



Illustrated by Josh Meehan

A Mate not a Meal

Sarina Dorie

Mama always said one could never be too careful when trying to capture a mate in her web. If only she had listened to her own advice.

“Male arachnipedes are tricky. If he is an imposter from another tribe, he’ll sing you sweet songs and claim his love is true, but then he’ll trap you and eat you,” she sang to my sisters and me when we were hatchlings. She used all of her legs to play a complicated song on her web to communicate, certain combinations of notes representing words.

I danced on the web with my eight perfect legs, trying to move like Mama. I accidentally twanged a discordant note.

She fixed all twelve of her eyes on me. “Malatina, pay attention. This is important. A worthy mate is hard to catch, and it can be dangerous if you misjudge his intentions.”

I was only weeks old, but already I knew there was nothing I wanted more than to leave home like Mama had and start a family of my own. I imagined what it would be like when I had captured a mate of my own.

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My sisters departed one by one over the following months. I grew bigger and stronger, and my outsides felt tight and too small. I wanted to climb out of the hole in the ceiling of the cave and fly away in the wind like my sisters, but I felt sluggish and heavy. I lost my appetite and didn't feel like singing, even when Mama tried to coax me.

"You need to molt again before you go off into the world," Mama said. There was a sadness to her music, like she missed me even though I was right there beside her.

Clavira and I were the only ones who hadn't yet left the cave, and she needed to molt too. We stuck ourselves to the web next to each other and lay on our backs so our outer shells would stay in place as we shrugged our way out. It was a vulnerable position, but Mama was there to watch over us.

I folded my legs inward toward my abdomen and pushed my body away from me. I accidentally kicked Clavira.

"Watch it!" she said. She kicked me back.

"No, you watch it!" I kicked her again, this time on purpose.

Mama shook the web in exasperation. "Behave or I'll feed you to one of the ground-walkers."

"What's a ground-walker?" I asked.

"Something that walks on the ground. Duh," Clavira said.

"The ground-walkers have been invading our territory. They can shoot venom made of lightning out of their hands." Mama pointed to a scar on her abdomen. "That's how I came by this."

Perhaps those tall and slender creatures with only four legs had been ground-walkers. I'd seen them that time when I'd tried to leave home. If Clavira hadn't jumped on my back and weighed me down, the wind would have caught the strand of silk from my spinnerets and ferried me away.

"As soon as you're done molting you'll need to leave our cave or else one of you is going to eat the other," Mama said. She added a chorus of, "Eat the other. Eat the other. Eat the other."

I would never eat my sister. This had to be one of Mama's little jokes.

A spasm of pain lanced through my limbs. I wiggled and arched my body, so absorbed in the task of molting, I hardly noticed the new song. At first I just thought it was another of Mama's lullabies, one so soothing it made me want to stop what I was doing and sleep. The voice that accompanied the strumming sounded like it was made of nectar.

"Look, a male," Clavira said.

I wanted to ask her how she knew. She hadn't ever seen one. But the intensity of the cramp in my legs stole my voice. I couldn't sing or play music to say anything back. Then I saw him for myself.

He wasn't light gray like we were. At least I didn't think so, but it was hard to tell from our angle. He stretched across the doorway, framed by the soft glow of the moons. Dewdrops clung to the hair on his legs and caught the light, reflecting a million miniature moons. His legs were delicate and smaller than ours. He was so beautiful. Tentatively, he crawled a few lengths down the wall. His abdomen shimmered purple and blue. My gaze was riveted on his glowing pedipalps. He waggled them suggestively. A new sensation washed over me—something warm and pleasant I couldn't explain.

He was twice as big as I was, but still only half Mama's size. I couldn't imagine why Mama had gone to such lengths to tell us how dangerous a male could be. She could crush him in her jaw. Not that I think she would want to harm such a handsome creature.

He plucked at the highest ladder of silk ropes. His song was simple, but perfectly on key. "Love me. Love me. Love me," he said.

The music vibrated down to the ropes that held me and pulsed through my very being. A shiver ran through me. It was love at first note. The air smelled sweet with his perfume of flower nectar and musky earth. Clavira was just as enamored apparently. She wiggled her head out of

her empty shell and sang along to his song. Her voice was raspy and the way she plucked the strings in her half molted state was off-key and jarring after his perfect pitch and tone.

I may have accidentally wacked her with a half empty leg as I wiggled out of my own shell.

His notes reminded me of that time I had poked my head outside in the bright daylight and been blinded. Long green stalks swayed above me, but I couldn't make out anything in the overpowering sunlight. I had the sense the world was a much bigger place, but it was too beautiful to behold. This voice was like that: so beautiful it left me senseless.

Mama struck at the silk cords in a complex song I had never heard. "If you love me, how will you show me? Will you sing to me until dawn and promise to never leave my side? Tell me I am your universe and you are mine." She repeated words every so often to accompany her strumming.

He imitated her song, adding stanzas of his own. Mama clapped her pinchers together in pleasure. Clavira tried to draw his attention. "What about me? Do you love me? Gimme. Gimme."

Her music was so inelegant it hurt my head. I wanted to chomp down on her with my fangs to put an end to her horrible music. I felt bad after I'd thought it. Maybe Mama had been right about why my sisters and I needed to go our separate ways.

The male tilted his head and studied her with eight eyes. He didn't have twelve eyes like us. Venom dripped from his fangs and onto his chelicerae jaws. He must have thought she was a tasty morsel rather than an arachnipe. I didn't blame him when her music was as disgusting as aphid droppings.

"Watch and learn," Mama said. "But not over here."

Mama grabbed onto us with two of her legs and tore the delicate lace of the web as she pulled us free. She crawled down the ladder of the central web to a little shelf that jutted out in the cavern wall. She thrust us between silk cords and onto the ledge before hastily patching up the web and turning back to the male.

The male and Mama circled each other, playing songs for hours. The music didn't vibrate through me now that I was no longer on the web, but I could still hear how pleasant it was. She played and danced as he sat on the web. He tucked his pedipalps under himself and curled up like he was about to molt. Mama had told us about this ritual. I couldn't see if he transferred anything from his belly to his pedipalp, but I assumed he must have when he uncurled. He would sacrifice his own pedipalp as they mated, so she could have their babies. It was so romantic! I couldn't wait to see how this worked.

Mama approached him, and he scurried backward. She started up her song again and let him approach her. She was patient and kept her movements slow and small so she wouldn't scare him away. If I had been her, I would have snatched him up so he couldn't escape, but I supposed I had to learn patience if I was wanted to lay an egg sac someday.

She must have made him feel safe because he let her come closer and closer. She arched her thorax upward, and he climbed under her belly. It was a great view to watch from below. She plucked out two simple notes she could reach from her position.

A molting spasm shook me, and I wiggled farther out of my shell. My attention focused on cracking the hard outer body around my new soft one so I could push it off.

My sister twitched and kicked me. I kicked her back. A discordant note twanged from above.

Mama screeched and shuddered. Her two back pairs of legs were bound together with silk. The male's fangs sank into her belly. She tried to shake him off, but he held onto her with his pedipalps and wrapped his legs around her abdomen. She rolled down the web, momentarily sticking before crashing into the wall. He held fast. Her legs twitched, and she kicked out, but not with as much effort as before.

"Mama, get up," I said. "He isn't a mate. He's an imposter male." My voice was a small raspy creak without the aid of music.

I trembled in horror. I wanted to turn away, but I was stuck in my shell, my eyes gazing upward.

Mama stopped moving.

The imposter mate bit other places under her abdomen and her legs, injecting venom as he

did so. If his venom was as potent as ours, it would take a day before her insides liquefied. Then again, his venom might be quicker. He had petrified her more quickly than ours did.

My molting would take hours more, and I would be stuck watching them all that time. I felt hot and sick.

He descended down the central web toward us. I was too weak to do more than wiggle. Clavira was farther along than I was. She had made it halfway out of her shell. Her head was pale yellow, instead of gray, and bald of the fur that would keep her from sticking to the web. She kicked her legs and pushed herself out of her old body more frantically.

He hovered above Clavira. He clacked his chelicerae jaws together and waved his pedipalps ominously. Another molting contraction seized her, and her legs curled inward. She was easy prey. She was so small and vulnerable. I couldn't bear to watch.

"Move," I told her.

She floundered, and more of her shell cracked, but she couldn't get full control of her legs yet. They were still inside the exoskeleton. I kicked at her, trying to push her from the shelf and onto the ground below. She rocked back and forth, but didn't fall.

He reached through the ropes of the web. I wrenched one leg free of my molted shell and batted his leg away.

"Over here," I sang. "Look at me."

He ignored me. He pulled her though the hole in the web and into his embrace.

"Clavira!" I cried.

He crunched through her shell and tore it away. She screeched and kicked out frantically with her pale limbs, but she was so weak. She looked like a baby in his arms. His fangs flashed in the light and tore through her soft yellow skin. He licked at her blood and bit her again and again.

A spasm seized me, and I curled into myself, pushing a little more of the exoskeleton off of me in the process. When the pain cleared from my head, two legs were free.

The male stuck my little sister to the web above to save her for later.

Venom dripped from his fangs as he descended toward me.

I tried to squirm away, but I was weak from molting, and my shell was heavy around my lower half. I was only partway out of my old body. He poked a long leg through the web and grabbed onto my molted shell with one of his claws. He dragged me closer. I use the two legs fully out of my exoskeleton to dig into the dirt shelf and keep myself from getting closer.

He thrust his mouth through the gaps in the web. Something crunched, but I couldn't feel it. He pulled back. A piece of my old abdomen fell from his chelicera. He clawed at the shell around me and shook it, which helped me more than it helped him. I managed to squeeze out of my shell a little more. I might have gotten away, but he shoved more of my molted shell into his jaws and chomped down harder. Pain blossomed in my back limbs as he yanked back.

I fell out of my shell and off the ledge, landing in a pile of the brittle exoskeletons of former meals on the floor. I writhed and tried to right myself, but I fell off-balance. He kept reaching for me through the web, but I dug myself under the dried remains of bodies and hid.

Instinctively, I curled in on myself and licked my injured limbs. There were two craters at the base of my thorax where he'd ripped my legs out. The next set of legs were stumps, halfway gone. I covered my legs with a protective coating of saliva and silk thread. My movements were awkward without the use of my back legs to help me and spinning bandages hurt as much as it helped.

He waited on the web above. I sank lower into the bodies, covering myself so he couldn't see me. Pain blossomed through me with each movement and made me shudder anew. I was giving away where I was.

He strutted back and forth on the lattice that separated us, testing the silk for weakness as I'd seen my mother do, only he wasn't about to make repairs. When he found none, he sang to me.

"Come out little one, pretty one. I have a pedipalp for you." He sang with nectar in his voice. He plucked on the strings of the web, lulling me into a trance.

I moved my two front feet in time with his notes as though I were playing the web. I stopped myself when I realized what he was doing. I wouldn't let myself fall under his spell. I wouldn't

trust him, nor any other males.

He played music until he grew tired.

My sister's body was still young and soft. It only took another hour before he sucked out her liquefied muscle. When there was nothing left, he tipped the dried husk of her body through the web. She fell next to me with a crunch. I turned away, not wanting to see her like this. I wanted to remember her as she'd been, giggling when I'd tickled her.

He sawed at the threads of web nearest to me with his fangs, venom dripping. I wondered why he didn't just cut it with his claws like Mama used to do when rearranging the pattern of her web. I'd witnessed his ability to cling tightly with his claws, but it appeared they weren't good for cutting. It took him forever to saw through one strand, and he stopped several times to rest.

He waited another day before eating Mama. I buried myself as deep as I could to try to drown out the sound of him slurping.

He plucked at the web idly with a leg. Slurp. Twang. Twang. Slurp. Twang. Twang. He was toying with me, marking the moment of this feast with a song to torment me. I hated him. I wanted to crawl up there and bite him on his belly while he was preoccupied. But there was no way I could crawl up the web without him feeling the vibration. Nor did I think I could crawl with only four legs.

His abdomen was bloated, and his exoskeleton looked so close to bursting I thought he might molt, and then I'd have my chance at him when he was at his weakest. Instead, he sang. His notes were lazy and languid. He didn't put much effort in trying to seduce me out of hiding.

"I'll have you yet, my little pet. Next time I'll catch you in my net," he sang as he left out of the hole in the ceiling.

Never again would I want a mate.

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I had to make sure no male ever came to me again. I needed a door across the entrance to seal myself in.

I labored through each step. My movements were unbalanced and I teetered back and forth. Several times I fell as I tried to run threads of silk across the hole. I used so much thread nothing could get in, not even food at first. That left me hungry and even weaker. I snapped some of my cords and widened the hole so thrip mites could fly in.

I grew larger and molted again. Two of my legs were still gone, but there were no longer craters in my body. I now had longer stumps, though they were still too short and lacked claws. Perhaps after another molting they would grow back. These longer stumps helped with balance at least, even if they weren't much good for grasping.

I had to break away more webbing from the door as I grew to allow bigger food inside. I called them with the songs my mother had taught me.

When a male arachnipepe came, a small one that was pure white with twelve black eyes, he sang in a different dialect that I could hardly understand. His sweetly sharp scent reminded me of the first male. My mind flashed to the memory of him sinking his fangs into my mother. My insides chilled and my legs itched to run away.

"Love me, kiss me, hold me," the new male sang. His notes were off. He didn't fool me.

I made my notes discordant and pounced at him. He skittered away and left. He didn't come back.

Afterward I thought I should have been subtler. If I had coaxed him inside I could have eaten him. As it was, my legs shook all over, and I felt as though my venom had dried up. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

The rainy season came and went, flooding my cavern and then draining away. The ground shuddered when larger species of arachnipedes hunted at night. I sang songs to my prey and went on as normally as I could, though I had to modify my music since I could no longer dance across my web to strike the right notes. I made smaller webs within a leg's reach, positioning myself so I wouldn't topple backward as I played with one front leg instead of two or four.

I could only think of my sister and my mother. That could have been me. I wished it had been

me. My life felt so empty I considered ignoring food that fell into my new web I had woven, but as soon as a tasty morsel dropped down, my instincts took over, and I couldn't stop myself from pouncing.

"I am a traitor. I should join them," I sang to myself.

No one answered my song. I didn't expect anyone to.

My heart felt heavier with each day that passed. I longed for companionship, but I didn't want a mate. I wanted Clavira. I wanted Mama.

I was so desperate for companionship I sang to the thrip mites and the beetlevores stuck to my web. My mother had said not to play with my food, but she'd never said not to play *to* my food. They didn't appreciate music though. They buzzed and flopped around in panic. Only arachnipedes were intelligent enough to sing.

One day, as sunlight spilled down from the hole at the top of my cavern, distant music vibrated through the walls and along my web. The song was faint, but when I traveled closer to the ceiling I could hear the music more distinctly.

The low notes captured my own sorrow so completely I was enraptured. I couldn't understand the words. It had to be a different species of arachnipepe. This wasn't some male seeking a meal under the pretense of a mate; this was someone so overcome by loneliness he barely had the will to live. He was like me.

I climbed closer to the door, hungry for more. It was too bright to see outside, and I was too large to fit my body through the hole without tearing through the packed earth. By the time the music ended, some of the darkness from my heart had lifted. I still lacked four limbs, but I felt more whole than I had in a long time. I was only sorry the music had stopped.

The following day when the sun rose, the music came again. The male arachnipepe expressed such emotion in each note I could resonate with his pain. When the song ended, my claws itched to play in response. Yet if I did, he would come to my cavern. I couldn't protect myself if he tried to eat me—and surely he would. I wasn't his species. If I was, we would have spoken the same language.

With each day that I heard the male's sad music, my longing grew more intense. I paced across my web, teetering ungracefully as I fought to keep my balance. My seclusion and solitariness suffocated me. I wasn't meant to be alone. I suffered through my pining until I could stand it no more.

A season of bottled up love songs burst out of me, flowing through my legs and into my claws where I struck the chords. My combination of notes made up words and in those words, I communicated my own heartfelt desolation and longing.

I sang as I played:

"You are a lonely heart

Seeking a mate up above

I am a lonely heart

Below, seeking my truelove."

I sang it several times. Then I waited in silence.

A moment later my reply came, an echo of my own song. The first time he repeated it, the words were garbled and not quite on key. I played it again, and the next time he repeated it exactly.

I had made contact with a male, and he had responded. I only hoped it wouldn't be my undoing.

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Each morning shortly after the sun rose the male serenaded me with music. Sometimes I repeated his songs, and sometimes he repeated mine. It thrilled me and frightened me when he sat above the hole to my home and his music was closest. Several times I thought he might come down. He stood over my entrance so that he blocked out the sunlight.

I ached to feel his notes played on my web and vibrate through my body as they were meant to be felt. My body longed for his touch. All I could think of were his pedipalps running under my belly to impregnate me. Surely this pining that hurt so much had to be what my mother had

experienced, the kind of overpowering distraction that made females risk everything. I had thought I would never want to mate again, but I was willing to risk being eaten rather than to live without his music.

I had to have him. I played more softly to lure him down. I sang quieter. I told him I was dying—dying for his love. Even if he didn't understand my words, I hoped he would understand my meaning.

It took weeks of courtship before he entered my cavern. He descended on an unusually thick strand of silk. It intrigued me he threw down the cord before he descended. He used his upper legs to shimmy himself down awkwardly and held the silk with his lower legs rather than spinning the thread from his spinneret as he lowered himself. As he neared, I could see why he moved so ungracefully and again, this gave me pause. He had only four legs—like me! No wonder the sorrow of his sweet songs mirrored mine.

I stayed back in the shadows under my web. He was big for a male, and this made me wary. He was still smaller than I was, but not by much. He touched his head and a glowing eye opened. He swept a ray of light along the wall and over my web. When his lower legs came in contact with my web, he tried to shake the silk off like an antivore or thrip gnat might, but the stickiness of the web held fast. He shook himself so violently he fell into the central web, angled so that his body was more or less upright, though at an incline.

His four legs kicked wildly. He twanged on the strands of silk inharmoniously, and he made screeching sounds that hurt my ears. The acrid aroma of fear filled the air. If I hadn't known he could produce such beautiful music, I would have thought he was a misshapen antivore or octopillar.

As soon as he stopped fighting and silenced, I was able to hear the faint percussion thrumming inside him. It made a pleasant ba-boom ba-boom ba-boom. I stepped into a place where I might be noticed, though I remained far enough back as not to endanger either of us. I plucked a note of introduction on my web.

"Hello," my music sang.

My future mate said nothing, only looked around, the light of his eye moving this way and that as he tried to find me. I repeated myself several times. When at last the brightness of his gaze found me, I was temporarily blind—though not deaf to the intensity of his newfound struggles. Maybe he thought I was going to eat him. I waited again for him to stop fighting.

Hoping to soothe him, I played our song.

"You are a lonely heart

Seeking a mate up above

I am a lonely heart

Below, seeking my truelove."

The ba-boom rhythm beating inside him slowed. A strange little squeak came out of his mouth, and he touched the web experimentally with one of the claws at the end of his limbs. It twanged. He stroked a different section and then another until the claws at the end of his front legs became stuck.

I shook myself to show him my dismay at his ignorance. Even arachnipedes only a few days old could spot the stickiest places on the webs. Slowly, like I was teaching a child, I lowered my pedipalp toward a strand of silk and touched the tips against the string. I pointed to the sticky part and then the smooth part that was safe to grasp and play music. He learned quicker than most of my sisters had and used the hard tips of his claws to pluck the notes with his one free leg.

He played music, so he couldn't be prey, and yet, he didn't understand anything about arachnipedes. If he was a hatchling, he might be from one of the larger sister tribes of arachnipedes who lived above. This theory didn't explain what had happened to his other legs. I would have suspected he was a ground-walker, but Mama had once said they were stupid and easy prey.

This creature hadn't been easy to lure down here.

He tested the strings before playing. It wasn't the same complexity of music he'd played before, but he wasn't in such a state of panic at least. After a moment of testing the notes of the

web, he repeated my song back to me, or as close as he could manage with the limited range of his reach. As he played, his last free limb got stuck on the sticky cords of silk, and he was completely trapped.

I ventured closer, intending to free him, but he screeched and struggled. The beat of his internal music thrummed more quickly. He smelled warm and delicious. Traces of nectar perfumed his skin, and I caught earthy notes of cow worm and octopillar. I didn't know if I wanted to eat him or mate with him.

I teetered up the lattice until I was right beside him. His ear-piercing screeches grew louder than ever. Males could be so overdramatic when mating. At least, that's what Mama used to say. I spat on the place the cord touched his skin on his upper limbs. His flesh was smooth like a cow worm, and his legs lacked the thick hair that would have kept him from sticking to the strands. The only part of him that didn't stick was his head where long black hairs sprouted. He squirmed enough he didn't need any help from me rubbing in my saliva against the cords and was able to free two of his legs.

I backed away and gave him more room. He calmed and tentatively started up in song.

He played my web until his upper leg—or perhaps it was a pedipalp—got stuck again. I supposed the way he was positioned on his back wasn't the most advantageous for playing music. If I freed him, though, he might escape. Or worse yet, he might eat me. I thought of my mother and sister and shook myself.

Hoping for a compromise, I decided I would place him in a safer place. I started by tearing a hole in my web. I spat on the webbing that held the rounded bulge of his back and rubbed at it with my claws to free him. I held tight as I lowered him through the hole, but he was heavy even if he was my size. He wiggled so much I dropped him. Fortunately, the pile of exoskeletons and my molted remains below broke his fall. He kicked them away and waded through the crusts of former meals toward the lowest silk cords that he could reach. I was amazed how graceful he was on two legs, using his upper legs to test the notes.

I played our song. He played it back to me, running back and forth to pluck the right notes. He occasionally twanged off-key, but I could see he was trying. Things were going very well considering he hadn't tried to eat me. Only, when I tried to ask him questions about himself, he repeated my question instead of answering. When I answered, he repeated that as well. He didn't understand anything.

My heart sank. So much for having a mate to listen to me and converse with. Maybe he was an imposter mate like the one that had eaten my mother.

He pointed to his abdomen and said, "Sofia."

It had a nice melody. I repeated the gesture and sang the rhythm. He shook himself, which I took to be disgust at my ignorance. He pointed to himself and sang the three-note rhythm. Then he pointed to me. I understood then. I pointed to him and sang the three notes that represented his name, "Sofia." I then pointed to my abdomen. "Malatina."

He chittered and clapped his claws. I clapped my chelicerae jaws together.

He pointed with his front claws at my web and looked to me as if waiting.

I played the note for web, and he mimicked. He emphasized the notes incorrectly, making the word sound more like "bew" than "web," but it was a start.

He proved to be a quick learner, better than I had been as a hatchling. He pointed to the hole above, the walls, my food, and anything else he could find, learning which notes represented the words he wished to use. The tangible words were easiest, things we could point to. Words like "love" or "fall" or "why" took a lot more trial and error. Even then I wasn't sure he understood.

I watched in amazement as he removed part of his back. He held some kind of shell with a long neck and a peculiar webbing that ran in parallel lines. He plucked the correct notes to play my name and his, as well other words he'd learned. Of course, he also added in a bunch of his own garble words that didn't make any sense.

It was the first happy song I had heard from him. I plucked notes to accompany him. It felt alien being happy, but I liked it all the same.

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I quickly learned there was more to having a mate than singing. He had to eat. I offered him the most succulent morsels. He shook his head, his long hairs swishing back and forth. He pointed to the hole of light above. I pretended I didn't understand and played another song.

He slept below the web, and I rested high above where he couldn't climb. He turned away when I ate and refused all food I gave him. On that second day his music wasn't quite as harmonious. He repeatedly pointed to the hole. He clutched at his abdomen in pain and rocked back and forth. I played and danced across the web, but music didn't soothe him.

I plucked the strings of the web to ask, "Hungry?" Looking at him made me ravenous. I wasn't certain if that was normal when mating. Then again, dancing across my web to reach the right notes in almost continual song was a lot of work, especially with only four legs instead of eight. It made sense I would be hungry.

He pointed to his abdomen. A low discordant note came from his mouth, and he played the word for hungry. The slow cadence of his tune sounded more sad than hungry.

He played on his own little web from his back. "Why Malatina cerutpad Sofia?"

I could hear the question, but couldn't tell what he was asking right away. I had to slowly decode each of his words and pantomime the meaning to see if I understood. Once I realized what he was saying, I help him play correctly.

"Why has Malatina captured Sofia?" he asked.

"Sofia has captured Malatina's heart with his songs." I gestured in the hope my meaning would be clear.

He repeated the words, but they still weren't quite right. I kept at it until he sang the words correctly. I didn't know if he understood.

"Sofia hmoe." He pointed to the hole in the ceiling. I played that word over and over and helped him play correctly. He now understood how to say "home."

I remembered how I had once been trapped under my mother's web with a male on the other side. Perhaps he feared I would eat him.

It broke my heart to let him go, but I didn't see another way. If I didn't allow him to escape, he would surely die. Yet, if I freed him, I might be putting my own safety in jeopardy.

"Sofia up. Sofia hungry. Sofia home," he played and then pointed to the hole of light above.

I hung my head in sorrow. "Sofia go home."

He couldn't climb out without sticking to the web, which meant I had to carry him. If I did so, he might sink his fangs into my belly. My best option was to wait until he was asleep. I sawed through sections of my web and tore away smaller ones that might hinder him along the way to the ceiling. Next, I spun a basket with my spinnerets that I was able to attach to my posterior using a line of silk so that there was ample room between us. As soon as I dropped him into it, he began to thrash. I had to hold onto my web with all four of my legs until he calmed. When I started ascending again, he must have caught on because he stayed still. The closer we came to the door in the ceiling, the more I feared what might happen next. I pulled on the thread to bring him closer. His skin smelled of a sweet-sour deliciousness that made me hungry. His internal beat pounded louder than ever.

I spat on the places he was attached to the basket. He didn't try to move away as I freed him, nor did he jump at me. He climbed the rest of the way up to the hole, using the thick thread he'd come down by. His limbs shook and he had difficulty lifting himself. I pushed under his thorax to lift him higher. It seemed to help; he scrambled out the hole.

I sang him one last song of farewell. I hoped he might give me one parting song.

There was only silence.

* * *

Two days later, I was startled to hear Sofia's music from above. He sang at my entrance, shining down a bright ray of light with his eye, but he didn't descend this time. He teased me with his music. My dance across the web to play the right notes were clumsy, and I stumbled to keep up with him. Not that he saw. We made beautiful music together for hours. How could he not be lured into my embrace?

He played me a song, mostly getting the order of notes correct to make words.

“Malatina below
And Sofia above
Minkag web misuc
To sohwh tehir love.”

“Making web music,” I corrected. “To show their love.”

He played until he got it right. I moved on to the next line that needed work. It took time and patience to reinforce his lessons in my language when all I wanted was for him to return to me. For days I endured his repetitions of simple words and his simple songs. Most of them were unromantic and childish. I did my best to redirect our music to something more suitable for courtship.

I played and sang:

“Join me, join me, join me.

You’ll be forever mine.

Sing to me, sing to me, sing to me.

I’ll be forever thine.

Love me, love me, love me.

In courtship we will shine.

Mate with me, mate with me, mate with me.

I no longer wish to pine.”

My persistence paid off. When Sofia next descended into my cavern, he lowered himself using two ropes this time. Later he called this a pulley and showed me how it worked. He avoided touching the sticky strands of smaller webs he passed on the way to the central web, and when he did, he used a hairy part on his arms that I hadn’t noticed before. The hump on his back was bigger than ever. I waited in one corner of the web.

He stayed a little ways above me, suspended in the air. It appeared he had stuck his lower half through a sort of basket so that he could hang there. He removed the miniature web from his back and played our most recent song. I played with him, wondering if he would mate with me this time.

When we ceased playing, he took something else from his back: a metallic box. He pushed on it and our song echoed back to us. I stared in awe. He was playing without playing. It was a kind of magic. As our song echoed back to us, he plucked up new notes on his miniature web, a different conversation he layered over the top of it.

I struck my leg against the web in a discordant note. “No,” I said. “Too much noise.”

He waved his claws in the air, stopped the magic song box, and started again. I shook myself and turned away in disgust. This was not how music was made. One song was communicated at once and on the rare occasion when there were two, we played the same melody. Still, I was intrigued as I listened. His counter harmony wasn’t aesthetically unpleasant. If anything, it enhanced the first song. It was hard to listen to all the words at once, but I wasn’t sure I needed to. I understood the joy and sorrow he expressed, even if I couldn’t catch every word. And half his words were nonsense anyway. Maybe he was trying to communicate that he felt multiple things at once.

He played the music again, this time the magic box echoing back the first and second song at once. He added one more riff. I joined in, carried away by the beauty and strangeness of this courtship. At this rate he was never going to fertilize me. Then again, I doubted any other female arachnipepe had enjoyed this kind of companionship and music before.

I didn’t need children if I had him.

* * *

With time, Sofia became better at using music to communicate. I became better at counter melodies played simultaneously with his music. With the ability to understand each other also came disappointment.

“Why won’t you fertilize me?” I sang.

“I don’t have the right equipment.”

“You still speak rubbish words. Talk properly. Where are your pedipalps?” I asked in song. “Did they break off mating with other females?”

He replied in refrain. “What are pealpidps?”

“Pedipalps.” Surely this was coyness. “Why won’t you fertilize me?”

“I’m not male.”

“What are you then? Female?”

“Yes. Do you understand now?”

My insides felt as though they were being torn in two. I didn’t want it to be true. “You can’t be female. You are too small. Are you a hatchling?”

“No. I’m fully grown.”

My notes twanged more sharply than I intended. “You can’t be female. Only males roam without a home.”

“I have a home. It’s above.”

“You can’t be female. You fit through my doorway.”

Wind whistled out his mouth. “I’m female. I fit through many doorways.”

I played without rest, not allowing him a chance to reply:

“You can’t be female. I love you.

“You can’t be female. Why would you come here if you didn’t want to mate?

“You can’t be female. How will I find a mate if I have already fallen in love with your music?”

My notes died away into silence.

Sofia shifted uncomfortably in the basket. “We can be friends. We both love music. Isn’t that enough?”

I shook my legs in disgust and turned away. Some actions spoke louder than song.

* * *

I didn’t feel much like playing music. After all that courtship, I’d fallen for a sister arachnipe. I should have just eaten her when she first came to me, but no, I had listened to her songs. When she came back, suspended from her basket, I considered eating her. As she played a happy song and the music repeated from her magic box, I ventured closer. The ray of light from her eye swept over the webs below until she found me.

I interrupted her echo box, striking the web as hard as I could to drown out her notes. “Females aren’t supposed to share a cave once they’re ready for mating,” I said. “My mother told me sisters will kill each other fighting for a mate or food. If a male comes, I’ll be forced to kill you for him.”

“I’m not going to compete for a male or your food. I have a mate and food of my own at home. Besides, I wasn’t going to stay long. I can go if you wish.” Her internal beat was a slow, sad rhythm. She returned her miniature web to her back and started to pull herself up.

My pedipalps spasmed in unexpected regret. I waved my front leg at her. “If you’re here, you might as well stay and play some music. Sing me a song about your mate. Does he stay home like a female while you go out and roam and hunt like a nomadic male?”

She chittered and took out her miniature web, playing slowly. “Sometimes I roam so I can learn more about this plenat. I tend the fuzzipillars and cow worms outside in the medaow and study the anamils. I play music when I’m aolne. My mate wroks inside. Well, he’s not ecactly my mate, but he will be soon.”

I couldn’t tell if she wanted a mate or not. She and I were so much alike. “Why do you sing while you’re alone? You would catch your mate more quickly if you played to him as you do for me.”

“I do play for him sometimes, but he isn’t like me. He doesn’t know how to play songs. Music doesn’t have the same meinang for him. Besides, that isn’t how csourthip works for my kind.”

Yet, that was how she worked. There could be no love without music. How I pitied her.

“But I have you,” she said. “A fiernd. We make beatiuful music tegother.”

I was too interested in the strangeness of this story to correct her mispronunciations. “What are your kind? What tribe of arachnipe has males that don’t play music?”

“I’m not. I’m human.”

That word didn't mean anything to me. Maybe she was a ground-walker.

I wanted to tell her I would be there for her forever. I would appreciate her music if her mate was too dense to do so. But I couldn't make myself tell her these things when I knew she didn't want me.

My notes came out sharp and quick, masking my longing and sorrow. "What happened to you? Why do you only have four legs? Did someone bite your other legs off?" I asked.

"Is that what happened to you?" she asked.

I shook myself to show my displeasure at what she'd asked. "This is enough singing for the day. If you don't leave now I'll be tempted to make a meal out of you." I wouldn't, but Sofia didn't know that.

* * *

When she next came, I asked her if she had laid any eggs with her mate.

"No, humans don't lay eggs. Have you laid any eggs?"

I ignored her question. "What's wrong with your male? Why hasn't he mated with you yet? If he isn't going to mate with you, you'd better be careful. He's probably going to eat you. Check to see if he still has two pedipalps. If he doesn't, he won't be able to mate, and you might as well eat him before he eats you."

"Humans don't eat each other." She tried to repeat the word I had said. "Pdeiplap?"

I corrected her and showed her my pedipalps outside my jaws for grabbing. She didn't have any. I wondered if her upper legs were actually pedipalps. But if that was true, she only had one pair of legs, and that was too much for my brain to fathom.

"What do pedipalps have to do with anything?" she asked.

Aphid droppings! No wonder she hadn't laid any eggs. Perhaps her mother hadn't taught her how to mate before she'd died. I decided it was time to have the talk about the pedipalps and the eggs.

She listened with the same rapt attention as I told her how a male transferred his seed to his pedipalps and transferred this into his intended. I explained how dangerous it was because of how close pedipalps were to fangs. Love and hunger could be easily confused.

"Sometimes the pedipalp breaks off during mating and the male runs away," I explained. "My mama said they always run away in the end though." My heart filled with loneliness at the thought. I could see why Mama had liked having hatchlings to sing the hours away with. I wanted hatchlings of my own. I just didn't know if I was willing to let a male get that close to me. I had let Sofia get close, but that was different. She was different.

"How many males have you mated with?" she asked.

I repeated the question to her, the notes coming out harsh and rushed.

She shrugged. "One. Jsut my mate, but we aren't acuatly mated yet, in your sense of the wrod. Not ofciially anyway. The tnhigh is, humans don't tlak about mating to each other. Is it rude to ask you how mnay males you've mated with?"

I twitched and recovered from my embarrassment by adding another note to cover my stammer. "Mothers must tell their daughters, but sisters would never speak of this—nor do we speak of anything with each other after we leave home. I will pretend we are mother and daughter.

"The truth is, I have had no mates. I drive all males away if they come to me. I'm always sorry afterward, though. I want a mate to fertilize my eggs. It's just that I don't want one to eat me like the one that pretended he wanted to mate with my mother."

The notes of her song were reassuring and calm. "What happened?"

I hesitated. My stomachs quivered inside, and I didn't like the way I felt, like my belly was exposed even though it was protected below me. I didn't think I could answer her, not yet. Instead, I said, "You can't be female. Why was your music so sad and sweet when you first began to court me if it wasn't because you were so lonely?"

"Not this song again."

I repeated myself until Sofia answered. "My mother died shortly before we met. My songs were sad because I was sad. We used to play music together. She was my first teacher and I felt lost without her."

Feeling the vulnerability in her own words, it reassured me I could share mine. “My mother died too,” I said. “She was my teacher too. I watched her die in front of me as I was molting.”

“Mltonog?”

I taught her the world and showed her one of the husks I’d shed below. Even though she could say it, I wondered if she understood.

I shared the bitter details of my mother’s death; my molting with my sister, the male who came and ate her and my sister, and how he tried to eat me, but gave up. She studied my amputated limbs as I explained how I lost them. She didn’t explain how she had lost hers. It felt too personal to ask.

“I never wanted to mate again until you came to me with your music,” I sang. “But you aren’t male, and I am worse off than before because I can’t imagine loving any male’s music as much as I love yours.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to deceive you,” Sofia said. She strummed nonsense words on her miniature web.

“It’s just as well I thought you were a male. It kept me from eating you.”

She chittered and clapped her upper legs together in the way she did when she was amused. Apparently she thought this was a joke.

* * *

It wasn’t a surprise I should need to molt again, not when I had so much energy to sing and attract tasty meals. At first I felt bloated under my exoskeleton. My legs ached, and my thorax felt too tight. I rubbed my abdomen up against the wall of the cavern to try to relieve the itch, but it only made it worse. My appetite disappeared like last time. Days later, the first cramps in my legs came as I played music with Sofia, making me twitch and strike the wrong note. It wouldn’t be long now.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.” I wasn’t about to show weakness in front of my new sister. I would finish our songs, and when she left, I planned to seal up the entrance so she couldn’t come back until I was done molting.

I ignored the burning in my legs and played on. Most days Sofia’s musical accompaniment ended too soon, and the remaining hours of the day dragged on. Today as pain clenched me around my middle, I found the opposite was true. I kicked out my legs, creating twangs of discordant notes that interrupted her song.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You must go,” I said abruptly. It was an effort to dance across the web to reach the notes to play music.

“Is something the matter? Have I done something wrong?”

I didn’t want to tell her. The truth made me feel as vulnerable as exposing my underside for her to stab with fangs. Yet at the same time, it felt right to tell her. “I must molt. Leave me so I have time to seal up my web to keep predators out.”

Sofia packed up her miniature web and pulled herself up her ropes to the outside world. Did she always move so slowly? The moment she was out, I climbed to the opening and covered it with a weaving of silk. I would have liked to secure the hole better, but I didn’t have time nor the energy. It exhausted me to do so much weaving, and I had to stop several times to keep my balance on my web. Seizures wracked my body, their frequency coming on without warning and leaving my limbs shaking and uncoordinated.

I wobbled down the web to the lowest reaches, tore a hole near a bottom section and lowered myself below. I replaced two of the strands before I collapsed onto an antivore husk. My body spasmed out of control. The worst pain was in the third row of legs, the ones partially amputated. I curled my legs toward my body to lessen the cramps and then relaxed as the spasm passed. Another wave of fire lanced through my abdomen and out my limbs. I curled my legs inward. The spasms repeated again and again, my outer shell loosening more with each shrug.

The light of the sun faded, and the cavern fell into darkness. More than anything I wanted to rest, but I labored to push away my old exoskeleton. Night passed into day. I managed to work

my head free of my shell as well as one leg.

I was so involved in my task I didn't notice the music right away. It was a slow, sensual serenade. My insides clenched, not unpleasantly. At first I thought it was Sofia, though this song lacked her childish wording and the cadence I'd grown accustomed to.

My twelve eyes fixed on the metallic blue of an abdomen above my head. His pedipalps shimmered and glowed in a way that filled me with desire. Fangs sawed at the silk cords nearest my head. Far above, light spilled down from the entrance. The clump of webbing hung in shreds to the side.

I had been too hasty in my attempt to seal it. If I had hurried Sofia out sooner, I might have had more time to ensure my safety. As it was, a male was now in my lair. And not just any male.

"Love me. Love me. Love me," he said.

I recognized the purple and blue shine to his abdomen. I had once heard this ballad before, the song that had lured my mother to her death.

He sawed at the web above me. Cold dread settled in the pit of my stomachs. This moment was everything I had feared. He'd come back for me.

He was larger than he'd been before. I wouldn't put it past him to have molted twice since we'd last met. It was a feat he had fit through the entrance.

"Love me. Love me. Love me," he played. "I've come back for you. Love me. Love me. Love me. You know my love is true."

I had once thought his song beautiful, but now I could see how simple it was compared to what Sofia and I had shared, even if what we had was only sisterly love.

My body seized, and my legs curled inward. I was trapped in the throes of molting, unable to stop. He sawed through the web, stopping occasionally to play music. The molting would take another day at least. He had grown tired of waiting last time. Perhaps he would again. But he hadn't been as big and strong. This time he didn't have two other meals to eat first and fill up on.

He watched with eight hungry eyes. One of the silk cords he sawed at snapped. He tried to thrust his head between the lines of web, but the hole was still too small. Venom glistened on his fangs. He returned to sawing.

My last memory of Mama and my sister flashed before my eyes. I would be eaten as they had. I would never know what it was to have a mate. I didn't want my only purpose in life to be some scheming male's meal.

The sun set and rose again. He sawed through another three threads in that time. I was helpless to stop him. I managed to wiggle more of my abdomen out of the empty shell, but my thorax was still inside. If I had the use of all of my legs, I could have kicked him into the web and spun my silk around him. I would have sunk my fangs into him, not the other way around.

The hole was large enough for him to fit his head through now, and he could have fit the rest of himself if he'd been smart enough to push his legs through first, but his legs got tangled, and he had to use his saliva to unstick himself. He maneuvered one leg through and then the other. He batted at my legs and missed. His claws pinched open and closed as he pushed against the web to grasp at me. He came close enough to brush me.

He sawed more frantically. "Love me. Love me. Love me. No morsel is more delicious than you."

He stopped when the new song started up.

"Malatina below,
And Sofia above,
Making web music
To show their love."

Sofia flashed her head light back and forth, searching for me.

The male turned and watched her descend on her double line. I struggled against the confines of my own body, but I couldn't reach the web to play a song to warn her. I tried to use my voice to sing, but it was hoarse and raspy from molting. I doubted I sang loud enough for even the male to hear it. This was going to be just like Clavira and Mama. Another sister would die

and there was nothing I could do about it.

The male twanged a few notes, his eyes riveted on Sofia. “My tender pet, I’ll surely bet, I’ll catch you yet, in my net. Juicy, juicy, yummy, yummy.”

Surely his insipid song would give him away. Would I ever say such a thing to her? She acted completely oblivious.

Sofia swung her light down the web, still not seeing us. She descended in her basket. The male retreated away from me and toward her.

“No!” I cried. “Go away, Sofia.” But my voice was a hoarse whisper. I still couldn’t reach the web to communicate like I usually would have. I screeched and wiggled. Another spasm caught my body and made me curl into myself.

Sofia’s light fell on me then. She noticed the male creeping toward her. She dropped her miniature web. It fell through my web and crunched into the bodies of previous meals.

The male crawled faster.

“Juicy, juicy, juicy,” he sang.

The way she flinched told me she understood now. Her internal beat sped up. She lifted her upper limb. Blue light shot from something she held in her claw. The male jerked back and screamed. The air smelled of burned hair. The male writhed and tumbled down the web, almost to the bottom, until he managed to grab onto a rope to right himself.

Sofia lifted herself higher on her web, but she must have forgot to watch for the sticky strands strung across along the way. She got caught and struggled to free herself.

I ripped my second set of legs from the molting shell, the pain so severe I went blind for a few seconds. The bright colors behind my eyes didn’t stop me from stretching toward the nearest strands of web. I shook the web with my front legs, wanting to draw attention away from her.

“My love, my love, my love,” I played.

The male ignored the entreaty and scuttled toward her. Sofia raised her arm again. He leapt at her. More bright venom shot out from her claw. The male quivered and danced in the air before dropping right before her. His claws missed their hold on the web and his legs fell through the gaps. He landed on his abdomen and stuck to the web.

He was close enough to Sofia to bat at her legs with his. One of his claws found purchase on her and clamped down. A shrill scream came out her mouth, the highest note I’d ever heard. He yanked on her, bringing her leg toward his fangs. The tool she held for making venom-light fell from her claw.

I wrenched myself further out of my shell, but I couldn’t shed it all just yet. I dragged myself up the wall and out the hole he’d created. I crawled across my web, struggling to keep my balance and carry the weight of my new body and the shell still attached. My old legs caught against the sticky silk. I fought to free myself, but I was stuck.

The male was strong enough to pull Sofia toward him. The glue on the web where she’d been caught held her, but the web stretched under the strain of him pulling. Her leg inched closer to his fangs. His pedipalps opened and closed.

Another spasm took hold of me. I curled in on myself. As the seizure passed, I kicked at my old body and yanked myself free. I sprang toward them. I landed just behind him and leapt onto his back.

I sank my fangs into his body with a satisfying crunch.

* * *

Sofia tried to speak, but she couldn’t reach the right notes from where she was stuck in the web. Her hands, shook and the notes she made came out all wrong.

She smelled of fear and blood. It took everything in me not to lick at the red stain trickling down her leg. I turned away and retreated down my web and into the crusts of old meals below where I found her web box. I gave it to her, but she shook too much to grasp it, and it fell from her claws again.

I worried venom had gotten into her wound. I leaned closer to smell her. The sweet perfume of blood made my head dizzy and overpowered anything else I might have smelled. I jerked back when I felt my own venom drip from my fangs.

I lifted her in my pedipalps, holding her as far as I could from my fangs. I carried her to the entrance, but she trembled so badly she couldn't crawl out. I looped threads around my thorax and stuck her to my back to carry her. Then I worked at the entrance with my front legs. My new flesh was soft and sensitive after molting. I didn't like the sensation of crusty earth touching my skin. I worked my legs so hard it felt as though my new hair would be rubbed off and my muscles would seize up, but I couldn't waste a moment to rest. I used my venom to soften the glue of the webbing that kept the entryway from crumbling and dug at it with my claws.

The hole yawned wider as I worked. The brightness of day burned my eyes. In a few more moments, the hole was big enough for me and Sofia to fit through. I stood outside, stunned and uncertain.

Sofia sang using her mouth song, the notes discordant at first. Then I recognized the words in her garble. "I need you to tkae me hmoe to my mtae. He'll hlep me. Turn rghit and then go strighat."

I followed her directions. The world was so bright around me, I was blind after my life of semidarkness. I stumbled into something, making Sofia cry out.

I righted myself and started again. Long slender blurs of green and purple loomed over me. From the perfume of nectar, I knew them to be the stalks of flowers my prey nibbled on. My eyes seared from the light, and I wanted to turn away, but I kept going. I would take Sofia to her mate.

"Another rgiht. Strgaiht," Sofia commanded, confusing how to sing her words properly.

I didn't correct her. I followed her commands until we cleared the flower forest and came to the wall. There was motion around me and dozens of screeches like what one would expect to hear from prey. Sofia made screeches of her own at them. I feared this inelegant noise was her language. Humans didn't sound much more intelligent than thrip mites or antivores.

The creatures blurring around me smelled delicious, like Sofia, but different. When their discordant songs quieted, I heard thrumming inside them, fast and frantic like Sofia when she was anxious.

She tapped her hand against my back, playing out a rhythm that told me to be calm and still. I didn't feel like being calm with all these little mites swarming around me. One of these creatures reached toward my back. I batted it away with my leg.

Sofia said, "Tehy need to hlep me. I will beeld to daeth if uoy dno't let tehm svae me."

It was an effort to muddle through her words and understand what she was saying. I shivered with revulsion as their stubby limbs stretched over my back and cut her from me. Their clawed pedipalps were pink like cow worms. I suppose she was too, but I hadn't ever thought of her as being disgusting. Her music had been too beautiful to think of her as anything else.

The weight on my back lessened. Her hand was warm and reassuring as it stroked my back one last time. Then I was alone and blind.

* * *

Thrip-like chitters and screeches of humans came at intervals. There were three who remained surrounding me, the thrumming of their internal beats out of sync.

I turned away from them and faced the wall. I curled my head under my body as much as I could to shut out the burning of the light. It was a vulnerable position, especially with my last set of legs gone and the second to the last set impaired stumps. As I flexed them, I realized they weren't the stubs they'd been before molting. My new legs were as long as those I'd possessed as a hatchling, though they lacked claws. They had grown in my molting. I hadn't noticed the change in my haste to help Sofia.

My back limbs were still gone.

The scent of the humans tickled in my nose. My stomachs cramped. I hadn't eaten in days and molting had given me even more of an appetite. I had fresh prey in my web at home. Only I couldn't see well enough to know my way home. I could smell my way into the flower forest, but I didn't think I could find the hole to my cavern. If I had been planning my return, I would have used my spinnerets to weave a rope from my home to Sofia's so that I could find my way back. It was too late for that now.

The salty scent of the three tasty morsels near me made my belly cramp. Perhaps Sofia had intended for these humans to sacrifice themselves so that I might eat. Then again, she didn't eat prey. And if she didn't eat her mates, it wasn't likely she ate any of her other people either. It was unlikely she would want me to eat her kind. I wondered where Sofia was and why she didn't return to tell me what I should do.

Hunger was all I could think of. The scent of food was torture. I dug at the earth with my front legs to take my mind off the pain. When the sky dimmed, the humans retreated. My last chance for a meal was also leaving. I forced myself to keep my fangs to myself.

The sun slipped over the edge of horizon, and the pain in my eyes lessened. White spots danced before my eyes, but I could see better than I had in the daylight. I wanted to stay to see Sofia, but I also knew this wasn't my home. I had to get to my web so I could grow strong. I spun thread with my spinnerets as I ventured into the flower forest, sticking a line of web to rocks and the base of flowers in the hope I would be able to follow it back to find Sofia again after I was stronger.

Twins moons rose in the sky, surrounded by a thousand flickering pricks of light that reminded me of dew on my web.

A giant cow worm erupted from the ground before me. I was so hungry I considered what an incredible meal it would make, but as it unearthed more and more of itself, I realized it wouldn't take much for it to roll over and crush me. I retreated and went around it.

White little mites the size of my claw tips fluttered through the air. They were smaller than the thrip mites that usually flew into my cavern. They smelled like a mixture of fresh blood and pollen. I tried to loop my silk to catch one, but they dodged away. They were quick, and I set out after them, trying again and again.

A moment later, I found what had made them swarm. A giant green fuzzipillar squirmed on the ground, purple blood spilling out in a puddle. A hunched form loomed over the fuzzipillar, hidden by the flailing body. Long spindly legs fought to keep the green fuzzipillar still. I approached cautiously, wondering if I could get a bite. Of course, anything I bit, I would have to wait hours until the insides liquefied.

I counted eight legs from the predator hiding behind the larva. The predator's head lifted. It was a giant arachnipe. If it was a male, he was the biggest I had ever seen. Ten eyes glowered at me, hungrily. He lifted himself higher. He was as tall as my cavern.

Any admiration I might have for his beauty soured as he clapped his pedipalps together ominously. The larva was still, subdued into a lull by the venom. I backed away.

The male climbed over his dinner. The sharp odor of decay wafted toward me. His back legs worked a thread from his spinnerets. His joints bent, and he looked like he was about to pounce.

Aphid droppings! I was in trouble now.

Blue light shot out from behind me.

"Sofia?" I sang.

Sparks flew from the abdomen of the giant arachnipe, and smoke billowed out of his wound. He flung himself backward, toppling two flowers as he writhed. Blue light shot out again and again, hitting the same steaming spot on his abdomen. The other arachnipe convulsed and ignored me now. Flowers swayed in the distance.

I sniffed the air for Sofia, but couldn't find her scent. There was another of her kind standing behind the base of a flower, watching me. The human's glowing eye fell on me. I skittered to the side to keep from going blind.

Another arachnipe pushed through the forest. It ignored the first thrashing arachnipe and fixed his ten eyes on me. He reached down for us, and the human shot more blue light from its pedipalp. I turned away from the light, my eyes burning anew. White spots danced across my vision, and my head stabbed with pain as if the human had fired at me.

But it hadn't. I wondered now if all humans had the ability to make this venom made of light, and if they did, why Sofia hadn't used it on me the first time we'd met. The stampede of more arachnipes thundered in the distance. We had to get away from here; the scent of blood out in

the open would call to them.

The human patted my front leg, and I jerked back. It waved toward two towering flowers and stepped into the shadows underneath. Noises came from the creature's mouth, not quite a song, but close. The notes were low, but garbled like Sofia when she had first come to me.

This was one of Sofia's kind, so I knew it was too intelligent to be considered prey, but I was so hungry. My insides felt like they would implode if I didn't eat.

I should have felt kinship with this human because it had shot my enemies, but I didn't. Hunger erased all loyalty.

The human smelled warm and as sweet as pollen. With the breeze, I smelled Sofia again. Or perhaps I just wanted to smell her. My life would have been so much simpler if I had eaten her the first time I'd met her. I worked a strand of silk out of my spinnerets and stretched it from my back legs to my front legs. The human was completely oblivious as I attached my silk to its back. I pushed more silk out and looped it around its middle. My prey fell over and thrashed around. The eye light moved from side to side, searching for me, but I dodged out of the way to avoid the blinding brightness. The human lifted an upper limb and shot out blue fire from something held in its claw. The shots went wild and in the wrong direction. A flower above exploded in a burst of light. In a quick burst, I threw a line of silk to the human's claw and snatched away the instrument for making blue fire.

I tossed the venom-light maker aside. There was nothing that could stop me from eating the creature now. The drum inside the human thrummed in a simple one-two rhythm, speeding up as I approached. The smell of warmth made venom ready itself inside me. I leaned closer.

Then he unleashed his secret weapon: music.

* * *

There was nothing that could have stopped me from eating a meal, save for one thing: Sofia's song.

A burst of familiar music came from the creature. I recognized the pitch and tone of Sofia's miniature web, but there was no web here. I scanned the shadows. The music definitely came from the human I intended to eat. Sofia sang our song, but the words were different after the first stanza. She sounded tired and there was a slight quiver that wasn't normally there.

"Malatina below,
And Sofia above,
Assisted by Sofia's mate,
To show their thanks and love."
Sofia is cared for.
Sofia is home.
And now it is time,
For Malatina to go home."

Her meter was off, and her rhythm wasn't her usual pleasing artistry, but I would forgive her just this once. She was injured, after all. After I was able to muddle through her inferior song, I wondered how it was possible she could send her music through her mate like this. It had to be some kind of mating magic.

I looked over the human before me. He had four limbs, and he did smell like her. Aphid droppings! This was her mate. I couldn't make a meal out of him.

I unbound his bottom legs and then his torso. He scrambled to his feet and retreated back.

I pushed his light maker across the furry carpet that grew over the earth. I was uncertain he wouldn't use it on me. But I had to trust Sofia had told him not to eat me, her sister.

Not that I'd been able convince any males not to eat my sister.

Maybe I was making a mistake. He watched me warily for a long moment before backing away into the flower forest. I allowed him to walk ahead of me, trusting this male about as much as he trusted me. He kept his light maker aimed ahead of him. No other arachnipedes encountered us along our way. He escorted me to my home, knowing the way better than I did.

When we came to the hole in the earth that I knew was mine, I was so ravenous I considered pushing him inside, but I again thought of Sofia. I allowed him to escape silently into the night.

It was another day before my venom had liquefied the male arachnipepe's muscles so that I could digest it. My skin toughened and grew less sensitive. After a few more days, I could have gone back to Sofia's people to try to find her. But what would I do when I reached them? I couldn't very well ask after her health. None of them understood me but her. I scared them. And in truth, they scared me.

Between meals, I patched the gaping hole in the ceiling. I didn't want to attract more males or anything else that was large enough to eat me. Small males were bad enough. But I made sure the hole was still large enough for Sofia. She had said she was home and all right, but if that was so, why hadn't she returned to me? Perhaps it was because I'd tried to eat her mate.

I grew so lonely as the days passed that I waded through the old crusts of meals on the earthen floor until I found Sofia's miniature web. I imitated how she had held it and plucked the notes as she had. The sound of her voice made me happy and sad at the same time.

My songs returned to the melancholy they once had been when I'd been alone without sisters or mother to keep me company. I didn't know how other arachnipedes did it. Mama had always said we were solitary creatures, that sisters were dangerous; we would compete for mates and food. Sofia and I had never competed for anything. She had kept me company and shared her music with me. She had never tried to eat me like a mate would have. Long ago, Mama had told my sisters and me stories of her first and second mates. Their companionship had been brief, and her own loneliness had abated when her children hatched.

My time with Sofia had been far longer than it would have been with any mate. She had saved me from the male while I'd been molting and sacrificed herself for me. She had sent her mate to help me. Now that I was well fed enough to be rational, I felt miserable. I'd repaid her friendship by trying to eat her mate.

I strummed on my web, listlessly. My music was hardly enough to entice insects, let alone a companion.

An echo from above mirrored the sorrow of my songs. I looked up to find a dark shape blocking the light from the door. Eight legs extending out from the body. Two glowing eyes shifted over the walls in search of me. The illusion lasted but a moment before I realized it was two figures, their silhouettes overlapping and making the four legs each possessed look like they had been combined. Sofia chittered and used her mouth music as she lowered herself down into my cave. Her mate descended a moment later.

Sofia's scent was off. A sharp pungent odor accompanied her usual salty sweetness. As she neared, the odor intensified. It came from her lower left limb. It didn't look the same as the other. It was metallic and shaped differently.

"My sister, my sister, my sister," I sang. "How happy I am to see you again." I waved a hand at her mate who lowered himself with the same pulley system as she did. "Err, and your mate too."

She chittered and repeated my lyrics several times. Then she turned to her mate and used her nonsense tongue with him. He hung, suspended in the air beside her. He flinched and lifted the venom-light maker in his claw when I approached to hand Sofia her miniature web.

Her mouth music turned screechy and she waved her arms at him. He lowered the little venom tool to his leg. Whatever she said hadn't made him feel any better. He watched me warily. I moved more slowly as I handed Sofia her miniature web. I stroked her head with my front leg, too overcome with happiness to stay back. Her mate shifted uncomfortably. Wasn't that just like a male to be jealous?

I pointed to her foot.

She leaned forward and tugged at the lower part of her limb. Her lower leg slid away with far more ease than mine did when molting. The leg below the black casing was pink like the rest of her cow-worm-colored flesh except for the dark red tip where there should have been clawed pincers. She removed the black exoskeleton of her other claw. The second was noticeably longer with stubby claws that looked ineffective for grabbing. Still, they were better than the leg that didn't have any claws.

I understood what had happened. The male had torn off part of her leg, just as he had done to

me. A shrill note escaped from my chelicerae.

I danced back and forth to reach the correct notes. It was easier moving across my web than it had been before molting.

“Such sorrow throbs in my heart
That you should feel the same pain as I.
You know what it is to be incomplete.
You, too, almost came to die.”

She repeated my melody, adding her own words and stumbling over a few.

“We are siterss in our hearts
We will cotnnuie to be strong
I have brughot a gift for you
I hope that is not wrong.”

She looked to her mate and said something to him. He removed part of his back and reached inside as she went on.

“I have studied your people.
I have learned their ways.
With my mate’s help

We collected from a male all that you crave.”

Her mate removed a pillow of silk thread. Resting on top was what looked to be a male pedipalp. The tip was covered in a glossy black fluid.

My heart felt heavy. A pedipalp to fertilize me wasn’t *all* that I craved. I wanted a mate to court me with song. I wanted love and companionship like she had with her mate. After all we had gone through, I didn’t know how she could still not know this.

I played high, happy notes to disguise my sorrow. “Thank you for the pain you have gone to on my behalf.”

“Just don’t try to eat my mate afterward.” Sofia chittered in the way she did when she thought something was funny. “If anyone gets to eat him someday, it will be me.”

There would be no more mate-eating in my cave if I had anything to say about it.

Her mate waited in silence, unable to speak and unable to understand, while she continued to play her miniature web. She serenaded me and only me. Perhaps she did comprehend what I needed. Music was love and love was music. I, too, understood her heart’s desires, and I suspected I could fulfill the ones he couldn’t.

Pride filled me. My chest felt tight as though I were in need of another molting. I gave Sofia a song of friendship and love.

Mama had been right about imposter males. They would trap you, but not just with their silk cords. I would forever be ensnared by Sofia’s music. Yet I didn’t mind so long as I could offer her my own in exchange.

Sarina is the winner of the Golden Rose RWA Award, Golden Claddagh RWA Award, Allasso Humor Award, and Penn Cove Literary Award, as well as a author of over 150 short stories published in markets like Analog, Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine, Daily Science Fiction, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Abyss and Apex, Cosmos, Bards and Sages, Neo-Opis, Flagship, Allasso, New Myths, Penumbra and Crossed Genres. Sarina Dorie's steampunk series, The Memory Thief and her fantasy series Womby's School for Wayward Witches, along with other novels, can be purchased on Amazon.