

Driftwood planks affixed to chiseled boulders formed our booth. I folded up my legs and sat sideways to fit. Intricate bas-reliefs reached into high arches along the ceiling, giving the room a lofty, regal feel. Staring at the each of the figures—a menagerie in wood and stone—I barely noticed our server arrive to the table.

"It's gorgeous," I said in reverence.

The woman giggled and nudged Riley. "Never shown her the Homelands, I see?" She winked at him and treated me with uncanny warmth.

Riley ordered a pint of ale and the server recommended I try a tisane made of wildflowers. I thanked her, grateful for her kindness, but continued to feel like a trespasser.

A sign behind the bar said, "Management reserves the right to refuse service to anyone ... especially those over four-foot-six." The patrons ranged from dwarves like Riley, barrel-chested and taller than all other patrons, to spindly-limbed brownies who sat a tiny table on top of a booth.

The server returned with two drinks and a bowl of what at first appeared to be toasted almonds. The almonds had legs. "Roasted crickets," Riley explained, while grabbing a saltshaker. He sprinkled salt on them and took a handful, popping one at a time. "What? They're good! Full of protein." With a chuckle, he added, "Suppose they're not vegan, though."

"Sure, it's a vegan issue. It has nothing to do with the notion of eating insects." I did my best not to grimace too much.

He laughed. "You really aren't from around here, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Meat's expensive if it isn't BioMeat. Bugs're cheap, nutritious, and plentiful."

"Whatever happened to a bowl of nuts with one's drinks?" I grumbled and took the tea strainer out of my mug.

He finished off his pint of ale in three swallows and ordered a second. My tea took a long while to cool before I could drink it. It sat half-finished by the time he spoke about our spy.

"The House," he muttered.

"What?" I asked, surprised to hear his voice.

"That's where I saw her before. Beneath one of those damned robes."

Alarm bells went off in my head. My voice rose sharply. "How could she be from the House?!"

Riley gestured for me to lower my voice.

"How could she have survived?" I whispered.

"Don't know, but she does seem rather interested in us, and wasn't hiding it." Riley tapped the table with his thumb in thought, while my leg bounced rapidly in agitation.

*What now?*

"This doesn't scan. Even if she is from the House ..."

"Why would she be following us?"

"And let us know it?"

I hesitated to leave, but when we exited Shorty's, there wasn't any sign of her. What caught my attention was a flashing sign at the other end of the corridor: Spin99.

"Let's head in there," I said.