

At a train station in Philadelphia, a man dropped a briefcase and it burst open. It shouldn't have. It was supposed to be locked. The man who had carried it cursed his luck, formed his lips into an O and tried to pick up all the glass vials that had fallen out. Some of them had broken, and the animals within had escaped, and flown away.

* * *

“Where is Abbott!?” yelled Crispian Peter “Creeper” Wasterman, editor of the fledgling and failing online Wasterman News Network (WNN) in Atlanta, Georgia. “Dammit, I need a reporter!”

“I'll find him,” said Bridget O'Day, his leggy, redheaded and underpaid assistant. She was the brains of the outfit. Wasterman had the start-up money, and he was a minimally competent editor, and able to plug text into an HTML template that Bridget had created.

Bridget texted Abbott, and tried to call him, with no result. She texted people she knew who might have seen him... maybe last week. She made some calls to people who never paid attention to texts. She got some leads, and located Abbott in Austin, Texas. After she texted a bartender, she finally got a call.

“This is Abbott, Bridget. I thought I was fired.”

“He's hiring you again. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not really, I guess. There are so many kinds of vodka here that I can hardly order a drink. What does he want?”

“We have rumors in Philadelphia of some large strange winged insects. Some say they are spiders. They are really big, they say. Like, the size of your hand. They are in Northeast Philadelphia.”

“Spiders don't have wings. It's impossible.”

“I didn't know that. See, you have that background in zoology. That's why he wanted you.”

“Yeah, he has so many other people on the string. Let me think about it and get back to you.”

Abbott thought about it and had another drink on it. Finally, he texted Bridget:

AUSTIN (WNN) The reports of giant winged spiders in Austin, Texas, may be true. This reporter canvassed all the bars on Austin's famous Sixth Street to try to find the elusive creatures, and it seems they only come out after dark. After watching an awesome sunset from a rooftop bar, we entered the cavernous area below.

According to local history, this bar was originally a warehouse. The walls are made of unfinished limestone rocks and the ceiling is about 30 feet high. The room is long and narrow. As this reporter gazed at the ceiling, with drink in hand, it was apparent that there was movement above. Some of the movement was moths attracted to lights and spiraling around them. Others could have been bats catching moths, but the slip-sliding, jerky movements of bats are familiar to this reporter, and these did not look like bats. One of the flying shapes was seen to launch itself from one wall, grab a moth in mid-flight and land on

the opposite wall. This reporter has never seen such a thing before and believes this could be a flying spider.

Bridget forwarded this nonsense to Creeper, and he thought it was a perfect intro to his planned series of Giant Flying Spider stories. He published it on the WNN page. Who could have guessed that it was a good idea?

* * *

Creeper paid for Abbott's plane fare to Philadelphia, and Abbott checked in to a cheap hotel and started working his usual methods. He made some calls and visited City Hall, talked to some cops, talked to a few people in bars near the center of city government. The next day, he filed an article:

Philadelphia (WNN) -- City officials say that reports of spiders with wings in the northern part of the city cannot possibly be true.

"Spiders do not have wings," said an official with the Department of Public Health, speaking to this reporter after obtaining a promise of anonymity. "It's an impossibility, unless they are some kind of weird mutation."

Nevertheless, this Wasterman News Network reporter investigated and spoke to several residents of the area who say they have seen them.

"They hide, and then they fly," said Yolanda Caleb, who lives in Glenwood, a district of northeast Philadelphia. "At night you can see them on the empty buildings."

This reporter did not search the area by night, and saw only an abundance of cockroaches during the day, which presumably would make good food for spiders. Follow the WNN for more developments.

Bridget was dubious, but Creeper loved it. "We're on to something here," he said almost gleefully. "It doesn't matter if it's true or not. What matters is that it's mysterious, it's strange, it's sort of scary. The people in charge are denying it, and nobody believes them! This is not the *Daily Mail* and I don't want it to be, but I call this a scoop!"

After Creeper posted Abbott's note, casual readers generated slightly more hits and one email subscription. An advertising rep called and wanted to know what the hell was going on, and Creeper told him not to worry, and read him the circulation figures.

* * *

In Philadelphia, Abbott kept asking around. Fortunately no one knew yet that he was a reporter or that he was working on a story. As anyone in the journalism industry knows, "guaranteeing anonymity" means that Abbott bought the drinks, and of course he was not foolish enough to ask questions. The best method was to troll by claiming he had "seen something."

Soon, however, his research led to a federal building, and he cornered a red-nosed fellow who was leaving a nearby watering hole, and his investigation bore some strange but sweet fruit:

Philadelphia (WNN) -- This reporter has discovered that the Department of Homeland Security has created an Alate Arachnid Task Force (AATF) to investigate the reports of winged spiders in the northern part of the city.

"We are not prepared to confirm or deny the presence of winged spiders in Philadelphia at this time," said a spokesperson for the task force. "We are investigating the matter, that is all."

Residents in the area that is supposedly affected say that the spiders exist and want something done.

"Man, that's bulls**t, said one man in the Glenwood area when told what the AATF spokesperson had said. "Those motherf**kers are all over the place."

City officials denied any knowledge of the task force or the spiders.

Abbott put Federalese into the mouth of his anonymous source, making up the quote, because his source had carelessly let slip the name of the task force but said nothing more. Abbott knew what an "Alate Arachnid" must be, though. The last sentence was merely a rehash of yesterday. Saying "residents want something done" is a common device to outrage the reader, and the quote by "one man" was genuine. This was legitimate journalism! Abbott shot this article off to Bridget and Creeper published it at once. Traffic on the Wasterman News Network site increased slightly.

* * *

One new reader was a problem. The Alate Arachnid Task Force was classified top secret, and the Department of Homeland Security came a-calling. The agents, in their dark suits and sunglasses, with substantial bulges near the left shoulder of their poorly-tailored jackets and a gangster attitude, frightened Bridget. To Creeper, the visit proved that Abbott's articles were valid ("valid enough, anyway" he said later) and a success. Creeper might not have been the brains of the office, but he wasn't stupid. He made up a story and told it to the agents, changing it a couple of times. He found out more from them than they found out from him. The DHS agents looked at each other after Creeper told them he knew the rumors began at the Amtrak station. Noting that reaction, he made the rest up.

Philadelphia (WNN) -- There is further news about the rumors of winged spiders in the Philadelphia area.

Sources that insist on remaining anonymous have informed this reporter that a NASA experiment on spiders at the International Space Station (ISS) was more than a success: the spiders that had been exposed to cosmic radiation developed wings. We must stress that this is an unsupported statement.

Further, says the source, after the spiders returned to earth, some of them escaped near Philadelphia as a result of the carelessness of a NASA employee.

"These creatures were severely mutated," says our source. "Some of them were barely viable; others had developed additional legs, strange mouthparts, or wings. NASA was

delivering them to either Harvard University or MIT for genome sequencing when some of them got away. Each spider was in its own sealed container, of course, because spiders will eat each other, but approximately 50 containers were in a briefcase that fell to the ground and broke open, and the glass containers broke. Not all the spiders were recovered. We believe... uh... that some of them flew away."

The escape is alleged to have occurred at the Amtrak SEPTA Regional Rail station near the intersection of North Broad Street and West Glenwood Avenue.

Abbott submitted his daily article, but Creeper called him instead of printing it. Abbott tactfully told Creeper he was "getting ahead of the story," meaning he was publishing things that were not factual, but Creeper said he was "going for it." He had landed a new advertising account, and wanted more. The next article contained Abbott's facts and Creeper's editorializations, as he called them.

Philadelphia (WNN) -- The Wasterman News Network has received a report concerning the winged spiders in Philadelphia that is troubling.

According to our anonymous source, the spiders were introduced into the Philadelphia area two years ago, after an experiment on the International Space Station. In order to conceal their presence, some buildings in which they were thought to be living were condemned, and then dynamited or burned, and people were displaced from their houses.

WNN has confirmed that buildings and houses were destroyed in the area by the City of Philadelphia, but the reason given was that they were unsafe.

We spoke to a person with the Alate Arachnid Task Force of the Department of Homeland Security who confirmed that buildings were dynamited but would not say anything more.

The City of Philadelphia refused to issue a statement. The WNN will continue to investigate.

Creeper told Abbott the rules for this story: "No matter what we learn, we need to milk it. We publish one fact a day, and maybe hint at another. Don't give me big articles full of new information. If you find something out and we have to change the story, that's a new fact. I have all this other crap about Princess Di still alive and living with her Arab boyfriend, which is fake, and every day there's a mayor or a city councilman somewhere who gets busted for DWI. That's not even news. This is real news. It's a scoop. Your next article is going to have one and only one new fact, but make it sound like we are really getting to the bottom of it."

Abbott submitted the following, causing Bridget to roll her eyes and Creeper to cackle:

Philadelphia (WNN) -- The Wasterman News Network has independently confirmed that there are flying spiders in Philadelphia. This reporter made the acquaintance of a person who lives in the area, who showed him around and helped find indisputable evidence.

If you have been following this story, you know that there have been rumors of these creatures, but they haven't been confirmed. Anonymous sources claim that the spiders were mutations created in space two years ago by a NASA experiment, and that although the

authorities have attempted to control their spread in Philadelphia by dynamiting and burning buildings, they have failed.

This WNN reporter spent a day and a night in the Glenwood area of Philadelphia to seek out the animals and there is no doubt that they exist. Not only is the WNN the only news agency following this story, but this is a major scoop of which we can be proud.

In the daytime, amid crack dealers and pimps, one can occasionally see a flying, leggy presence that lands seemingly at random and scuttles into a crevice between bricks or boards. Closer examination of the animal reveals that it has eight legs, wings and only two parts to its body.

Residents of the area seem to be used to seeing them. I made the acquaintance of a man who lived in the neighborhood. He said, "Yeah, that's one of them."

After some time on the street, we went to my acquaintance's apartment and talked about the odd-looking creatures. He said, "I've lived here for years, and these things are new. Some people I know have them in their houses, and can't get rid of them. I've seen them come out of nowhere and fly across the room and then disappear again. They are spiders, but they fly. They are scary. No one I know has been bitten yet, though."

"What a hook!" exclaimed Creeper. He checked the hits on the main page and the article page. There was no doubt about it: readers were going directly to the article, meaning that some other news sites were linking it. "Find out who's linking to us," he demanded of Bridget.

The next day, Abbott wrote:

Philadelphia (WNN) -- A third-grade student reportedly brought a giant winged spider to school for "show-and-tell."

The Edward Gideon Elementary School was placed under lockdown when Justatone ("Boo") Caleb displayed the creature to his class and his teacher called the authorities.

The animal was taken into custody by a member of the Alate Arachnid Task Force and the student's mother, Yolanda Caleb, was contacted and picked her child up. She refused to comment.

Yolanda Caleb was interviewed earlier by the WNN <link to previous article> and was one of the persons who confirmed that flying spiders exist.

After the panic ended, students returned to school. Some parents are threatening to sue, saying that the sight of the winged spider was traumatic and will make their children not want to attend school.

"Slam-dunk!" yelled Creeper when he saw this. He called Abbott.

"Yes, I suggested it, sort of," Abbott said. "At least I supplied the pickle jar that the kid

used to contain the spider. Now that I know what to look for and where to look, I can get more of the damn things.”

“Get me one,” said Creeper, and hung up. The next article from Abbott was not at all what he expected:

Mexico City (WNN) -- A resident of Mexico City tells the Wasterman News Network that he found a spider with wings in his house.

Sr. D. S. E. Seis-Septiembre says that the creature emerged from a crack in the wall, spread its wings and flew across the room, where it grabbed a fly or some other bug on the opposite wall and disappeared into another crack.

"It was not dangerous looking, but the idea of such a animal horrifies me," he added.

The Mexican government refused to comment.

Creeper called Abbott again. “What the hell is this? No one cares about Mexico City!”

Abbott agreed, but added, “This is my chance to get to talk to one of these guys on the Alate Arachnid Task Force. He's going to go down there and I'm going with him.”

Creeper had to think about it. “Look, I'll pay your plane fare down there. But Philadelphia is where the action is. Get back as soon as possible. Let me know.”

Abbott said he would, and a few days later, he had a final report:

Mexico City (WNN) -- The Wastrel [sic] News Network has investigated a report of giant winged spiders in Mexico City but has not verified it.

As reported last week, Sr. D. S. E. Seis-Septiembre said he saw a winged spider in his house. Our reporter has been staying with Sr. Seis-Septiembre since then. An observer from the Alate Arachnid Task Force, of the U. S. Department of Homeland Security, obtained clearance from the Mexican government to observe as well.

Our intrepid reporter interviewed the AATF observer, Mr. Orotund Vowel, who said, "I don't know why I'm here. This is a long way from Philadelphia where we are finding the goddamned things. Oops, I guess I shouldn't have said that. OK, yeah, I'll have another, pass the limes, too."

However, neither our reporter, nor Mr. Vowel, nor Sr. Seis-Septiembre has seen a winged spider since Sr. Seis-Septiembre reported one.

The WNN is recalling its reporter, but Mr. Vowel will remain for another week. Fortunately, the drinks are on the house.

Creeper didn't merely recall Abbott; he fired him. “Where's Costello?” he bellowed at Bridget, “Abbott

can get back by himself.” Bridget, the long-suffering Bridget, knew that Abbott had arranged the trip to Mexico City to get away from Creeper's editorial tyranny, but she couldn't find Costello at first. Finally, she located him in Portland, and asked him to come to work again for the WNN.

Costello asked, “What do you need?” and Bridget told him. Costello laughed and said, “I'm on it.” A few minutes later, Bridget received an article from him:

Portland (WNN) An unusual incident at a Portland street fair has tongues wagging.

As a performer juggled organic apples and rode his custom bike from one side of the street to another, Lo! Suddenly in the midst of the glory of the streetfair his golden fixie was dimmed. The sun was blotted from the sky in the eyes of the onlookers, and dark fell about him. He fell, too. A giant flying spider, launching itself from a discarded fedora, attached itself to his neckbeard and with a great scream he crashed upon his side....

Bridget called him back and told him, “I think you've had enough of Portland. Here's the boss.”

“This is C. P. I've got you on a flight to Philadelphia tonight. Bridget is sending you the ticket. You know the job, or I hope you do. Don't run out on me like Abbott.”

Costello made it safely through the security procedures at the airport and arrived in Philadelphia shortly after midnight. The cheap hotel that Bridget had reserved refused to let him have a room until he ponied up another \$20, and he vowed to invoice that to the WNN. The next day, however, Creeper didn't hear from him, except a short note (with an annoying invoice for \$20 vouched as a “bribe”) saying he was going to do some street interviews. The WNN marked time with an article that Creeper made up.

Philadelphia (WNN) -- Officials in Philadelphia report that there have been fewer reports of giant winged spiders in the last month, and assert that this means that the animals do not exist. However, this WNN reporter has interviewed people who say that the spiders hide during colder weather.

[Editorial comment] We understand the official position and sympathize with our city leaders, who are unwilling to recognize that winged spiders are slowly but surely infesting the entire city of Philadelphia.

However, enough is enough. Although all the evidence of the creatures is anecdotal and generally comes from the poorer neighborhoods of the city, it has become compelling.

In addition, the federal government's Alate Arachnid Task Force has been here in Philadelphia for two years, and doesn't deny that the flying horrors exist. We have had confidential reports from City inspectors that substantiate the claims of the people. We ask the City to get involved.

He didn't hear from Costello the next day, so Creeper wrote something that was unverifiable and undeniable.

Philadelphia (WNN) BREAKING NEWS -- Mrs. Athena Sturdivant-Vanderbilt of Society Hill called WNN and reported that she saw a winged spider in her house. Here is a transcript of the call:

WNN: WNN News line.

Mrs. Vanderbilt: Hello, is this WNN?

WNN: Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. V.: I've been reading your reports about the spiders and I think I saw one.

WNN: Where was this?

Mrs. V.: In my house.

[The WNN representative obtained personal information, including her address, from Mrs. V for later verification.]

WNN: Where did you see it?

Mrs. V.: I was clipping coupons in the drawing room when this thing flew in front of me.

WNN: Please describe it.

Mrs. V.: It had lots of legs and it flew. I've never seen a thing like that.

WNN: Mrs. V., do you know what a crane fly looks like? Some people call them daddy-long-legs. They are flies with long legs.

Mrs. V.: Yes, I know what those things are, they sometimes get into the house. This was much bigger and the body of it was bloated looking, not like one of them. They have skinny bodies.

WNN: Did you happen to count the legs?

Mrs. V.: I did. After it flew across the room, it landed on the bookcase where my late husband's complete collection of Black Mask is. I'm too old to be afraid of a little thing like that, so I went and looked at it. It was a spider. It had eight legs and it was about the size of my hand. It had wings but they were folded up when it was on the bookcase. Then it ran up over the magazines and disappeared.

WNN: Did you try to find it after that?

Mrs. V.: No, but I called Anna, my maid, and told her what I saw and that she should be careful.

WNN: What happened after that?

Mrs. V.: Nothing, really. Anna said that she has seen them at her brother-in-law's house on her days off, and she would not have anything to do with it, they scared her so.

WNN: Thank you, Mrs. Vanderbilt. Do you mind if we send a reporter to your house?

Mrs. V.: Why would I mind? He would not be admitted, of course. Really, what an odd idea.

WNN: You mean it wouldn't do any good to send a reporter?

Mrs. V.: Certainly not. The spider is gone. I am doing you a favor by calling.

WNN: Thank you, again, Mrs. Vanderbilt.

Mrs. V.: Good-bye.

The next day, Costello reported:

Philadelphia (WNN) A home invasion was foiled by the Giant Flying Spiders of Philadelphia.

A man and his expectant wife, who want to remain anonymous, told the WNN that they were watching TV when suddenly their front door was kicked open and two thugs entered, pointed guns and told them to lie on the floor. They complied.

The two invaders started looking around for things to steal and ransacked the house. However, one of them apparently disturbed the flying spiders that lived there.

The wife told the WNN, "We knew there might be a few of them, but we didn't have any idea that there were that many. They came out from under the furniture, out of the baseboards. They came out from the air conditioning vents. They landed all over those two guys and started to bite them. One of them was really, really afraid of spiders."

The invaders started running around, trying to get away from the spiders. One of them was screaming. In the confusion, the husband managed to retrieve his Colt M1911 and shoot both of them.

Then the husband called the authorities, and the WNN has obtained a transcript of the call.

Operator: 9-1-1 emergency. Police, fire or ambulance?

Husband: None of them. Send a coroner.

Operator: Is there a dead person there, sir?

Husband: All right, send two coroners.

The husband told the WNN reporter, "We knew the spiders were around. I thought they

weren't doing any harm. They ate all the cockroaches, I think.”

“That's true, but they are still bugs. You need to get rid of them soon,” said the lady of the house, patting her baby bump and giving her husband a significant look.

Two days passed. There was no word from Costello, no copy filed, and Bridget was unable to find him. Creeper was at his wit's end. In the morning, he called Bridget into his office and explained the situation, which Bridget knew as well as he did. He told her to go to Philadelphia, find Costello and stay there with him, and find out about the spiders.

Bridget packed up and left. Creeper was alone in the office for the first time in months, and simply sat there. He didn't know much about the things that Bridget had been doing – getting articles from other sources, changing them slightly, and installing them on the WNN's webpage templates – so he watched the page hits counter, pulled a bottle out of the deep drawer of his desk, and had several drinks. Journalism was so hard these days. Maybe he could sell some ads.

Bridget arrived in Philadelphia at about three in the afternoon, and checked into the same hotel as Costello had. She had already called several times from Atlanta trying to find Costello but she asked again. She asked for the room that he was checked into and was told that the room was occupied. She got a room on the same floor, cleaned up a bit, unpacked her laptop and sent an email to Creeper, and hit the street. Her immediate goal was something good to eat. Half a block from the hotel was a coffee shop with a menu in the window and she went inside.

She ate and talked to the people who worked there, but the picture of “her friend” Costello on her phone got no affirmatives. The picture of Abbott, however, got a reaction. “Yes, he was in here a few times, but I haven't seen him lately. He said he was leaving for a while,” said Dolly, the waitress who also owned the place. “We don't have any of those animals he was looking for in here. I make sure this place is clean. He used to go to the bar up the street, too.”

Bridget figured this was a lead. The bar up the street was called “The Office” and she went in without hesitation. It was dark; it smelled like beer and urine and there were noises coming from under her shoes as she walked to the bar.

The bar was magnificent. It was of oak, with a curved edge facing Bridget and a two and a half foot expanse of parquet behind. Behind that loomed a fat, bearded man who put a paper napkin in front of her and looked at her. She looked right back at him, and ordered a Yuengling lager. He turned around without expression and drew a draft and put it in front of her.

Bridget accessed her picture of Costello, and laid it on the bar. The bartender looked and asked, “Who are you?” Bridget said she was a reporter for the WNN, and this guy – she put her finger on the picture – was another reporter.

He nodded. “Yes, he was here nearly all day for a couple of days, haven't seen him since.”

“This bar is amazing. It's beautiful. Who made it?”

“It was here when I was a kid. They tell me it's been here for over a hundred and fifty years. No one knows who made it. It is nice, isn't it?” He pulled a towel out of his apron and started wiping the

parquet. “They don't make things like this any more. Bars made of tin, riveted down, bah.” He gave her a surprisingly shy smile.

“What was my friend doing here, I wonder?” said Bridget, as if to herself. “I'll bet he was asking some weird questions. He was not all there, you know, if you ask me,” she said, and tried to rivet the bartender with her eyes.

He was unaffected by her attempted hypnosis. “Yeah, he talked to a lot of people. But it was no big deal. Heck, I've seen those spiders, too. I even told him, “Don't talk about them, catch one and have it sent to a lab or something.””

“You've seen them? Where do you see them?”

“You can get them anywhere around here. Nobody tries to catch them, though. What for? They eat the cockroaches and they aren't stupid. You know how roaches just run around? The spiders stay hidden, they come out, then they hide again. I suppose they bite, but I never heard of it.”

“Where can I catch one?”

“I guess they're hard to catch, since they fly away. You'd need a butterfly net, you know?”

“OK, I can get one. But where do I catch one?”

“They are everywhere. You're serious, aren't you? You're just as bad as that other guy.”

“I'm on the same job that he was. Thanks. Maybe I'll find him and we'll be back.”

The bartender looked at the ceiling. “Yeah, sure.”

Bridget left a tip on the bar so he would remember her and left. It was about 5 o'clock; too late to try to find a butterfly net, she figured. So she wandered around and talked to a few people who were getting off work or waiting at bus stops. Nothing was new. The existence of giant flying spiders in Philadelphia was already established as far as she was concerned and she wanted something new.

Eventually she returned to her hotel room and emailed Creeper about her day's activities. She did her Facebook for a while (she had a strict personal rule not to say anything about her job there) and got ready to go to bed.

When she turned out the lights, a leggy silhouette passed across the thin curtain over the dimly-lit window. She thought it was outside at first, but then it occurred to her that if it had been outside, it would have looked like a shadow on the curtain, instead of a shadow in front of the curtain. She got up and turned on the light.

It took some doing, but she finally found it about 11:15. She emailed Creeper:

From: bridgeto@wnn.com

To: cpw@wnn.com

Mr. Wasterman:

I found one of them in my hotel room! I saw it fly when I turned out the lights to go to bed. I turned the lights on and off again several times and it started moving around, I think I annoyed it LOL. I chased it down and caught it in the plastic cup they give you in the bathroom. I left it on the nightstand with the cup covered by the Gideon Bible and ran down the hall and got a handful of ice. I put the ice in there and now it's quiet and probably dead. I'm going to ship it to you tomorrow as soon as the mail drop down the street opens. Pictures are attached. For publication:

Philadelphia (WNN) The latest WNN reporter on the scene has not only independently verified the existence of giant flying spiders, she captured one. This is a photograph of the giant flying spider that was infesting her hotel room: <image>

The WNN reminds its readers that we are the only news agency covering this story. The existence of these animals has been denied at every level of government, but it is our duty to our readers to publish indisputable proof that giant flying spiders live in Philadelphia. We ask the government: Why? Why do you deny that they exist when they can be seen everywhere and a woman, alone in her hotel room at night, can capture one with a little effort and render it harmless?

We ask other news media: Why are you ignoring this story? Have you been influenced by the government?

The WNN will send the spider to the best laboratory we can find for examination by arachnologists, followed by dissection and DNA sequencing. We will report the results as soon as they are available.

Until then, we urge you to read the WNN every day so you can be the first to know.

When Creeper got to the office early the next morning and read this, he yelled in delight. He made a few changes to Bridget's copy and put it on the front page, with the picture blown up as big as he could get it without making it grainy. Then he sent Bridget a reply asking for the tracking number of the shipment and any other details she might have. He didn't get a reply after waiting an hour. He called her cell phone. He called her room, but she wasn't there. He called the hotel; they said she was still registered but they couldn't tell him anything more. He decided to wait to hear from her.

He waited until the next morning, and there was no email from Bridget. Remembering that Costello had disappeared, too, he bit the bullet and called Abbott. He had to call three times before Abbott picked up.

Abbott: What do you want, Creeper?

Creeper: Don't call me that. I've got a situation. Costello disappeared in Philadelphia and Bridget went to find him, and now Bridget's disappeared, too.

Abbott: Have you notified the authorities?

Creeper: We did that for Costello, I haven't done it for Bridget yet because she's only been missing 24 hours. But I know damn well that she ended up like Costello did, whatever that is. Did you see her

article? I gave her a byline.

Abbott: I saw it. I saw the picture, too. Yeah, this is, uh, disturbing. I'd say creepy but I --

Creeper: Dammit, Abbott, I don't want your jokes. Call me "Boss" again. You've got a raise, the usual amount. I'm paying your fare to Philadelphia from wherever you are. I want you not to disappear and I want you to find out what's going on.

Abbott: Creeper, it's like sending me into a war zone. You have no idea what's happ---

Creeper: I'm doubling your pay if you do this. Where the hell are you?

Abbott: I'm in Bandera, Texas. I actually have some copy for you if my pay starts now. Send me an advance.

Creeper: I'm doing it. I guess you have to fly out of San Antonio. Your ticket will be there.

Abbott submitted this, and Creeper published it unchanged with Abbott's byline:

Bandera, TX (WNN) The WNN's reporter in the Texas Hill Country reports that the chicken wings are almost perfect at Maggie's here in Bandera.

While this reporter and his companion were munching on the juicy crunchy-skinned wings, an older fellow in dusty cowboy clothes sat near us, and ordered a beer and a plate of wings. What we-all (as they say here) were drinking is not important. Of course, we nodded at him and he nodded back. People don't ignore one another here as they do in the big city.

When his plate of wings arrived, the cowboy paused a minute before eating. We thought (as we discussed afterwards) that perhaps he was saying a little prayer over his food, but it turned out he had philosophy on his mind.

"Did you ever notice," he said, turning to us, "that there seem to be a lot more chicken wings to eat than other chicken parts? For instance, this place here, you can get wings or a burger, but not the rest of the chicken. If you go to the store, you can buy these packages of wings, or legs or breasts, but the packages of wings are bigger and there are more wings in them. There are two wings on every chicken, and two legs and two breasts, but every time I count there are a lot more wings. I thought about this, over and over, and I wondered, 'What do they do with the rest of the chicken?'"

He started eating, and we waited for a minute, looking at each other. My friend said, "What? What do they do with the rest of the chicken?"

The cowboy finished chewing a bite and said, "I guess it doesn't really matter. Chickens can't hardly fly, anyway."

My friend said, "What on earth are you suggesting!?" but the cowboy continued to eat and didn't answer.

Abbott made it to the San Antonio airport, a hellhole of a facility if there ever was one, and got to Philadelphia quickly. There he made it a point to check in to the same hotel that Bridget had, and ask for the same room. They told him that room was occupied... oh, no, it was not. The room rent was overdue. Abbott explained that Bridget had disappeared and asked to see the manager. The manager wasn't there and the assistant manager needed convincing.

Abbott suggested a procedure to verify his legitimacy and bona fide interest, and the man agreed. The assistant manager went to the WNN web site and sent an email to the address for the editor; Abbott got Creeper on the phone and told him to reply immediately, and he did. Then the assistant manager called the manager, who said he'd been reading about giant flying spiders on WNN and it was OK. The manager extracted a promise from Abbott that the name of the hotel would never be mentioned, since giant flying spiders "infested" it. Abbott made sure of that in another call to Creeper.

The hotel had removed Bridget's belongings from her room and stored them. Abbott looked through the boxes and didn't find Bridget's laptop or cell phone, and reported this to Creeper. Creeper had no good suggestions, except that Bridget was going to send him the spider that she had captured.

Abbott went to the mail drop down the street and no one recognized a picture of Bridget. Then he went to The Office, knowing that the local bar was the source of all information, and there he ran into Costello's informant.

"I bet I know where your people are," said the man. "The spiders are all over the place, but I told that guy Costello to check out one particular building. He probably went in by the front door."

Abbott privately vowed not to do that and went to the address, just down the street. It was a boarded-up two-story apartment or office building; it was hard to tell which. He hung out across the street for the rest of the day and noticed nothing unusual, then he went back to his hotel. Outside the hotel was a man dressed in ragged, dirty clothes, who accosted him. After a minute, he realized it was Costello.

Costello said, "I'm glad you're here. I saw you watching that building. This is a major problem. I've been watching that building for a while. For the first couple of days, I saw guys in suits going in and out. Then they stopped. I think they figured out I was watching. Then I started living on the street like this. I don't know what's going on in there, but there are some lights inside sometimes. Like flashlights."

"Why haven't you been in touch with the office?"

"I have. Not by phone or by email, because these are the feds and they'd find me. I've sent him some letters." He shrugged. Both of them knew that Creeper wouldn't bother to open the mail. "When I got here, and realized the feds were involved, I figured I'd better lay low. I think I was right. Bridget has disappeared, hasn't she?"

"Yes," said Abbott. "She was looking for you."

Costello winced. "Sorry about that, but she was way too obvious, and her picture of the spider...oh boy. This is very hush-hush, whatever it is." They talked for a while and came up with a plan.

Abbott called Creeper. Creeper wanted to know what was going on, of course, but Abbott merely told

him he was conducting a careful investigation. He said he didn't want to disappear like Bridget and Costello. He wasn't going to say anything more or file any articles. He was going to be discreet. Creeper fumed and yelled, but eventually had to admit that Abbott had the right to stay out of danger and that something was suspicious.

After taking care of that, and hoping that it had been monitored by whoever had taken Bridget, they watched the building some more, Costello in his homeless getup and Abbott as himself. Abbott would hang around the coffee shop across the street, hit a bar, come back and watch some more, shake his head and go back to the hotel. Costello would push his shopping cart down the street occasionally, or stagger down the street without it, but usually when Abbott wasn't there.

One day, Abbott was accosted by a street person, who said, "Listen, man. I know how karma works. A while ago, this guy came by here and asked me if he could bum a cigarette. I had a few, so I gave him one, and gave him a light. After he left, I looked down at where he'd been standing, and there was a quarter. I thought that was cool, and I picked it up. Then I looked around some more, and found a dollar bill. I was, like, wow. Then a car drove by and it was playing my favorite song and I listened to that for a while. After that – you see that house over there? -- a pretty woman came out of the front door, stark naked, and picked up the newspaper, and looked at me and smiled at me. I've never experienced such bliss. It was the experience of my life."

Abbott said, "Can I bum a cigarette?"

The street person yelled, "Hey, fuck you! You don't understand karma!"

They did this for two more days. On the morning of the third day, Abbott found a note from Costello slipped under the door of his hotel room. It read: "After you left, some suits left the building. Get ready to go in tomorrow night. Remember the plan."

Costello went to a hardware store and bought some tools, which he put in his shopping cart underneath the junk and old clothes he had. Abbott went to The Office and found the informant again, who declined to help directly, but after a bribe, introduced him to someone who provided some additional materials.

At three in the morning, they met at the rear of the building and found a boarded-up window without glass. Using the small crowbar he'd purchased, Costello pried off a few boards and broke in. The inside of the building was decrepit and trashed. Abbott noted footprints in the dust and dirt; they seemed to lead to the stairs. None of the footprints went up the stairs, though; they all went down.

Costello waited on the first floor while Abbott silently ascended the stairs and looked around the second floor. He came back and pronounced it clear. They both went down, cautiously. They reached the basement, which was an abandoned and dirty place with an old furnace, phone and utility connections. There was nothing there but another door. When they opened it, they saw another flight of steps going down.

There was nothing to do but proceed. These stairs did not look the same and were obviously not part of the original building. They went down seven flights of ten steps, a number that Costello noted. They came to a door with a small window, and they looked inside. There was a long modern hallway, looking like one in an office building, with another door at the end. A person in a uniform was walking

away from them. They ducked below the window and discussed what to do.

They used the time that the guard took to walk back and forth a few more times to get ready. When he was at the other end of the corridor, Abbott used the lockpicks (which Costello had obtained through the informant at The Office) and got the door ready to open. When he came back to the near door and turned around, they pushed open the door. The guard spun around with a surprised look, and Abbott used the Taser on him. Then they gagged him and immobilized him with zip ties and left him on the floor.

There were three doors on the left and three on the right, in addition to the door at the end that they had seen through the window. They decided to take them in order. The first door on the left was unlocked and appeared to be storage. The first door on the right was locked. Abbott picked the lock, telling Costello snarkily that this was a useful skill that all reporters should have. They opened the door and there was Bridget.

“Oh, I'm so glad to see you guys!” she said, throwing her arms around Abbott. “I was afraid it was one of those guys who ... I won't tell you now. Just get me out of here!”

They decided quickly. Abbott would stay and look through the other rooms and Costello would get Bridget up to the street. Costello left, supporting Bridget, who seemed a bit weak. Abbott looked around the room where Bridget had been held, and it was an ordinary modern apartment, with a living room, bedroom, bathroom and kitchen.

Abbott tried the next door, picked the lock, and opened it. This room appeared to be a fully-equipped laboratory: slate tables with water, gas and air cocks and sinks, shelves of reagents and upended glassware on stands. Incongruously, there was an adjustable medical bed in the middle of the room and what looked like medical monitoring equipment at its head. Abbott put it out of his mind and left.

He decided to skip the other rooms and try the door at the end of the hall. This door was different and he had trouble picking the Rabson lock on it, but he finally got it. He entered an unlighted room. Abbott's impression was that it was fairly large, and he switched on his flashlight, and put his lockpicks in the door to keep it from closing.

He saw a cobblestone floor, walls of stone blocks and a ceiling apparently supported by a double row of pillars of similar construction. He felt a sense of confusion, as if something was trying to probe his mind. There were gratings in the floor that he thought were for drainage, but he was mistaken. Flying animals headed toward his light. Some of them landed on him and he saw that they were giant flying spiders, but his attention was diverted to something in the last row of pillars. There, Bridget was tied to a pillar, her arms tied above her and her feet tied at the bottom, utterly naked, and the flying spiders were all over her.

“Noooo!” Abbott shouted, and beating away the spiders that were settling on him, ran to the end of the room. It was unquestionably Bridget. Her wiry red hair was unmistakable, but she was with Costello...how was that possible? She was unconscious. Behind him he heard a clanging sound and he turned to see one of the gratings roll around on the cobbles and a shapeless creature covered with eyes rise from the hole underneath.

Abbott almost lost his sanity when he saw this. Telling Bridget, “We'll be back for you,” and

momentarily wondering who “we” were in his confusion, he ran back to the door, which he noticed had a star in a circle painted on it. He went out, removing his picks and slamming the door. Then he started killing the spiders that were on him. That task made him feel better and restored his mental equilibrium.

He ran down the corridor, ignoring the tied-up guard, and out the door at the bottom of the stairs. Up the stairs and across the basement he ran, then up the second staircase to the first floor. The front door was open, and he exited and started down the steps.

Two steps down, he stopped and looked at a scene of devastation. Several of the cars on the street were burned. The pavement was charred. In the middle of the street lay a burnt body, surrounded by a few men and women in suits, and others in hazmat gear. As he looked around in fear and amazement, Costello grabbed his arm. Behind him was a guy in a suit. Costello said, “They used flame-throwers. It wasn't Bridget after all.”

Abbott said, “I know.”

Meanwhile, Creeper was frantic. He had not heard from any reporter on the giant flying spider story. He had no office help because Bridget was gone. He had to write all the copy himself, and do everything else, too. He had an idea, though. He'd look through the news from Philadelphia and rewrite it....

Philadelphia (WNN) Giant flying spiders are linked to the explosion of a taco trailer on Philly's north side.

At about 5:30 pm. on Wednesday, the dinner crowd around the Los Jaliscienses Chapina food truck was building up. Orders were being given and taken, and the cooking inside and serving from the vehicle was reaching a furious pace. Armando Saltillo was there. He was waiting for his dinner after consuming, according to him, “about 10 beers.”

Mr. Saltillo and a friend were standing in line when a giant flying spider landed on the propane tank and crawled across it in its loathsome bloated way. Saltillo saw it. Shouting, “No, no, not that!” he pulled his concealed weapon and attempted to shoot the spider. He succeeded in exploding the propane tank. The force of the blast sent the metal tank flying 50 feet into the air, and it landed in the backyard of a nearby home. Flames shot 200 feet into the air. Two people who were making tacos, a mother and her daughter, were killed. Whether the spider survived is unknown.

Saltillo has been charged with manslaughter, possession of an unlicensed weapon and being stupid. Everyone in Philadelphia knows the giant flying spiders are harmless.

Pleased with efforts like this, Creeper wrote more twisted copy for the WNN as well as publishing the links to other news sites as part of inconsequential opinion articles. This was the way he had started the WNN, after all. When, he wondered, was he going to hear from his people on the scene?

Back in Philadelphia, the guy in the suit wanted to arrest Abbott and Costello. Abbott told him, "Fine, arrest me. We're just reporters, and we'll tell everyone what we saw here." The guy in the suit looked like he wanted to ask what they had seen, but decided not.

Another guy in a better suit arrived and stood in front of all three of them. Looking sternly at Abbott and Costello, he said, "You guys are a pain in the ass." Then he spoke privately to the guy in the cheap suit for a while. He came back to the WNN reporters and told them, "You can go, for now. I have to talk about to some other people about you. I don't care where you go, we'll find you if we want to. Go to your hotel and make it easy."

Abbott and Costello went to a diner not far away and talked about what they'd seen. Costello told him they were up against something occult, and said that he had read about it. It took Abbott a little while to understand. Costello's theory was that the design painted on the inside of the door was an "Elder Sign" and that the thing that came out from underneath the grate in the floor was a "Shuggoth." Abbott described his confusion when he was in the dungeon, as they agreed to call it, and Costello said that was coherent with his theory. According to him, the Shuggoth could be controlled telepathically and sent out powerful telepathic feelers. It was probing Abbott's mind for instructions, but Abbott didn't know how to issue them.

They agreed that they needed to rescue Bridget, the real Bridget, from the basement room. Costello already had a plan.

They went to the hardware store together and then to a Walmart to get the things they needed. All the while they discussed Costello's plan. Abbott thought he'd have problems doing his part of it, but Costello told him how they'd take care of it. They went to the library.

By then it was late afternoon, and they held a council of war. Costello said, "Look, maybe none of this will work. We're going to write it all up and send it to Creeper tonight. If he opens the mail one day, he'll know what happened to us."

Abbott nodded soberly. "That thing I saw, it think it could kill me. It could kill us both."

Costello told him, "Yes. They are an artificial life form created millions of years ago by aliens on Earth. They were bred to follow orders, which included warfare. When they are not governed by a superior mind they are unpredictable."

They shook on it and hugged. There was more at stake than their own lives. Even if they were killed in this attempt to rescue Bridget, they wanted the world to know what was going on, so they spent a great deal of time writing everything out before getting some rest.

Since Costello's cover as a homeless person was blown, Abbott watched the building the

next day. There was no activity, but they didn't know how many feds were inside. When he discussed it with Costello, Costello said that the feds usually took at least two days to decide what to do, so the time to act was now. That made sense in a way, and Abbott decided to risk it.

That night, Abbott went to the alley in back of the building again. The window they'd broken into was still open. He slipped inside. Everything looked the same, but now he knew what he would find. Abbott determined to pursue his objective resolutely. He went down the stairs and waited by the door with the window, lockpicks ready, for Costello's ping. There was no guard in the hall.

Meanwhile, Costello had found a way into underground Philadelphia. An old city, Philadelphia has cellars and tunnels that have been unused for a hundred years or more. The dungeon where Bridget was held was clearly one of these old cellars, and they had decided after looking at old plans in the library that it was probably accessible from another one. Costello threaded his way through the Philadelphia underground, guided partly by photocopies of old maps. When the maps failed him, he managed to find his way using GPS. Collapsed walls and rubble were obstacles, but he moved rocks and wriggled through holes to get around them.

Abbott waited patiently for the signal. When it came, he opened the door with the window, walked down the hall and got his equipment out of his backpack. Then he picked the lock on the door at the end of the hall, and pinged Costello back. As he opened the door and propped it, there was a rumble and Costello burst through a wall to the right at the end of the dungeon. Abbott could see that the wall had been a cheaply constructed barrier of cobbles and some bricks with mortar. Both of them unfurled their towels, on which they had painted the Elder Sign.

Abbott advanced between the terrible pillars and Costello came in from the side. To Abbott's left, a floor grating moved and one of the monsters appeared, but the creature inside retreated when confronted with the towels. Abbott smiled grimly. At least one of Costello's ideas worked. Bridget was still tied up in the same place. She seemed semi-conscious. The spiders were crawling on her. Abbott took out the trench coat they had bought while Costello used a heavy sharp knife to cut the ropes tying her feet to the pillar.

While they were thus occupied, the creature they had seen crept from its hole again and seeing what they were doing, emitted some piercing musical notes. Two other gratings overturned and shuggoths emerged from beneath. The men felt their brains under assault and they were weakened and confused. Costello handed the knife to Abbott and flourished his towel. He held the shuggoths back while Abbott cut loose Bridget's hands and wrapped her in the coat. Abbott started to half-carry and half-walk Bridget to the hall door. He draped the towel across their shoulders, Elder Sign out, for some protection.

Costello ran to the other entrance. The operation had gone as planned, if only Abbott could get Bridget out, but he still had a job to do himself, and one of the shuggoths was after him. He attached quick-fasteners to the walls surrounding the hole by which he'd entered, stretched the prepared sheet with the Elder Sign over the hole, and ducked

underneath.

Abbott made it to the door with Bridget, dragging her part of the way, with shuggoths close but unable to touch them because of the Elder Sign. Their minds were beating on him and he felt his will to live disappearing. He and Bridget staggered through the door and he kicked out the piece of wood he'd used to prop the door open. Then he lay Bridget down, and fell down himself, exhausted.

“Well done,” said a voice. “We were going to rescue her, too, but when we requested the equipment we needed from Washington, first they told us we were crazy and then they said it was 'in channels.'”

“You miserable fuckers,” Abbott managed to croak, and heard two men laughing.

Abbott and Bridget were now “in custody,” they were informed. Bridget was “receiving medical attention,” they said. Abbott was shown to the room where the fake Bridget had been found, and told to get some sleep, which he did. He awoke and found that the refrigerator was well-stocked and the kitchen was fully equipped. He cooked bacon and eggs and fried some half-inch potato cubes in the bacon fat. Then he ate a slice of cantaloupe. He decided someone else could do the dishes. He felt much better and wondered who his captors were.

He soon found out. He was escorted by one of the men who had laughed to a room on the opposite side of the hall, in which there was an ordinary conference table and three well-dressed middle-aged men. The middle one stood and introduced himself as Bradbury, and said, “This is Asimov, and this is Heinlein.” Each of the indicated men kept his seat and gave Abbott a nod. Abbott strongly suspected the names were fake, but said nothing.

“We are here,” began Bradbury, seating himself and indicating a chair for Abbott, “to find out what you know and share some of what we know with you. It has been decided that you are a person who has a ‘need to know’” -- Bradbury made quote marks with his fingers -- “some of the matters we will discuss. There is the possibility that you can be useful to us, and we will talk about that. There are some things we will not tell you, but we may ask questions about them to see what you know. If you make inferences, they are your own and we will not verify or deny them. The first order of business is this: Nothing that is talked about here can be published by you or by the WNN. You cannot tell Mr. Wasterman about it. Do you agree to that?”

“Reporting is my job,” Abbott said. “If it's news, I really ought to write it up. I could write up what happened here anyway, and let people try to figure it out themselves. And what about Bridget? She --”

“Bridget is going to be fine. The spiders are barely venomous and although they fed on her she has no permanent harm. Have you noticed any bites on your own person?”

“No.”

“They are not quick to bite. Anyway, to proceed: Bridget will also be debriefed, although less thoroughly, and we will get the same agreement from her. I say, we will get her to agree. I have not yet explained what happens if you do not agree, or if you violate the agreement. I am with the National Security Agency, and I am heading the Alate Arachnid Task Force. Mr. Asimov, here, is nominally with the Treasury Department, which as you know includes the Secret Service. He is also our adjunct to the FBI, when needed. Mr. Heinlein is with the Defense Department. This matter goes to the very highest levels of government, Mr. Abbott, and we have every intention of getting your agreement to our terms and making sure you keep your word. As I said, you may be of some help to us, sometime. If you do not agree, or agree and violate the agreement, we can and will hold you incognito in a place like this indefinitely. I want to mention to you also that since there are matters of national security involved, you might consider it your patriotic duty to cooperate and help.” He looked at Abbott intently. “Does that sound corny to you?”

“No. All right, I agree. I'll never repeat to anyone what we say here. It seems I have no choice, anyway.”

“That is correct. You do not. Now, Mr. Heinlein will explain something to you.”

Heinlein rose. “As Mr. uh... Bradbury has said, I am with the Department of Defense. I am also affiliated with NASA to some extent. I know about the spiders. The idea was sound: to take some spiders, wolf spiders, *Hogna carolinensis*, the Carolina wolf spider, to be more precise, up to the International Space Station and expose them to cosmic radiation. It was merely a preliminary study. As you may know, we are doing that with various kinds of animals and plants just to see what happens. The experimental animals were mature female wolf spiders that had been mated.

“It didn't seem possible to us when one of the astronauts reported that a brood of baby spiders had wings. At first we thought he was playing a joke and that the pictures were faked. Then they reported that another brood had wings as well. The spiders were isolated from each other according to plan (which is necessary because they will eat each other) and returned to earth. One of our couriers was carrying them from Washington D.C. to M.I.T. on Amtrak when he carelessly dropped the case containing the spiders and it fell open. About 20 of the vials containing spiders broke and the animals escaped. We hoped that they would not survive in the city, but they did. They also reproduced.”

“That is all I am going to tell you. After it became apparent through the news media, the Wasterman News Network, in fact, that the spiders were still around, the matter was turned over to our good friends in national security and law enforcement. NASA is not known for its ability to keep a secret.” He smiled wryly and nodded to Bradbury.

Bradbury continued, “That was almost three years ago. We had a few reports after the first year, and more after the second, but we kept it quiet as long as we could. However, when your little website started writing articles about the spiders this year, we needed to do more. Contrary to your reports, no buildings were burned or dynamited to try to eliminate the spiders, but those kind of fear-mongering articles had to be stopped. There were other articles that we suspect were also complete fiction. Were they?”

Abbott said, "The one about the taco truck that just appeared was. Creeper... that is, Mr. Wasterman must have done that himself. The home invasion one had a little exaggeration, not much."

Bradbury nodded. "Thank you. The taco truck explosion was creative. We interviewed a number of people and no one saw a man fire a gun at the propane tank. Now we come to the strange part of the story." He looked at Asimov.

Asimov rose and began to lecture. "Mr. Bradbury told you that I am nominally with the Secret Service, but he did not mention that I also head a select group of scientists and others who have studied the spiders. DNA studies on the alates showed conclusively that the wings are not the product of a radiation-induced mutation of the spider genome. Some kind of prepared DNA was present, and had been grafted, if you will, into the DNA of the spiders to give them wings. Some suggested that this was alien technology. Others had crazier ideas. The facts and the theories went up to the highest level of government, and we had a visit from a person who ... is frankly a sort of crank and an occultist. He suggested that it was shuggoths. We already knew about shuggoths but didn't tell him."

"Of course, the stories, which we call a "legendarium," written by H. P. Lovecraft and his imitators are fiction. Nevertheless, it seems that Lovecraft somehow managed to imagine some truth, perhaps in his dreams. As you know, the shuggoths have peculiar mental powers. We postulate that they could have told Lovecraft about themselves in his dreams. We are working on technology to communicate with them and control them. At present all we can do is contain them. The salient fact is that the spiders for the mission to the ISS were made ready and selected in a certain laboratory, and near that was a secret laboratory where shuggoths were being studied. The shuggoths, according to the legends, are artificial life created by genetic manipulation. It appears that they have some ability to perform genetic manipulation themselves. We found that a shuggoth from that other lab has nodules of prepared DNA in its body. Some of that DNA was very similar to the DNA grafted onto the spiders' chromosomes. We think that somehow the shuggoths from the lab transferred the DNA into the spiders before they went up to the space station. Are you following me?"

"Partly," said Abbott. "I don't know about this Lovecraft, but I've seen the shuggoths. What about the fake Bridget that was here? How does that fit into it?"

"Yes. That also was genetic manipulation. And... what you might call mind control. The fake Bridget was a shuggoth, of course. They can assume any shape. We had an incident; that's all I can say. If Bridget chooses to tell you her whole story, maybe you will understand. But remember your agreement with us."

Asimov cleared his throat. "In any event, this facility, which was originally established to house shuggoths, has attracted a great number of the spiders. We are not really certain how they get into the abditory. We think, though, that the shuggoths are attracting them by mental emanations. We are studying the problem."

"They probably get in under the door," Abbott said.

Bradbury, Asimov and Heinlein looked at each other and after a second, Bradbury turned back and said, "I told you, Mr. Abbott, that you might be able to help us."

Abott shrugged. "OK, now what?" he asked.

"You will stay here for a few days. Bridget will be ready to leave with you soon. When you leave, we will give you a contact number and a code. We'll put both of you up in a hotel. Your partner Costello presents a problem. We have not been able to find him."

"I don't know where he is."

"Yes. We thought it was useless to ask you in any event. We have lost him completely. However, now that you have this whole mess in perspective, I hope, we are going to ask you about some things. This is not really an interrogation; we are not going to ask you the same question two or three times and hope for a different answer. But we want to know about Mr. Wasterman, what he knows, and what his interests are, among other things. We are still striving for some kind of secrecy and the WNN is a problem. So is Costello."

After that, they asked Abbott questions for an hour or so. They wanted him to describe his feelings when he was near the shuggoths, what Costello and he talked about when they were planning Bridget's rescue, and many other details. Then he was released into the custody of one of the laughers and taken to his apartment. The kitchen was clean, he noticed, and he took a nap.

Meanwhile, Costello had decided that his knowledge of the occult sciences was insufficient. He was driving a car he had bought for cash from a dealer on the outskirts of Philadelphia and heading toward Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts. His problem at the moment was that there was no Miskatonic University and no Arkham, Massachusetts, but a week ago he had thought there weren't any shuggoths. He was heading up to New England and deciding as he drove that the old sit-in-a-bar and talk-to-old-timers approach would be best.

He was in Providence, Rhode Island, the next day, the city in which Lovecraft had lived. Costello, unlike Abbott, had read Lovecraft, which was why he recognized the shuggoths from Abbott's description and realized the significance of the sign on the inside of the door. Fortunately, he had been right. After a night in a hotel, he was ready to try to find Arkham.

After a few days as guests of Bradbury, Asimov and Heinlein, Bridget and Abbott went back to the hotel. Both rooms and their meals were paid for indefinitely, as Bradbury had said. Bridget said that she wasn't feeling 100% yet but she was ready to carry on. Abbott was amazed at her recovery after almost a week in the dungeon of the shoggoths and he asked if she was sure.

Bridget said, "I wasn't in the dungeon, as you call it, all that time. I think I ought to tell

you what happened.”

“I found one of those spiders in my hotel room. As soon as I sent an email to Creeper and lay down to sleep again, these three guys came into my room. They had the room card and they busted the deadbolt. They tied me up, got my laptop and all my stuff and the spider I'd captured. They never said a word. They took me out the back way of the hotel and loaded me into a van. They took me to that basement place.”

“I spent the first day in that apartment. The same one you stayed in. They took my blood. Then they took it again, and also scraped the inside of my mouth. That's for DNA, you know.”

Abbott nodded.

“The next day, they took me to the room next door, which was a laboratory. They strapped me down on a medical bed. They had one of those shuggoths there in a strange-looking cage, and they kept injecting it and it kept changing shape. About that time the guys who had kidnapped me left, and I was alone with this one guy. He said he was a scientist and not to worry, everything was going to be all right. He explained what the shuggoth was. But after a few more injections, the shuggoth changed again and started to look like me. Then he turned on this machine and put a helmet on my head that was wired to it.”

The guy said he was making the shuggoth like me, but I had already figured that out. It was a typical mad scientist setup, and I knew things were going to go wrong, but what could I do? Anyway, this machine went on for a long time. I think it was getting my brainwaves and my memories and all that. He injected the shuggoth a couple of more times, I think. I fell asleep for a while, I know. When I woke up, that shuggoth looked just like me. It talked like me, too. The scientist was grinning and saying, 'Finally I had a human subject and I made this work.’”

“He let the shuggoth out of the cage and told it that it was me, now. He left the lab with it. I guess he put it in the apartment where I had been. Then he came back and raped me.”

“Wait a second.” Abbott said. “They told me they had an ‘incident.’ Now I’m really pissed off.”

“Well, by then I realized the guy was crazy. He bounced around the lab like a wild man after that, and then raped me again. I told him to let me go and I wouldn't ever tell, but he said, 'No, I have a plan for you.' Then he gave me an injection that knocked me out. When I woke up I was tied to that pillar. I never saw him again.”

Abbott got on the phone to Bradbury using the contact number and the code for the encrypted line. He said he knew what had happened to Bridget. Bradbury said, “The individual in question has been removed. It's a setback for us because he was our best researcher, and his notes are incomplete. We suspect that the shuggoth exerted a mental force on him that caused him to do what he did. He may have had sexual relations with

the shoggoth, too. We have apologized to Bridget.”

“Apologized! That's not enough!”

“I almost agree with you, but it has to be enough. We cannot have any publicity of this. Bridget has agreed. Remember your agreement.” Bradbury hung up.

In Providence, Costello was not having much luck canvassing the bars. First of all, mostly he was meeting guys who had always lived in Providence and didn't know Massachusetts. Even the old fellows who had lived in Massachusetts had never heard of Arkham or Miskatonic University, unless they had read Lovecraft, and then they gave him sly looks and insincere smiles. He had some conversations with the Lovecraft fans, but they were no help. Naturally, he did not reveal that he'd seen shoggoths. He decided that Providence was not the place for these questions, and drove up to Massachusetts, staying away from the coast and trying to aim at Miskatonic University, wherever it might be.

The next night he was driving a lonely road, headed inland, and fog surrounded him. The branches of the trees by the road reached for him as he drove, looming out of the fog like the dendrites of a malignant brain, reaching for his consciousness and leading him on, promising and threatening.

He drove into a town. There were small-paned fan windows over the front doors of the houses, and curious looking gables. He drove past them and stopped in front of a tavern, which was obviously the central point of the village. He needed dinner, a bath and a place to sleep. He parked his car out of sight in the back and went in. He wondered then if he had been transported back through time two hundred years or more. A pretty girl in an ancient dress with an apron walked out from the rear of the establishment, which was, he supposed, the kitchen. He said, “Where am I?”

She answered, “If it please ye, sir, this is Arkham.”

Abbott wondered about shoggoths. What sort of creatures were they, really? He went out and bought some paperback books with stories by H. P. Lovecraft. After a few days of reading, he tossed them aside and gave up. It was clearly fiction, and mostly nonsense. The one story that attracted him was “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and he went to the library to look at old newspapers and see if it had any basis in fact. To his surprise, after a week of research, he learned of a naval operation off the coast of Massachusetts at about the time that the story was supposed to have taken place. Then he had the idea that perhaps Costello had gone to the Massachusetts area to do his own Lovecraft studies.

By this time, he had been in touch with Creeper, who told him that the copy that he and Costello had filed before the rescue, about 20,000 words, was unprintable. He made it clear without saying so that he was forbidden from writing any more stories about giant

flying spiders unless they were approved by the Alate Arachnid Task Force and that printing anything about shuggoths was out of the question. Nevertheless, he paid them for the stories and told them to hang on.

Abbott called up Bridget on the hotel phone and went down the hall to her room. He told her he was skipping out. He was going to investigate the things that had happened in his own way. Maybe he would find Costello and maybe not. He really didn't have any leads. He asked Bridget to tell Creeper that he was taking an indefinite leave of absence and told her not to worry.

Bridget said, "Wait a minute. Today, the task force agreed to let me in on their research. They say the cat is out of the bag and needs to be put on a leash. If I write scientific-style articles on the spiders, they'll give us an exclusive. Creeper is going nuts. He says he'll publish science as long as it's sensational, but I told him it can't be. It's going to be science. Mostly Creeper wants the exclusives, I think. The task force says they'll guarantee exclusives, in writing, if they can approve the articles before the WNN publishes. It's a fantastic opportunity."

"I like that, Bridget, but you can do that yourself. I want to do something else. And I'm not telling you where I'm going, especially now that I know you'll be working with the task force. I don't trust those guys with the government."

Bridget protested in vain. Abbott looked at her and thought that maybe working with her wouldn't be bad; she was a good kid and pretty smart. He knew that now she was recovered, and she was back to telling Creeper what to do and doing a lot of the work for the WNN remotely, but... no. He had a curiosity to be satisfied. He felt a calling.

Abbott caught the Amtrak to Boston and rented a car, and asked directions to Innsmouth. There was no Innsmouth, as he knew already, but the town and the area surrounding it was fairly well described in the Lovecraft story. In addition, he had the reports of the naval operations and their approximate location to guide him. So he drove out toward Cape Cod and slowly thence up the coast.

After two days he thought he was getting close. The terrain was as described in the story. He came to an old town, stopped at a store and, changing tactics, asked if there was a bus that would take him to the fishing village. The aged proprietor told him the bus didn't run any more. The road had been washed out by hurricanes and never rebuilt. The old railroad tracks still went out that way and you could see where the road used to be, he said, but nobody went there any more. Abbott asked what hurricanes had done this and the man became surprisingly garrulous. "Why, there was Bob in 1991, Floyd in 1999, and Bill and Earl. All good names, but I remember when hurricanes only had girls' names." Abbott asked for directions to the road and the railroad, and the man gave them, shaking his head.

Abbott slept in his car that night and found the ruined road in the morning. It took him all day to hike to the village on the coast. He was wondering as he walked if he was headed for the right place, or was it all just a story? When he finally arrived, the town was just as Lovecraft had described it.

Costello had a good old-fashioned dinner and slept soundly at the inn. In the morning, he had a good breakfast and looked around Arkham. He had entered from the oldest part of town. Miskatonic University was at the other end, and it had the usual surroundings of a university: book stores, fast food restaurants, cafes, bars, and the other satellites of an environment inhabited by young people. The University itself was surprisingly large, the campus covering several acres. He roamed around until he located the library, and asked there for rare books. He was told that rare books were in the museum, and he went there.

At the museum he located an assistant curator, produced his press credentials and told the woman what he wanted. She told him he needed an authorization from the University President's office. It took him most of the rest of the day to get it. He had to show articles he had written for the WNN, and he had to see the President himself. He used a tactic he had picked up during his career: he told the man that this was a very confidential matter and swore him to secrecy. Then he related, with careful omissions, the story of the giant flying spiders and Bridget's rescue from the Dungeon of the Shuggoths. It helped that the college president had already heard of giant flying spiders and wondered why they had not been in the news recently. Costello explained in a very intimate way that the government was suppressing the most recent stories and they would probably never be known to the public, without insinuating that there was anything wrong with that. He returned to the tavern.

The next day he appeared at the museum again, authorization in hand. He met with the same woman and she was clearly impressed at his accomplishment. She led him to a room out of the public area, where the volume in question rested, closed, in a glass case: The Necronomicon.

Then a disappointing conversation took place. Abbott asked, "I'd like to read it."

"That is not allowed."

"Do you have a reproduction of it that I could look at?"

"No. That is not allowed."

"Hmm. Well, how do I see what is in it?"

"You cannot. Years ago, the Regents of the University decided that this book was to be displayed this way, but the contents of it were never to be shown to anyone."

"It seems that I've come here and gone through a lot of trouble for nothing."

"Not for nothing, Mr. Costello. First, the book does exist, despite all the scholarly opinions to the contrary. Second, our restrictions should help to convince you that the study of it is dangerous in itself. Since you have acquired the necessary permission, we will show you our provenance and our notes on the people who have studied it. Third,

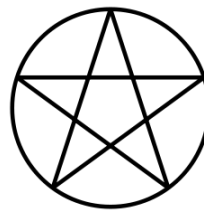
we have cataloging notes on the book, which you may also see. Try to take this seriously. As you will read, some people have lost their lives because of the volume you see there.”

“All right. I’d like to look at those materials, please.”

Costello read what the museum had on the Necronomicon. It wasn't much. The famous story of Wilbur Whateley was barely mentioned. The other people who had read the book had gone insane or died in Antarctica, it seemed. The cataloguing information was cursory but revealing. Apparently the book was a compilation of several texts in different languages, bound together in 1661. The title page, which the notes said was the only page dating from 1661, was reproduced:

West Bow, Edinburgh

Ye Necronomicon



[Being a collection of Thomas Weir]

Ye Notebookes of Abdul al-Hazred; Some Parts of De Vermis Mysterius of
Ludwig Prinn; Ye Pnakotic Texts; Ye Booke of Azathoth; Liber Damnatuſ &
Ye Booke of Dead Names

1661

While this was very interesting, Costello was dissatisfied. He had spent too much time on this project to be frustrated this way.

He left the library and explored the off-campus area. There was a market on a side street, covered by a large US Army bivouac tent, with interior partitions. He was looking at the fruit and vegetable vendors when a man came up beside him and asked Costello if he could have a dollar to buy a couple of apples. Costello gave him a dollar, and in return the man gave him a piece of cardboard the size of a dollar with a dollar bill drawn on it.

Costello thought this was amusing, and in the next area of the market, he offered the cardboard dollar to a popcorn vendor for a \$1 popcorn. The vendor, recognizing him as a stranger, told him, "I can't take that – you'll have to get change." He indicated the money changers with a jerk of his head. Costello walked over there and the "change booth" was several dozen cardboard boxes stacked up around three guys. He offered the cardboard dollar to one of them and said, "I need change." The fellow took his dollar and gave him a crudely drawn note saying "This is a dollar," drawn on a piece of cardboard about the size of a sheet of ordinary paper. He took it back to the popcorn vendor who accepted it and gave him a box of popcorn.

Costello left, and on the main campus drag he sat at a bus stop and told a woman what had just happened. She said, "You were ripped off. The first guy you met is an artist. His dollars are worth a lot more."

Costello returned to the inn, had another good dinner, and planned.

Abbott walked around Innsmouth for the entire day. An attractive young woman sold him some food at a grocery store, but he was clearly a stranger in town and the people treated him that way, ignoring him and snubbing him. He tried to check into the only hotel but was told there were no rooms, and he couldn't sleep in his car again because he had left it behind. Having little choice, he looked around for a place, and ended up on the docks. There, by knocking on doors, he found a rat and roach-infested room in a hovel that hung out over the water, for which he paid too much.

In the morning he took a bath in the harbor, and refreshed by that, returned to the center of town. The grocery store had a little grill in the back and he got breakfast there, fried eggs and pancakes. The woman who cooked was the same who had waited on him yesterday.

Her name was Althea, he learned. She said she was from "an old family." Abbott didn't want to explain what he was doing in Innsmouth when she asked, so he said he was "doing research." He produced his credentials from the WNN. She was amused.

"I work here every day, but I never met anyone else who had a real job," she said.

Abbott felt like confessing. "It's not a real job. I only have to write things. Sometimes I

make them up.”

Althea's smile wasn't fake, and it went all the way to her big black eyes. Abbott had a feeling that he hadn't had for a couple of years.

She said, “I know you don't have a place to stay while you do your research. I have a big house and you can stay in a room there.”

Abbott was astounded but accepted, of course. She gave him the address, and told him that she closed the store at five o' clock, and he should go there then.

Since Abbott had some time on his hands, he went back to the place where he'd spent the night. The old lady was there and was glad to see him, thinking that he would pay for another night. That wasn't his intention. He engaged the woman in conversation and tried to find out about Innsmouth. He couldn't assume that what he had read about Innsmouth was accurate, so it took some time.

The old lady, still smiling in the hope of getting rent for another night, told him that Innsmouth was once a whaling and fishing town, until Captain Marsh came back from a voyage with a new wife. After that, and especially after Marsh's children by his “foreign south-seas wife” were born, fishing became secondary, and a cult took over. Everyone was provided for, because the Order of Dagon, as the cult was called, generated fabulous riches. Then the horrible attack by the US Navy destroyed nearly the whole town. She recalled the day, she said. Since then, people had left, and those that remained did nothing except fishing for themselves, although the cult was still active, with only a few members.

Abbott disappointed her by thanking her and leaving. He went to the address that Althea had given him. It was an enormous three-story house situated on a corner lot, with a semi-basement, a first floor with bay windows facing each of the streets, a second floor projecting out above the first, and dormer windows in the roof above the third floor. A short wrought-iron fence surrounded the front yard and wooden fences concealed the side yards and the back of the house. One section of the wooden fence had been repaired or replaced recently; everything else seemed old. Abbott walked around the corner and noted that the rear of the house was accessible from an alley through a wooden double swing gate.

Seeing no one, he went up the front stairs and knocked using the antique knocker. There was no answer. He checked his watch and decided that although it was after 5 p.m., Althea might not have arrived home yet, so he sat on the stairs to wait.

Althea came walking down the street a few minutes later. She smiled at Abbott when she saw him waiting, told him to get up and come inside, and opened the door with a key. The front door opened upon a hallway, with a hardwood floor, shoulder-high wainscoting, and twelve-foot ceilings with an ornate coffering. Immediately, an older woman came out of a side room and said, “Welcome home, Ms. Althea.” Althea asked if the guest room was ready and the woman said, “Yes, ma'am.”

Althea said, "Come on," and led Abbott up a staircase to the second floor, turned right, opened the first door and entered. Following her, Abbott stopped and looked around. It was already apparent to him that the interior of this house, although old and out of style, had been lavish in its day. The room he looked at now had plenty of space, a four-poster bed with a canopy, a writing desk, a large armoire with a full-length mirror and drawers, a smaller chest of drawers, some occasional tables and chairs, several rugs and various paintings, pieces of pottery and carvings.

"There's the john," Althea said, pointing to a door that Abbott hadn't noticed yet. "Come down for dinner in half an hour."

"Wait," Abbott said. "I wasn't expecting room and board, and you haven't told me what the rent is."

Althea grinned at him. "It costs you nothing. What do you think of my house?"

"It's overwhelming. It's beautiful. But... nothing?"

"Abbott, I'm so rich you wouldn't believe it. Maybe someday you will. But right now I want to help you a little bit. I might have other reasons, too... we'll talk about them. Now, wash up and get ready for dinner. Come to think of it, I don't know your first name?"

Abbott told her, and she said, formally, "Pleased to meet you. I'm Althea Marsh." She extended her hand and shook, grinned at him again, and turned around and left, closing the door.

Dinner was served in a small dining room on the first floor. They were just beginning on the chowder when Althea said, "There's a larger dining room for more formal occasions, but we hardly ever have one."

The chowder was followed by a poached fish of some kind in an unusual but delicious sauce, accompanied by some fresh vegetables and greens that were unfamiliar except one: Abbott knew it was a seaweed. Dessert was a sort of ice cream.

Meanwhile, Costello had decided to steal the Necronomicon. The library did not have very good security. He spent a couple of nights scouting the outside and chose the window he would enter after hours. There was a security guard on duty every night, but mostly he stayed in one place and his rounds were easy to predict.

Costello got some black clothing from a thrift store, and that night he lurked around the museum. When the time was right, he sprung the latch on the window with a pry bar and climbed in.

Inside, it was dark, and he had to rely on his memory. The display case that contained the book was toward the back of the building and he had entered from the side. In a

general way, he had to find a way to the archives to his right. Moving forward, he soon came to a place that he recognized: the entrance to the archives, and he turned right. The lock on the door was easily defeated, and soon he was in front of the glass case that displayed the book.

Suddenly there was the sound of breaking glass from the next room. Thinking now or never, he broke the glass of the case, grabbed the book and retreated the way he had come. He heard a man shout, "Stop!" and concealed himself behind a door as well as he could. There was a commotion behind him and he stayed put and kept quiet. There were two gunshots, and the sound of a body falling. Costello ran back to the window, climbed out and concealed the book under his jacket.

Behind him, the attention of the security guard was occupied by the body of the person he had shot, who had broken in through another window. He lay on the floor dead, well-dressed, with tentacles creeping from under his belt that pulsated like the body of a beheaded insect. The security guard said, "Oh, not again."

Costello returned to his room at the inn to peruse his stolen booty. He discovered that it was several books in one. There were books in Latin, Greek, German and other languages that didn't use letters that he knew. He realized he should have known that from the title page on display in the library. He had his work cut out for him.

Fortunately he had the Arkham University library and the internet. In the next couple of weeks, he managed to decipher some of the text and learned quite a bit about languages as well.

In the meantime, Bridget was working with the Alate Arachnid Task Force (AATF). She only told Creeper the things she was authorized to tell, but he was happy to have it. He gave her a raise, which was minimal, and wanted to know what happened to Abbott and Costello. At first she told him she didn't know, but he insisted, again and again. Finally she told him they were both on first and he shut up.

Working with the AATF was interesting for Bridget. She was assigned to an AATF agent named Nancy. They walked around Philadelphia and collected as many spiders as they could. Not all of them were giant flying spiders; Nancy was an arachnologist who made detailed notes about each animal she collected. She knew the scientific names of most of the spiders, and if she didn't, which was infrequent, she knew the scientific name the next day and told Bridget with a smile. She also said that the giant flying spiders needed a scientific name: "They are here, and we need to, you know... fit them into the system. So far, they won't let me publish anything." Bridget liked Nancy.

Working outward from the North Philadelphia Amtrack station where the infestation began, they walked all the streets of the Glendale neighborhood, and then started looking in the Nicetown-Tioga, Fairhill, North Philadelphia East and West neighborhoods. They made forays into other surrounding areas, trying to determine how far the spiders had spread.

They discounted the report of a flying spider from Mrs. Vanderbilt in the Chestnut Hill area, but still were not able to determine the limits of the spider's range. After all, it had been two years and the spiders had wings.

In the interim, Abbott had learned Althea's real intentions. As a Marsh, and as the direct descendant of Captain Marsh, she could, if she wanted to, tell him everything he wanted to know about the Innsmouth cult, the reason the US Navy attacked the town and what happened afterward. But she wasn't telling him anything; instead she was being friendly and flirting a bit. He found himself flirting back and tried to suppress it, without much success. The problem, he supposed, was that she was an attractive young woman and entirely compatible, and he was feeling an urge to settle down.

They established a routine. After breakfast, which was usually clam chowder (the best he'd ever had) with an unusual kind of toast, but sometimes a kind of caviar, she went to work in the store and he went around the town doing his investigation. He was not learning much, but he started to notice that the people he spoke to were more polite to him and sometimes gave him a smile. After both of them finished their work and come home, they ate dinner together, and it was always seafood (again, the best he'd ever had).

"Listen, Abbott," she said one night, a week after they had established a friendly lifestyle. "Listen, Abbott," she continued, "I think we ought to get married."

Abbott's eyebrows went up until his forehead disappeared. "What?" he managed to say.

She told him. She was a princess. All she wanted to do was marry him and make him a king who would have almost unlimited power and unlimited wealth. As the last of the Marshes, she had an obligation to have children, and looking a bit sideways at him, she said she thought that Abbott was completely suitable for that. If that wasn't enough, she'd fallen in love with him the first time she saw him.

Abbott decided not to mention yet that he had similar feelings for her. There were questions to ask, and he asked them. He got the history of the Marsh family and Innsmouth.

Althea was a princess because that's the way it worked. Captain Obediah Marsh was her several times great-grandfather. The "South Seas wife" that he had brought home was a princess of the Deep Ones. The Deep Ones lived in the ocean and were able to breathe underwater. Eventually, Althea said, she would change into a Deep One, develop gills and perhaps other physical features for living underwater, and join her parents and other relatives in the ocean.

"Your parents are alive?" asked Abbott.

"Yes, but they can't live on land any more. They have fins instead of feet. You'll meet them, of course. I have an uncle who grew a tail. What would you think of me if I had a

tail?” Abbott colored a bit and Althea laughed, and showed him that she already had more webbing between her fingers than the average person. She raised a finger. “We live forever under the ocean. I have met distant relatives more than a million years old.”

“So, you see, I am a member of a royal family that you never heard of. The riches of the ocean are mine and my family’s. Because we love each other, I know” -- Abbott failed to protest -- “I want you to join my family, for your mortal life. And we will wait for the day when Cthulhu wakes, which could be in your lifetime. Then we will face Him, and if we show no fear, we will be devoured swiftly and painlessly. Those who show fear have eons of terror, horror and pain ahead.” Althea said this with her usual good humor and an occasional smile, and Abbott found himself wanting to believe it, although it was clearly impossible, if not insane.

“Ultimately,” she continued, “my family is descended from Him, which is why we are the rulers of the ocean – until he awakes. You can make the same choice that Obediah Marsh made, since you are a mere mortal. You can be a king. I am willing to be your princess.”

Abbott had more questions. “Suppose we get married, what happens?”

* * *

Costello took the book to a store where he could make copies, and spent the entire day copying it, which cost him more than \$200. He copied the front and back of each page and noticed something: on the back of the blank page that followed the title page, there were signatures:

عبد الحضر (Costello translated this as Abdul al-Hazred)

الحكيم بعمره الله (Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah)

François Villon

John Lansing, Jr.

Ambrose Small

Joseph Crater

He decided that now he had to return the book to the Miskatonic University Library. It was only slightly damaged from the copying because it was only loosely bound between covers of some kind of pale leather. He wrapped it up in brown paper. He suspected the security guards would be on the alert after what had happened and he didn’t want to get caught with the book; it was probably grand theft.

In the end, he decided to simply mail it back to the university. He didn’t consider what might happen to the person who opened the package. He was already too obsessed for that.

Bridget and Nancy were still getting along well. Nancy lacked Bridget's interviewing skills, which were essential when talking to the people in the neighborhoods, so they made a good team. Interviewing people was a shortcut to finding out where the spiders might be lurking. They continued their collecting, and discovered that there seemed to be three kinds of winged spiders. First, there was a kind that was mostly grey with white and black banding, which Nancy called "wild type" because she said they looked like the original spiders that were sent into space. After comparing pictures, Bridget agreed. Except for the wings, she said.

One of the other kinds was totally black and they agreed to call it the "stealth" kind. The third kind, the rarest kind, was on the average slightly larger than the others and took on different colors depending on how the light struck it and one's angle of view. Nancy told Bridget that this was called "iridescence" (which Bridget almost knew; she had heard the word) and it wasn't unknown in spiders, but this degree of iridescence was uncommon in the Lycosidae. Nancy had to explain that. Bridget was learning a lot.

By now, Nancy and Bridget had quite a number of preserved specimens and first-hand observations. They had taped interviews with people who said that they knew about the spiders, which were less important, because they were dubious at times. Some of the interviewees were drunks or street people; others were homeowners who considered the spiders a pest. Some were apartment dwellers who said that their landlord was responsible. None of them, however, had been bitten by one of the flying spiders.

Bridget had been bitten many times in her days of torture in the Shoggoth Dungeon. She and Nancy had discussed that many times, and Nancy was of the opinion that the shoggoths were telling the spiders to feed on her, and the time had come to examine the spiders' DNA.

Abbot was settling in to his situation. He still didn't believe everything, even after meeting Althea's parents, who swam up to a dilapidated dock at the end of Innsmouth's central street one day and assured him that whatever their daughter wanted was all right with them. He was a little put off by their batrachian appearance at first, but when they spoke in perfectly understandable American English, and Althea said, "Hi Mom, hi Dad," he found that he accepted it. What man, who finds himself in love with a woman who wants him, and has the approval of her parents, would not, he reasoned.

The wedding date was set and Abbot and Althea, both of them blushing a little at first, started sleeping together. Abbott had some experience with women, but none of them had parents who looked somewhat like frogs. He had no difficulty overcoming that obstacle, as it turned out.

On the appointed date, Althea and Abbott went to the Grand Hall of the Order of Dagon. A large man with a wide mouth and feet that looked like swim fins presided. Abbott's vows were only to love and cherish Althea for his mortal life, but Althea promised forever. She had told him that this was traditional. It seemed to Abbott that most of the town of Innsmouth attended. The men thumped his back and told him that anything they could do for him, they would; the women teased Althea a little until they realized, in the way that women do, that she might already be pregnant. Then they had nothing but congratulations.

Abbott discovered that being a king was not an easy job, but he also discovered he had unlimited wealth at his command. Laundering gold into currency was a problem at first, but he found family records with Althea's help, and dealt with the same bankers. He was a Marsh now from Innsmouth, and the bankers had records, too, going back almost two centuries.

There was no need to return Innsmouth to a center of fishing, trading or whaling, but people needed things to do and he organized them and made sure they had all the money they needed. No one had been doing this before, and it was appreciated. He realized why the men at the wedding had made promises: they knew that better times were at hand. He had the road into town repaired. He established business relations with a couple of trucking companies, and they brought construction materials, food, medicines and other things that were needed from outside. The old woman who had rented him a room by the docks got a better place to live. The place where she used to live was torn down and replaced by a floating dock where Abbott sometimes met his in-laws.

Costello studied his copy of "The Book," as he now called it. There was nothing on his mind but The Book. His studies convinced him that there were points of contact with other dimensions. Indeed, he thought, the names written on the back of the page after the title page were the names of people who had found them. He recalled that page of the book had a different texture; not the parchment of the Egyptian pages, or the fine silk of some of the German or Greek pages, or the rough paper of the title page itself. It was more similar to the pale leather of the cover; a kind of vellum.

He learned, without knowing how he learned, that by moving a shiny object over a map while meditating as instructed, he could see lines and points that were not on the map. He had the best results with his brass Cross pen with silver chasing until he busted a radio antenna from a parked car. That was longer and more shiny. He could see more detail, and it seemed to him that he needed to go to New York City. The lines and points told him there was a gateway there.

The way from Arkham to New York was difficult. It was almost as hard as getting from the real world to Arkham, which Costello had realized was not in the world that he had known before. He kept driving and finally found a foggy place with overhanging trees, and on the other side he saw a Massachusetts state trooper and knew he had returned.

He drove carefully to New York City and found a hotel room. There, he studied The Book for a few more days. After he bought a local map, he located the gateway. It was in the Holland Tunnel. He explored the area when he wasn't absorbed in The Book.

Costello finally decided that he was ready. He signed his name under the other names on the back of the blank page after the title page, left his copy of The Book on the table in his cheap hotel room, and left, headed for the Holland Tunnel.

Bridget and Nancy started writing up their results as scientific papers, but they had to propose a scientific name for the winged spiders to fit them into current taxonomy. The DNA studies clearly

placed them in the order Aranae (spiders) but there was the matter of wings to consider. Nancy said that they needed to create a new order or at least, a suborder. Bridget went along with this, because Nancy had greater knowledge of science. They spent several days doing measurements and making notes on the appearance of arachnid body parts, and described three varieties. Nancy said that they could not be considered separate species or subspecies at this point. She said she'd leave that to someone else; it was bold enough to create a new order of the Arachnida. It turned out that Bridget was a better writer and editor than Nancy and took shorthand as well, so the preparation of the papers went well with Nancy dictating to Bridget.

There was another difficulty. Since the DNA of the spiders was altered, but wasn't altered by human technology as far as anyone knew, there was no government regulation in place according to the laws and regulations for GMOs. When Nancy and Bridget explained this to the AATF, Bradbury had no idea what to do about it. He absolutely refused to go to the "bureaucrats" (as he called them when he calmed down) for guidance or a decision. The next day, he said that he had talked to someone, and the decision was that since they were wild animals, they were not regulated. He did not say who he had talked to, but Bridget and Nancy guessed, because the answer arrived so quickly.

Since the spiders were to be in a different order, Nancy needed a completely new scientific name. The name of the Carolina wolf spider's genus, *Hogna*, couldn't be used even though it belonged to the closest biological relative of the flying spider. Nancy and Bridget looked up Latin words and rejected names like "Shuggothfacta" with some laughing and decided on the scientific name *Abnasa volantes*, "flying (thing) from NASA." Because they could not mention shuggoths, they had to adhere to the theory that spiders with wings were a mutation caused by cosmic radiation.

On his way to the gateway, Costello assaulted a man who was changing the flat tire on his car, and stole a chrome-plated tire iron. He continued with it in his hand.

Near the entrance to the tunnel, an old woman stood in his path and asked for money. Deep in his obsession, Costello struck her with the tire iron and continued to bludgeon her after she fell down. He realized then that a sacrifice improved his chances, nay, that it was necessary.

Arriving at the entrance, he turned the shiny blood-stained tire tool around in his hands, seeking the right orientations by a process that was now part of him but that he did not understand. Advancing into the tunnel and stopping traffic, he continued to twirl and twist the shiny piece of metal in a pattern and rhythm that he knew without knowing. Soon he achieved his goal of utter mindlessness, disappearing from the earth, and became one of the outer gods that dance forever before the daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time and space amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin monotonous whine of accursed flutes.

Bridget and Nancy continued their studies and remained best friends. Bridget never learned what

had happened to Abbott or Costello, which was just as well.