

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: It was always going to be a horror show down here...

Continued warning: Spiders.

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Baby giant spiders freshly hatched from spider eggs aren't too big. But they're still bigger than normal baby spiders. By a lot. In fact, every baby giant spider comes into the world about the size of an index finger. So when they come pouring out of the dead Dark Elf's mouth, it's quite startling just how many squirm forth from what is clearly her hollowed out chest cavity.

Thomas held back like Sevinarya had wanted of course. Her plan, as much as it was a great risk to herself, seemed like a decent one. Letting her free as many of her people as possible while also using herself as bait just in case the mutated giant spider was lurking nearby certainly seemed viable. All he needed was one good shot and he could shove his Magic Steel Halberd through the 'Spider-Queen' and kill it dead, hopefully.

However... it would seem that they were too late. Much too late. It had only been a little over seven hours since Sevinarya had arrived in Last Hope and Thomas would be the first to admit that he didn't know how long your average spider, giant or otherwise, kept their prey fresh and alive for later consumption.

But here at least... it quickly becomes apparent that the Spider-Queen didn't leave any of the Dark Elves it had captured alive. Perhaps that should have been obvious from the bite taken out of Sevinarya's side and the fact that she'd arrived to them on death's door... but it certainly hadn't been obvious to the Dark Elf herself.

As she screams, swinging her arms wildly and getting the baby giant spiders off of her face and front while stumbling backwards, multiple things happen at once. First, the work of her original careful steps are completely undone as she

stumbles right into the numerous white strands crisscrossing the floor and finds herself stuck fast in them.

Second, the loud sounds coming from her throat seem to be an almost siren call as the rest of the lumps of web lining the chamber begin to bulge and burst open as well. More baby giant spiders spill forth, leaving behind Dark Elf corpses that have clearly been used as incubators in the short time Sevinarya has been gone.

Third and finally, the web that Sevinarya has stumbled back into trembles and shivers all the way across the floor of the chamber, something that Thomas only catches because his eyesight has improved massively thanks to his Gift over the past few months. The more he's focused on his skills of observation and perception, the better he's gotten at both thanks to his relentless potential.

As such, it doesn't really surprise him when half a moment later, a screeching cry comes from nearby... and the Spider-Queen herself finally joins them in the main chamber. Even as the baby giant spiders are swarming mindlessly all over the place, the massive Spider-Queen that Sevinarya's subordinate had created unfolds itself from one of the other passages, pushing forth and spreading out its eight long legs.

Malevolent spider eyes focus on Sevinarya in an instant and with a screech, the Spider-Queen launches herself forward, clearly intending to end the threat to her children immediately. Only, before she gets there... a vial of acid smacks into the side of her head, shattering and sizzling away at her carapace as the huge, mutated spider rears back with a fresh shriek of pain and agony.

Thomas grimaces as he lowers the hand he just used to throw that acid back down to the shaft of his halberd, starting forward out of his hiding place. Yes, he'd just given up the element of surprise. Yes, if he'd let the giant mutated spider attack Sevinarya, he would have almost certainly had a clear shot at killing the damn thing in one blow.

However, there were a couple of problems with that. First, using Sevinarya as bait had been predicated on the idea that she would at least be able to *move* if

the Spider-Queen showed up and attacked her. Something she can't do right now given she's stuck in the damn web.

Secondly... he sort of needed her alive if he wanted to get out of this place. The only way out without digging his way to the surface was via her Gift of Shadow... so his only choice is to try and keep her alive as best as possible.

That, of course, means that he's just managed to pull the Spider-Queen's attention to him. Not really something he cares about though as he steps into the center of the chamber, mindful of the webbing at his feet, and sets his stance with his halberd held in front of him. It was always going to be like this, in the end.

Unlike the King of the Forest, the Spider-Queen does not immediately lunge forward to attack him. She does reorient to him, correctly identifying him as the bigger threat at this point... but the cunning in her myriad of eyes is different from the King of the Forest's cunning. It's more... calculating.

Of course, the King of the Forest was an old monster, wasn't it? He was a great big beast from deeper in the Darkwoods who had come out to be the biggest and baddest monster in a smaller section of the woods. In comparison... the Spider-Queen couldn't be more than a few days old. Big? Yes. Dangerous? Undoubtedly. But experienced? Not quite. She was young, untested, and so far undefeated.

Yet she still clearly knows to consider him dangerous. Not just because of the acid... no, Thomas detects a wariness for his halberd as well. Even as her children stream across the floor, scurrying deeper into the hideout through the passage she just came from, the Spider-Queen seems to almost be studying him.

Thomas studies her right back to be fair. And he waits, even as he watches Sevinarya recover out of the corner of his eye. The Dark Elf has long since stopped screaming, quieting right around the same time that he managed to bean the Spider-Queen in the head with acid. The baby giant spiders weren't

actually dangerous and were just trying to flee anyways, so she was under no threat from them.

Now... well, now she crouches down slowly, curved daggers in hand, and clearly aims to begin cutting herself free. A good idea, Thomas figures. If she can free herself, then they'll be able to take the Spider-Queen on two on one and-

His eyes widen as the Spider-Queen suddenly fakes him out and once more lunges for Sevinarya. The Dark Elf barely has time to lift her head at the surprise move while Thomas has to lunge across the floor with all his strength and speed.

Fortunately, he arrives just in time and his halberd cleaves through the air, slicing one of the Spider-Queen's legs from her abdomen while her mandibles are mere inches away from Sevinarya's face. Another screech emits from the huge arachnid before she whips around on him in earnest, moving with blistering speed to attack him instead.

Thomas is forced to backpedal, dancing among the webs, relying solely on his memory of what the floor looked like while he was studying Sevinarya's path towards the closest moving lump of web. He dodges amidst the strands, some of them tugging at his boots but none of them actually managing to find purchase.

Meanwhile, his halberd lashes out, half a dozen strikes in a half a dozen seconds slamming forward towards the Spider-Queen to keep the great big monster at bay. It works partially, the two of them dodging each other as much as trying to attack one another.

The giant mutated spider is fast... faster than the King of the Forest was, in fact. However, Thomas has also become faster in recent weeks. If he and the King of the Forest were to face off against one another today, he believes he would take the fight a hundred times out of a hundred.

If this were a fight up on the surface in one of the other spider nests he'd been exterminating for weeks now, Thomas would have similar confidence against

this monster too. However, it's not. This is a fight in the Spider-Queen's home territory, for as little time as that's been. It's a confined spaces encounter and while the main chamber is more than large enough for him to bring his halberd to bear, it's not so large that he has unlimited dodging room. Eventually, something has to give.

That something happens when one of the Spider-Queen's legs manages to slam into his shoulder with enough bruising force to knock him back into a bit of webbing. At the same time, Thomas does lash out and take off another of the mutated arachnid's legs, bringing her down to only six limbs left.

However, it's not a fair trade. He's caught between a sticky situation and those venomous mandibles screeching right towards his face. All Thomas can do is shove the haft of his Magic Steel Halberd up into the Spider-Queen's jaws to stop her from closing her mandibles on his head or chest, blocking her and shoving with all his considerable might.

But he's still stuck... still trapped in the webbing she's managed to shove her into. Gritting his teeth, Thomas has to let go of his halberd with one hand, relying on the other to hold the Spider-Queen off while he reaches down to his belt for another vial of acid. His fingers close around it... just as he hears a scream of articulated rage and grief.

With a howl, Sevinarya lands on the Spider-Queen's back, having leapt at the monster from behind. The two curved daggers that the Dark Elf wields flash in the darkness of the cave before coming down and carving furrows into the monster's carapace.

"Die, die, DIE!"

The Spider-Queen screeches some more, whipping around and bucking wildly as Sevinarya is cutting and stabbing and slashing like a mad woman. Alas, one of these bucking attempts comes just as Sevinarya is pulling her daggers back, leaving her without a proper grip on the creature's back.

She's sent flying back across the chamber, landing hard with a grunt... but it's enough. Her distraction is enough for him to grab the vial of acid and burn himself free.

Detecting the danger she's in at the last second, the Spider-Queen whips back to him... but it's too late. Thomas is free and his halberd is held in both hands once more as he lashes out. The mutated giant spider is too close... he cuts right through her mandibles and into her head, slicing open the arachnid's skull like butter with his Magic Steel.

He pierces right through the creature's brain and watches as it trembles for a moment... then, he twists and yanks his halberd back out. There's a brief instant in time when Thomas can't tell for sure that the beast is dead... but then it flops over onto its back, its legs curling inwards in a way he more commonly associates with the death throes of much smaller, normal spiders.

Panting heavily, he nevertheless steps forward and gives the Spider-Queen a couple more well placed stabs just to make sure. But... it's done. The monster is dead. They've won.

"No... no, no, no..."

Of course, victory tasted quite bitter in this case, even for him. After all, he'd agreed to come all the way here for one reason and one reason only... to help save Sevinarya's people. Killing the Spider-Queen had stopped being the point... it was about rescuing who they could.

Unfortunately, it's clear at this point that Sevinarya was far too optimistic about things. Even seven hours had been too long. They were already all dead by the time they got here... dead for a lot longer than that, in fact. Whatever had been done to create the Spider-Queen, whatever had allowed them to mutate a giant spider into that monstrosity... it had also clearly given the thing an appetite. Not to mention, the ability to reproduce asexually?

Once again, Thomas didn't understand spiders all that well... but he certainly understood death by this point. And all around them, hanging half out of what they now knew to be egg sacs, were dead Dark Elves. Every single one.

Sevinarya's grief is... understandable, all things considered. She clearly blamed herself for what had happened here and from what Thomas knew, she should blame herself. However, he also recognizes that saying as much in this moment would be counterproductive.

But then, what did you say in a moment like this? What possibly condolences could he give the woman kneeling on the ground on the other side of the chamber?

He's still trying to figure it out when a quiet buzzing reaches his ears in the ensuing silence. Even as Sevinarya seems lost in her grief, Thomas' head twitches to the side, his ear perking up ever so slightly. He's gotten better at hearing just like he's gotten better at seeing thanks to his Gift. At this point, to say he was superhuman wouldn't be too far off.

Still... what is making that sound? And why does it sound like a cellphone vibrating on a nightstand?

"... Sevinarya."

His voice cuts through the Dark Elf woman's grief, her eyes twitching towards him as he steps around the Spider-Queen's corpse and makes his way over. Brow furrowed, he gestures in the direction of the buzzing sound.

"Do you... hear that?"

Sevinarya's long knife-like ears twitch, the Dark Elf's head turning in the direction he's gesturing to. For a long moment, she just stares in confusion... and then understanding dawns for just a moment before her face goes blank and her eyes go dead.

"Yes. I hear it."

Thomas opens his mouth to ask her what it is, but before he can speak, Sevinarya is already on her feet and marching down the hall, cutting through webbing as she goes, making her way towards the sound with a purpose that surprises him given what she's just been through. In the end though, he just shrugs and follows after her, curious to see what's going on.

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A/N: *Bzzt* *Bzzt* *Bzzt*

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