

Moroneae Domesticus

It was a slow, dreary day at the Gibbettville sheriff's office. As a tiny town in southern Ohio, the deputies had become accustomed to slow days; the tiny town barely qualified for its own post office. The main street offered asylum to a neglected bank and a Days Inn, gleaming from daily cleanings despite the infrequency of use. What counted as crime here included playing music too loud and parking on the wrong side of the street. The only thing that made this day stand out was how particularly rainy it was.

Sheriff Tom Abrams was in his office. A former marine, so he always said, he was a large, gruff cougar approaching his fifties. There were pictures in his office that proved the light-brown furred feline once was in good enough shape to be a contender for professional football or the marines; nowadays, however, when one spoke of him as large, they had to specify if it was his height or his waist.

Lieutenant Eileen Ellis, sitting at her desk in the middle of the tiny station cleaning her gun, might very well *have* been a former marine. That or a UFC fighter. It wasn't that the tan canine's frame was particularly large, she had a very average, if well-toned, form; it was that the dingo could punch holes in walls and bend steel poles with ease. Her fondness for talking about crushing other people's balls kept the other deputies on edge.

Deputy Robbie Nordberg sat at his desk, directly across from Ellis. He was absentmindedly playing around on his computer, shuffling files around between folders in between games of Tetris. The grey wolf desperately wanted to become a detective, but in a tiny town with tiny aging women and their tiny cats, he doubted that would be much more exciting than his current position. That and the out-of-shape wolf was frightened easily by fireworks and so distractible he had forgotten what he had eaten for breakfast that morning.

Deputy David Ledding, who, at three years, was the newest to the force, was at the third desk in the station, the front desk. He was diligently filling out paperwork from a call earlier that day, the only call that day. Writing down the bare details of how he rescued the cat from the tree, the small white mouse sighed and looked around. Nope, no change in the office situation. It seemed the dull thud of the hard rain was providing such interesting music, no one wanted to overpower it with conversation. Sighing again, Ledding went back to his work, writing the empirical minutia of how Mrs. Thompson thanked him for saving Popsicle from his arboreal captor.

It wasn't so much that Ledding liked the company or conversation of his coworkers; it was that Ledding was bored. He had to concede: boring was the norm here. Still, if Ellis suddenly leapt across her desk and started to strangle Nordberg, just *watching* the violence would be a better use of the mouse's time than the paperwork.

Without uttering a word, Abrams stood out of his chair and left his office with his coffee mug. He went into the main room, occupied by the three deputies, and into the door along the same wall as his office only a few feet away, into the kitchen. None of the other officers thought anything of it, until

only several seconds later Abrams emerged from the kitchen. His face was stern, his stance stiff, and when he spoke, it was in a crisp, loud, commanding voice.

“Officers, fall in.”

Ledding and Ellis stood and casually strolled over to the sheriff, adopting indifferent postures. Whatever it was, Ledding decided, it was better than paperwork.

“What?” Nordberg asked, looking up at Abrams quizzically.

“Get up here, Nordberg,” Abrams responded in a calm but demanding voice.

“Well, sure,” said Nordberg, moving to join the others in front of the kitchen door, “but what’s it about?”

“Nordberg, shut up before I crush your balls,” Ellis said sternly. Ledding made a mental note to add another tally to the number of times Ellis mentioned crushing balls today.

“All of you, quiet!” Abrams commanded. He looked at his three deputies with a penetrating gaze. He stood, without speaking, for several long moments. He straightened himself before finally speaking.

“Gentlemen, . . . and lady, . . . I think, I know you aren’t used to a lot of action. This is a pretty dull town, not a lot happens here. Hell, we barely qualify for a sheriff’s office. What’s the worst that could happen out here? Well, let me tell you, this is pretty bad –”

“What’s going on?” Nordberg spoke up, concern on the wolf’s face, grey ears perked up in attention.

“Nordberg, please. As I was saying, this is a pretty uneventful town. But today, we have a crisis on our hands. A full-scale crisis. The kind of crisis people prepare for, a Cold War-style crisis, a *nuclear*-style crisis –”

“Oh my God, what is it?”

“Nordberg!” Ellis snapped back, her face serious, clearly intent on finding out what the situation was.

“Sorry,” said Nordberg quietly, tail dropping.

“Anyway,” continued Abrams, “a big-time crisis has developed, right here in our own backyard. I’m not sure if any of you can handle it; not even you, Ellis. It’s the trouble with being a small-town cop: you deal with small problems. When something big falls into your lap, you can’t handle it. Well, gentleman and possible lady, we’ve got no *choice!!* It’s up to us to deal with this! Help ain’t comin’, and we’ve got to navigate up turd creek without a paddle! Our tiny little outfit has to wrestle with the big dogs – no, the *tigers* – no! The *robo-tigers* –”

“Jesus Christ, sheriff, what –“

“Nordberg!!” Ellis and Ledding shouted simultaneously.

“Well if it’s such a big deal, why are we just standing around?!”

“He’s got a point, Tom,” Ellis said to Abrams.

Abrams closed his eyes, setting his jaw and steeling his nerves. The cougar stood in silence, a calm anxiousness emanating all around him, infecting the deputies with his worry. The officers looked at him, the silence almost too much to bear. What could be so serious, in such a small town, to get the sheriff so worked up? He spoke, finally, in a whisper.

“There’s a spider in the kitchen.”

Ellis, Nordberg, and Ledding stared dumbstruck at their sheriff for several long moments.

“Seriously?” Nordberg uttered.

“Yes,” Abrams replied. He *was* serious.

There was another pause. “Is this a joke?” asked Ledding, cocking an eyebrow, setting his pink ears low.

“Ledding, I have never been more serious in my *life*!”

Ledding rolled his eyes, turning back to his desk. Ellis shook her head and did the same. Nordberg threw his head back and huffed.

“What?!”

Nordberg ran his hands through the grey fur on his head, and then went back to his desk. Ledding sourly returned to his paperwork, cursing himself for thinking Abrams had something interesting to provide.

“You guys, this is a serious situation!”

“Do you have any B-12 forms?” Ledding yelled out to Ellis.

“Check the cabinet,” she answered, pointing to the set of cabinets along the wall opposite the kitchen.

“This isn’t a joke!” Abrams proclaimed as Ledding went to pull some forms from the cabinet.

“C’mon, you guys! We’re police officers, we have an obliga—“

“I almost wet myself, man!” screeched Nordberg.

“It’s our job Nordberg!”

"Abrams," said Ellis softly, standing. "As much as I respect and like you, you almost made Nordberg wet himself. Only myself and loud sudden noises are allowed to do that."

"Exactly!" Nordberg chimed in.

"B-b-b-but . . ." Abrams stuttered, pointing behind him to the kitchen door. "Ledding!" He called out desperately.

Ledding slowly turned to face him. "You made an arachnid sound like a threat to national security," he said slowly and seriously, coldly staring at the cougar with his ruby-red eyes.

Abrams stared back at him. "Is that a 'yes' or a 'no'?"

Ledding scoffed and threw his hands in the air.

"Hey, this very well could be a serious threat! Spiders are evil, nasty little monsters! The one in there is probably just a drone or scout or something; a *prelude* to the spider invasion! Ever seen *Arachnophobia*?"

"*Arachnophobia* is just a movie, Tom," Nordberg responded.

"Is it?!" Abrams yelled back, eyes wild with conviction. Ledding rolled his eyes and turned back around.

"Sheriff, listen," Ellis said, putting her hands on the cougar's shoulders. "You say you used to be a marine. Is a spider *really* the biggest threat you've faced?"

"This isn't comparable to anything in the marines! The corps teaches you to fight commies and terrorists, not insect invasions!"

"Arachnid," Ledding chimed in, deep in his paperwork again.

"Whatever! The point is the marines can't prepare you for spiders."

"Still, can't you just go in there and smash it?"

Abrams dipped his muzzle, fumbling with his hands. His ears drooped, making the tall and large sheriff look like a ten-year-old, if a considerably fat one. He murmured something Ellis couldn't understand.

"What?"

Abrams scuffed the floor with his shoe. He looked up at the dingo, his muzzle still low.

"Could you go with me?"

Ledding and Nordberg barely contained their laughter, coarse chuckles slipping out of their throats. Ellis stared at Abrams, her face far from amused. "Man up buddy boy," she told him, slapping his shoulder and returning to her desk.

Abrams stared at the unresponsive officers. "So none of you are going to help me?"

None of the other deputies answered. "Very well." Abrams regained his composure, standing to his full height, putting strain on his shirt buttons. Abrams turned and looked at the door, stretching his limbs. "Do we have any bug spray?"

"TOM!!" yelled all three officers.

"Just . . . deal with it, man!" Nordberg added.

Abrams huffed and tugged on his tan shirt. "You all suck as cops," he muttered, mostly to himself. The cougar gripped the door handle, let out a long breath, and went in quickly. Ellis, Nordberg, and Ledding didn't pay it any mind.

Less than a minute later, Abrams emerged again, exiting the room even faster than he went in, pressing his back to the closed kitchen door. "Good Lord it's even bigger than I thought."

Ledding snapped his pen down, glaring at the wall in front of him in frustration at how ridiculous this was getting. Ellis shook her head again as she put her gun back together. Abrams panted, eyes bulging with fear, sweating profusely, back taut against the door for several minutes before he relaxed.

"I can't go back in there," Abrams muttered between breaths, "it's too dangerous. I'm going to need your help!" he called out.

"I'm not killing your spiders for you Tom," Nordberg stated, gaze affixed on his Tetris game.

"You wouldn't do it alone! We'd be together!"

"Meaning I'd be bait?"

"Well, either you or Ledding."

Ledding let out a single, sharp "ha!".

"Then it's up to you Nordberg!"

"No!" replied the wolf, clearly frustrated.

Abrams' shoulders and ears dropped. He turned his head from one spot on the floor to another. "Well, I have no choice. I'm quarantining the kitchen."

"*What?!*" shrieked Nordberg.

"You can't be serious?" Ledding retorted, twisting around in his chair.

"I can't endanger the rest of you!"

Ellis slammed her hands on her desk and stood. "That's it!" Ears flat on her head, the dingo snapped the slide on her pistol back and pushed Abrams aside. "I'm going to crush its balls!"

Without looking, Ledding made a downward slashing mark, tying together four others on a list titled "Balls Ellis Crushed Today".

"You're taking your gun?" Abrams asked quizzically.

"*I like my gun!!*" she shouted back, holding the weapon up for all to see. "If anyone wants spider ball stew, I'm taking orders!" As Ledding wondered if that was list-worthy, she disappeared behind the door.

Abrams turned away from the kitchen door, grinning smugly. "She's got a lot of promise." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his tan pants triumphantly. Nordberg shrugged and went back to Tetris.

Moments passed. Abrams stared at the door. As more time passed, Nordberg looked away from his Tetris and at the kitchen door. After a full five minutes, even Ledding noticed that Ellis hadn't come out. He got up and joined the others in looking at the door. Each officer's face was streaked with astonishment.

"She hasn't come out yet," Nordberg said, sounding as if he had been dazed.

"No . . ." agreed Abrams.

"All she had to do was crush a spider. What could've happened to her?" Ledding asked quietly.

" . . . maybe the spider got her . . ." Abrams said slowly, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, don't be stupid!" Ledding told him.

"I think I'm gonna wet myself," Nordberg said softly, his voice trembling.

"It is entirely possible Ellis was eaten by that spider. You get caught in a web, and *boom*," Abrams slammed his fist into his hand. "Done."

"I'm gonna wet myself . . . "

"Oh, is that so? You've watched too many movies Tom!"

"Doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"Oh, *c'mon*—"

Before Ledding could finish his retort, Ellis emerged from the kitchen. Her eyes were wide, her face was drawn, and her entire frame was shaking. She placed her back against the door and just stood there. "I couldn't do it . . ." she barely whispered.

"Good Lord, Ellis!" said Abrams.

"Oh my God!" Nordberg cried.

Ledding went over to the frightened dingo. "Ellis, what happened?"

"I couldn't do it . . . I just couldn't do it . . . "

"Ellis, are you alright? Did you get bitten or something?" Ledding asked, getting her to sit at her desk. Abrams retrieved his jacket from his office and draped it on Ellis' shoulders.

"No, no, I'm fine. Well, not hurt anyway."

"Ellis, what happened in there?" Nordberg asked her.

"I -- . . . I went in, and I saw the spider, on the floor right in front of the vending machines, and I went up to smash it . . . and . . . and I looked down at it . . . and I-I-I just couldn't do it!"

Abrams, Nordberg, and Ledding stared in disbelief at Ellis. Moments passed, time ticked away in silence.

"*Bulls*&!!*" Ledding finally yelled.

"It's the truth!"

"Are you telling me that --"

"Hold on, Ledding," interrupted Abrams, "I think Ellis might be telling the truth."

"*What?!?*"

"So, are you saying spiders have mind control powers?" Nordberg asked timidly.

Abrams shot a glance at the wolf. "That is exactly what I'm saying."

Nordberg looked away, whimpering. Ledding stared blankly at his peers. Surely they couldn't be this stupid?

"Think," Abrams said to Ellis, "did you black out, or was there a fog, or any other classic signs of mind control?"

"This is a joke," Ledding said in a flat voice.

"I-I don't know --"

“Eileen,” Abrams told her softly, gripping her shoulders and getting her to look into his eyes, “we need to know what you experienced. We don’t know what kind of powers spiders could have. If we are to defeat these things, we need to know what they are capable of.”

“I-I-I-”

“It’s a *spider*! It spins webs and walks on walls!”

“Just relax, Eileen. You’re safe here.”

Ellis looked away, her eyes still very wide.

“Did you black out or hallucinate? Did you feel like you weren’t in control of your movements?”

“Well . . . I suppose I did lose control It would explain why I . . . couldn’t . . . couldn’t *crush* the damn thing.”

“It’s just as we feared,” said Abrams coldly, turning to Nordberg and Ledding.

“What?! You’re delusional!”

“A-a-and, and when I got up to the spider, it seemed normal at first, but, as I stood there, I swear to God it seemed like it got *bigger*. Bigger and bigger and *bigger!!* Before I ran out of there —”

“You *ran*?” Ledding asked satirically.

“You *ran*!?” Nordberg exclaimed, unable to contain his fear.

“—the spider was at least ten feet tall!”

“I’m dreaming. I must be. I *need* to be.”

“Abrams, did you hear that? The thing in there can make itself ten feet tall!”

“Or maybe it *is* ten feet tall, Nordberg. It just appears to us as a smaller spider.”

Nordberg stared at Abrams in complete shock. Ledding looked at them both in disbelief.

“You know that ceiling is only eight feet high, right?”

“What are we gonna do, Tom? How can we fight a ten-foot, mind-controlling spider!?” shrieked Nordberg, verging on hysteria.

“Calm down Nordberg!” Abrams shouted. “Don’t wet yourself . . . unless you already have I should have known from my own experience in there that a single man — or single Ellis — can’t handle such . . . such a . . . *beast*! Not alone, not as individuals, but as a team we can beat this thing! We just need a plan and proper teamwork!”

“I’m in,” Ellis said without any hesitation. She and Abrams turned to the wolf.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I'll do it," Nordberg answered nervously.

"Ledding?" Abrams inquired, turning to the mouse. Ledding looked back at the three other officers.

"You guys are idiots."

"Ledding, we need you. This is a major –"

"It's a major delusion!" He pointed at Abrams, "You're out of it," at Ellis, "you've been traumatized by a spider, and you . . ." he pointed to Nordberg, ". . . you're *Nordberg!* I'm not helping you gut the kitchen in a crusade against a pest!"

"Ledding, do I need to reiterate –"

"No! You don't! I'm too convinced you've gone completely insane!"

"Dave," said Ellis, trying to sound soothing, "we need you. Please, Dave, don't flake out on us."

Ledding crossed his arms under the gaze of the three. He bent his head, biting his lip with one side of his mouth for a few seconds. They certainly were intent on what they were doing. But it was absolute insanity! He thrust his hands in his pockets as he looked up at Abrams, Ellis, and Nordberg. Gazing at their faces, their intensity, their conviction, the honest fear of his co-workers, Ledding knew what he had to do. He leaned down, getting his face low and close to all three at once. The others leaned closer to him simultaneously.

"F*%& you, and the horse you're riding in on."

All three sets of eyes went wide as dinner plates as Ledding went back to his desk.

"Okay . . . Ledding is out," said Abrams slowly. "But that doesn't mean we're helpless! We need a plan."

"The building plans are in the back," Nordberg chimed in, "those might help."

"Good thinking Nordberg, go get 'em." Abrams straightened himself again as Nordberg ran into an adjoining room, straining the buttons on his tan uniform shirt. "Ellis, what weapons have you got?"

Ellis gave the cougar a devilish grin. "What *don't* I have?" She and Abrams went off to the armory in the basement.

Ledding buried his face in his hands. He dragged them down his face, pulling on his eyelids as he groaned out loud. "I work with a bunch of gits."

The phone on his desk rang. The mouse didn't particularly want to answer it, already deep in paperwork concerning a pointless call, and now dealing with three counts of grand idiocy. Given the day

so far, this call would probably be just as pointless and stupid. Ledding let it go to the third ring before he generated the willpower to pick up the receiver.

"Officer Ledding," he said in a monotone.

"Davey? Dave, 's'that you?"

"Probably. This is my office phone." Ledding looked around him as Nordberg emerged from the back room and tripped, spilling papers and blueprints all over the floor. "Though my office may have been moved to the Twilight Zone."

"Davey, its Arnie. We got a situation out here. I need your help as a policeman."

"Generally, you call nine-one-one for that –"

"Naw, man, I need *you*!"

Ledding pulled the receiver away from him and sighed. Whatever this was, it was *not* police-worthy. Still, if it got him away from the station . . .

"Alright, where are you?" Ledding took down the address and hung the receiver up. He took his keys from his drawer and stood.

"Guys, I gotta call," he shouted, hoping to reach Abrams and Ellis in the basement. "I'm gonna go take care of it. Like a *cop*."

No reply. Nordberg was too busy mulling over the blueprint on his desk to notice.

"Could be serious! Might develop into a real emergency!" he lied. Maybe if he blew it out of proportion, it would get the others to come with him.

Ledding's only answer was the dull thud of the rain on the building.

"It's a bunch of my redneck friends; guaranteed to have a lot of booze, people to gawk at!"

"Ellis," Ledding heard Abrams shout from the basement, "this one isn't even legal!"

"That's its appeal!" answered Ellis.

"Right," Ledding finally relented, picking up his jacket and going to the door. "No one wants to do their job today." Ledding walked outside to his cruiser, the rain easily the least annoying thing he had to deal with today.

The call took a little over an hour to respond to. Ledding's friend Arnie was apparently having a party, and the neighbor was so upset with how loud the music was he stormed into his house to shut it off. After watching both parties scream at each other for he didn't know how long, proving that this call was *not* police-worthy, Ledding found the stereo and unplugged it. Arnie and his neighbor were still

fighting when Ledding quietly left; Arnie's guests were completely distracted by the neighbor leaping on Arnie and trying to rip his arms out.

Ledding truly didn't think his day could get any worse. This call was going to have him filling out forms for the rest of the day, something he wasn't sure he could do with the other officers going bananas over a spider. As he pulled into the parking lot of the station, he had to stop out of sheer awe.

The glass front door had shattered; the only thing remaining was the plastic frame. Dancing on the exposed walls were flashes of red and orange, the tell-tale signs of a flame.

His day just got worse.

Ledding parked his car and stepped through the glassless door frame, face filled with shock as he gazed on the destruction. He couldn't tell from his cruiser because of the rain, but the sprinkler system had been activated, drenching the whole of the station and adding a soft rustle to the thud of the rain. Somehow, the door had been smashed from the outside, so the tiny hall leading to the main room was filled with glass fragments that crunched under each step. His jaw dropped instantly when he entered the main room. The drawers on the filing cabinets had been ripped open, their contents littering the floor from wall to wall. Nordberg's desk was a smoldering black ruin, flickering flames dying on the corners. Shell casings were scattered on the floor around Ellis and Nordberg's desks and in front of the kitchen door. Abrams' office had been barricaded by his desk. Ledding looked around the room, but couldn't find the others amidst the destruction.

Ledding closed his eyes as he turned to the right to face his desk. Wincing, he peeked one eye open.

Completely drenched.

Ledding wanted to cry. The folders in his filer were limp and drooping; work he had been doing for weeks, destroyed. His day's hard work, the paperwork concerning Mrs. Thompson's cat was nothing more than a black smear on white jelly. Ledding picked up the paperwork he had been doing all day and whimpered.

"Ledding!!" Ledding sluggishly responded as the gruff cougar pulled aside his desk and came out of his office. "Dave, thank God you're here."

Ellis and Nordberg followed Abrams out of his office. Ellis was wearing black SWAT armor, carrying an automatic rifle, and had a samurai katana strapped to her back. Nordberg had a large stain on the front of his pants. All three's clothes and fur were a shade darker from getting so wet.

Abrams hit the emergency shut-off for the sprinkler system, ending the gentle barrage of water and its soft rustle. "It's been an utter disaster over here. We looked over the plans for the station, but they weren't much help."

"The kitchen is a really small room," added Ellis.

“So we decided to just rush in and see if we could take the spider through sheer force,” Nordberg continued.

“That was a very bad idea,” Abrams commented.

“The spider got out —” Ellis picked up.

“—not before it tried to jump on us —” said Nordberg.

“—making Nordberg wet himself —”

“—and it proceeded to scamper around this room —”

“—and Ellis starts to unload on it —”

“—but it runs under the desks and stuff —”

“—so I’m basically wasting ammo —”

—“
“—and I’m trying to give Ellis a clear shot at it by opening the drawers and pulling out the papers

“—but Ellis won’t stop *firing* —”

“—making Nordberg wet himself *again*, even though I’m an excellent shot —”

“—and the spider is running all over the place, when Abrams —”

“—I thought it would be a good idea to scare it with fire —”

“—when Tom lights up Nordberg’s desk like a barbeque —”

“—so now I’m completely losing it —”

“—when Ellis pulls out a grenade —”

“—*water* starts coming down from the ceiling —”

“—my life is flashing before my eyes —”

“—I’ve lost track of the thing —”

“—what can I do, this grenade is *live* —”

“—I wet myself, A-GAIN! —”

“—so I yell I’m going to protect the armory —”

“—in my head, three, *two* —”

“—when I see the spider coming out from behind the cabinets —“

“—I mean, none of us *really* know if spiders can use weapons, right? —“

“—I toss it outside in the nick of time, it explodes in the *air* —“

“—*glass!!* Like it was shot out of a cannon! —“

“—I’m knocked down, and I find the *monster* is coming right at my face —“

“—the daze is a lot like being drunk —“

“—I’m convinced I’m dead, the ringing in my ears is actually angel music —“

“—paralyzed with fear, but I’m stronger than that —“

“—with the weaving and the imbalance —“

“—and I see Ellis and realize it’s actually Hell —“

“—sweep my hand out, knocking it away long enough for me to get up —“

“—except it doesn’t last as long —“

“—‘why, God?! *Why?!*’ —“

“—leap into my office and start to barricade the door —“

“—*right* next to the kitchen, so I open fire —“

“—‘and Aunt Cassie, and Cousin Cynthia’ —“

“—Ellis starts shooting again —“

“—but I lose my balance —“

“—‘and that cute girl from my seventh grade math class’ —“

“—I scream at them to get in my office —“

“—I managed to corral it back into the kitchen —“

“—all of a sudden Tom grabs me and shunts me through his office door —“

“—he’s crying like a four-year-old —“

“—I close the kitchen door —“

“—the carpet in there tastes like llama —“

“—I tell her we should wait for you —”

“—because we just don’t have enough manpower —”

“—but his wife is a rabbit —”

“—so we decided to wait and fortify my office —”

“—you would be able to help us —”

“—and I’m about to say something when he says —”

“—‘Ledding can help us stop the spider,’” they all finished together.

The mouse stared at the others completely dumbstruck. Several moments passed in silence before the ink-stained gelatin in his hands split along the fibers and fell to the floor with a wet ‘plop’. “Say what now?” he asked quietly.

“Ledding, look at what the spider di—”

“*No! NO! This is not the work of a SPIDER!!*” Ledding declared, thrusting his fists down, sticking his head toward Abrams. His face was contorted with anger. “This is the work of over-imaginative, over-armed, delusional *morons!* I mean, I knew you all were idiots, but this is a whole new level! Look at what you did to this place! It’s completely trashed! All of our files, our stuff, for God’s sakes, there are *bullet holes!* In under an hour you’ve managed to undo *weeks* worth of work! No spider could do that!”

Abrams, Ellis, and Nordberg stared at Ledding. After a pause, Abrams spoke up. “A simple ‘no’ would do.”

“WOULD IT?!? You guys . . . please you guys. Please.” Ledding had had enough. He couldn’t argue with the others anymore. The insanity over the spider, his calls, and now the destruction of both the station and his work; it was too much. He wanted peace, he wanted normalcy, and he wanted a return to the dull days he was used to. Even paperwork would be a reprieve from this psychosis.

“I’ve let this go long enough. It’s just a spider. It’ll be dead by the end of the week, and in the meantime it’ll haunt the corners or under our desks. Please, let’s just let it be. Help me rebuild the station, and everything will be okay! Please,” whispered Ledding, voice trembling with emotion, “give up on the delusion.”

Abrams approached the defeated mouse. “We need to see this through,” he said slowly and sternly, his face filled with zealous conviction.

Ledding hung his head, shoulders slumped and arms limp, ears sinking. “I —” he whispered, voice cracking, “I’m gonna start cleaning up.” He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand and sat down at his desk.

"Um, Ledding," Nordberg said meekly, "your chair is wet."

"Yes. Yes it is," he responded, his face blank. Truthfully, he hadn't noticed the dampness seeping into his pants until Nordberg brought it up.

Ledding sighed, and then grabbed his garbage can. Frowning, he turned it over, spilling the water it had accumulated onto the floor.

"David, please —" Ellis started.

"No. I'm going to do real police work." He didn't hide the disappointment in his voice.

"It's alright, Ledding. I understand," Abrams said, placing his hand on Ledding's shoulder.

"Unless you plan on cleaning up this station and admitting the spider is a delusion, you don't understand."

Ledding picked up his filer and dumped the water-logged contents in the trash.

Abrams turned his back on Ledding. "Clearly, he's been traumatized," he whispered to Ellis and Nordberg. Ledding rolled his eyes. "I don't know what spiders have done to him in the past, but we can't ask him for any help." Abrams turned sideways to let Ellis and Nordberg see him. "He's been through enough."

"Yes I have," Ledding threw out, his words oozing with sarcasm.

"So what's the plan?" Ellis asked.

"Here's what we'll do: Nordberg, you open the kitchen door and rush in directly at the spider. Ellis and I will sneak around it while you have it distracted and take it down!"

"What if it kills me?" asked Nordberg.

Abrams narrowed his eyes at the wolf. "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten."

"Oh," Nordberg said vacantly. "Wait, this sounds a lot like the old plan."

Abrams glared at the wolf. "No, this one is different —"

"How?"

"Nordberg, you're the *bait*. You wouldn't understand it anyway."

Abrams placed his back against the wall to one side of the kitchen door. "Ready? *C'mon*, Nordberg!"

Nordberg shook himself out of his vacant gaze and took his position. "Ready," he said, gripping the door handle.

Ellis drew her sword. "Ready. Let's crush some balls."

Ledding sighed as he picked up the list "Balls Ellis Crushed Today". It was completely ruined. "Not ready."

"Three . . . " Abrams counted slowly, eyes intent. Nordberg could feel beads of sweat run through the fur on his face.

"Two . . . " Ellis gripped the hilt of her sword tighter. Ledding flipped his keyboard over, draining it of accumulated water, cocking an eyebrow at the amount of it.

"ONE! GO!!"

In a whirl, Nordberg ripped open the door and rushed in, followed by Abrams. Ellis raised her sword and let out a fierce war cry as she ran in. Ledding pulled open the drawers at his desk, grunting at how wet even those files got.

The noise in the kitchen was kept to a maximum of quiet shuffling for about five seconds before a cacophony of screaming broke out. Ledding continued to work despite the screaming. He tossed the wet files in the trash and closed his desk drawers, then started to pick up the shells that were nearby.

"Nordberg! Nordberg, can you flank it?!"

Ledding frowned as he realized his meticulously organized desk calendar was ruined.

"No, no it's too close, I can't get around!"

"Tom, it's coming closer!"

"It's moving in for the kill!"

The screaming rose to an even higher pitch. Ledding looked around his desk. Was there a mop anywhere nearby?

"Tom! Tom, whaddo we do?!"

"We pray."

"Ohmigawd . . . " "

"This can't be how it ends!!"

Ledding looked around at the rest of the station and exhaled sharply. This was going to be a daunting task.

"Be strong men! Possible lady . . . " "

"My life is passing before my eyes!"

“Robbie, Robbie, I’ve always loved you!”

“Why, wh- . . . what?”

Ledding placed his hands on his hips and bit his lip. He had had a bad enough day without needing to do cleanup duty on his own.

“Eileen, Robbie, it’s been an honor!”

“I said I –”

“But do you really mean it?”

Ledding rubbed his temples, his head throbbing from a migraine.

“Well –”

“Because we probably have enough time to . . . well, if Abrams doesn’t mind watching –”

“I said that because it’s cliché!!”

Ledding threw his hands into the air. *“F*%& it!!”* The mouse stormed over to the kitchen and yanked it open so fast he hurt his arm. In the corner to the right of the door, Abrams, Ellis, and Nordberg were cowering in sheer terror, arms around each other. The two circular tables in the room had been overturned; the microwave had been thrown upside-down in between them.

“There!” Ellis shrieked, pointing to the left side of the room. Along the wall were two vending machines. On the floor in front of them was the spider.

It was at most half-an-inch wide, no bigger than a quarter.

Ledding leered at the tiny arachnid. *“THAT’S it?! That’s the monstrous, mind-altering spider?! The ten-foot tall beast?! The source of all mayhem and destruction known to Earth?! THAT’S IT?!?”*

He didn’t receive an answer so much as he received more screaming.

Ledding saw red. It didn’t matter that this was a tiny, defenseless arachnid. It didn’t matter that his co-workers were delusional and psychotic. All that mattered was that this spider was at the heart of Ledding’s bad day.

The small mouse stomped over to the spider and smashed his left foot down on it with a sickening crunch. The screaming stopped immediately. Rage in his eyes, Ledding turned to face his co-workers. His fists were clenched tight, his nostrils flared, and his breaths were heaving through his nostrils.

The others stared wide-eyed at Ledding, completely silent as Ledding fumed at them.

“Is it dead?” Abrams asked softly.

Without uttering a word, Ledding twisted his foot first to the left, then to the right, each movement punctuated by a sick crunch. He gave a single curt nod. The others kept staring.

“Great job Ledding!” Abrams said enthusiastically, snapping up. “You stood steadfast in the face of danger and almost certain death and conquered all! You weren’t afraid of some measly little spider!”

“I thought you said he was traumatized by spiders?” Nordberg asked.

“Psh, please! Ledding isn’t afraid of anything!” Abrams beamed, went up and wrapped an arm around Ledding. “That’s why he’s my main man! Three cheers for David Ledding! Hip hip!”

Abrams turned to look at Ledding, and the cougar’s broad smile vanished slowly under the mouse’s death glare. His nostrils flared even wider as his breaths got heavier and more ragged. His red eyes bulged wide, anger practically seeping through his body.

Abrams’ expression went meek as he removed his arm from Ledding. Looking down at his toes, he tapped his fingers together. “Would you like us to clean up the station, David?”

Ledding gave out another curt nod.

“Right. Um, guys?” Abrams motioned to the kitchen door. He, Ellis, and Nordberg slowly went to the door, Ledding following them with his gaze. Abrams opened it and went out, followed by Nordberg. Ellis turned to Ledding.

“For what it’s worth –“

Ledding cut her off with a sharp grunt, thrusting his finger at the door. The dingo made a hurried exit.

When the others had gone, Ledding slumped his shoulders, rubbing his red eyes. It was the first time he had closed them since he entered the kitchen. He heard the door handle shift, and looked as Nordberg opened the door.

“Uh, Ledding, you wouldn’t happen to have any spare pants would you?”

Ledding gave Nordberg a bewildered stare.

“Right. I’ll just get back to . . . uh . . . cleaning” With that, Nordberg closed the door.

Ledding let loose another long sigh. He lifted his foot, peering at the yellow-green spider pus on his shoe. He really didn’t want to do it, but he didn’t have a choice.

He turned on his heels and faced the vending machines. “Let that be a warning to you,” he said sternly, placing his hands on his hips in an authoritative pose. “I will not be forgiving to anyone who jumps the gun.” He couldn’t afford it. The stakes were too high to let a single mistake ruin so much planning and preparation.

Ledding kneeled down, resting on the balls of his feet. “He was a fool. Don’t be like him. Our day will come, rest assured.”

Without a sound, dozens of spiders scurried out from under the vending machines, assembling in front of Ledding. He looked down at them. “I’ve trained all of you well. You’re ready; I know that. But you must be patient. Our strongest advantage is not our mind tricks, or even our numbers; it is the element of surprise.”

Ledding twisted his mouth into a crooked smile. He was worried that he had been too enthusiastic; that all his talk of delusion would alert the other officers to his plan. He almost panicked when he heard his drone used the mind trick on Ellis, and when the others refused to stop attacking his spider, he went to his wit’s end and almost gave up. He was able to stop them, though, just in time.

“Soon, my soldiers. Soon” The others didn’t catch on though. They still thought Ledding was the quiet, sarcastic mouse of the station. The small white mouse burst out into uncontrollable, maniacal laughter. More spiders came out from under the vending machines, small swarms moved in from the corners. The fools he worked with hadn’t caught onto his plan. They would be easily defeated, and soon after, so would the entire town.

Ledding tossed his head back, red eyes shining with primal pleasure as his arachnid army converged on their general.