

Vera panted, the panda woman's quarterstaff had done its work in drubbing her way through the pack of imps, either knocking them out or scaring them away. *Then* a giant spider had added to the confusion. Whether the imps intentionally roused it or not, its appearance had been traumatising for her.

It seemed it hadn't been fully intended as it attacked the imps first, buying her time and space for her to calm herself. As the nasty creatures were slapped aside with claws, took worrying fanged bites or even got hit with sudden swings of web-lined limbs, Vera's martial prowess took over and her hands and legs spoke for her.

She felt a pang of regret when all was calm, having not wanted to slay the thing outright, yet there it lay, ichorous fluids pooling around it. She stepped back, cleaning her staff tip on one of the fallen imps, who groaned in response.

The panda stepped forward, the whole reason she'd approached was the chest that lay tucked in the back, now it was time to see if the spoils of the tussle would pay off for her. Her hands floated over the top of it, brushing a layer of dust back, checking for any trapped mechanisms.

With how poorly the rest of the dungeon exploration had gone she'd not be surprised if a spear or arrow tried to skewer her for opening it. Still that usually only happened with the obvious chests in the centre of their rooms or those without guardians.

Confident in her check, she slammed the lid back and then sidestepped just in case. Nothing happened, to her relief. Within the chest lurked some loose coins, a vial of some unmarked potion and the centrepiece... a sturdy looking pair of boots, pristine and clear even of dust with a decorative yet serviceable metal toe-cap.

Vera glanced at her own footwear, ankle covering boots, scruffy and with the left steaming from acidic slain-spider innards that had mostly been wiped off. It was enough to warrant the panda to change there and then. Her old boots came off, dropped to the side, then she brought the new ones forward.

Despite the bulk of her feet and toes, it looked like they'd have room enough to sit comfortably within. A smooth lining welcomed her heel, easily gliding into position in the one boot and then the next. She held onto the chest for stability as she stood, tapping her heels on the ground to be sure they were in. "Huh!" She remarked to herself happily, they were not only better looking and more apt for dungeoneering, they were also perfectly comfortable. "Well if nothing else I got something worthy of being called an upgrade."

She stood, turning, looking for what else lurked in the room. No levers or anything that might open the many paths from behind, though there was a further branch at an angle to the one she'd taken. Gathering her staff and pack, she stepped towards it.

She felt something off several paces later. A sudden tightness at the ankle and a twist of her foot made her stumble forward. She caught herself from falling yet the recently added potion vial slipped free, cracking on the floor! Worse, the solid thud of the boots changed with each frantic step, getting harder and sharper, forcing her onto her toes and raising the heel off the ground, making it all the harder to balance. She glanced down, shocked to see that the footwear had morphed!

The flat sole had morphed to raised heels, six inches high, the solid make of the boot had tightened down across the top of her foot and the solid toe-cap had transformed, pulling away from the front, revealing her digits, and reforming into a cage-like lattice that ringed each toe, squeezed above the foot and clasped as tightly as a manacle on her leg. They were cursed!

“Damn it! Why?! Ooooh... there better be a scroll in this place.” She hissed, stamping the offending footwear down, even balancing with her staff so she could reach with her hand to try and tug one off, already knowing it would be useless.

As she wiggled her staff pulled back in a slightly odd way, jeopardising her balance and causing her to stumble once again until she felt something squish, softer than the dungeon’s stones and unfortunately helping her to stabilise in a different way. She shut her eyes, taking a second to prepare herself for what she guessed she would see.

Webbing. Gross, thick, sticky webbing from the spider was squashed around the pointed heels and the toes of both of the boots. Her toes curled up in revulsion, feeling a strand tugging on one of her claws. That also explained her quarterstaff, the bottom of it had several of the threads clinging on.

The strand pulled back on her, the wet, clammy chill of more webbing slipped along a toe. “Oh no, no, no!” She growled, tugging her staff, splitting it from the floor and using it to shove at the moving webs, a signature of the beast known as a mana-arachnid! Cursed shoes, an *enchanted* giant spider and the latent magic that remained even after its death in its webs. She pulled and prodded as best as she could, still just able to step up from the gooey webs, though not being left enough space to step fully clear of it.

Her eyes flicked between her staff and her legs, doing her best to ensure that the webs didn’t rise too high on either end. She was experienced enough to know that with the web’s maker dead, it should only have enough magic to slow her so long as she kept on top of it, especially since that breed of spider was solitary. There’d be no mate to mourn it or share its snares.

Her experience should have been correct, yet behind her, out of her vision and out of her mind, the liquid from the potion vial pooled and spread. The surface of it struck the webbing, which absorbed it as thirstily as a dry cloth.

Vera stepped again, taking constant paces to stop it sticking and find areas where it was thin or absent. It should have been slowing down, yet suddenly it sped up! The surge caught her

off guard, tracing up her left leg, well past the boot hem, while she was distracted it also wound up the staff, catching her fingers and snagging over her wrists.

“What? Why- What’s going on?!” She shouted, wrenching the tangled leg up, managing to just barely split enough strands to get it off the floor, yet not enough to cleanly break free. The web was concerningly strong, her head twisted looking over her shoulder expecting to see another spider or at the very least an imp or two somehow affecting it. The cracked vial caught her eye, the pool of its contents was diminishing, sucked into the web. It must have been a mana potion suffusing the construction with extra energy!

The rapidly expanding webbing grew thicker as it climbed. She tried to drop her staff but it clung, tethered to hands that couldn’t fully stretch apart. The bottom half of the stick was a total mass of off-white webbing, like her left leg from the knee down. The tide of it was growing along her arms and right leg.

She was caught in it, mired well and truly, yet the potion was at least depleted, she had to do her best to tough it out, knowing that any struggling right now might just mire her in a worse position. Her best bet would be to keep what wasn’t connected to anything away, so that at worst she’d end up in a webby suit with linked arms.

If her footwear weren’t cursed she’d have tried to step out of that when it went still too, but given it was locked on she’d have to endure annoying web-soaked legs with awkward heels, if she ever figured out how to step free.

Her jaw tensed, teeth gritted as she pulled her head up from the encroaching webs that were sucking on her elbows and threatening her hip on one side. However it was definitely running on the last dregs of energy. Fortunately that magic hadn’t been spent solely on binding her up, the web on the floor had also grown thicker, little pockets of energy waited to try and snare the next intruder.

Had it focused entirely on her or had the web’s builder still been alive it would have been a different story, instead she had at least avoided full cocooning. The tangling web around her staff had reached an equilibrium where it hung awkwardly, keeping her from being able to straighten up. Instead Vera cut a humiliating sight, half bent forward, legs wide, bulked up and smoothed over within the trapping embrace of the spider’s silk.

Her eyes flicked back the way she came. Hoping the imps wouldn’t think to venture down this way when they recovered to at least give her time to work her way out of this. Otherwise they could well finish the job or leave her even more compromised...