

Chapter 9



Having finished his makeup, Grant took a moment to run a brush through his hair.

Paul felt his aggravation growing. "Milady? Chop. Chop. We're all waiting on you."

Grant felt the sting of feminine annoyance. Men. "I'll just be another second," he called out in his soft voice, but he kept brushing, now dragging out the process just to teach Paul a lesson. He reveled in his petulance. Once he felt he'd kept Paul waiting long enough, he put his mirror and brush back in his inventory, then tugged at the top of his corset. With the new patches, his corset was becoming better and better as a kind of magic armor.

Grant held his hand out and Marlena helped him stand. He smoothed his skirt and as he turned on his heels he tossed his long blonde hair over his soft round shoulders. The guys all tried to pretend they weren't checking him out, but all three felt masculine stirrings at the sight of Grant's glossy lips and wet lashes. The blush on his cheeks and the wet look of his lips made him look like a woman who was hot to trot, and the men couldn't help but feel it.

"Jesus," Grant said. He'd decided to solidify his move, and he walked right up to Eric and took the man's arm, fitting himself into Eric's body. He slit his eyes defiantly at Hal and Paul, then smiled up at Eric. "Should we get going?" He asked in his sexy voice.

Nimue, the AI, giggled. "There you go, honey." She juked Grant so he felt a tingle of pleasure playing the coquette. "They look so cute together."

Grant felt shocked both by the intensity of the sudden surge of pleasure as well as the fact it seemed to be associated with the way he'd nestled up against Eric. He almost pulled away, but didn't want to negate what he'd

done. It had been his plan to play the lovestruck girl, but he hadn't expected to like it so much.



Paul and Eric both got an angry and annoyed look on their faces, the same look any guy got when he lost out on what he at least perceived as a contest for a girl's attention. "I'll go scout," Hal said, voice gruff. Paul shook his head side to side, like, I can't believe this, but then he turned away as well.

Marlena took her place at Grant's side. She had her hands folded under her chin as she admired the newly bonding couple.

As Grant clicked along in his heels, clinging to a man's arm and buzzing with positive vibes, he felt deeply conflicted. "Am I turning gay? He felt chills. No. No. That wasn't... he couldn't... I'm just more emotional now, he

decided, thinking about how much he'd been crying, all the intense highs and lows. It was hormones. His ex-wife had always been talking about being hormonal when she was acting all crazy. He'd assumed she was just making excuses.

Now, he realized she wasn't. The experience of life was different for women. He knew that now.

He felt a sudden surge of empathy for her, a feeling he'd rarely felt for anyone in his adult life, even as recognizing he was feeling the things she felt, a woman felt, made him feel more vulnerable, less than he'd once been. It was both a relief and a source of shame that he was "hormonal" now that he had a woman's body.

Hormonal. The word, the concept, suddenly struck Grant as wrong.

The former thug was not a reader. He didn't know much about science and VR and all that sort of thing, so it had taken a bit of time for the question to occur to him that now popped into his head. If this isn't my real body, if this is all some kind of video game, why would I be "hormonal?" Isn't that something in the body?

Eric noticed the look on Grant's face. "You okay?"

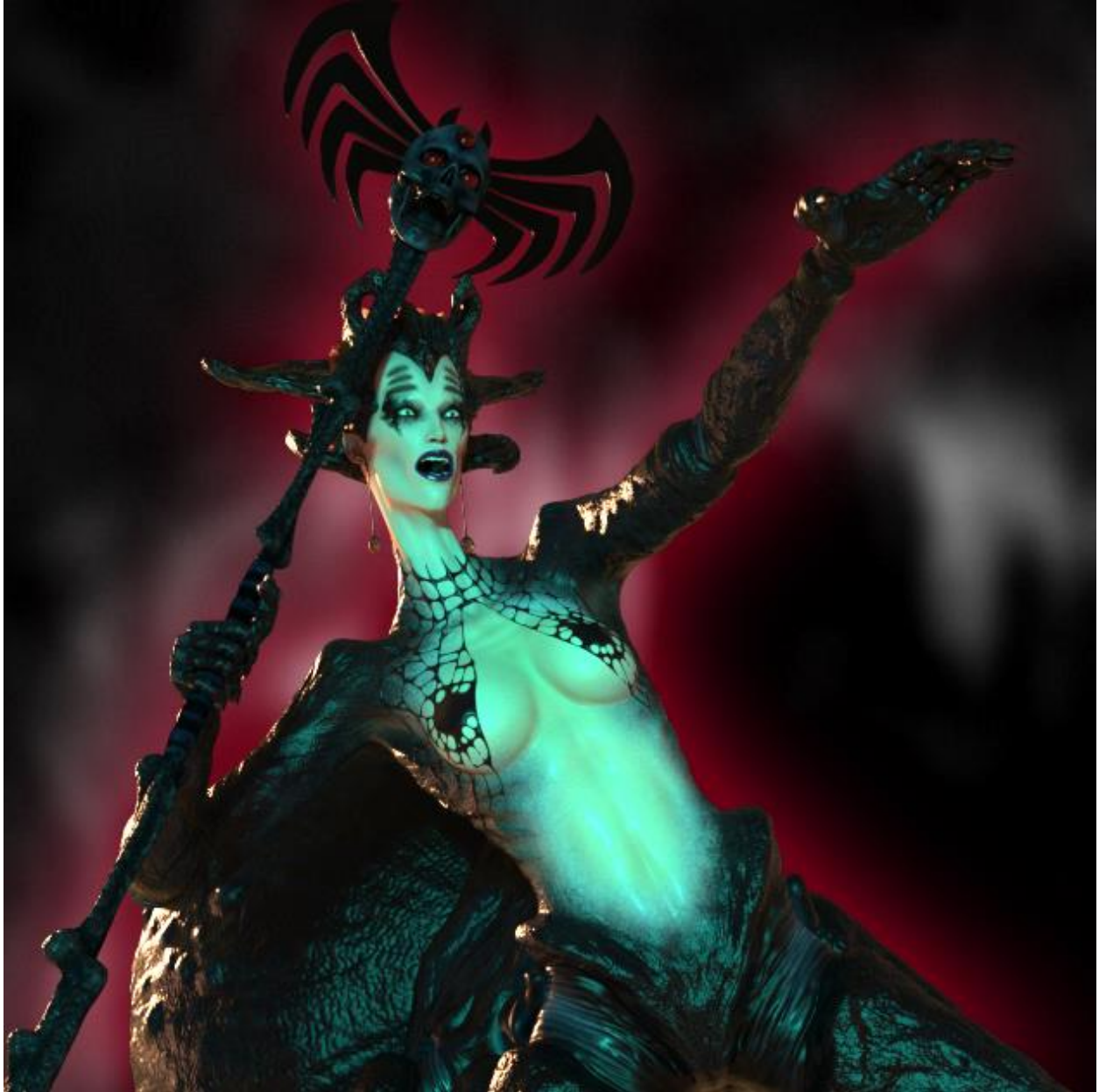
Grant snapped out of it. He plastered a vacant smile on his face. He'd found that his smile distracted and disarmed men. "Oh, I'm fine," he said, giving Eric's arm a squeeze.

Hal crept back. "All clear to the cavern entrance."

"How's it look?" Paul leaned on his hammer.

“Lots of webs around the outside. Spiders like the one you just squished around the perimeter. One really huge spider– or half spider. It has a woman’s head– or a very ugly woman’s head.”

“The Spider Queen!” Marlena hissed. “Ugh. I hate her so much. She has spells and poison and webs. She is... evil.”



Grant patted Marlena on the head. "We'll get her, and we'll rescue your family."

The Foxes. Rescuing them was the mission. "Did you see the foxes?" Eric asked.

"I saw cages. They're behind the spider queen. There were people in there."

"That's where my family is," Marlena confirmed.

"I wonder if there's a way we can rescue them without fighting all those spiders?" Eric looked over the scene, thinking out plans.

Paul groaned. "How many times do I have to remind you we WANT to kill stuff?"

"Right. Right." Eric's instinct trended toward sneaking, getting away with things without leaving a trace, but he knew Paul was right about this. Getting experience was the name of the game.

Hal grunted. "I could sneak down and backstab that giant spider hag. I can do a lot of damage that way."

"We still need to deal with the other spiders," Eric said. "We barely got past one of them let alone- how many do you think?"

"At least eight."

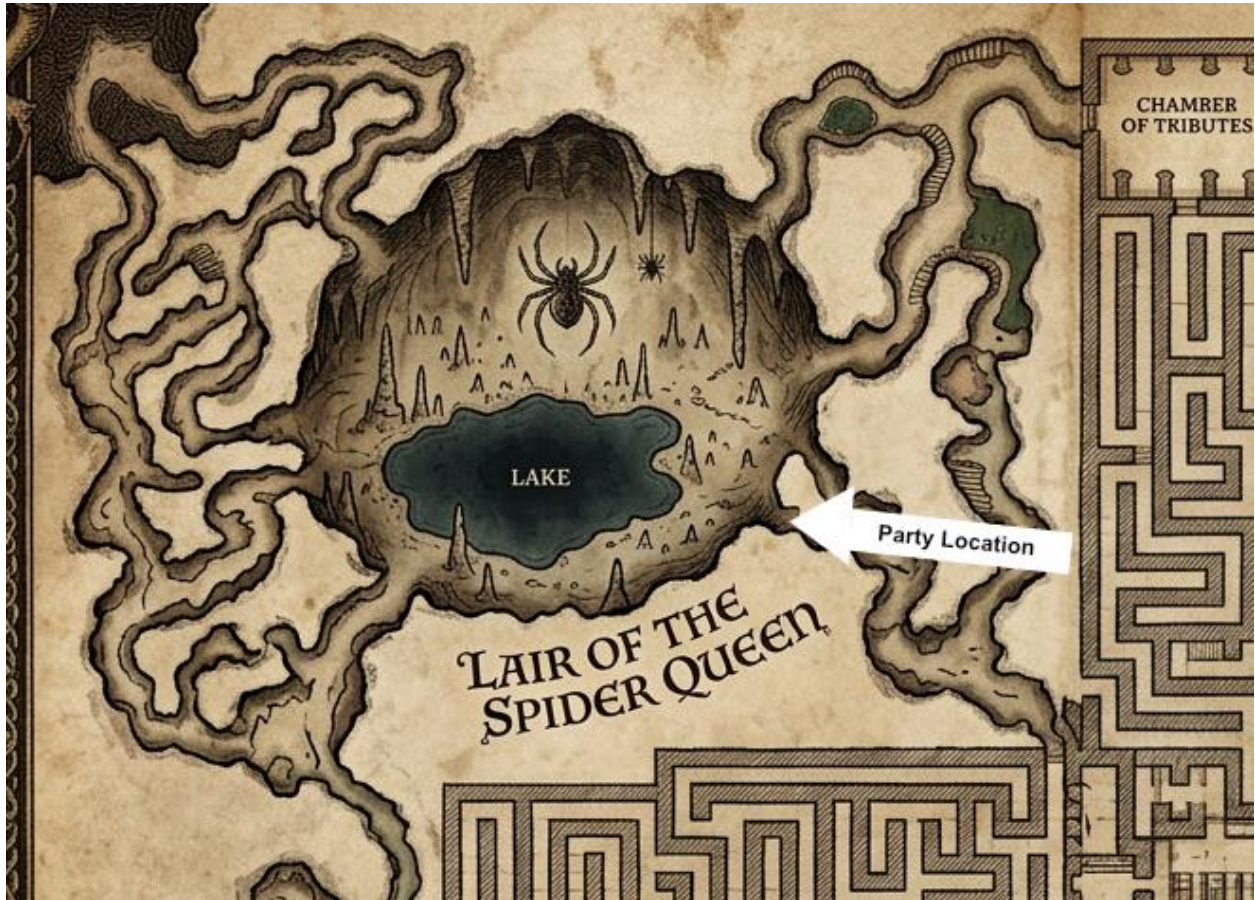
Paul rubbed his chin. "A distraction. We need a distraction of some kind. When I was running my company and an investor got suspicious something wasn't right, I always found a way to distract them."

"Until you didn't," Hal said.

"It was the financial crash that exposed me, not..."

"A distraction is a great idea." Eric wanted to get them back on track.

"Divinity has a new spell. It's a trap spell that creates a hot spot that will explode when crossed." He pulled up the map.



"We draw the spiders over to this other entrance. The trap is located down the hall a ways. When the first spider crosses, the trap explodes, the web ignites, and those spiders die. At the same time, Hal has snuck down to the lower level. He backstabs the Spider Queen. I'll stand ready to blast it with magic missiles if it doesn't die right away."

"I like it," Hal said.

Grant nodded. "Works for me."

Paul shook his head. "No."

Eric hid his annoyance. "Problem?"

"I don't get any experience in this plan of yours."

"We all get experience when we rescue Marlena's family. We all win," Eric said.

"This is all so your girlfriend can level up faster," Paul said.

Eric thought— of course. Jealousy. This is why the military didn't want women in combat. Guys would always get thrown off task by the presence of a woman.

Before he could answer, Grant stepped away from him and tilted his head to the side. "I'm not his girlfriend." Even though he'd kinda planned it all, being called out publicly as another man's girlfriend shocked him. It didn't make sense to him, but it didn't have to make sense. He was just, he decided, thinking like a woman. It also, in what was a new experience for him, enraged him to have it suggested he was getting special treatment because he was a girl. "And that special treatment thing is such bullshit."

"Is it, milady?" Paul spat back.

"Fuck you," Grant squeaked, his high-pitched feminine rage piercing the ears of the men with pain. They all covered their ears and grimaced. "Asshole," Grant screamed, working his way into a full blown hissy.

"Hey, hey," Eric said. "Quiet. The spiders."

Nimue was laughing and now jacked Grant to become more and more enraged. She liked seeing the little female angry. It was a sexy look for her.

“Don’t you shush me,” Grant turned his fury on Eric. He’d lost it, driven to near insanity by Nimue. “Just because I’m a woman...”



Paul, happy the angry woman had shifted her focus, glanced into the spider cavern. The Spider Queen looked in their direction and tugged at the webs around her, sending tremors that rippled out to the perimeter. The guardian spiders stirred, lifting their legs and heads as if tasting the air. “Guys...”

“You’re getting too emotional,” Eric said. “I need you to stop talking.”

“Emotional?! You think you can shut me up?” Grant screamed, his face red.

"You shut up!" Marlena shouted, supporting her friend. "Boys are stupid."

"Calm down. Calm down," Eric said.

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

Paul, seeing the spider's approaching from the big cave, raised his hammer. "They're coming."

Grant was now wagging his finger at Eric, looking just like any furious woman screaming at her husband. Eric was trying to calm the little female down, but the more he told her to calm down the more furious she became. Nimue decided to ratchet up the drama. She flooded Eric's brain now, so he was both feeling turned on by Grant's temper tantrum but also something else happened. Eric suddenly laughed.

Grant stopped screaming as a stunned and appalled look came over his pretty face. "You think this is funny?" Grant asked. Eric didn't understand why he'd suddenly laughed, but years of experience told him it was a mistake to laugh at an angry woman. He tried to apologize, but he couldn't stop laughing.

"Oh, shit," Hal said. He and Paul each took a step back.

WHAP! Grant slapped Eric across the face. Then, he screamed and started punching Eric with his little fists. Eric grabbed Grant's wrists. "Hey!"

"The spiders are coming," Hal said, turning his attention back to the cavern. The spiders were swarming toward them now, skittering along the webs.

"The SPIDERS!" Paul bellowed, his booming voice echoing along the caverns.

Finally, Grant froze. Eric froze. “Spiders?” Grant said in a small voice, his terror of the eight-legged monsters overwhelming his rage. “Spiders?” Looking out into the cavern he saw them coming towards them. “No. No.” Eric let go of Grant’s wrists and turned to see the approach of the spiders. Grant, his mercurial emotions flipping, now threw his arms around Eric and clung to his man for protection.

Women, Eric thought. Who can ever understand them? “Fall back,” he called out. “Fall back!”

Paul and Hal, having had pretty much the same idea, fell back, the party



retreating down the tunnel. Once they were a ways down the tunnel, Eric said, “Cast a glyph here.” Grant, clinging to Eric and trembling with fear, didn’t even realize that Eric was talking to him.

“Glyph,” Eric shouted. “Cast the glyph.”

“Oh!” Grant said. He raised his

hands. He’d never cast the Glyph spell before and a wave of feminine anxiety washed over him. I hope I don’t mess this up, he thought as he cast

the spell. A mystic pattern glowed on the floor and then faded. "Oh! It didn't work."

"It's just invisible. Back. Back." Eric grabbed Grant's hand and pulled him back. "Hal," he called, pointing toward the plateau where the guard spider had been. "Up there. Wait for your chance."

"Yup."

They fell back a little more, then Eric said. "We make our stand here."

Paul took his position in front of the group, cradling his new hammer in his hands.

The spiders came skittering down the tunnel. The first wave consisted of three spiders– one crawled along the floor, one along the wall and a third along the ceiling. The spider on the floor crossed onto the glyph– BOOM! A bright flash and the spider burst into pieces, the other tore apart as well, legs and mandibles and eyes flying everywhere. Smoke swirled in the tunnel where the glyph had exploded. They could hear the chittering of the remaining spiders but couldn't see them. Paul braced himself. Gradually, another spider appeared, pawing at the floor with its forelegs.

"Come get me!" Paul shouted.

The spider rose on its hind legs. Webs spurted out, arcing toward Paul, who batted at the webs like a baseball player fouling off a bad pitch. His new, enchanted hammer glowed and instead of getting trapped in the sticky webs, it incinerated them. Paul laughed. The hammer vibrated with power, and he charged forward, swinging it in a great arc at the confused spider. As the hammer slammed into the spider with a mighty squish, Hal leapt off the plateau and plunged the **Diabolical Dagger** he'd received in the first treasure dispersion into the spider's back. The Diabolical Dagger did double

damage when used to backstab an enemy, and as they plunged into the spider's hairy back, they flashed and sparked with power, the giant spider screeching as it instantly died.



Seeing the carnage, the other three spiders retreated. Paul, now consumed with bloodlust, chased after them, but they moved too quickly, racing back into the cavern and running toward the Spider Queen.

Hal gave Grant a dirty look. "So much for distraction and surprise."

Grant just dropped his eyes. He felt ashamed of how he'd acted, but Eric pulled him tight and kissed him on the head. "It's okay."

"Thanks." Grant whispered, feeling himself grow warm.

The group moved to the edge of the cavern. "Cowboy it?" Paul said.

Eric clicked on the Spider Queen. No one had checked her level yet. They all took a step back. She was Level 16 and had 500 hit points. He whistled.

"That's tough, right?" Hal said.

"Very tough." The surviving guardian spiders now took up defensive positions around the spider queen, who shouted in a silky language none of them could understand. In the cages behind her, the foxen growled and whimpered in fear

Marlena growled. "She can talk to us and not just in dumb spider words."

"She can?" Eric thought about it. "I have a new plan, and all of us will get experience. We're going to need to use some potions."

Bonus

