taking this power source with them to power vessels that flew among the stars!

Of course, the Captain had to admit, in the hands of the Doctor, creatures, any living beings, even humans could become nothing more than a resource. Stabled and penned and farmed for the life of their flesh, such a power plant would become a virtual hell. Any chance of that happening had to be stopped. The power construct had to remain here, below ground with the Anansesem. At least for now, when there were people like the Doctor sitting in high places throughout the world.

Shaking away those nightmarish visions, the Captain tuned his ears to Ghost-Tongue's deep humming and asked aloud, "Jobi, old boy, how far along are they in their bloodletting bee?"

"They should be fetching blades shortly. How shall we proceed?"

"One moment, please." With that, the Captain reached up to his goggles and began focusing its lenses through the tiny dials along its rims and frame. With a twist here, a push there, and a few well-placed vulgarities under his breath, the left lens was modulated to its inletting refraction mode while its cohort was trained to reflect that same *quinta essentia* and project it back out into the world in a widened conical beam. After this final bit of tuning, the Captain promptly closed the aperture of the right lens and turned his attention back to the peril at hand.

"There!" the Captain exclaimed, drawing the attention of the other prisoners away from the advancing horde of eight-armed humanoids back to him. "Now gather close," he instructed, trying to keep his head still. "Make sure we're all touching!"

The current of *quinta essentia*, leeches from the web and all that lived within reach, flowed unseen through the air to all but the Captain. There it gathered through the aperture of his goggle lens. From the goggles to the Captain to the Doctor to Ghost-Tongue and back again, that *quinta essentia*, the life force of all

living things travelled. The three of them, it could be said, had never been more alive.

“Zey are getting razer close,” the Doctor announced. “Vhatever it is you’re doingk, dear Captain, make wiz ze haste.”

“Almost there,” the Captain replied, though in truth he had no gauge or meter by which to make that statement.

“Vhy hullo zere!” Skaar said to the nearest Anansesem. “Zat is a fery nice blade you haff. Kill zis Indian first, would you? I insist... really.”

“Close your eyes, gentlemen!” the Captain ordered and was promptly obeyed.

With the encircling spider people closing in like a noose, the Captain had to hope for the best, which just so happened to be the thing he was best at. So he closed his eyes, reached up, and slid the lever that opened the aperture on his right lens to let loose a dazzling flash of pure white light.

The effect was audible as a simultaneous grunt escaped the mouths each and every Anansesem in attendance. To the subterranean creatures this was both painful and blinding. The entire lot was brought to a stupefied standstill.

“Let’s get hell bent, boys!” the Captain announced and immediately dashed forward up the marble stairs of the dais he knew to be there and headed for the throne. Nearly winded at its summit but with one brilliantly lit but slowly dimming lens illuminating the way, he snatched up Marybelle and Ghost-Tongue’s spear. Then, lighting the electric torch and shining its beam back down the way he had come. He located Ghost-Tongue amid a swarm of disconcerted Anansesem. “Jobi!” he bellowed and hurled the spindly weapon at his friend. Then, turning back for his belt, the Captain found it had vanished.

“Barbarian!” Baku hissed and slung the belt around, striking the Captain in his gob.

Only slightly staggered, the Captain turned the beam of the electric torch on the Queen, which immediately and effectively blinded her, as well as causing all six arms to fly to her face in defense. His belt crumpled to the floor and he grabbed it up. “Excuse me, Your Highness, but we must take our leave of you! I do hope you’ll forgive our hasty departure but you must admit to a certain level of inhospitality on your part!”

With that, he dashed back down the stairs, blasting forth short bursts of flame to drive any recovered Anansesem back and periodically blinding them further with the electric torch. Once near to Ghost-Tongue and the Doctor he declared, “Follow me, boys! We’re headed home!”

Alas, he was surprised to find Ghost-Tongue flat on his back even though the Anansesem were more than five yards away. The solid punch that then landed on his jaw did not come from the direction he expected it to, though in hindsight it should have been the first place he looked. Skaar’s sucker punch landed hard and dropped the Captain on his rump. Marybelle was snatched from his hands and his goggles were ripped from his face before he could recover.

Then Marybelle cried out and her angry roar was fierce.

Flashes of gunfire dazzled as a spray of bullets tore through the crowd of spider folk followed by jets of flame. The Captain screamed in protest and made to pounce but Skaar turned the whirling barrels in his direction and he was forced to leap for cover around the base of the dais. It wasn’t what he wanted. They could

have made it out without any more bloodshed. Worst of all, that bastard was violating Marybelle!

The Doctor on the other hand, had long since made his decision. "You'll rot in arachnid hell, you fiends!" he screamed and turned his attentions to the goggles. These he poked at and prodded, twisted and fought until in his wicked brilliance he believed he had reset the technical spectacles and modified the projection lens.

At that particular moment he found the Captain in the process of charging him and opened fire with Marybelle yet again. The agile American jiggled and ducked and launched himself up the stairs, finding himself behind the throne where he found a very enraged Queen Baku dangling from the back edge of the dais.

"Hullo there, Your Highness!" he exclaimed. "Funny thing! The madman you captured four years ago now has my accoutrements and is intent on killing all of us."

"You'll suffer my claw, Captain," she snarled ineffectually.

"At your pleasure, Your Grace," he smiled.

Then the Gatling fire stopped and a bit of a chuckle wafted through the air. The Queen stopped her attempts to clamber up and looked to Tripp questioningly. "Did my soldiers get him?"

"I don't think so, Your Highness," the Captain admitted.

Then they were answered, "Dear Captain! Still alive up zere?"

"Will you go away if I say no?" said the voice behind the throne.

"Ha ha!" the Doctor laughed. "Vell perhaps you've been keepink track of time. I was too busy slaughterink zese monsters to do so." A burst from the *Dragon Breather*<sup>TM</sup> sounded.

"What's that?" the Captain asked, shrugging at the queen's visible curiosity. "Are you late for dinner? Why do you want to know what time it is?"

The Captain knew as soon as it fell out of his mouth that he did not want to know the answer to that question. But before he could take it back the Doctor answered, "Oh I vas just vonderink how much chi I vould haff channeled into zese goggles by now. You see, I figure if one vide burst of energy could do so much damage, vhat vould happen if I narrowed zat beam and focused it on one..."

The Captain grabbed two of the Queen's wrists.

"...specific..."

The Captain leapt.

"...point!"

The air sizzled and all hair stood on end for half a second before a ray of indigo blue light shot forth from the right lens of the goggles and struck the throne. The gems there encrusted began to shatter and explode as the surge of energy travelled up through the crystalline web. It too began to burst and disintegrate, and the entire construct began to collapse. Great shards of crystal and chunks of stone fell from above.

At the same moment, the Captain and the Queen slammed into the ground. The broken ribs, dislocated shoulder, and badly bruised hip were of no surprise or even concern to the Captain though. What he found most interesting was that when the Queen struck the ground beside him, in the light of the crystalline explosion he could see, she shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. Some were flung far away while the majority remained in a slightly humanoid shape where she

landed topped by the tuft of her hair. But then, just as quickly as they had scattered, these pieces began to move and even recollect. The tiny pieces wriggled and scampered and as he watched this he realized that they were actually thousands of tiny spiders. These spiders were rejoining and combining to form Queen Baku!

He could only smile at the wonderment of it all as she took shape again, sprouted a new head of gossamer hair and rolled to her side to face him. "All of Kese'Esum is held together by the power of the web," Queen Baku whispered, "Without the web, it shall all come undone."

A groan came from out of the distant darkness along with the sounds of a struggle. A burst of flame and another yelp followed before a rumble began from every direction. Then the electric torch shone out coming from around the corner of the dais.

"Cap'n!" Ghost-Tongue shouted. "Cap'n!"

"Over here, old boy!" Tripp bellowed. "I'm broken but good this time!" he said.

"He fell," the queen explained as she stood up.

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer, chap," the Captain smiled.

Then a boulder crashed down from the ceiling and Baku looked around. "My people! They will be crushed!"

"Madam," Ghost-Tongue said glumly, "I believe most of them are dead already. When Skaar shot them, they fell to pieces." The Captain nearly began to explain the entire spider conglomeration that was the Anansesem when the tall Indian added, "And then he even burnt the pieces."

"Skaar!" the Captain cursed. "Where is he?"

"He escaped," said Ghost-Tongue, "But I stuck him like a pig before he could. That's how I got Marybelle back."

"Good man," the Captain smiled.

Ghost-Tongue's face turned grim, almost apologetic. "But he still has your spectacles," he said.

"No worries, Jobi," the Captain grinned. "I can craft another. This is why we have schematics."

Stone had begun raining down in several sections of the roof now. As the Anasazi and the Anansesem Queen helped him to his feet, the Captain remarked, "I fear we should follow suit of the damnable Doctor von Skaar and get hell-bent on our escape. We'll do the world no favors by meeting our ends down here."

With an arm thrown over Ghost-Tongue's shoulder, the men made to leave by light of Marybelle's electric torch but discovered they had become a pair. Looking back they saw Baku standing for the first time helplessly and weak as a cascade of rock and dust poured down behind her.

"Come, Your Highness," the Captain said, "We'll need you to show us the way."

"I cannot leave my people," she explained. "They cannot all die and only I remain."

The Captain told her, "Surely there are others; a spider here and there, sentinels at distant stations who will survive, Your Majesty. You cannot give up so quickly."

The shower of rocks falling from above had begun to increase. One was crushed beneath its own weight nearly five yards away sending a smattering of debris at them.

“And what will we have?” the Queen wallowed. “A pit? A quarry?”

“Your grace! Do you know who I am? I am Captain Tripp Vaguely! I’ve punched a manticore in the face and walked away laughing! I have sung sonnets from the buttresses of flying castles! And I believe, dear lady...”

“Pay attention here, madam,” said Ghost-Tongue.

“I believe you have yet to see your finest day! I believe you will make for yourself a new kingdom and a new throne and weave for it a new web forged from the hearts of stars!”

Baku’s head lifted and her back straightened.

“You will give to this world the kind of majesty and nobility it has never seen the likes of while you cut shines that only a trickster god could muster!”

Her shoulders drew back wide and her many hands clenched to fists.

“Anansi will look down from his great web in the sky and say, ‘Bully for Queen Baku!’”

With the haughtiness and sincerity that only a victor can declare she said, “Yes, Captain. I believe you. There can be more. I am not done here in this world.”

“Atta girl!” he exclaimed.

“And I will reclaim the kingdom of the Anansesem in the name of Anansi!”

“There you go!”

“This day you have made a terrible enemy, Doctor Skaar! And the last beat of your heart will be between my teeth!”

“Well let’s not get morbid now,” the Captain smiled and motioned for her to follow. “Come, Your Grace! I’ll take you back to America; to Thunderdune; to my lab. We could use a gal like you!”

And they were off.

