





CHAPTER 1

It was pizza night at the house. The driver making the delivery had been the one to do so at this address many times before. Every time, a young kid would answer the door and take inside the plentiful bounty of pizzas, an amount that appeared far too much for just him and the grandma he had seen there just a handful of times. It wasn't any of the driver's business, but these curious thoughts did cross his mind from time to time.

The driver parked the van and collected all 10 of the pizza boxes, still steaming and filling the vehicle with a strong aroma of garlic and tomato sauce. He stepped out cautiously so the mighty and greasy tower would not tip over. He angled the pizzas so that he'd have a clear field of vision, with only pepperoni fumes and some smoke coming from his cigarette to bother his eyes.

The house was surrounded by an abnormally tall chain link fence, almost up the chin of an average sized man. It didn't provide the highest security but it did carry some aura to the house, giving the impression of being an obstacle more so than what it actually was. There were no pets to be kept inside the yard and the house itself was a simple and outdated one story home. The roof was heavily shingled and the brick walls were a classic red. Large wooden posts held the extended roof over the front and sides of the house.

Out of all its features, the thing that stood out the most was the abundance of spider webs. On every wooden post, underneath every window even around the front door, large white spider webs covered the surfaces. Nothing about the house seemed unkempt or dirty except for this. The webs were there every time and seemed untouched by humans. It was clear that many spiders shared the webs, spread like chocolate chips in white cotton candy fields.

The driver opened the unlocked gate with just the tip of his finger and walked up the concrete steps of the sidewalk to the front door. He set the pizzas down next to him and rang the doorbell. Immediately, as if he'd been waiting, the kid opened the door and stared directly at the driver.

He was quite short and wore an oversized hoodie that was always worn with the hood up. His long black hair dangled in front of his forehead and a bit over the eyes, concealing about half of his face. He wore light colored blue jeans that were painted over on the bottom

with flames all around. He always had his left hand in his pocket, unclear if he was actually holding onto something or doing so for comfort. His shoes were made for playing basketball, white on the top with large, black rubber bottoms.

The kid's expressionless face showed no emotion whatsoever. Just a blank stare with his lips almost in a frown. It was not due to a bad attitude however. In fact, he was always kind and spoke with a peculiar formality that wasn't necessarily fitting for the situation. He exuded calmness and was straight to business.

"Hey bud, order for Arath. \$84.95, the usual, heh," the driver spoke carefully as to not let his cigarette fall from his mouth.

"Gotcha, here's \$100, change is all yours." Arath said as he handed him the bill.

"Yo, you need any help with these boxes? They're heavier than they look."

"Nah, I got it, don't worry about it."

"If you say so, bud," the driver said, eyeing the towering stack of pizzas one last time.

He turned around and took a step to head back to his van but his foot slid after stepping on an unexpected leaf. The driver caught his balance easily but his cigarette had slipped from his lips and tumbled towards the ground. Before it could reach the concrete, a spider had shot like a spear from the web that lined the front door. It latched onto the cigarette with a decent grip and swung gently back and forth in place. The driver reached out, grabbed the still burning stick and put it back in his mouth.

"Heh, thanks eight-legged bud. I will never get used to this place," the driver said with a small smile on his face. He was no longer shocked at what he might see here. He was shocked the first time he saw one of the house's many spiders do something out of the ordinary but now he just assumed anything was possible.

Several deliveries ago, his shoe had come untied while he walked up the steps and he nearly dropped the load he carried. Almost immediately, several of the spiders had come to latch onto his shirt and held him into place while he gathered his senses and rebalanced himself. The driver had asked Arath to explain what he had just witnessed and Arath said very matter-of-factly "Well, some people train dogs, birds, whatever, so this is my thing I guess." The driver was curious to ask more

but the fact that it was spiders crept him out just enough to keep his mouth shut.

He put the cash in his pocket, nodded his head at Arath and walked back towards the work van. Arath opened the door and grabbed a single box from the top of the pizza stack and walked inside. Then all the surrounding webs around the door and from the ceiling casted out their arachnid dwellers into a swarming formation around the boxes.

The spiders swiftly crafted a series of webs that covered the cheesy tower from top to bottom. The boxes were then dragged like a roman chariot by their hungry horde of fanged crawlers. After they were pulled inside, they were welcomed by even more spiders that cling to various webs that were scattered along the walls. The pizzas were stringed out in a frenzy as the spiders devoured and ripped apart the cheese and crust.

It happens so quickly on pizza night, that the webs and cheese become almost indistinguishable during the first few minutes. Arath sits on the couch during the chaos but it dwindles down eventually. He turns on the TV and clicks on whatever old horror movie he was in the middle of already. The spiders will slowly file into place around Arath on the couch and attentively watch along.

The driver stepped into the seat of his van and slung across his seatbelt and pressed play on his stereo. He eased on the pedal and would make his way back to this pizza shop. He grabbed the rear view mirror and adjusted it, now seeing the silhouette of an unexpected passenger sitting next to him. His eyes widened and his hands gripped the wheel until veins appeared. The passenger had a wide smirk on his face, showing some teeth even though his mouth was closed. He didn't have a beard but his face was littered with disconnected stubble. He wore a denim vest with the sleeves torn off, obviously carelessly and wore a vaguely white shirt with a diverse assortment of stains. A knife was pulled out of the inside of his pocket. It was chipped and dirty, now pointing right directly right at the driver.

"Scram", he said with a smile, his eyes piercing the delivery drivers pupils.

Before the driver could even abandon his van by opening the door, the intruder planted a firm kick to knock him through the window and onto the pavement. He quickly crawled a few feet away before stuttering to a standing position. He didn't even turn around to see what the strangers intentions were for the van, he just ran until he was out of sight.

Inside the home, Arath heard a knocking at the door. He had no reason to be suspicious and lived his life a bit carelessly. So he opened it.

"Sup buddy, gotta slice for me?" The disgusting man said to Arath as he balanced the knife on the tip of his index finger, now leaning his back onto the frame of the door.

Arath wasn't scared of this unwelcome guest. He had absolutely no reason to be. Anyone could come to this conclusion given the appearance of the scene of a kid sitting amongst scores of spiders with shredded pizza all over the place.

This house belonged to Arath's grandma and he had lived there his whole life. Arath was now a community college student studying a little bit of everything, still searching for what would become his career. He cared somewhat about his education but his mind was typically elsewhere. His attention was paid out to playing bass to decades old rock songs or watching documentaries about places he had never been to.

Most importantly, he is on the receiving end of a particularly powerful curse. Its effects are still seen today and Arath is the only one standing in the way of the world having a new meaning for the world wide web. These spiders that are amongst nearly every inch of his house are not from the same place as other species. For one thing, they are spawned directly from Arath's pocket, coming and going in direct synchronicity with his will. But most importantly, that entryway in his pocket is one-way only. Not Arath, or anyone else, has seen what exactly is on the other side of his pocket now but it's clear that the curse has birthed a gateway.

Through the limited amount of the shared consciousness between Arath and the spiders, Arath has seen what appears to be a glimpse into their world. Every once in a while, as they spawn from his pocket and crawl over his skin, he sees the barren landscape, devoid of light and vegetation. Only spiders. As far as his shared eyes can see. Mountains of rock covered in mountains of spiders. These are the small moments where even Arath feels fear, as he hopes this is not the future of his world as well. He didn't wish for this curse of a pocket full of spiders or worse, a planet filled them.

This curse, and all that it had brought, meant that the present day situation did not fill Arath with an ounce of fear as he stared down a smiling maniac with a blade in hand.

"Dude, you're going to wake up my grandma, get out." Arath said as if he was scolding a kid at the park.

"Well wake her wrinkled butt up and ask her if she wants a piece too," he said with a widening smirk, holding the knife closer to his face.

Arath was unphased and appeared to be calculating his movements based on his predictions for what was coming next. The intruder leaped mightily into

the air, directly in Arath's direction and wielding the knife for an attack.

Arath cocked back his fist and, at last, removed his hand from his pocket. Before the hand had even left his pocket, an outward avalanche of spiders had begun to stream out and climb his hand and pour down his pants to the ground. The many spiders around the room also immediately switched their attention and formed a swirling ring around Arath's feet. They moved like water in the ocean, as if there was a flow of blood and life through their formation instead of just individually.

A stream of the spiders jumped from the ground and wrapped around Arath's hand, at first like a tentacle and then surrounded his hand similar to a boxing glove. Arath focused his eyes on the incoming assailant as he descended from high above and through his fist directly in his direction but not as a punch. When his fist had extended fully, the spiders shot off his hand like a shotgun slingshot. There must have been hundreds of spiders in the attack, moving as one in a ball-like formation.

This ball of spiders collided in the air with the attacker and not only stopped his momentum but knocked him flying backwards and into the wall. He smashed into the wall and fell down to his knees, dropping his weapon. His eyes lifted and stared directly at Arath but time was not on his side.

He hadn't even had an instinctive thought or movement before the spiders that just hit him had scattered and spread a wide net around his body. Not a single spider was touching him as they all glided in a circle around him. In an instant, they diverted their paths and the web tightened all around him from his neck to his ankles. The web was impossibly strong and sticky as it bound and incapacitated the man, now neatly packaging him like a sausage.

He had only a moment to test the integrity of the web by squirming and flexing his muscles to get out before he realized this wasn't their only successful attack. On his forehead and arms, he felt an incredible itchiness that had a pinching feeling at several sources. The spiders had bitten him so briefly before launching themselves off his body and tying him up. The poison swished around in his bloodstream and brought his pain down to zero. He was dearly holding onto consciousness, or possibly even death, as his eyelids felt heavier than his head.

Pizza night was a holy night of tradition in this house. So the greasy intruder's interruption was something to quickly forget and move on from. So, Arath and the spiders promptly placed him in the bin and returned back for their movie and then to be followed by hours of late night gaming. Best of all, Grandma was a heavy sleeper and her eyes didn't open an inch over this quick battle.

The garbage trucks in the city were making their rounds and proceeded towards the street where Arath's home was. The two workers had made this trip for the last several years and did so nearly by muscle memory. Marlo was at the back, standing on the bumper with his hands on a pole that allowed him to quickly dismount and grab the bins at the curbs. He was a professional and could do it effortlessly without spending too much time thinking about what he was doing. To pass the time, he often listened to podcasts and live radio in his wireless earbuds. His favorite show at the moment was a strange but interesting broadcast, found by accident after an online rabbit hole. It was called *Darkest Entry Radio*.

Marlo wasn't entrenched in conspiracy beliefs or the supernatural but he found the topics much more interesting than the typical daily news, filled with real dread and real problems. He couldn't stand to read the stories about missing children, government ineptitude or incoming economic disasters. Hearing stories about deeply demonic and magical creatures becomes relaxing in comparison. Every once in a while, a story would stretch from his curiosity into the realm of possibility and he'd have to think long and hard about how plausible it actually was and not how badly he wanted it to be true.

On tonight's episode, the narrator of the show, referred to as *The Author*, was speaking on the topic of supernatural bites. For quite awhile now, he has been desperately in search of a fabled lizard-human hybrid that could be patrolling the city. The Author broadcasts somewhere in the city that Marlo lives in or nearby and has been listing what he believed to be evidence whenever he found it. So far, no hard evidence of a lizard-human hybrid bite has been found but there were many suspects. He seemed to be thinking out loud about what he should be looking for and what the possible repercussions could be.

"The dangers of a paranormal bite cannot be understated. Anything from the mighty transylvanian demon lords to the subterranean reptile people poses a great risk to the soul-body barrier. A crack in that barrier creates a pathway to dimensions that linger parallel to our own reality. The fleshy vessel we live in could become a clown car of post-cosmic mischief if one of these entities were to cross over." The Author continued to present his case.

"The first signs of a breakdown of the soul-body barrier are related to the subconscious. New and uncontrollable urges present themselves, dependent on the entity's personality or wishes. Next are the physical symptoms. The infected person will become much more

primal, regardless of the entity, because the self-control that humans have attained over our evolutionary process as a species will crack to the stress and fear."

The Author concluded his train of thought, "If you have witnessed or suspect to have come into contact with someone dealing with a supernatural bite, please, do not hesitate to call the show."

While listening to the broadcast, Marlo had made many stops along the way and had tossed several bags of trash into the back of the truck. His partner in the driver's seat, Anders, was chugging along on his second energy drink of the night while blasting some heavy metal songs on the truck stereo. At this point, they were nearing towards the final quarter of the night's route.

In the hopper of the truck where all the trash was, the compactor had begun to smash and churn the trash together to make room for the remaining bins. Occasionally you could hear the smashing of glass, the crunching of cans and other noises that were part of the filthy conglomeration. In all of this mashing, a head of hair rose up from underneath several layers of old boxes, used band-aids and exhausted candles. The greasy strands were grabbed and slicked back into their intended position by callused hands and a pair of eyes opened to reveal his location.

"Where the heck am I? Smells like home but I don't remember walking back." The stranger from Arath's house had awoken from his poisoned slumber, tossed into the garbage truck after being hidden in clumps of web.

He thought to himself, "Wait, what happened with that kid? I'm still hungry so I don't think I got any of that pizza. Dang I'm so itchy, what did he do to me? Last thing I remember was...spiders. What the hell are all these dots on my arm?"

He looked up and down his arms and rubbed his hands along his neck, back and his stomach. Sure enough, pairs of holes littered his body, making his skin look like a tattered and torn rug that had been puked on and thrown out. He looked around the garbage he was surrounded by and made his move out of the waves of waste. The truck was still moving but he climbed out on top of the roof of the truck while Marlo was focused and facing the street, hands on the metal bar that allowed him to dismount easily.

The greasy creep made his way near the front of the truck by way of the roof and he thought of his next move.

"Hm, I already stole one van tonight. What's another truck going to do to my karma?" He thought to himself while crawling forward on the ceiling, pulling

himself over the edge and squishing his face directly onto the windshield below him.

Anders was broken from his routine stare as he stared directly into the wild eyes of the gross and demented hooligan staring back at him. He swiftly slammed onto the brakes and the truck's wheels squealed as they slid to a stop. Marlo yelled due to his shock and clung tightly to his pole, confused as to what could be the problem.

"What the hell you doin' up there, Anders? Did you hit something?" He yelled from his position right beside the truck.

Anders opened the door and quickly jumped out, toppling over himself as he struggled to undo the seatbelt and bring his mind back into his body. Once out of the truck, he ran directly towards Marlo and without using his voice, he communicated every drop of fear he had in his body.

Marlo took a few steps forward, his mouth wide open and his eyes full of curiosity. He peered ahead and saw the silhouette of a man on the pavement. The figure was sitting on his bottom and positioned himself upright by his elbows. He was looking straight at Marlo, showing a wide stretching grin and eyes were fixed with devilish intentions. The shadowy figure stood up and walked into the light that was cast out by the headlamps of the truck.

He was dripping with filth and trash, perfectly fitting for the ugly expression he wore on his face. Most shockingly to Marlo were the countless bite marks all over his body. His skin was clearly irritated to the point of resembling dry carpet and the fact that he was able to stand and stare down Marlo felt nearly unhuman.

Marlo followed Anders, as quickly as he could. No matter how curious he was, he did not want any answers to the questions that one might have in a situation like this. His past time of listening to spooky radio shows and his love of the paranormal couldn't prepare him for the reality of an encounter with something so seemingly otherworldly. It could just be a human for all he knows. There are plenty of people fully capable of carrying out horrific acts but seeing this side of a person, without even knowing their intentions, brought a spiritual stress to Marlo. He didn't know anything but the fear itself.

The man didn't follow either of the workers. They ran without turning back and without saying a word to each other. Eventually Anders tripped from exhaustion and Marlo was snapped out of his focus.

"Come on man, we have to keep going. Who knows if that thing is still behind us," asked Marlo.

Anders was breathing almost too heavy to get out a word. He turned in his head to look behind himself and said "There's no one coming I think. I ain't that fast and that thing got up after being flung from the truck, I think it would've caught up to us by now if he wanted to."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Just what in the hell was that thing? I ain't never seen eyes like that."

"I don't know man. It looked like roadkill from hell. Like a zombie or something. So damn ugly..."

"What were those dots all over its body? Look like bed bugs or something."

"I didn't get a look after it rubbed its damned mug on the windshield. I just booked it."

"You know. I was just listening to *my radio* and the guy was talking about demons and stuff and what happens if they bite ya."

"Oh come on Marlo, you've been around this city. Plenty of people smoke who know what or using needles with what the hell ever they want inside them. Probably just some junkie flipping out."

"I don't know bro. The only thing those people ever want is some gas station junk food, not to wallow around in the trash like a pig."

"I don't really care too much to investigate but damn, we gotta go back and get the truck. Let's call the boss and go back together. Who knows, they might have dropped dead from hitting the road."

Marlo called his boss from his cell phone and the two waited for backup so they could go check out what had happened at the scene. Their boss arrived about half an hour later in his four door pick up truck. In the passenger seat was his large rottweiler dog, Borscht. Their boss didn't have an intimidating figure, standing about a foot less than both of them, but he was stern as could be with a face worn and weathered like a tree trunk. He was carrying his pistol on his hip and held Borscht on a short leash right next to him. Borscht was a sweetheart dog who didn't even bite at mosquitos nipping at his ass but he was big and toothy with lots of drool.

Marlo and Anders hopped into the bed of the truck and their boss drove the four of them to the scene of the crime without saying a word. Marlo had explained everything the boss needed to know on the phone and he was pissed as hell that this was the way he'd be spending his night and that he might be out of a truck.

They drove up the street until they got to the approximate position where everything happened but it looked exactly like what they expected. A few pieces of garbage from the stranger's disgusting escape that had fallen from the back and not a truck in sight. The boss drove for a bit further just to be sure that his two

employees weren't misremembering the exact position due to the chaotic nature of the situation.

But no truck was found, they had done all that they could've done. The boss phoned the police and waited to file a report with them. Marlo and Anders didn't speak at all in the back of the truck as they just wished for the night to come to a close.

Marlo couldn't get the image of the stranger out of his head and couldn't shake the eerie feeling of seeing him immediately after what he had heard of the *Darkest Entry* episode. The coincidental nature of it all was too much for him to comprehend but this brought back to his memory a previous episode of the show on synchronicity, the coincidental nature of connected events occurring suspiciously at the same time. Whether it was spiritual, quantum mechanical or nonsense, it's the reason why so many people are afraid of talking about ghosts, demons, monsters, people that they don't want to run into in public. What if we speak something into existence? What if our thoughts manifest themselves into real world occurrences? What about just listening to other people and the words they speak?

The Author always gave a word of caution with his topics because of the doors that might open if we bring ourselves too close. The most mysterious creatures

in the world are often seen throughout time, regardless of geography and surpassing the limits of culture and understanding. It's as if they know we're curious and come out of hidden doors.

So, Marlo closed the door, as so many others would. He wasn't a coward but he preferred to be a casual bystander when faced with something as unnatural as this. He might bravely recall this night among friends and family years later but nothing more. The boss would deal with the police and if the truck was found and brought back, it was nothing to think twice about. Just a thief, a drug addict or a wild man during a psychotic break.

Marlo had seen it with his own eyes but that didn't mean this was his puzzle to solve. Maybe he was the man in the middle and he needed to carry this thing over to whoever would take the next step. The police would never hear him out so there was only one call to make.

Marlo grabbed his phone and dialed a number he hears very frequently, at the end of every episode of *Darkest Entry*.

"Press 1 to leave a message. You may hang up when finished," a prerecorded message said from the earpiece on Marlo's phone.

For the Author, this had been the lead he had been begging for all this time. He had previously thought about shutting down the hotline as the messages tended to be erratic delusions from the imaginative or disturbed. Also it was costing a steady five dollars every month. It was a free radio show after all

His patience had finally paid off and he was already filling up his thermos with a fresh pot of coffee with cinnamon flavored milk creamer. This lead had him traveling to a neighborhood he was vaguely familiar with and the details were sparse. All he knew was that there was a disturbing man covered in punctures and pus and that he had hijacked a garbage truck from its crew. Hopefully this wasn't another listener who was confusing their dreams with reality, as was the case with the mutant cow man that turned out to be an ice cream mascot spinning a sign in front of their store.

Bite marks were an especially exciting lead as the Author had reason to believe that there was a reptilian humanoid creature somewhere about the city. He had found slime covered claw marks at the scene of a few crimes and he had collected what he hoped to be lizard scales on a few different occasions. If not, he had collected the most cursed and forbidden dandruff of all time.

The old blood in the Author's veins was pumping like it had many times before. What a long time since these feelings stirred.

The radio show that the Author secretly did was his hobby but that's not the case for his life as a paranormal investigator. Long before the radio show era of his life, the Author was a black suit in one of the government alphabet gangs. A salaried man with bosses and paperwork to turn in. A life was dedicated to the efforts of his agency, the Federal Inquisitors of Abnormalities.

They were supposed to be the arm of justice that extended when confronted with the strange and unnatural. Often this involved cases filed under extreme secrecy that wouldn't receive a drop of ink in the media. Whether they were solved or not, heroes or villains, no one's face would ever be known.

The Author wasn't supposed to know about his past, as was required as part of the decommission protocol at the end of an inquisitor's tenure. If an inquisitor left the agency, their memory was wiped from their frontal lobe via cell replacement technology.

The agents wouldn't remember a single detail of their work. No diligent studies related to the paranormal or any of the extensive military-like training over the years such as with firearms or in martial arts. A clean slate, freshly wiped.

Old memories were replaced with new ones so that they could lead a normal life. Everything from "new" university days, to first days at their new jobs and the occasional work outings. All were planted from custom created cells.

These agents were without families until their decommissioning because of what they saw everyday. The possibility of cutting the last strand holding society's collective sanity together was too much to risk.

The public has their own forums and mediums to speculate and be curious, but most of them are unaware of how they would really act when faced with the truth of the existence of these things. Vampires? Werewolves? Aliens? The Author had seen or come close to many of the classics. Witness testimonies and photographic evidence failed to capture their true fear inducing characteristics.

The Author did remember all the monsters he was faced with though. When the agency closed down suddenly and without explanation, all agents were quietly decommissioned. Before, it was a handshake and a "thank you for your service" but this time, they simply woke up into a new life. Blissfully unaware that they had been brave soldiers venturing into the true final frontier.

The agency was ramping up their assistance to other government agencies with more controversial tasks and the Author had taken note before the great decommissioning. He came here every day because of his curiosity for the strange and was filled with empathy for the creatures seemingly out of place. The cryptids were not meant for zoos, the ghoulish deserved to be exorcized into the next life and the extraterrestrials needed a jump start sometimes.

In the final days of the agency, there were less subjects that saw a release back into the world. No rehabilitation or relocation efforts anymore. Only an increasingly intrusive presence of the military, who began to stick their nose far and deep into everything they could. The Author dreaded a world in which cohabitation was no longer the goal. Some monsters had to be slayed and some demons needed to be exiled but most creatures and entities were just as dedicated in their search for life or purpose as were the humans.

Humans were only becoming greater monsters of overindulgence and Author didn't want all of his hard work to be part of this ugly new era. It was not possible as a man on the inside to change the course but maybe there was a path from the outside to curb the new agenda.

He had prepared in many ways for being captured, sedated or killed by his own agency and rightfully so. In the end, they tried sedation to bring him

unknowingly to the decommission chamber. The Author's justified paranoia paid off as he had purposely let a demon latch on to him to wake him up if his brain activity stalled out. The decommissioning was carried out by bureau robots that placed the agents inside furniture boxes and moved them in secret, so as to not tip off others that were not sedated yet.

The demon was able to reactivate the Author's consciousness and he was able to escape by deactivating the robot, navigating the furniture box to a garbage chute and quickly traversing the insides of the building until he was liberated.

He was free physically but the Author knew he was going to forever be a wanted man with a bullseye on him the moment that he let his guard down. Still, his resolve remained even if the mission had now changed. His demon ally followed him until the Author decided on a city to make his headquarters and then they went their mostly separate ways.

Even under the tremendous pressure of now being a fugitive, the Author had crafted a decent life for himself and had developed an alternate identity that provided enough cover for him to be a relative unknown in the world. His previously shaved head now had long, slightly wavy hair that dropped all the way down to his back. His once cleanly shaven face had a large and bushy handle-bar mustache, resembling a giant, brown caterpillar. He traded away his square bureau sunglasses for large, almost v-shaped frames, blacked out and easily reflective of light.

Uniform days were long gone and he stuck to sporting large denim, short sleeve shirts, patched with various random organizations like local motorcycle shops. He wore long, boot-cut slacks that held to his leg quite loose and layed on top of his leather cowboy boots.

During some nights, he broadcasts his radio program and mulls over his ideas with a modestly sized audience, unafraid of who might be listening. The people deserved a peek into the world of the paranormal, especially with the threat of their own government using that world recklessly in their own interests.

This modern era has given way to countless niche broadcasters that covered all kinds of bizarre topics, allowing the Author to decently blend in. The audience was unaware that he was almost guaranteed to be the only investigator with confirmed credentials.

He now strived to make contact with cryptids to learn from them and provide allyship if they became hunted or captured. But as an independent investigator, now without resources or a team, he had relatively few successes. That's what was so exciting about this particular lead. It sounded wildly unnatural but it fit the profile of cases he had worked on before. A human with a potential supernatural affliction by oral transmission.

A case as old as time.

The Author stopped his van at the sight of an overturned trash can, sprawling with spider webs and several feet off the curb.



CHAPTER 4

Arath was inside his home, now knuckles deep in a gaming session. He had moved on mentally from the intruder that had disturbed his peace, unbothered with a curveball as he normally was. He was currently playing a fighting game against a group of his spider companions, winning only about one out of every five matches. They shared his brain's wavelengths and acted accordingly, proving to be a more formidable opponent than the game's computer A.I.

It was a good exercise for Arath, allowing him to add new folds and wrinkles to his brain. He made new neural pathways from having to both think of his own strategy and react against a foe that was actively reading his mind through a direct feed.

Most importantly of all, they were more fun to fight than most online opponents. That was the main reason he fought them.

Arath still hadn't developed a greater sense of purpose despite being cursed with a great power that would ruin most people's sanity. He had overcome the challenges of having a pocket full of spiders and even transformed it into a great power that he wielded efficiently.

He could've turned into a great hero or a wicked villain, but he simply let life continue in whatever weird way it would. His hobbies dictated most of his life and he kept going to university so he could have a career that kept funding those same hobbies.

The most important hobby for the past few years was his love of music, particularly the bass guitar. He loved video game soundtracks and funk music, playing and slapping along to the songs by ear. He wasn't part of a band yet but he did dabble with writing his own songs or playing along with his Uncle who played guitar and sang.

His Uncle was a big influence on his life and they shared many of the same interests. Besides playing music, they often traveled together to go hiking, see historical monuments and visit off-the-beaten-path spots. They often went to places that were not filled with people but it wasn't because of anti-social tendencies, they just wished to see things that were more unexpected or unexplored.

This was also how Arath had come to inherit his current affliction.

They had traveled to an old temple about two hours outside of the city. It was much larger than modern churches, with tall and wide stone blocks that built the

foundation in a rectangular shape. No one was allowed inside the building itself but they could walk the steps to the top and see the many shrines that were on the outside on various levels. Each floor decreased in size until the summit, where it peaked like a pyramid but with a glass ornament that allowed the sun to send its light inside to dance along the mysterious, ancient ritual rooms.

Arath and his Uncle stopped by many of the shrines and took a few pictures on a disposable camera. Both of them had their personal qualms with social media and still made photo albums the old-fashioned way. They explored attractions such as this more like explorers than tourists, trying to find the answers themselves to any curiosities that came to mind.

Alongside one of the shrines that appeared more broken down than the others, Arath and his Uncle noticed a tiny walkway that extended to the inside. No one else was around and there were no signs denying access. Of course they knew going inside was strictly forbidden in general but this was just a few steps in and appeared to be more of a window to view inside than it was an entrance to a room.

They carefully kneeled and ducked when needed to carve their way around the collapsing stone structures around, making sure as to not create any noise or break any ancient columns. The sun shone through the top and bounced around on mirrors then dimly lit the inside. It looked like the indigenous ancients that erected the temple had a deep understanding of geometry. Triangles of light showed the earthly skeleton but nothing more. There were empty stone clips on the wall that appeared to be holders for torches but alas Arath and his Uncle were torchless. Except for a lighter his Uncle had in his pocket. They thought twice about and decided they would light it just to see if anything else could possibly be seen on the balcony they stood on.

Uncle flicked the lighter to life and disappointingly, nothing more about the temple revealed itself. A few moths flew over to see the flame and a frog hopped right behind, possibly looking for a snack. The frog started both of them but they didn't scream or make any big sudden movements, just let out a sigh of relief that it wasn't anything more than that.

They expected the frog to sling his tongue outside of his mouth and onto one of the months but he didn't open it at all. He had a peculiar stare aimed right at the two of them as if he was waiting for one of them to speak. Arath thought something might be wrong with

the frog and being as compassionate for animals as he was, he reached and grabbed the slimy amphibian.

It was girthy and large, and didn't put up a fight at all when grabbed by this human. Arath stared at the frog and examined to see what might have been making it so eerily still. He gave its belly a small squeeze and its pupils immediately dilated. It appeared to have something inside and this might've been its signal to the humans that it wanted whatever it was out.

Arath gave it another firm squeeze and its mouth opened, showing that the frog was fully stuffed with shiny objects. Now with urgency, Arath held the frog upside down, gave it a larger squeeze than before and also a little shake. Several metallic coins began to fall onto the floor and the size of the frog immediately shrunk.

The two humans were shocked to see just how many coins, about 15 or so, had been in the frog this whole time. Could it have eaten them one at a time and realized too late that they weren't going down? Or did someone use the frog as a purse and it hopped away? Whatever the case was, the frog, now empty, was eager to hop away and return to where it came from. Arath and his Uncle surveyed the area outside to see if anyone was running towards them after hearing the clanging of the coins as they fell to the floor but the coast was clear.

They both looked at each other and nodded, silently confirming that this was their souvenir for the taking. They picked the coins up one by one and placed them in their pockets, knowing they'd share whatever the find was once they talked about it later. After their pockets were stuffed, they quickly made their way back to the outdoor portion of the shrine and began to walk back to the stairs.

There was no point in risking their find by exploring more of the temple. They decided it was time to go to the truck and see just what they had come across. It wasn't a question of monetary value to them, they were genuinely excited just to have these tokens of history to appreciate.

Before they reached the truck, Arath's pocket had begun to tighten and it felt like several threads of his pants had begun to tangle themselves around his hand. He tried to pull away but it only got tighter, so he looked to his uncle, beginning to feel the stress of what was happening.

"Hey uncle, I can't take my hand out of my pocket. Something's holding it inside," said Arath.

"Huh? Did you grab a bug or snake or something?" Replied his uncle.

"No way. Come on, it's starting to pull my hand in deeper. There's nowhere else to go though."

"Come on Arath, stop kidding around. Here let me see what's going on here."

Uncle at first tried to grab Arath by the arm and pull his hand out but he saw that his nephew was not playing a prank, it was really stuck in there. They struggled at first, seeing if they could wriggle it free but it seemed pointless. Uncle then put his hand in Arath's pocket and tried to feel around his hand to see what could it be tangled with.

His hand was met with the feeling of several insects that quickly bit into his hand and began to crawl out of the pocket and onto his arm.

"Arath! It's damn spiders! Pull out before they bite you too. Son of a gun that hurts." Yelled uncle.

"What?! But nothing's biting me. I can feel something starting to crawl on my hand but no pain yet."

"Look at my hand! You see those bite marks right? Let me squash them, they must have bitten your hand or something and made it numb."

Uncle began to swat, punch and kick Arath's hand in his pocket and tried again to pull his nephew's arm out of the pocket.

"Dude stop! I can feel everything. It's not budging!" Arath said with uneasiness finally reaching his voice.

Arath began to move and wiggle his fingers around to see how many spiders were actually in there and to see how they could possibly be holding his hand down. All he felt though were a few spiders and the coins. Yet one coin felt vastly different than the others. It felt almost hot to touch and the moment he touched it, it felt like his eyes blinked but he hadn't blinked at all. Grazing the coin with his fingers was blacking out his vision each time.

The two men were already near the truck and uncle decided to pick Arath up and run for it. They were either going to get in trouble for stealing from the temple or Arath was going to die from some strange species of spider.

They arrived at the truck and uncle was going to take Arath to the hospital. They would have to worry about the bigger trouble they might be in if it came to that but he only cared about saving his nephew. Arath said next to him, contemplating what he might be able to do in the meantime. The spiders were not biting him after all.

“Don’t worry kid, we’re going straight to the emergency room. Surely they’ll have some type of anti-venom for us. Damn, I’m starting to feel a little sleepy too. I think these bites are starting to knock me out.” His uncle said, eyes starting to slowly droop down.

Arath could drive them if he could get his hand free and help his uncle move over. He started to forcefully shake his hand around and pulled as hard as he could. In the struggle, the warm coins slipped into his palm and Arath felt compelled to squeeze it with all his might. In an instant, his vision turned to black.

He was not unconscious. His senses were working fine and were picking up all kinds of strange signals. He heard a rustling noise all around him that only got louder the more he paid attention to it. His eyes darted around where he was and tried to make out any shapes but only hill-shaped silhouettes appeared.

He was unable to yell or call out to anyone. Even opening his mouth to breathe was impossible for some reason. The light must have slowly trickled into his eyes and he could now see the hills were vibrating and moving. He looked down to where his feet should be and the ground was squirming and moving in strange patterns. It wasn’t grass swaying in the wind or water washing onto a beach. It was spiders. Everything, everywhere, was spiders, as far as his eyes could see.

This was the first vision Arath had into their world.

Time had passed since then and the direness of the situation didn’t push Arath into a dangerous place mentally. The spiders weren’t hurting him and they didn’t seem to bite to kill when they did sink their teeth in someone. This was something they would have to try to understand and deal with but neither would ever fear the curse as much as they did in their first encounter. It did seem like a gift most of the time and nights like tonight only reinforced this idea. Arath knew there was great strength in this power and that’s precisely why the intruder didn’t phase him whatsoever. He cared more about waking up his sleeping grandma than he did his own safety.

Thankfully his grandma was still fast asleep and the night had returned to normal. He and his spider friends had made their way through all of the pizza that they had ordered. Now it was time to throw out the boxes before hordes of ants came for their share. One creepy invasion was enough for this house. .

Arath unlocked and opened the front door, carrying all the boxes of the pizza himself this time. He walked to the gate and saw that his trash cans had been knocked over. The man that he tossed inside must have escaped.

Yet he saw two boots sticking out from the can that laid on its side. Whoever was inside heard Arath walking up to the cans and they crawled out.

“Hey kid, you’ve got quite the infestation here.” The Author said, now covered with remnants of webs from his search inside the cans.



CHAPTER 5

Arath and the Author stood facing each other, only separated by the chain-link fence in between them. The Author was looking in the trash can outside of his house because of the large amount of spider webs that covered the inside. It was much thicker and had a more milky color than normal spider webs. It was a possible step in the right direction of the case he had picked up.

“Excuse me kid, I didn’t mean to frighten you by digging through your trash,” the Author told Arath, “I got a little bite from a bug while walking nearby and saw the webs.”

“I don’t think that was from anything in there,” Arath said, not trying to leave anything up for debate.

“Well there are a lot of spiders here. You don’t think this is an awful lot of webs for the spiders we see around the area? Have you seen what they look like? Just the webs it looks like in here.”

“Nope.” Again, Arath answered with the clear goal of making the man go away. One stranger was enough for the night. At least the Author wasn’t a greasy, screaming maniac.

“What about your house? Just curious if you ever see spiders inside too?”

“Do you even live around here?” Arath had never seen this man before, or even someone closely resembling him. There are plenty of people that you could see outside walking, it’s possible he had missed seeing the Author around.

“Well not too far from here, sometimes I like to change up my route.” The Author had to closely push Arath on the topic to see if he’d offer up anything at all. Arath wasn’t cleared of being a suspect for harboring a secret but the Author ultimately doesn’t hold authority over anyone to demand the information. “Look, I’m just keeping an eye out for my community. I’d like to see if this spider problem might get bigger and affect more than just me and you.”

“If I see anything I’ll let you know.” Arath said while not making an effort to get any contact information.

The Author was at a dead end with Arath. There was no give and take and that made the Author more cautious of the kid because normal people had a healthy worry about spiders. Even if people liked spiders, the Author himself had them in his top ten of favorite animals, they would be quite concerned if there was evidence of a large infestation such as this.

This was a spot to keep an eye on and without the badge to demand more answers, the Author could simply offer only his card.

“Here, call me if you see anything out of the ordinary. You can call me Author. I host a local radio show about the supernatural called *Darkest Entry*.” The Author clipped the card into the chain-link fence and nodded at Arath.

He looked at the door frame that Arath was standing under and noticed there were quite a few spider webs and some webs even had spiders on them. They were clearly coming from inside the house as well.

The Author brought his eyes back and looked down where he had just placed the card and noticed a few spiders, now at the bottom the chain-link fence, close to where his books were. It felt like eyes were closing in on him, providing deeper surveillance the longer he was present there.

“Relax kid, I’m heading back to my car. There’s no reason to get worked up.” The Author had to see the connection between the Arath and the spiders.

“Huh? I’m just waiting for you to stop being creepy at my house dude. I’ll head back inside when you walk away.” Arath was turning from apathetic to stern with his demeanor.

The Author felt a slight tickle on his back as Arath began to stare him down more intently. The Author shrugged his shoulders at the kid and turned to walk back to his van. He took a couple steps and the sensation on his back went away. This made the Author immediately spin around and grab whatever it was that was clinging to his back.

He held a spider in his hand, with a web still attached to its rear. It must have been slingshotting it’s way back under the assumption that the Author was finished here.

The Author’s eyes swiftly followed the web and saw that it was attached to the roof of the house. By the time he had seen where it had come from, the spider had once again activated its spinnerette on its abdomen and the Author was yanked off the ground and in the same direction.

He quickly let go of the spider while he was in the air and was able to land on top of the chain-link fence, planting his feet firmly on the top and gathering his balance.

Arath’s pocketed hand now emerged and a swath of spiders poured out into a formation around his feet. They swayed in organized waves that surrounded Arath

like a ring. His hand was out of his pocket but his arms just lay by his side. His near-expressionless face remained unchanged but still focused on the Author.

“Well now we’re getting somewhere. Who else did you bite tonight?”

Arath remained still as the Author spoke.

“I’m not here to start a fight with you. I think whoever you sent your little minions after has more bad intentions than you do.” The Author was trying to reason with Arath, “He’s only causing trouble out there. If you don’t help me out here, this thing could snowball.”

“Forget you came here and go find him yourself,” Arath continued, “My grandma’s trying to sleep.” Arath’s arm now raised from his side and the ring of spiders around his feet shuffled and rearranged into the form of a long and skinny tentacle with many bends.

“Last chance, bud. I’m a detective but there’s more to me than what you think you see. Clearly you’ve come across some great power but that’s just a gift. I’ve put in the work and become proficient in over ten styles of martial arts, perfected to put us mere humans in position to contend with the unnatural.”

The Author’s past life as inquisitor had given him all the training he could have possibly needed, regardless of what power this boy was wielding. He had trained under many masters at the top of their craft and had shaped his body to translate all these styles into a multi-dimensional force of offense and defense. He was among the top agents in these pursuits, becoming involved in so many disciplines of fighting that he could go toe-to-toe with championship boxers or mixed martial artists and end up with a victory due to his overwhelming access to moves and techniques.

Most importantly of all, these specific disciplines were more than mere muscles in motion. They were born out of efforts to synchronize the human form with the hidden harmonies of the universe, the spiritual connection between all lives and dimensions. Many people meditated to become closer to this almighty transcendental state of mind but martial artists knew that humans had their limits but this only meant that they must exceed these blocks and force the next evolutionary step.

These masters were humbled by the pursuit of achieving nirvana and felt only gratitude for the drops of life that the universe poured into them. The Author had decades to go to master these forms but he was spiritually activated in the eyes of these masters. He had at least pushed himself to the point of tasting what it’s like to move your evolutionary status forward.

Now it was time to see if Arath had made these same efforts.

The Author chose the style he would use in this fight and started the first stance while still standing atop the fence. He slowly moved his arms in circular motions, moving in opposite directions of each other while his back arched upwards and his knees widened. Once his body had become open and stretched, he quickly tightened together to make the next stance by positioning one open palm forward and the other hand in an open position on its side.

Arath attempted to interrupt the Author’s preparations by lashing his tentacle formed by spiders in a whipping motion. It was long but narrow, making a whooshing sound as it sliced through the air in front of it. The Author pulled back one of his hands and then struck in a forward motion using one side of his body.

The tentacle came crashing down but the Author hit it dead on, immediately stopping all of its momentum but Arath was prepared. The tentacle was smashed apart but the spiders that weren’t hit immediately launched into the air with their webs coming out around the Author’s arm.

“AFTERBURNER STYLE - HAWKER HURRICANE.”

From the Author’s shoulder, down to his hand and several feet forward, hot air burst into supercharged streams surrounding his limb and moving forward. All the spiders that were trying to latch onto the Author’s body had been knocked in opposite directions. The punch that had just been thrown out had a second life to it, making it the perfect answer to Arath’s style of attacking with a swarm.

Afterburner style was crafted to match all the force that was put into the fighter’s fist and pull with it an equivalent amount of energy in the form of heat. Once the punch would land, the heat that had built up in the quick motion would then immediately release in the same direction in a wide-ranging conical assault.

Arath had never come close to going up against a force such as this. In one counterattack, the Author had proved to be more than worthy of going against Arath’s curse. In all honesty, Arath had only used it against two people since he had inherited the ability and one of those people was the intruder today. He didn’t welcome any challenges to his strength and was never openly wielding his power. That wasn’t to say that he didn’t practice and use the powers often. He had often gone to secluded areas such as the forests and mountains that he hiked to and created scenarios and tests for himself to become comfortable with his abilities. Yet nothing could have prepared him for an interaction like this.

The Author leaped off of the fence and brought his knees to his chest. He planted himself right next to Arath in a full crouch, on all fours like a panther about to pounce. Arath turned and raised the waves of spiders from his feet to create a wall that could react to the next move if he could see it coming.

The Author quickly stood up and brought his foot from the ground and met the wall head on with his shin. His body had turned to lead with his chest, then his and then leg was like a lash from a whip. The colliding of the shin immediately dispersed the majority of the spiders from the wall into a spread pattern, all over Arath. Just like the last connected hit, many spiders were able to cling onto his leg despite being hit and this time, many bit into the Author's leg, finally penetrating his defense.

But it was in vain as the afterburner kicked in once again and streams of hot air shot out from around his leg and straight ahead. The spiders on his leg were knocked off and the wind blasted directly into Arath's body, scattering all the spiders he had at his side.

Most worrying of all for Arath, steam seemed to be erupting from the bite marks like a whale's blowhole. Bits of blood spewed and the Author's level of experience in combat shone through in this moment. The venom was sent to the air, away from where it could infect the Author's bloodstream like it had to others before.

Scores of spiders had been displaced from around Arath and even though he could continue pulling them out from his pocket, he was only losing ground. He was not at a disadvantage yet however, as the scattered spiders now gave him far and ranging reach over the battlefield that his yard had become.

The Author launched from where he was standing and was going for a head on attack on Arath himself. The spiders launched their webs from where they were standing, littered all around the grass, the walls and the fence. Their webs connected quickly and with great strength compared to normal spiders, creating a stringy fortress that wrapped the Author up the more that he moved forward.

The Author slammed his feet into the ground, sliding in the dirt and coming to a halt. He began slicing the webs using swift, chopping motions with hands but it seemed that more webs were coming than he was removing. In his preoccupation, Arath had pulled another large cluster of spiders from his pocket and as a result of his defensive success, he had an opening.

Arath crafted a sphere of spiders around his fist just like he had done to defeat the stranger but this time, it was larger and more tightly packed. The spiders could

sense the fear that had begun to breach into Arath's emotions and responded accordingly.

Arath had no time to waste and placed his feet firmly on the ground and punched at the Author with all of his might. The spiders launched off his hand and flew at the Author with tremendous speed. This was because the spiders had great jumping abilities and when synchronized in this ball, they could launch off each other and create an immediate spinning motion like a baseball with a million moving parts. This centrifugal force carried them forward and the spiders in the inside would move to a position that would allow them to move in place, keeping the ball rotating and in the air.

The Author saw this mass of arachnids flying his way and tried to wiggle a limb free to counterattack but was unable to escape the strength of the webs that bound him. His only option was to plant himself where he stood and face the projectile head.

He cocked his head back and put all his faith into the top middle corner of his forehead. He met the ball head on with his skull and everything apart from the Author and the ball was blown back by the sheer energy created by the two objects meeting with such deadly force. And then, the afterburner kicked in, even from the Author's head and completely unexpectedly from Arath.

It wasn't nearly as strong as it was with his fists and feet but the ball stopped in its tracked and knocked back enough for the Author to dodge extensive damage.

This was not a victory however, it was a brief escape from doom. The Author was still bound and the energy he had used to stop the ball was all that he could muster as he fell to his knees, allowing the spiders to tighten their binds even more.

"Hey, look at the webs," Arath said, "Notice there's no spiders coming your way. I've never killed anyone but I'm not sure how to stop you without doing exactly that. Here's your chance to convince me to let you go."

The Author processed what was happening and considered if this boy was really an enemy. Arath attacked only when the Author pressed too much and was giving him a chance to escape despite having the upper hand. The whole reason he came here was to investigate a paranormal event and Arath was indeed a paranormal person but that didn't mean he was the instigator. He might have just needed to defend himself earlier, the same that he was doing now.

"Sorry bud," The Author began to apologize, "Can't say I meant for things to go this way. Look, I am a paranormal detective and I am trying to get to the bottom of some innocent people getting attacked by something strange. As much as I'm dying to know why spiders are

crawling out of your pocket and following your orders, how about we call it even and you help me find whatever thing you dealt with earlier?”

“I’m not interested in anything but going inside right now. If it’ll get you out of my yard, then I’ll lend you a spider. It’ll lead you to the dude that broke in my house earlier as long as the venom is still in his body. He was insane for sure but weak as hell.”

“Alright kid, I’m in no position to bargain, I’ll take it,” the Author was slowly released from the webs, seemingly gaining some amount of trust from Arath. “I insist you take my card, just in case. The paranormal world has changed quite a bit in the years I’ve been a part of it. It might come knocking at your door, whether you like it or not.”

The Author held out his card and a spider on Arath’s arm shot its web onto it, then reeled it back so Arath could grab it and put it in his pocket. The Author nodded as a sign of respect and one of Arath spiders had jumped on to his shoulder and then onto the ground, waiting for him to follow”

“Thanks bud,” the Author said to his new non-adversary. “That was fun, for what it’s worth. Sorry I made it boring and got caught being careless.”

“Yeah yeah, just don’t squish my spider or else,” Arath said firmly but turning around to head inside as he said it, appearing to be showing his acceptance of the conflict coming to a close.

The Author remained hopeful of an alliance forming between the two but realized it wasn’t really up to him at this point. Arath didn’t appear to be a threatening entity but was capable of so much more power if he truly wanted it. He showed plenty of inexperience in their battle yet his quick thinking allowed him to take advantage of the situation.

The Author would be beating himself up for a while after getting caught so easily in the end, especially when he was pressing the advantage so strongly.

For now, it was best to find the man with venom in his blood. Paranormal encounters can create spiritual imbalances and the Author needed to close the book on this man’s story before it progressed any further.