

## Arachnids

### Chapter 2: Caught in the Web

It had been two months since the incident with Susan and her son, yet the cursed words that the spider spoke continued to disturb me. As each day passed I slowly lulled my mind into believing that its vengeance wouldn't come true, yet in my heart, I could feel a burning anticipation, waiting for it to strike again. Edgeville was more relaxed than ever before, its people were cheerful once again and the shadow of the disappearances' had been lifted. I desperately tried to scavenge as much news as possible about the wilderness, focusing on any whispers of 'inconspicuous' giant holes emerging. Any form of talk coming back out of the wilderness was rare enough; minor details about its landscape were simply non-existent. I began to forget the ordeal and continued my own day to day chores, content with the fact that I had not heard rumour or gossip of more vanishings; I assumed that the spider activity had stopped. I assumed wrong.

I closely inspected the mithril bars I was planning to smith into armour decoration, others would argue that there are better places where I could get the task done more efficiently, however I have some sentimentality towards working with metals in Varrock. It's a very brief walk from the bank to the anvils opposite and the short jog allows me to reminisce on times gone by. As I walked out of the bank, re-counting the number of metal bars I had in my possession, I could hear a man's voice stalking me. "I'm certain it's him, sir" it calmly stated. I ignored the voice and continued to walk into the small smithing shack. As I began hammering away at the metallic bars of forged metal, I noticed two soldiers to my left, talking between themselves, yet intently studying me, as though they were quietly judging my technique. I couldn't bear it anymore; I stopped hammering and looked back at the soldiers. To my surprise they were already approaching me, "Adventurer, the king demands..." the other soldier coughed outlining his verbal mistake. "... *Requests*, your presence at the castle" he stated. I initially thought it was some form of prank, but when the soldier vacantly looked at me I realised the seriousness of the situation. "What does the king want with me?" I curiously asked. "It is not the king who requires your attendance" he replied. "This request was made on behalf of Reldo the librarian; it has been given the highest royal approval as it entails the security of Varrock." the soldier insisted, I raised an eyebrow trying to disguise my surprise. "What's the problem?" I replied inquisitively. "I'm not at liberty to discuss that here, I must stress that you are required in the castle immediately. You'll be informed there" he responded again, gesturing to leave the shack. "I guess we'd better move then!" I exclaimed, sarcastically shaking my head side to side and frustratingly gathering my things together. I went to head towards the bank, but the soldier grabbed my arm. "Can I not deposit my items?" I asked innocently, slightly raising the pitch of my voice. "There is really no time, I must insist you come with us now." he said tugging on my elbow. "Hey, I'll come! There's no need to take me into custody!" I replied jerking my arm away.

The soldiers were here for a reason, so I followed them as promised, tossing my bag of mithril over my shoulder. They walked either side of me like bodyguards, ensuring no one would intervene with their retrieval until we reached the castle. It was interesting to see the reactions of the folk we passed; some instantly passing judgement upon me as being a criminal, my partially torn fibre bag, full of concealed objects didn't aid help to convey my innocence. Even Baraek stopped to raise an eyebrow as I was paraded through the city centre. The soldiers lead me through the large, wooden castle doors, marching directly past Sir Prysin's office, then towards Reldo's library. The library door

was shut, yet I could hear the familiar sound of Reldo speaking aloud whilst he read. The shorter of the soldiers leaned forward and knocked boldly on the door; "Librarian Reldo. We have the civilian you wished to see". "Civilian?" I thought to myself pretentiously, I really hated being called a civilian. "Ooh good! Please... send him in..." Reldo's dim reply sounded like he was only half listening. The soldier turned to me and nodded, gesturing to enter. I grasped the door handle to the library and slowly opened it not sure what I was about to see. The familiar smell of papyrus and old scrolls filled my lungs and I could see stacks dusty books cluttering the tables. It was more of a mess than usual, which means Reldo has been searching for something. I walked around the table towards where the librarian was studying; he had not even gazed up to see if it actually was me. "*You Rang?*" I sarcastically stated. "Yes..." He said and then paused to continue to read. "Hmm..." he mumbled, he seemed somewhat uncomfortable, more uneasy than usual, as if he couldn't understand something. The silence seemed to stretch on, I didn't want to disturb him, yet I felt like he could leave me standing here for a while if I didn't interrupt him. "Well?" I questioned, impatiently raising my voice and dropping my metallic bars on the floor to deliberately make a loud, distracting racket. "Yes!" he paused again, slamming the book shut. Clouds of dust rose from the pages yet he continued to glare at it, silently pondering to himself. Finally he turned to look at me, and then tilted his head down to inspect me from over the top of his glasses. His expression transformed from a confused frown into a smile. "Ah! It's good to see you again adventurer!" he exclaimed clutching the book in his hand. "Alas, you know as well as I do that, had things been happy and rosy here, we wouldn't be having this conversation..." he explained, waving his finger at me. "Firstly, do allow me to apologise, what have the soldiers have told you?" he asked curiously. "Not a lot really, something about high security... danger to Varrock.... You know. The usual." I replied with a cheeky grin. "Hah yes! Very funny! Yet. I feel you haven't grasped the urgency of the situation, thus why I sent the royal guard out to find you!" he said pointing at me as though I were a child. "You see, we've stumbled across a significant security threat. Something *new*. Something *different*, which... doing my homework, it seems you are our only specialist in." I was confused. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, we've been having a few disappearances lately, two civilians and a guard around the edge of the wilderness..." I was starting to understand what he was hinting at.

"Do you have any leads..? People disappear in there all of the time..." I asked inquisitively, trying to force a direct answer. "Just one... there was another guard on duty when the guard disappeared, but frustratingly, his captain relieved him of his responsibilities immediately. I haven't found him yet. The missing persons have not returned either." he replied. "Have you sent any scouts into the wilderness?" I enquired, trying to help as much as I can. "These are very dangerous times adventurer, we keep a close eye on the north and, based on recent events, we expected that the fiend Zemouregal would have had something to do with it. However, reports back informed us of the discovery of a suspicious hole, to the north of the wilderness ruins. I understand there was a similar incident in Edgeville?" he replied. I felt a profound feeling of dread. "Yes... I know what is causing it as well... Spiders" I informed him. "Spiders?" he questioned, scrunching his face together in confusion. "Hmm, now that is interesting" he said, stroking his chin and then shuffling around a pile of scrolls. Reldo didn't seem too surprised, yet he didn't look like he was expecting it either. "Nevertheless! We could use your experience to get to the bottom of this, but there is another thing which maybe you could help us with" He revealed. "Oh?" I replied. "Yes... roughly three months ago an adventurer like you came seeking my council about certain ... matters..." I wasn't sure how this would help, but I continued to half listen, so I didn't come across as rude. "Matters involving

gemstones and magicks” he continued. “Tell me... Are you familiar with the concentration properties of gemstones? Enchantments or charms?” I was still unsure of what he was getting at. “Yes... I perform these regularly on my amulets and rings...” I said, curious to understand his peculiar question. “Well, this gentleman was asking about sapphires. Specifically, their ability to focus magic, to execute cryostasis successfully” I was baffled by what Reldo had said. “Cryo ... what now?” I responded, perplexed. “Cry-o-stasis” he replied cynically, spelling the word out slowly. “It’s a term I’ve fashioned to define preserving one’s self into a conscious sleep. I had not encountered it or even thought it was possible until he suggested it. So, I wasn’t much help at the time. Then he described how he was going to be rich, gesturing he had found gems the size of a steel full helmet! Then he quietly left, continuing on his escapade I presume.” I was still curious about this term he had created. “Preserving sleep? Like the techniques of the Lunar Clan?” I asked. “No, no. One has to preserve themselves physically, so, I would image freezing yourself somehow, probably in a block of ice.” I felt my body ironically freeze, finally apprehending his words. My memory flashed images of Jhallan and how I had helped him into his slumber, I began to wonder if this other adventurer had encountered or disturbed him. “Did he say where he was going or why he was asking?” I said, questioning the librarian again. “Unfortunately not, he vaguely mentioned to the north, but he never returned... which leads me to the other reason why I needed to speak with you.” I was relieved; I felt explaining things to Reldo would complicate too many things, certainly since they were about the Majharrat. “You see, there’s a lot of coincidence between the adventurer disappearing to the north and the emergence of, what you say are spider holes that you’ve stumbled upon. It’s why I have been intensely studying so much.” I nodded, agreeing with what he said. “The time frames do seem to fit together, how do you think they are related?” I asked him. “My theory? I think he thawed something out of its slumber in the depths of the wilderness... Something evil and wicked. Why else would he want to know about the spell?” Reldo sternly replied. “When I explored the holes, it appeared like they were burrowed, I encountered and killed a giant tarantula, but even that was a fraction of the size of what burrowed those holes.” I boastfully explained, trying to hide my pride. “There’s more” I said, working myself up to reiterate the evil words of the shadowed spider.

“Another spider addressed me; it muttered something as I collapsed the cave... ‘She’ is still hungry” I informed Reldo in the same way the spider had spoken to me. “‘She...?’” Reldo enquired, his face began to frown from his lack of understanding. “Like a queen or leader perhaps?” he second guessed whilst trying to make some sense of the mysterious words. “Regardless, it’s obvious that there are more of them roaming the wilderness snatching people up for whatever cause.” I replied. “Yes, you are absolutely right” he briefly smiled. “I knew that sharing our intelligence with you would prove vital in developing a solution to our problem.” He looked at me from the top of his glasses as though he had offended me, studying my body language to gauge my reaction. I had noticed his calculated use of ‘our problem’, almost charming me into agreeing to handle their ‘pest’ problem, but I felt like this was a quest I was destined to resolve. The librarian continued to speak, justifying himself, changing his tone to speak seriously. “Of course, as usual adventurer, you would be doing our lands a huge favour and the king is willing to pay a reward.” I laughed casually. “You know, most of the time I don’t do it for the money. I’m not some spontaneous mercenary. I just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time... mostly” He laughed at my brash comment. “But it is an incentive?” he said grinning, raising an eyebrow, knowing he had me sold. I briefly paused considering my options; Reldo didn’t break eye contact with me. “Fine, I’ll do it.” I sighed reluctantly, submitting to Reldo’s pressure. “Excellent! You truly are noble!”, “And probably looking for a death wish” I thought

to myself. "I'll need more information about this, cryo ... standing ... sister ... thing" I said, yearning to know what I was getting myself into. "Yes, yes, of course" he said rearranging the books around on his table. "Come here, I've got some interesting scrolls to show you" he said pulling a specific scroll open across the width of the table and pointing to the top of it. The scroll appeared to be a blueprint for a spell, detailing the layout of the ritual. It was identical to how Jhallan had achieved it, I tried to look surprised. "Evidently, it is very rarely practised anymore and my understanding is that it can only truly be achieved by powerful sorcerers who are able to manipulate and conjure a rush of ice. The actual setup for the spell is what requires the most skill, but it is probably some form of ancient magick to which I'm unfamiliar with" he said, I tried to hide the fact that I also knew about the spells that he was describing. "Firstly, it requires the possession of a number of valuable sapphire gems" he clarified, pointing to the diagram on the scroll. "Once, they are laid out in this manner, I believe the spell is cast upon any of the enchanted gems, with its target confined in the boundaries of the jewels, the cast will then materialise in whatever form... ice... I would assume." I nodded in agreement to make it appear like I was genuinely trying to fathom it out. "So, say if one of the sapphires were to be removed or stolen...?" I rhetorically asked. Reldo paused and thought about the question for a moment. "The spell would be broken perhaps?" he replied, quizzing me back. "The spell would be broken!" I replied exaggerating my words. "What if whatever was held inside of it... was released? Or set free! Perhaps our mysterious friend let whatever *it* was loose whilst he looted the place? He did say he was going to be rich!" Reldo smiled at me. "You know adventurer, I think you are on the right track with this!" I smiled back at him. "You see! I'm not just some barbarian! I do have intelligence too!" I replied, making Reldo chuckle softly. "I never doubted you for a second!" he said walking back around the desk, opening up another smaller scroll. "Here is the map our scouts made..." He said, handing the scroll to me. "One of them made a brief diagram of where this 'spider hole' has opened up, that should make it easier for you to find. I'm informed the scouts did not proceed to enter it, they only observed whilst their safety allowed it. I'm afraid you are on your own for this one, bold knight!" he said, trying to encourage me. "Aren't I always?" I replied smugly. "Yes, that seems to be the case." he replied, I could tell he felt somewhat guilty for my participation, possibly because he understood how dangerous it was going to be. "Right, well! I'd best get my gear together for this new quest of mine!" I said insolently. "Oh, adventurer..." Reldo quietly stated, not looking up from the book he had began reading, suspending my attempts to leave. "Yes?" I replied. Reldo slowly looked up at me from the book. "If what the mysterious stranger said was true... about the size of the gems he had found, I would imagine that kind of magical enchantment would be required to bind or trap something with significant strength or stature. You should take the utmost care investigating the area. I would feel quilt if I learned it was me who sent you to your death..."

Reldo seemed to be expressing legitimate care, despite having a weird way of showing it. "Thanks" I answered appreciatively. "If you need anything else, you know where to find me" he added as I was leaving, he was probably just being courteous, paying more attention to the scroll he was analysing. I was glad to see the guards had not waited around for me; I needed a little solitary time for myself to try and order my thoughts. I slowly stumbled back through the castle, thinking about my task, heading outside towards the eastern bank. I had so many burning questions etched in my mind, but no answers. I sustained my concentration, almost telepathically navigating through the courtyard without noticing where I was going. Upon my entrance into grand central square of Varrock I was stirred out of my thoughts by the sound of ambiguous conversation, which was briefly interrupted

by the loud clanking of forged metal being beaten by a hammer from the local blacksmiths. "My mithril!" I yelled out aloud, realising I had left them in Reldo's library, knowing they would probably disappear if I left them long enough. I dashed back through the castle and advanced to the old wooden door of Reldo's library, entering without an invitation. "Sorry I'm back! I forgot my..." Reldo had vacated his library, most likely to attend to royal business. The bag holding my metal bars was where I left it, however I noticed an interesting piece of parchment laid on the table that my bag was leaning against. "Hmm... Should I?" I inquisitively whispered to myself when I noticed my name was at the top of the papyrus. Studying the page closer I noticed it also had the king's seal of approval at the bottom of the page, although at first glance I thought it was a warrant to find me, I started to read the words branded into the page about me:

*"... Seems as though he has maintained contact with many desired artefacts under intense scrutiny. This exposure could lead to unknown and questionable side effects or symptoms. Any race that walks could use him as a weapon. Lest we not forget that we are at war, the threat from the north is ever present, patiently gathering strength. My apologies your highness, but I must highlight the fact that we barely survived the recent attacks from the beast Zemouregal. Varrock is weak, even with the beacon system in place, I dare not imagine the consequences of another attack of similar proportion. Although an ally, take caution, he knows more than we think..."*

Reldo entered the room, barging the wooden door wide open. "Ah! Adventurer, your back! So soon?" I had my back turned to Reldo; I reached down and snatched the bag of mithril off the floor and then turned to face him. "Yes! I forgot my smithing materials!" I explained, dangling the bag so he could see. "Ah, forgetful... I hope your lack of memory is balanced with an aptitude for strength!" he said, chortling at my absentmindedness, I could see the parchment delicately floating across the floor away from me, eventually resting underneath the table opposite. "Anyways! I'd best be on my way!" I stated again. "Is there anything else you are forgetting?" I paused, fighting the desire to quiz Reldo about the message. "Nope." I bluntly replied. Reldo moved out of the way of the door to let me pass through. I began to have second thoughts about the quest, I wondered if my assignment could be part of a different motive. I swiftly moved out of the castle, walking back through the courtyard. As I past the fur stall in the centre of Varrock an older man deafened me by shouting "Read all about it! Buy your Varrock Herald now!" I'd seen some of the stories printed in the papers, it was mostly lies and deception, especially their coverage of the Zemouregal attacks, although this was probably at the request of the king to keep the city out of a state of panic. I continued to walk, passing the local store, finally arriving at the bank. I climbed the steps into the bank wondering whom the letter may have come from; clearly it was sent from someone who knew me. The banker interrupted my thoughts, "How can I help you, sir?" he politely asked. "I'd like to make a withdrawal from my bank account please" I quietly replied. I began listing the items I would require for the journey, stuffing the food, runes and potions into my backpack. "What else sir?" the banker tiredly asked. "I'd like to deposit these metal bars and... hmm let's see... Oh! And could you withdraw my armour, magic short bow, dragon long sword, pickaxe and machete as well please?" I said fake, sarcastic smile, enjoying the torture I was inflicting. The banker nodded, rolling his eyes, I could see he was already tired of my requests. Each time the banker returned with a different piece of armour I quickly slipped it on and adjusted it fit appropriately. "Here are your gloves, sir" the banker said returning from his thirteenth trip to the bank chest. I gazed at them realizing they were my combat gloves and not the slayer gloves that I would actually need. I coughed loudly, "I'm sorry, I require my slayer gloves, not my combat gloves..." I contemptuously stated, gently handing them back to the

banker. The banker flared his nostrils, becoming impatient with me and then vacantly left without saying anything, dealing with my demands. I quickly slid my ring of life onto my index finger; the large diamond glinted snowy white and sparkled in the light. The final item he returned with was my long sword, which he held delicately across his palms, offering it to me. He understood how rare and expensive a sword crafted out of this metal was. Very few happen to stumble across such a powerful blade, with its origins unknown, the chances of finding an item of such fine craft are very small. The metal itself glowed with an aggressive blood red aura and was capable of slicing through almost any material with great ease. However, there I always felt something peculiar when wielding it, the weapon felt like it was an empty vacuum, as though the sword had lived, but its soul had been ripped away. It made me thirst for battle, whilst the sword gladly devoured and gorged upon whatever enemy it struck down. It was a power that scared me, yet blessed my strength and vigour. It was a truly remarkable weapon to wield, but I've always believed such a power could never exist without its drawbacks. "I must say sir; this sword gave me strange feelings when I gripped it by the hilt" the banker admitted. "I get that feeling sometimes too" I agreed, as I grasped the sword and snatched it away from the banker. "Have a good day, sir" the banker forcefully said, relieved at my departure. It felt gratifying to wear my armour, despite arguing with Reldo that I wasn't a mercenary, my armour filled me a sense of purpose. It made me feel sentimental; reminding me of the battles I had survived. The plate armour clunked and shuddered with every footstep I made closer to the wilderness.

I gracefully leapt over the segregating wall, briefly allowing myself to become accustomed to the foul stench and to clear my lungs of the initial choking ash. I was less familiar with this area of the wilderness, the occasional chore that required my presence in the wilderness revolved around Edgeville, where I would warily enter the abyss to bind runes ready for casting. I had not ventured here for a long time. The rare whisper I had uncovered during my search for news about the spiders talked of Fremenniks roaming the eastern shore, I was tempted to investigate, but I never found the time. I headed directly north, being extremely careful not to stroll too close to the chaos temple. It stood in solitude, secluded from the rest of the area by a moat of fire, a crushed shadow of the strong outpost it formerly was, destroyed and twisted by the war this land sustained. The bubbling hot magma frequently spit huge, projectile lumps of sizzling lava into the air which burst and scattered upon collision with the ground, propelling scorching shrapnel everywhere. I fear the horror of witnessing an unsuspecting explorer being stuck by one; it would maim and burn through even the thickest of metal. The inferno surrounding the temple guarded an altar where anyone could express their faith and seek blessings from the god Zamorak. I always searched to be sanctified before I bear anywhere dangerous, but I always felt uneasy requesting blessings from here, the land itself was distinctly unholy. I continued to walk north, wandering past the graveyard of shadows. It acquired its name from the reanimated bodies of the deceased that walk the hallowed ground and the ghosts that drift mindlessly, eternally suspended between life and death. I felt empathy for these lost souls, a mixture of victims and beasts from the war that once was, they believed that they were dying for a just cause yet, were cursed to forever wander without attaining true peace. These shadows had clearly been tormented and tortured for years; aggressively attacking and wanting to harm any life that approached them. I could still hear the ghostly moans carried on the wind as I continued to head north, directing myself from the memory of the map Reldo showed me. I slowly approached the wilderness ruins, the mood always changes in this area of the wilderness, the wind never whistles, the rotting trees don't sway or make any noise, it's always eerily silent. The warm red

glow of deadly red spiders scampering through the dirt was unmistakable in this part of the abandoned land, even through the gloom. These spiders had been congregating here long before the emergence of the tunnels, there was a supernatural trepidation which haunted the area which lulled and lured them. "Hooooaahh" whispered something from behind me; I could hear the sound of faint, ghostly murmurs and breathing surrounding me, as though something was trying to call out to me. I swiftly turned around again, "Hello..?" I nervously called out, fearing what I might hear back. It was silent again, calm and tranquil. A twig snapped from behind me, instinctively I lunged around forcing my sword into the floor. The spider temporarily shrieked in pain, then lay motionless on the floor. "First spider kill of the day!" I gleamed with pride. I thoroughly wiped my blade clean and studied the terrain, lingering in an area for long periods of time had a tendency to attract things that wanted to cause pain, so I swiftly passed through the ruins without inspecting the ghostly voices any closer. "Perhaps I will return with my ghost speak amulet someday" I contemplated, considering a return to this paranormal place in the future. I knew I had to be close to the newest spider opening, I could feel it burning in my chest, so I continued to bear slightly north east of the ruins. A conspicuous gathering of trees transpired into my vision, I approached it vigilantly, remembering how I stumbled and fell into the hole before. The undergrowth was similar; it was surrounded by dead, lifeless shrubs and unearthed tree roots surrounded where the hole was. I detached my hatchet from my rucksack and began to accurately carve into the protective dead plant life. The branches and parched limbs of the undergrowth tore and snapped easily, falling to the floor. I was alert and aware of each step I made, constantly observing the floor in anticipation that it might suddenly stop.

As I expected, the trees parted and I could see across the width of the hole, it was identical to the other, seemingly burrowed by something immensely large in size. "Abseiling into the hole should be less painful" I said to myself, smirking as I recalled the memory of falling again. I quickly glanced down into the hole, unable to see the bottom; it was a void of darkness. I walked back through the dead trees to where the ground was more stable and rested my backpack on the floor. I rummaged around in the bag, pulling out two lengths of rope, a large steel nail and my hammer. I tied the two lengths of rope together, "It should be long enough" I said, not entirely confident in my estimation. After tying the rope around the nail, I softly placed the nail into the dusty black floor of the wilderness. I quickly glanced around to see if anything was aware of my presence; moss giants and poisonous spiders roamed the area to the east from my position, sometimes they wandered further away from their areas in search of prey. I was relieved to remain undiscovered; I began bashing the nail into the floor to secure the rope. The ground was very tough to pierce, requiring at least eight swings with the hammer before I was satisfied it was secure. Finally, I gathered all of the rope together and guided it along the floor to the spider hole, throwing the remaining rope into the abyss. I took a brief moment to prepare myself, taking a quick swig of water, igniting my lantern, organising my runes and ensuring my sword was easy to unsheathe. A loud 'whooshing' sound broke the ambient, resonating noise of the strong wind whistling. I quickly turned around recognising instantly what the sound signified, as I gazed up I noticed the white tail of a projectile spell spiralling towards me, I was too slow to react and the spell connected with my body knocking me off my feet. I felt a gripping energy pass through me, the revenant had prevented my teleporting abilities. I swiftly jumped back onto my feet to notice the partially transparent, grey shadow of the revenant knight levitating towards me, preparing to cast another spell. "Why now?!" I screamed at the knight, throwing my backpack over my shoulder and grabbing the rope. The revenant released another

spell, it was red in colour and more likely to inflict some form of physical damage. I began to sprint towards the hole without looking back, passing the rope through my free hand as I ran. As I reached the edge I leapt into the darkness of the hole, free falling for moment before my tight grip on the rope stopped my fall. The rope shuddered under my weight, aggressively swaying and throwing me around, I held onto the rope with my other hand, momentarily scared I might drop my lantern. I held my breath and looked up the cavern to the edge of the opening, praying the revenant did not decide to pursue me. I transiently thought I heard the sound of another spell being cast, however nothing appeared and I breathed a sigh of relief. I looked down the depths of the darkness and began to slowly lower myself down the rope. The breach was significantly deeper than the other I had explored; I continued to lower myself until I reached the end of the rope. I looked back up to the entrance of the hole, it was some distance away. "Escaping is going to be even more difficult than last time" I said to myself, considering my options. I knew there was a possibility that the revenant could be waiting at the entrance of the hole, so there was only one thing left for me to do. I looked back down into the blackness of the chasm below me, took a deep breath and then released my grip on the rope.

I fell peacefully for what seemed like a lifetime, only to be interrupted by crashing into the floor, causing a loud crunching thud to echo through the tunnel. The impact winded and dazed me; I rolled around and gasped for air whilst clutching at my aching head. My vision was blurred and my entire body throbbed with every mighty beat of my adrenaline filled heart. I blindly reached around where I landed, feeling the hilt of my sword pass through my fingers. I gripped hold of it tightly and forced myself back onto my feet, using the sword like a walking stick. I desperately tried to gather my things together as quickly as possible; some blood and death runes fell out of my backpack; scattering around as I impacted. I hoisted my shield back over my left shoulder and seized my lantern pointing, it down the tunnel. I froze in my footsteps; I thought I saw the outline of a moving shadow some distance ahead up the tunnel. "If you think you are going to get the jump on me ... you're wrong ... I came prepared this time!" I declared, smiling into the darkness. I slowly dropped my heavy gear onto the ground and stabbed my sword into dirt. I picked up the lantern and walked forwards a few yards and then intentionally placed the lantern in front of me. I opened my rune pouch, whilst keeping a cautious eye on what was ahead of me and began hunting through it for a collection of runestones. I cleared my mind and focused on the size of the fire I wanted to fashion, simultaneously smashing the runes together. My hands ignited with a deceptively chilly orange fire, which spread up to my elbows, my bulky armour made it difficult to control the elements, yet I remained focused. I aggressively drove my hands forward, aiming at where the shadow stood. The wave of fire lit the tunnel red as it glided through the air, the sound of the blaze got quieter as it passed into the distance. The spell splashed into a small inferno where it landed, the shadowy outline burst into flames, shrieking as it frantically ran around. "Shadow spiders..." I murmured to myself, becoming aware of what I was facing. I hated shadow spiders; their physical attacks smothered the very essence of life, consumed your faith and dimmed all the hope you hold deep within. Although they were relatively easy to dispatch, being face to face with them was troublesome. The noise of spider screeching filled the tunnel; the darkness began to dance, I could see spiders and shadows sweeping past the flaming carcass of the shadow spider I had killed. I cast six more waves of fire down into the abyss at various different positions, hoping to hit my enemy. The whole tunnel was momentarily lit with a warm fiery glow, emitting flashes of yellow and white when the spell landed. The spiders continued to angrily scream at me as they approached, making it difficult to distinguish if I had killed



any. I noticed some of the spiders alight, still rushing towards me, abandoning another two bodies that lay ablaze and motionless behind where the spiders had reached. I realized how close the spiders were, so I frantically started firing more spells, not caring where they headed. The sound of burning was as loud as the shrieking spiders and the tunnel had morphed into a vein of blazing earth. The flames on my arms had extinguished themselves, "I've used all of my runes!" I exclaimed glaring at my hands. I quickly retreated back to my abandoned gear, preparing myself for combat. I pulled my sword out of the ground and lifted my shield, just in time to deflect the lunging spider. I punctured the overturned spider through its body, before it could get up, leaving it to die. A spider lunged at my leg and bit into my armour plated legs, although it didn't physically harm me, I heard cursed whispers; a curious gush of white dust transferred from me to the spider as I felt my faith drain. I bashed the spider away from me with the hilt of my sword and then slashed through a different approaching spider, causing it to fall instantly. I turned around to face the dazed spider, and then stabbed it through its body. As I knelt down to dispatch the vulnerable spider, another jumped onto my back and began to gnaw at me. I noticed the subtle divine glow again, followed by the familiar feeling of dread. I grabbed the spider off my back and threw it in front of me towards the entrance of the tunnel. I heard more spiders behind me, so I spun around to face them. There were just three spiders left remaining, I hurled my shield towards the spider to my left, which sliced it in half like a guillotine. I finally executed the remaining two arachnids without suffering a scratch, hacking and carving the defenceless creatures apart. I grabbed my shield and then returned to the spider I threw, it lay on its back screeching in a daze, manically kicking its eight legs around in the air. I enjoyably plunged my sword through its body, releasing it from its physical pain. I looked down the tunnel at where the spiders came from; the floor was littered with smouldering carcasses and splashes of hemolymph.

"First things first..." I said to myself delving into my backpack of items. I slowly pulled out one of the potions I had packed, squinting my eyes to see the colour of the liquid in the single, dim light of the lantern. The pale green liquid contained in the vial was the prayer potion I wanted. I pulled the cork out of the top of the vial, savouring the promising "pop" sound, followed by the sweet aroma of the rannar based potion. It was a truly delicious scent which reminded me of the smell of ripe sugar cane and honey. I tilted my head back and took an extended swig of the drink. As the liquid passed down my throat I could feel it warming up my chest, revitalising my soul and inspiring me to continue. I wiped my mouth with satisfaction and then took a deep breath. I wanted to rest longer, but dawdling was dangerous, so I quickly gathered my things together and began to cautiously make my way further down into the tunnel. The architecture of the tunnel was identical to the one I navigated previously, large in diameter and excavated by something of astonishing size. Similarly to the other, it burrowed deeper into the ground; the air thickened and became hotter the further I walked. I was vigilant of more spider holes, scanning the roof and the walls for any fissures that waiting spiders could jump out of. I was surprised to find very few, only the silver sparkling of abandoned webs reflecting the light of my lantern provided proof that there were spiders here previously. The deeper I trekked, the more deceptively safer I felt, dust swirled in the wind and clinched to the stubborn, resolute cobwebs. It was clear this part of the wilderness had been undisturbed for a considerable amount of time. The air suddenly became clotted with thick dust, I moved back and removed my helmet, replacing it with a facial mask, so I could breathe, throwing my rune helm into my rucksack. The air was dangerously suffocating and large fragments of rock lay ahead, the volume of dust in the air suggested that there had been activity nearby. I coughed hard as I struggled for breath, the stale,

dull taste of earth made my tongue dry and parched. The light from the lantern struggled to pierce the viscous air; illuminating only a few steps in front of me. I noticed the tunnel abruptly halted ahead through the dust; it looked like the cave had collapsed from above. "A dead end ... fantastic!" I sarcastically said, considering whether my journey had been a waste of time. I didn't want to falter here, so I untied my pickaxe from my backpack and began clearing what I could from the rock pile. I knew how dangerous this was; a stray hit could cause the delicately balanced pile of rubble to turn into my own personal stony tomb, so I was careful to be extremely precise with each of my swings. I continued to swing perseveringly for another twenty five minutes before I finally gave up. "It's no use!" I screamed at the immovable obstacle standing in my way, throwing my pickaxe blindly at the rock fall. The rocks agitatedly crumbled and a few small rocks from above tumbled down, I started nervously pacing backwards anticipating the roof to rain down. I breathed a sigh of relief when the rocks calmed and stopped threatening to give way, yet I could still feel my frustration. "There must be another way! Surely!" I shouted, my voice muffled by the mask. I hopefully passed the light of my lantern around the edge of the tunnel, trying to figure out a way by or notice a weakness in the stone barrier. As the beam of light passed the right side of the rocks a blue flash caught my attention, I promptly returned the light of my lantern back to where I saw it. I didn't notice anything peculiar and I started questioning my sanity in these hot, close conditions. Once, I moved the light of the lantern away it mischievously sparkled again. "What on Earth...?" I said, inquisitively walking closer to the rocks to try and identify what I had seen. I negligently moved a few rocks aside, forgetting how fragile the pile was and shone my light again; the blue light was stronger and more prominent. The light glistened and shimmered with the movement of my lantern. I continued to hastily pull rocks away from the rubble, desperately trying to dig my way to the suspicious light. I reached a point where I couldn't move any more rocks out of the way, so I picked up my pickaxe and began unearthing the object. The rock pile shuddered with every hit of my pickaxe; larger rocks plunged and rolled down increasingly from above the point I was digging at. I passed my arm through the opening; I could just stroke the object, but not grasp it. It was ice cold to the touch. As I flailed my arm around to grab it I could feel it was protected by a thin fabric and was nestled deep within it. "Oh no" I muttered to myself as a deep sadness overwhelmed me, I started putting the facts together and realised what I had found. I grasped the cloth-like material and lightly tugged it, loosening it from the rock pile, but the rocks also started to yield around me. "Here goes nothing!" I muttered to myself, yanking the item free.

I fell backwards onto the floor, falling backwards over a rock that had sneakily landed behind me. I speedily got back onto my feet still gripping the object tightly in my right hand. I glared up at the rock fall before me which had started submitting under the weight, "Land slide!" I shouted, spinning around and sprinting back up the tunnel. My heart began racing and I struggled to breathe again; even with the mask on, the air was still a turbid blend of soil and dust. Large rocks began to fall from the roof of the tunnel and the sound of the earth disintegrating around me roared loudly. The collapse wasn't as violent or as big as when I caused it to happen in the previous tunnel, so I stopped running when the rocks stopped falling. I looked down at the object I held in my hand. It looked like a brown shoulder bag, weaved together by hand using cloth. It felt heavy, but appeared no bigger than a few books. The bag was freezing and as I turned it over to open it, I felt the soaked through cloth with the palm of my hand. Inside the bag was the most glorious sapphire gem I had ever laid my eyes on, it was large enough to craft an entire orb of oculus and truly beautiful to look at. As I shone my lantern on it, dazzling blue light emanated from its heart, filling the tunnel up with a bright

blue glare. I noticed it had strange, untranslatable markings branded down its sides and was also partially transparent, revealing diamond-like, icy core. "Reldo was right" I whispered to myself, considering Reldo's theory of what had happened. I searched the bag further and found a set of limp, flimsy pieces of paper that were drenched from the bag. "There's writing on it!" I excitedly said, although my excitement died down a little when I realised the ink was smudged in some places, I could however decipher some of the writing, hovering my lantern above it:

*"... I 'm certain what he said is true. He was very impressive, though, I'm not sure if I should trust him. Tomorrow I shall find out more from the librarian! Patience Sergio! Tomorrow is going to be a great day!*

*Day 32*

*After my meetings with Reldo my plans are somewhat still too open, he had no lie in his eyes. He was telling the truth and was somewhat offended I had asked about something which he never imagined was possible! Poor Reldo, in his studies of magicks to never stumble across ice magicks! Ah! Calvin you are a truly gifted wizard of the arts! And a knowledgeable one too, I hope his tip offs are correct!*

*It's a shame I couldn't truly understand what Calvin was referring to, he also seemed pleased that I didn't understand how the spell worked. Maybe he wanted me to learn? Never mind that. I'm going to be rich! Darn it Sergio! Hastily shouting that to Reldo! What if he goes exploring too? I cannot wait much longer; I have been patient as it is, gathering my research, honing my skills! I am a great adventurer and I should be exploring, not biding my time for safety!*

*Day 34*

*It's taken two days to prepare, but I'm finally ready! Runes, potions, food and equipment. Armour and weapons. I've even invested in some poisoned rune arrows from the grand exchange... you can never be too sure! I bear north tomorrow! To be changed forever!*

*Day 35*

*This place is enormous! It is so beautiful, there's a huge, chamber on the inside of the hive, hidden from the world, like the tip of an iceberg submerged underwater. The swarm of spiders on the roof guarded it well, but I still managed to walk straight in. I hope Calvin was not referring to the lonely sapphire on the roof. I've seen people snatch it all of the time! Hmm ... Come to think of it, it keeps reappearing ... very suspicious. I've cleared the hive out and I'm going to break through the floor with my pickaxe.*

*What an incredible sight to behold. This place is magnificent; I've used all of my rope just reaching the bottom! I hope I can climb back out! The room is like an icy vault, its freezing inside and ice stretches across the walls of this desolate cavern. Whilst I climbed down the huge column of brilliant blue light was so distracting, yet alluring and it stretched all the way from the floor to the roof, shining radiantly.*

*The platform on the floor is covered entirely in ice; the light originates here, conjured by truly awesome sapphires. What a relief! They appear to be bore into the ice, with strange markings that emanate glare an angry red and orange light, as though they have been branded into the gems.*

*Extinguished pots of oil are dotted around the edge of the room; whoever created this needed a lot of light, but the light beam provides more than enough light for me.*

*I swear on Saradomin himself, the gems are arranged in his name, as a fitting tribute to his glory, I had to pause to catch my breath! The beams of light that connect the sapphires together shine out in his symbol. There is a larger sapphire at the centre, the largest, about the size of a pumpkin! Maybe worth the same too! That's where the column of light is strongest. I think I'll only be able to take the big one! But. Should I? The longer I look at the light the guiltier I feel, I don't want to do it. But for the price I simply must, Oh great Saradomin, please bless me with your treasures.*

*The ice started to crack and then it smashed when I thawed and pulled the largest sapphire out of the ground. The whole cave shook and there was a scorching white light, burning from the ceiling. The cavern is melting, rocks are falling everywhere. She shrieked and now she is loose. I caught a flash of red. Her eyes. Her mark. How long has she been imprisoned here? Her unholy wrath lying dormant, bound by the ice. I am being hunted. I must escape.*

*We fought; I have hidden in a tunnel under the ice room. Did I release her? Have I done this? Do I deserve this? She injured me, my other arm is bright red, it looks venomous. Calvin did not warn me of this, he didn't warn me about what I could awake from its slumber. Is this why he did not want me to know?*

*I burn; I feel fire, in my body, in my mind. I ache. I'm so tired. The world is blurring... how did I get here?*

*My body is failing. My last act will contain. Close it off. It will claim me too. Redemption? My pickaxe is heavy.*

*Come to think of it I haven't dreamt since.*

*||-*

The remaining pages were blank; the moisture had spoiled the other pages. "Poor guy" I said sympathetically, looking back at the cave in. "He must have done this to imprison whatever 'she' is" I mumbled, acknowledging my thoughts aloud. "She..." I pondered, standing silently, looking at the pages of a desperate man, trying to find meaning in his dying words. I recognised where the nest was, buried in the very depths of the wilderness lay a mound guided by spiders with just a single sapphire burrowed into its roof to signify its importance, "Perhaps this tunnel lead there?" I considered, pessimistically glaring at the cave in. A violent gust of wind blew the papers out of my hands, scattering them everywhere. I fanatically scrambled to organise them back together before they became damaged or dirty. I scooped them altogether and rearranging them more neatly before slipping them into my backpack when I was finished. Another strong breeze moved through the tunnel, sweeping up a miniature whirlwind of dust and earth. The wind was coming from behind me, "Hmm" I contemplated. I could hear gentle whistling next to the cave I was in. I walked back down the tunnel towards the unusual noise, examining where it could be coming from, the noise got louder with every step that I took. The whistling was more vivid and louder when the breeze was stronger, which made it easier to discover the source. I could see the section of wall where the wind was moving to, yet I couldn't tell exactly where it was coming from. I passed my hand gently along the wall; the rocks felt damp, warm to the subtle touch of my fingertips, but sweating from the heat

of the fiery volcano deeper in the earth. As I continued to glide my hand along the wall I could feel the wind passing in-between my fingers. I shone the light from my lantern towards the wall and noticed small cracks had emerged throughout the height of the wall. "The last cave in must have compromised the structural integrity" I said, inspecting the wall and relating to the experience I have had with construction. I moved the light onto the roof, trying to calculate the consequences of breaking the wall down. "Seems like nothings being supported by it..." I said, trying to induce some self belief in my actions. I felt like risking it, I didn't really have much of a choice; the route was completely shut off. I untied my pickaxe from my backpack again and placed the rest of my gear to one side. I raised the pickaxe above my head and swung it with force against the wall, the pickaxe penetrated it easily, crunching through flimsy layer of rock, leaving a big hole and causing some rocks from above it to fall. The wind became more furious and gusted stronger the more I smashed open the hole. I dropped my pickaxe, hearing the metal head "clang" off the floor and grabbed my lantern to have a closer look, leaning against the outside of the wall. It unveiled a small opening that dropped into a narrow, black corridor that lead downward, spiralling down into darkness. I could hear the echoes of the rock knocking and colliding with its rocky shell as it fell. "Wow... what a hole" I said, peering into the black abyss, hearing my voice echo four or five times. The echoes were very loud; I aimed my lantern down into the shadow, it revealed the hole only opened out to a width just big enough to fit a man into. As I stared down into the darkness a mystical dark blue light kindled itself, illuminating the hole and growing larger every time it pulsated. The glow flickered between different shades of blue as it expanded, until it reached the width of the tunnel, at which point the colours bound together like blotches of paint, clearly separating the centre of the light from the outer, darker edge. "A portal?" I questioned myself, recognising the familiar, serene 'vorooming' sound. The portal continued to linger, sustaining its colour and inviting me in. I heard rocks falling behind me, I swiftly spun around, sword in hand ready for battle; the cave was desolate and silent. I re-sheathed my sword, I felt relaxed that I wasn't under attack. The whole tunnel began to shake with anger at my optimistic thoughts, followed by a nightmarish roar. I re-drew my sword, recognising the thundering howl. "I have ... hunted ... you down!" the reverberating, deep voice of the hiding spider shouted. It sounded like it was coming from further down the tunnel, but it also sounded muffled, as though it was coming from behind the walls. The tunnel shook and then burst with a deafening explosion, firing rocks towards me. I covered my face, protecting myself from the debris. My ears throbbed from the volume and I could hear a low pitch hum coming from ahead of me. I walked into the centre of the tunnel shining my lantern into the darkness; it appeared the tunnel ahead was clouding even darker; a thick black shadow slowly crept along the walls and the floor of the tunnel. The hum was getting louder and more aggressive as the shadow drew closer, I opened my eyes wide in terror as I realised the sheer numbers of the spider horde descending towards me. "I can't win this fight" I said to myself, throwing my pickaxe into my rucksack and grabbing my lantern in a panic. I had no other options; I was sealed in by the rock fall and cornered by a host of spiders. I ran towards the opening in the wall jumping down into the hole. "Here we go again..." I nervously mumbled to myself.

I pencil dived, feet first towards the portal, briefly enjoying the exhilaration of free falling. I felt my body warm up as I passed through the portal; looking up to see the portal was darker and purple in colour as I passed through to the other side. Even though it continued to move further away from me, I could still see it rippling and swaying like the surface of a pond when a pebble is thrown into it. My brief spell of enjoyment soon turned into screams of terror as I realised the height at which I

continued to fall from. I was plummeting into darkness, an impenetrable void of night with just the dimmest beams of a large full moon to allow me to see my body. I began to fall through branches, feeling them snap and crunch as gravity continued to pull me down. The leaves were wet and the water was drenching my face mask. I landed unexpectedly with a soggy “splat”, cushioned by a pile of something soft and moist. I desperately tried to grab something solid, to pull myself out of whatever it was I had landed in. My body began to sink as I felt the firm texture of an extending tree branch, out stretching its thorny arm to offer aid. I gladly tugged and pulled myself out of the mushy pit that I was bathing in, raising myself over the edge and rolling along the floor. “Ewww” I wailed, expressing my disgust, flicking the slime off my hands. I wiped my fingers across my chest, scooping off a generous helping of the gooey substance; it had a peculiar, stale, damp smell, almost like the smell of grass after morning dew. I wiped the goo off the lens of my lantern; the light glared a snotty green as I smudged and smeared it across the glass. I aimed my light to where I had landed; it looked like a groove in the platform which, upon closer inspection, looked like an aperture carved out of a thick branch of a tree. The pit was overflowing with a thick, liquidized, mossy substance; it looked like a natural formation but to a size I’d never seen before. The air was very chilly; I ripped my moss soaked face mask off, repulsively holding it away from me between my thumb and index finger. I splattered when I lazily discarded it into my rucksack. I spared a few moments to inhale some deep breaths of refreshingly clean air; it was pleasant to no longer be choking on dusty ash. As I glared up I noticed the very faint outlines of immensely large tree trunks, extending as far as the light from my lantern could pierce. I could see the light of the moon, being incised in-between the gaps in the trees that surrounded me. Thin strands of web connected some of the trees together whereas others were connected by larger, fully weaved webs, threaded like a net between branches. “Spider webs... where am I?” I questioned myself; I was beginning to worry as I had no bearing or familiarity with my surroundings. I curiously looked down, wondering what it was I was stood upon. The tree branch was extremely wide and slightly raised; I could step down off the branch onto a slightly adhesive, webbed platform that stretched around the radius of the tree trunk. I picked up my rucksack and dusted off the last few drips of moss that clung to my knees. I then grabbed my sword and lantern tightly; knowing how precious they were going to be to me now. As I walked around the tree trunk I began to comprehend the sheer size of the tree; strange, pale green mushrooms resembling those that grew in Canifis grew in the grooves of the tree trunk, they illuminated a dim fluorescent green light when I touched them. “Strange... yet weirdly soothing, I don’t think I’ll be eating any of these...” I joked, nervously laughing at myself. I was alerted by a short faint hissing from the darkness behind me, I spun around, sword at the ready, yet I could not see anything.

I thought about calling out, but convinced myself otherwise, in fear of what could hear me. I began furiously questioning myself, “What if something’s hunting me? What if there are more spiders here? Where am I? How do I get out?” I shut my eyes tight and shook my head in frustration to regain my composure. I noticed a long strand of web that connected the platform I was standing on to another tree. “Looks like it’s the only way off...” I gulped, urgently looking around for another option. I reluctantly sheathed my sword and placed the grip of my lantern between my teeth, pushing down on the web with my foot to test how strong it was. I warily lowered myself down onto the strand and slowly crawled the distance across the two trees. The tree I arrived on was identical to the one I’d abdicated, however there was a layer of spider webbing encasing the trunk of the tree, just out of reach of my grip. I dexterously jumped up the tree and grabbed onto the lowest point of the hanging web, climbing up to the higher platform. As I scrambled onto the safer, more solid

webbed platform a strong gust of wind travelled through the dark forest, causing the trees to sway, it startled me into grabbing onto the floor to balance myself. I could hear the branches from the top of the tree “whooshing” as the wind passed through. It was almost silent here and very tranquil, but too quiet for my liking, it made me very nervous. I was made even tenser by the odd sound of snapping branches from above my head. It made me feel exposed, so I pulled my runite helm back on; although it constricted my view, it made me feel better psychologically. I continued to navigate the monstrously large trees, climbing and jumping from web to web in a bid to find an exit or a portal out of this alien world.

An hour past of athletically demanding tree to tree movement before I discovered a glimmer of hope. In the distance from within the darkness, shone a large, yet very dim white light. My heart lifted and began to beat faster; I was beginning to doubt my hopes of finding an exit from the foreign lands. I energetically swung across the dangling web strands to the next tree, the light glowed brighter and extended further across the horizon. I was beginning to forget my fears and concentrate on the excitement of discovery, until a deafening screech broke the silence. “Eeeeeyyaaaaaaggh”, the sound surrounded me, I couldn’t tell where it came from, I drew my sword in eagerness, expecting to be ambushed by some undiscovered, hideous beast. I was surprised to hear more screeches, significantly quieter, but different pitches, coming from farther away. I didn’t like the fact these seemed to come from different, individual directions in response to the first outcry of might. It fell eerily quiet; I heard the beginnings of a low pitch, buzzing sound. At first it was very quiet; however it gradually became louder and more irritating. I moved back towards the tree trunk, sinking into a cavity and pressing myself against it in an attempt to camouflage myself in the darkness. The buzzing was so overwhelmingly loud my head began to ache. I ducked down and crouched in my hiding hole as a black shadow passed overhead, I could see through the darkness, there were more of them. I silently gasped as the closest humming came from within a few yards to my right, stopping suddenly. A colossal fly slowly walked into my view, preening itself and rubbing its legs together. “It hasn’t noticed me” I thought to myself, relieved, yet frozen, motionless. Its head violently tilted from left to right, it was so fast that at one moment I thought it had spotted me. It’s large, unblinking, net-like gaze was cast upon me. I didn’t move. It was as though I was locked in stone like a statue. The fly continued to rapidly move around, but then it suddenly twitched to look behind itself, cautiously walking out of view to my right. I wanted to lean out of the opening that I had found refuge in to see what it was doing, but I didn’t hear it fly away and I didn’t want to be found. A curious odour had begun to fill my nostrils; it was very peculiar, smelling like a mashed up mix of lime and the smell of decomposing leaves on a hot day. I gingerly moved myself to the left, pressing my hand against the cold surface and sliding myself across to try and get a better view. I felt something wet suddenly jerk away from my hand, I squinted my eyes trying to see what it was through the darkness. A loud snapping sound caught my attention; pulling me away from the distraction, I gazed up in horror realising my hiding hole wasn’t a hole at all. Large spines had extended around the opening, I frantically tried to move, but the hole closed up before I could escape.

I tossed and turned attempting to squirm away from the grasp of what ever had entrapped me. I was blind; it was so dark I couldn’t even see the outline of my own hands. I felt something whistle past my face, grinding and sparking against my helmet. I panicked, drawing my sword I began slashing and hacking at the darkness. Thin cuts appeared in the obstacle ahead of me, beaming the dim light from the outside onto my chest. I felt a strong, spear like pressure being applied to my lower back

which had enough force to push me forward. I continued to manically incise and etch more cuts into the obstruction; I heard a strange sound, like the tightening of rope around an object and then felt a sharp pull on my leg. I finally slashed an opening big enough to rip myself out of the grasp of my attacker, but the vine coiled around my leg was pulling with even more intensity, causing me to fall face first onto the floor. I maintained a firm grip on my sword; I forced myself onto my feet and severed the vine laced around my leg. It wriggled around for a few seconds before becoming lifeless and limp, resting on the floor. I watched, my eyes wide with fear at what the innocent groove in the tree had become; the plant had elongated out of the tree hollow around me and attempted to swallow me up. It appeared to be a giant flytrap, its mouth had relaxed wide open, providing the opportunity to view and inspect what was left its insides. It had spines around its lips which were originally concealed, camouflaging it and successfully misleading me into thinking it was harmless. I looked closer inside the mouth of the plant, it revealed more spikes which had protracted whilst I was inside, it looked like an iron maiden, yet the tips of the erect needle-like vines dripped poison, probably to pierce and then sedate its unsuspecting victim before it began to digest them. I turned my gaze away from the plant, closing my eyes; the thought of being injected with the poison made me shudder and shake. I opened my eyes to see the fly had succumbed to the fate I narrowly avoided. It had been caught halfway in the grasp of the oversized plant, its liberated wing periodically twitched and fluttered as the flytrap injected its toxins into its body, indulging on its catch. I bent down and unravelled the vine bound around my leg; its thick thorns had hooked into the metal, further scratching the surface of the already battle damaged armour. "Giant carnivorous plants ... oh how far away Karamja feels now..." I announced aloud, reminiscing the smaller, less deadly fly traps on that lonely, tropical island. I began looking around; it had fallen eerily quiet again; in the commotion I had forgotten about the dangers that were flying above me. "Where did you go...?" I whispered to myself, scrutinizing the darkness for movement. "Bzzzt ... bzzzt", the subdued sound of a single fly came from the platform to my right. I re-drew my sword; I felt awake and began to pulsate with a fresh energy since the flytrap had caught me off guard. Everything was motionless, even the branches far above my head had stopped swaying in the wind, nothing appeared from the sky and I was isolated, alone on the platform. "Bzzt, bzzt ... bzzzzzzt", the intermittent sound had become solid now, I cursed under my breath as I heard more flies approaching. I didn't want to risk getting eaten by a flytrap again and I began to grow tired of running. I gripped my sword so tight I could feel my own pulse throbbing in my wrist, "perhaps not the best approach..." I concluded, instead, deciding to sheath my sword and prepare my bow. I grabbed a handful of poison tipped mithril arrows from my backpack and neatly placed them on the ground in front of me. I performed a few aiming exercises to warm my arms up and judged the distance, kneeling down to patiently wait their arrival.

The sound of buzzing grew louder; the landscape was so deceptive and bewildering that echoes off the trees disorientated and morphed every sound to be significantly louder. I still couldn't determine the direction they were coming from. The buzzing resonated heavily from my right; I spotted three in total as they flew from below me, rising up towards the platform opposite me. The bodies of the flies looked remarkably different, they were more sleek and thinner. "They look more like wasps..." I thought to myself, before cruelly noticing their accompanying giant stingers. "Giant wasps with giant stingers..." I stated sarcastically, pulling the string of my bow back. One landed on the platform whilst the other two hovered near the edge looking down upon something. "Now's my chance..." I smirked, firing a carefully aimed arrow directly towards the floating wasp. I didn't see the arrow hit



clearly, but I could see the wasp had become distressed. It began to uncontrollably spin around losing its altitude before plummeting into the darkness below; its buzzing vanishing along with its body until it was completely silent again. I was prepared for the oncoming retaliation, quickly reloading my bow with two arrows ready to fire. "Bzzzzzz" one of the wasps had begun to fly towards me, now aware of my presence, however I was too swift for its futile attempts to extract vengeance upon me. My bow glistened and shimmered with the same bright green, magical essence as the tree it was fletched from, my vision was improved as a magically induced aura briefly lit up the platform. I fired the first arrow which pierced the air, fizzing towards my enemy like a shooting star, leaving behind a sparkling trail. I immediately released the second shot, which followed closely behind the first. I was reluctant to release the magical capabilities bound to the bow due to the length of time it takes to rejuvenate. It did however; provide a significant edge in combat, despite the snapshot technique being less accurate, my strengthening skills with a bow almost guaranteed I always hit my target with either of the two arrows. I smiled as the arrows effortlessly passed through the wasp's body, visibly inflicting lethal wounds. Its momentum drove it through the air, off course, away from where I was standing. I watched it crash land on the platform behind me, lifelessly sliding along and then off the edge, falling into the abyss of darkness below. I was distracted, the final wasp had flown within attacking distance and I wasn't sure what to expect. The wasp arched its lower body towards me, menacingly driving forward, lead by its pointed stinger. I dived to my left, rolling along the platform; narrowly avoiding a hail of stinger bolts. I heard the dull "thud" of them forcefully hitting the tree behind me. The wasp began to furiously fly towards me in a seemingly berserk and suicidal last resort, branding a rejuvenated stinger as it charged. I dropped my bow and pulled my sword out of its sheath, dodging and slicing the wasp in the same movement. The pale, straw colour of the wasp's blood splashed across my armour and dripped off my blade. I was afraid I had only injured the wasp, it momentarily crawled away from me, cowering, but then it became airborne, making a swift retreat. I followed its movements for as long I could see it and then listened intently to fading sounds of the wasp's flight, ensuring it wasn't recuperating or preparing for another attack.

Eventually the noise had silenced, allowing the muffled, sporadic buzzing from the other platform to ring out again. I was becoming increasingly exasperated, so I hastily gathered my belongings and began climbing across the webbed connection of the two platforms. I attempted to avoid staring below into the immeasurable darkness, but when I heard the web rope begin to stretch and tense under my weight I unwillingly took a glance. I quickly, yet nervously clutched the rope tighter and shifted myself along to the other side, feeling the sweat from my forehead slip down the side of my cheek. I clambered up over the edge of the platform and rolled over onto my back, allowing myself some time to catch my breath again. I forcefully dragged myself to my feet and removed my full helmet, scanning the inside of the helmet to gauge how much moisture had condensed from my gasping. I slipped my finger through the sweat above my visor, "Phew" I panted, still breathing heavily from the panicked climb. My finger was completely soaked; I rubbed my sopping face against my garments that I wore under my body armour and began to walk around the platform. The visor on my helmet clattered and clunked with every step I took as I clutched it by the end of its dark blue plume. I tried to securely shut the visor before I made any more noise, but I stopped dead once I had reached where the anguished fly lay. "Brrztt, Brrztt" the fly was almost completely bound in spider webbing, swinging from side to side and dangling from a large overhanging tree branch. The tiny gap in the binds between its wings gave it a false hope of escape, but I knew how strong the webbing was; visibly, its efforts were in vain. Black liquid had begun to pool underneath the imprisoned

creature, dripping from the bottom of the cocoon. I vigilantly approached the vulnerable insect until I was close enough to examine the putrid liquid I had become all too familiar with. It looked fresh and was only recently administered into the veins of the fly; it was too soon to see what effect it had in the long term. "Grrraagggghh" I heard low grumbling and the snapping of branches booming from above me. I quickly glanced up in an attempt to react to the moving shadow but I was too slow, I tried to scream but I choked, coughing and spluttering saliva. The pain spread throughout my body like electricity from my lower neck, I fell to my knees, stunned by the pain and clutching at the wound. I looked at my hands; they were covered in a mix of blood and black liquid. My vision began to blur with every heartbeat. I became weaker whilst trying desperately to call for help. The shadow moved into my sight, my vision was so blurred it created the illusion of a hundred illuminated yellow eyes spinning around me. I heard the shadow mumble something before I fell onto my back; "Come not between us and our prey", the branches above me swirled and blackened. I felt my legs seize and my arms became paralyzed as I began to die.

I wasn't sure whether I was living or dead, dreaming or awake, I could feel pain and I could feel my eyes blinking, yet my sight was completely black. My head whirled and thumped like an earthquake, my hearing squeaked with an annoying high pitch tone, the back of my neck throbbed as the cool air tried to douse the burning wound and the rest of my neck ached from supporting the weight of my heavy, hanging head. I couldn't muster the strength to raise it more than a few inches to look around. My body began to shiver, I was freezing, I tried to move my right arm but it was restrained, I could feel the tight binds biting into my wrists. The loud, bellowing sound of a heavy stone door being opened startled me. It grumbled and shook the ground throughout the room, eventually coming to a stop with a loud "clunk". I began to hear the faint sound of voices approaching the door; I pretended to be asleep but listened intently. "How long is he going to be out for?" the higher pitched voice questioned, "I'm not sure, Animus caught him by surprise... whilst he wasn't looking. Apparently he was found whilst they were out looking for *him!*" the other voice described, they both grunted and chuckled at his remark. "Have you heard anymore about 'The Hunter'?" the lower of the voices questioned, "String me up...!" the voice whispered, "You know how Boss feels about that... if he heard us discussing it, we'd be locked in the cells with the rest of 'em!" the voice scowled brashly, "I know, I know, his whole 'pride thing'... I heard he's been pulling the legs of would be accomplices... one by one for treachery!" the other replied insolently. I could hear the soft sound of scurrying legs as the voices became louder. "Yeah, well... I'd like to keep all of my legs thank you... besides what does Boss want with him?" the higher voice asked, "Not sure. He didn't say. You know how he gets with *the humans* though. I heard that as the news was passed around about its capture, the queen herself had to make a statement and calm the uproar. A few still remain with left wing, archaic beliefs. Personally, I believe Guthix put us all here. I have no problem with them." the lower of the voices exclaimed "Yeah, well... me neither, but this ones being treated as an accessory to the escape, so I'm staying opened minded..." The voices halted, a muted white light began shining through the opening of the doorway. I had to move my head away and tightly close my eyes. The beam of light was briefly obstructed by a shadow, "Lights out..." I opened my eyes in surprise; the voice came from behind me, "Ahhhh!" I yelled in agony, the pain in the back of my neck intensified, it felt like someone had poured salt into my wound. The pain was almost unbearable; my head became scrambled and palpitated in agony. I felt my body weakening again and then I completely shut down, gliding back into unconsciousness.

I dreamt of better times, experiences of joy and happiness, yet it felt like I was being watched, like a shadow over my shoulder was stirring and examining my every move, reading my memories like a book. I didn't care; it was painless and euphoric; an escape from the pains of reality. "Time ... to ... WAKE UP" a voice bellowed into my head, pulling me out of the depths of my dream. I felt cold water splash against my face, forcing me to open my eyes instantly. I squinted at first, the light was brighter in this room and it made the backs of my eye sockets ache. "Again..!" another splash of freezing water collided with my face following the command, I wasn't fully alert and I accidentally swallowed some of the liquid, only for it to get stuck in my throat. I coughed and spat it all back out again. "Nice to see our little 'mud monkey' is finally awake! Isn't it Sierra...?" the voice remarked. "Yes, boss..." the familiar voice agreed. I could finally focus on the objects in front of me; there were two enlarged spiders present in the room. The first was adorned in scratched, scuffed, steel like armour; it was looking directly at me and it stood like a statue, seemingly guarding the entrance of the doorway. The other was in close proximity, inspecting my reactions; it too was adorned in a dull, chainmail-like, steel armour which covered its body. The way it spoke gave me the impression it commanded respect through fear and terror. "I don't have the time to waste on your pathetic lies human! So I'm firstly, going to ask you ... *nicely*" it informed me, in a polite, sarcastic tone. "How did you help *him* escape and what price did *he* offer you?" it announced, its numerous eyes glared deep into mine. I was still weak, but I was even more confused. "W... what do you mean?" I replied, "Don't play games with me, you pathetic little ape" it aggressively said, turning away from me in anger. "I have had a dangerous convict on the loose from my prison for far too long! Only one has ever escaped these walls and *she* was lucky!" it snarled, pushing its face up to my nose. "We've never liked your kind, we've been here for hundreds of years, safe, from your corruption... your wars ... your ... tainted way of living, consuming and devouring everything you can get your opposable hands on!" it grumbled, looking at me in disgust. "Then thousands of you swarm here like flies, out of the blue, scourging our home like tourists, all because 'the reaper' is scared of a 'little spider' in his bath... I had to bite my tongue I was that ... insulted!" it concluded, repulsed by its thoughts, turning its back on me again. I tried to move, but I could feel the binds around my wrists again, I looked at what had me shackled, long thick strands of spider webbing were stretched tightly from the roof and the walls of the room. I was fully restrained; the strands were tied tightly around my hands and ankles. "Boss..." the other spider muttered attempting to calm the incensed spider. I heard it sigh angrily; I wanted to talk but I was too afraid to say anything in case I offended him. There was a brief moment of silence before it turned around and slowly approached me again, "This is MY prison ... and I'd take the wrath of Guthix in ALL of his fury ..." its voice softened "... before I witness another ... blasphemous traitor ... disappear into the darkness of the forest..." he calmly stated. I felt cold again, I could see my breath and I began to shiver uncontrollably, it made it even more of a struggle to speak. "L-l-look, I d-didn't help anyone or anything escape from h-h-here. I don't even know how I got here! I don't know w-where I am and I don't know who you are!" I exclaimed, trying to plead my innocence. All of the spider's eyes narrowed simultaneously, "... So ... You expect me to believe that these events were all just coincidental? That you just... fell ... out of a portal that just happened to open up in the sky?" he said mocking me, pacing backwards and forwards, I couldn't help but smirk at the irony of what he had said. "Find something funny do you?" he growled, stopping his movements to focus his anger back on me. "What you said ... that's exactly what happened" I replied anxiously. I couldn't decipher what he whispered under his breath, but it turned around to grab something. "Well then, how do you explain this?" it challenged, raising my rucksack upside down and tipping out its contents. My gear rattled and crashed to the floor,

followed by the colossal sapphire, it clunked and crashed onto the top of the pile. "I know what this is..." the spider announced looking at me, lowering his tone. "I had heard stories and legends about this as a spiderling ..." he said staring back at the gem. "I also know what was once locked away with this" he scolded. I stammered, "I found that in the possession of another adventurer!" I blurted, trying to bargain with him. I knew how culpable this made me appear, both spiders seem to uncomfortably twitch. "You know nothing!" he snarled, discounting what I had said and delicately placing the gem back into the rucksack. "I don't believe a word that you spit out ... mammal ... do you Sierra?" he questioned turning around to face the spider by the door, "No boss!" Sierra answered quickly and enthusiastically. "No matter... we have ... *methods* ... of finding out if you're telling the truth." The tone of his voice terrified me, I expected a new torture device to be rolled into the room, but instead he turned around to command the guard. "Sierra, go and fetch that abomination 'Dreamcatcher' from his nest. I need answers... QUICKLY!" He shouted. "Yes Sir!" Sierra replied, scurrying away to carry out his orders. I realised I was now alone in the room with 'Boss'.

The spider turned around to address me again, "There was once a time when we would tear the flesh from your very bones for sport. Human." it said in a threatening tone, slowly approaching me. "The spiders you encounter in your realm are nothing compared to us... they are just shadows... creature's of a disjointed bloodline. We are the source of your fears... of your phobias." he continued to explain, "Our faith in Guthix steered us away from that pitiful primitive behaviour, like that of the other warmongering monkeys... they would much rather see the foundations of the Earth turn into dust!" he paused, then fell completely silent, his armour cluttered and the sound of its breathing got louder. "The false tales of corruption and whispers of tainted belief are always how you crawl your way here. Those with the most power wanting more power. Your kind has that weakness. The queen forbids us to speak of it, a historical mark so black and defiled ... but always you are there. I wouldn't divulge anything to you anyway, you are scum." it scolded. I tugged and pulled on my binds again to try and achieve some level of comfort, it made the web strings cut even deeper into my skin, I stopped at the sound of the scurrying feet approaching the door. Sierra was the first to enter the room, followed by a smaller, pale green spider. "Ah you found the eight legged freak!" Boss scolded, towering over the less dominant spider. It seemed to cower in his shadow, exhibiting signs of fear, this spider looked more cowardly than mighty. "Isss this my ... ssspecimen?" the spider snorted, inspecting me from across the room. "Yes." Boss bluntly replied, watching the actions of the other spider closely. "Excellent" he whispered, whilst grinning, displaying its fangs more prominently. "Find out if he's lying. Get to work." Boss plainly commanded. "Yesss, sir" the other spider replied, bowing as he said it. Boss turned his back to me, "I hope your lying adventurer, I'll enjoy what I can do to you then..." he threatened and then left without saying another word. "I'll need the chamber ... Guard!" the unfamiliar spider dictated. Sierra looked vacantly back at him, "That also means you need to disssappear... I cannot ssstand being ssstudied, especially by a guard, like you. Sssierra." he said narcissistically, looking at the guard in disgust. Sierra hissed at the other spider then walked out of the room without replying. "Finally, I can think..." it said as it slowly scuttled towards the door. "Clossse the door!" it commanded, shouting into the hallway. A loud rumbling thundered from the doorway again, it began to slowly close, draining all the light from the room "Let'sss get ssstarted." it stated, grinning again, "Don't be afraid, thiss will only hurt ... a little" it said as the last of the light crept out of the room. I felt the floor shake as the door rumbled to a close. I was alone in the darkness, at the mercy of a dangerous spider.

I couldn't see anything; I couldn't hear anything, not even the movement of the other spider in the room with me. "Do you fear me?" the spider asked, its voice coming from the right side of the room. "Should I?" I questioned trying to second guess what it might do to me. "Well, that dependsss on how helpful you are..." its voice whispered from behind me. "What I said to 'Boss' was true, I had nothing to do with your escaped prisoner!" I answered looking over my shoulder. I heard the faint whistle of the spiders gentle movements. "I believe you" it whispered, its voice echoing from my left. "You do? Well how about you help me out of these... web... bindings?" I demanded aggressively, "I cannot" it said softly, its voice now originating from in front me. "You must have a few ... quessstionsss?" it implied "... pleassse ... allow me to shed some light on your confusion... on your curiosity, on your will to mess with things that don't concern you..." it asked. I felt unnerved at the spider's placid, yet shifty behaviour. "I guess I should start with... Where am I and who are you?" I asked quickly and bluntly. It was silent for a moment, as though the spider had to think about the answer. "Me?" he laughed. "I am referred to as Dreamcatcher ... and we call this realm Aracael." he pronounced slowly, continuing to enlighten me, "You are being held, prisoner of war, in Arachnabad, the prison of spiders..." he explained, his voice moving within inches of my right ear. "You have no chance of escaping ... only two have ever left these walls alive" it hissed. "I have often wondered about what is necessary to unlock these walls. Is it infiltration or Sorcery?" he said rhetorically questioning himself, running off topic. "No one knowsss how they did it... they just vanished into the night without a trace" Suddenly, Dreamcatcher's eyes ignited, like a group of tiny green candles trailing in the dark, I could see where he was moving now, his eyes glistened like stained glass. He seemed anxious; casually pacing around, unable to stand still. "More!" he ordered; "I don't get to ... socialize very ... often" he pleaded. I was momentarily silent whilst I thought about a question to ask him, his unblinking eyes glared at me with expectation. "Who escaped from the prison then...?" I asked, desperately trying to keep the conversation flowing. "I think you know..." he said suggestively trying to force a reaction, I resisted the temptation and remained silent, much to the disappointment of the spider. "Those who are judged guilty of crimes are purged of their titles and are given a title with no honour, the convict who recently escaped is known as 'The Hunter'", the voice of the faceless spider I encountered in the wilderness echoed in my head. "And the other...?" I asked again. "The only other who has escaped ... *she* ... is known as ... 'The Widow'". The room froze at the very mentioning of her name, even Dreamcatcher hesitated. The hairs on my arms stood on end, "*Her*...?" I whispered to myself, recalling each time I'd heard this cryptic reference. "Yes" Dreamcatcher replied, eavesdropping on my whispering, "Boss is convinced you helped her escape" he said, emphasizing the blame on me, "*She*, is very powerful and is feared within our colony, but... I feel thiss is a story I should not tell you about ... but ... I am confident you will find out about soon enough..." he claimed ambiguously, narrowing his eyes. "Is that why you were sent here? To ... torture me into telling you information?" I demanded, raising my voice, "Well I'm not going to tell you anything different because I've already told you what I know... the truth!" I shouted, I began to struggle, trying to loosen the bindings again; blood began to trickle down my arm. "Perhaps... Indeed I am here to extract the information from you, but I don't need you to talk..." he said presumptuously, whilst slowly scuttling towards me. "You haven't asked ... *why* ... they call me 'the Dreamcatcher'" he bragged, satisfied that his verbal games were starting to infuriate me. "Why are you called Dreamcatcher?" I aggressively barked, fulfilling his request. The spiders eyes widened as he finally came to a standstill, "It is an interesting question ..." he said, pausing to find his words. "We are named according to our speciality, our purpose, our contributions and usefulness award us with the honour of a title..." he happily explained whilst peering at the webbing that constricted me.

It felt like his gaze had command over the web; it tightened the webs grasp around my wrists and ankles, intensifying the pain I felt. The pain suddenly faded as my rope-like binds began to glow a sapphire blue. The colour darkened and enhanced as it spread along the webbing towards the wall. It was enchanting to gaze at, paralysing me in fascination. The glow continued to morph and transform into a blue fire, slowly burning along the length of the web. The aura of the magic began to lick and caress the surface of my skin; an icy blue smoke rose as though the web was smouldering. I panicked and began to kick my feet; a blue mist began to cloud around the web strand, following where it was moving. "You see ..." the spider said savouring my fear, "I can see into your dreams... I can see into your nightmares. I can live your memories like the pages from a book. I can banish your lies and pursue your truths." The binds gradually began to heat up, like they had a ray of sunlight magnified on them on a warm summer's day. The room began to light up brighter, the midnight blue glow enhanced, blending and swirling into a brilliant white light. The same emanating, mystic glow slowly revealed the spider's ugly face to me again, "I AM DREAMCATCHER! And there is nothing ... you can hide from me!" he exclaimed as I felt a rush of energy electrify my body.

The pain was excruciating at first, I clinched my eyes tightly together. Although the pain of my physical body was still intense, all I could see was a vast white landscape; a place very different from where I had been. I cried out in agony, overwhelmed by the ringing in my head. "It's a weird sensation isn't it?" Dreamcatcher's voice unexpectedly questioned loudly, chuckling at my distress. "Arrrgh! I ... I'll ...!" I emptily threatened, struggling to utter my words from the pain. "You'll thank me once I'm done... I'm trying to help you!" he shouted back at me, trying to justify his actions. "It gets easier... I've already done this to you once" his booming voice revealed. "You were in my dream earlier! I-I-I could feel you watching me!" I shouted back into the white emptiness. "I was ordered to. I didn't enjoy it. It has been an age since I last saw the sun..." he paused, ending his sentence short. The pain slowly regressed to a dull ache; the back of my neck seized as though an electric current was jolting through it, along to the bottom of my spine. "When does it stop being painful?" I asked uncomfortably, "Not long ... it will fade the less you resist, let your mind wander..." he advised. I could feel his thoughts being pushed through my mind, as though one of his thin legs was reaching into my skull, guiding me how to think. "Can't you put me to sleep?" I asked wishing for an escape from the pain, "No. I cannot force your mind into a state of unconsciousness, although it is painless when you are sleeping, unfortunately... I need you awake" he admitted. "You see, I cannot control your thoughts when you are asleep, I'm restrained to whatever memory or experience your brain chooses to project" he carefully explained as another jolt of pain caused me to wince. "When you are awake... I can wander through your thoughts like an endless maze, passing from one to another" his voice called out again, "What's stopping you from viewing memories I don't want you to see? I don't feel comfortable with this!?" I demanded. "Just imagine a stone door in front of any memories or thoughts that you wish to lock me out of... I will be refused entry" he replied, explaining the procedure. "I need you to focus on the events leading to your arrival here, I will be able to see the truth..." he requested. I focused my mind on the memory of falling through the portal, my brain felt like it was boiling, but my skull felt like ice. I started to become incredibly tired, but not in a restful sense, my eyes became heavy, yet it felt like I had been sedated, like I was losing control of my own body. I couldn't control my own thoughts. "Close your eyes. It will make it easier to focus" my new conscience said, tempting and luring me into a disturbing slumber. My head nodded as I grew more jaded until I couldn't resist anymore, my head fell back and my eyes slowly shut. "Fassscinating..." I could hear Dreamcatcher's voice echoing. "Kalphites ... Falador? The wise old man!" he listed,

blurting the things I was familiar with. "You are interesting adventurer... you have engaged with a great deal of species from across your realm" he said. "I have found the genesis of your tale, let me take you back..." he warned before my head acutely ached and my vision glared white again, "Have you seen my son?" Angela's familiar hoarse voice echoed in my mind. I opened my eyes and I was back in Edgeville, on the day I had met Angela, staring at myself talking to her. "Is... is this ... real?" I questioned Dreamcatcher as I inspected my hands. "Yesss... And No..." he said indecisively, contradicting himself. "It is a projection of your memory, a very vivid reality constructed by your mind; this is where you come when you dream" the spiders voice bellowed from behind me as though he was stood there. "It's what the Fremmeniks like to mess with..." I slowly turned around to face him, "What's happened to you!?" I yelled, shocked to see a large black, smoke-like shadow suspended in the air in front of me.

It felt like I wanted to look away, like I wanted to ignore and neglect it, as though the smoke warped and distorted the very fabric of my dreamy reality. "Thiss is your mind" the shadow implied, speaking with Dreamcatchers voice. "I cannot truly be perceived here, yet you will feel my presence, but choose to ignore me." The shadow drifted next to me, twisting and bending the space around it, "I feel threatened by you" I warned, "I feel like you shouldn't be here!" I continued to admit. "It is natural to resist my manifestation. In truth, I wasn't here" he replied as his shadowy figure strayed away from me. "Let's start at the beginning then shall we?" Dreamcatcher advised. I felt peculiar now, almost relaxed, I wanted the spider to witness my peril; I wanted him to acknowledge what I'd been through and believe me. Everything passed so quickly, as though my life was sped up, I was reliving it all again, but watching it unfold from over my own shoulder like a guardian angel. "Ssshes been feasting..." Dreamcatcher mumbled to himself, my dream was paused when I had encountered Joel trapped in the webbing. "Did the widow do this to him?" I questioned inspecting the webbed cocoon again. "Most likely ... I would imagine she became tired of cannibalizing her own offspring..." Dreamcatcher calmly explained. "Thats disgusting!" I replied narrowing my eyes in revulsion. "To you... maybe ... this is common amongst us, especially since she had no other source of food, she is blessed with many ... gifts ... generating offspring is one of them, like our queen" Dreamcatcher stopped talking suddenly and continued to scrutinize my memories. "You slay the tarantula single handed with primitive weapons, I am... impressed..." he confessed, surprised at my feat. "I did, and then the other spider came..." I spoke, watching it all happen again. "Velox..." Dreamcatcher spoke. "Who?" I questioned as I listened to his evil name. "The Hunter... he too has found refuge in your world, probably with his new queen." he warned, unsurprised at my vision. My memories continued to race past before me as Dreamcatcher frantically dipped into the different parts of my life. "Calvin...?" Dreamcatcher whispered, verbally pondering the name as he watched me read the last words off the dampened notes that I found in the tunnel. "And you discovered the binding stone with the remains of the other human?" he questioned, "Yes." I answered, "It was he, who must have released the widow from her bonds and then died from the wounds she inflicted upon him". I explained, answering Dreamcatchers question. "Of course. Her venom is deadly and swift. He was doomed to die as soon as the wound was inflicted. It is interesting to see her poison is still as potent as I remember... She may not have aged throughout all of these years, perhaps she is now more powerful than our queen..." he explained. I felt like Dreamcatcher was secretly pleased by this fact; he fell eerily silent as though he had heard my suspicion. I tried to divert him by quickly focusing my thoughts solely on the widow, voluntarily allowing him to continue to sift and search through my memory. "A portal ... that is most ... intriguing..." the shade considered. "This is how I fell into your

realm!" I boldly declared whilst running over to the opening and energetically pointing down the shaft leading to the portal. "I see..." he said quietly. It felt strangely unnatural to move through the dusty wilderness caverns without the fear of choking, or feeling the soft, gentle breeze on my face. "It all looks so real, but I can't feel the subtle features..." I quietly murmured touching the dirty, rocky wall. "Your mind is very powerful; it holds imprints of textures visualization very ... effectively, but it is not a true reality, the tastes and smells you won't remember as vividly, so your mind substitutes them" he explained in detail. "I have done what I was asked. You will be free to return..." his voice promised before it faded as an intense white light pierced the tunnel from the entrance of the wall opening. It shone so brightly I shielded my eyes with my arms, its brilliancy intensified, I felt an electrifying pain spread throughout my body again, my hearing was engulfed by a high pitched squeal and I shut my eyes tight waiting for it to end. The light vanished, the noise stopped, but the pain remained. My neck was aching again, I shivered from the cold biting at my bare skin, I could smell the damp rock of the prison cell and I could feel the binds around my wrists restraining me once again. "Welcome back ... to reality." Dreamcatcher's voice sternly said, chuckling and taunting my predicament.

The light vanished, the noise stopped, but the pain remained. My neck was aching again and I was uncontrollably shivering. I opened my eyes; all was black in the room once again, the blue enchantment had faded. "Is it still necessary to keep me bound, freezing to death?!" I shouted, chattering my teeth. "It seemsss ... not ... adventurer" Dreamcatchers voice spoke kindly and softly from out of the darkness. "But..." he said halting my hopes of finally being freed. "But? But what?!" I announced. "I'm not finished with you" he said as his eyes began to glow in a deep electric blue colour. My head began to throb greatly, "It is astonishing to think how much we are alike, adventurer, and we have more in common than you think..."it admitted to me. "What do you mean? Release me!" I confusingly asked, aggressively demanding my freedom. "We are both... misunderstood. Our intentions sometimes lead us to greater, more important purposes..." he continued to explain, speaking cryptically. Dreamcatchers tone drastically changed, "I don't unders..." the spider interrupted me, "Your mind is like none I have ever construed! It is a wealth of information, neatly mapped, and unhinged by those curious Fremennik inquisitors" he menacingly announced. "Oneiromancer?! I am insulted... she barely understands the grandeur of the art... your previous experiences in the dream world may have granted you an affinity with the magical arts, but it has also shown me the path into your soul... but there is something ...else ... something ... stirs..." Dreamcatcher fell silent again, I could hear the soft patter of his legs approaching me, but he had shut his eyes, masking his proximity. The webbing began to glow with an increasing radiance, I realised I could see the outline of his body standing in front me just as he opened his gem-like eyes only a few inches from mine. "Your pounding heart drums with the beat of a different life force ... a different energy. I can ... see it in your eyes ... I can ssssmell it in your stench ... I have tasted it in your blood" he growled, quickly scurrying behind me. "You were changed ... in a fraction of time, in a single instant. The legends are true!" he shouted into my ears. I began to writhe in agony, my head felt like it was about to explode, my eardrums popped distorting my hearing. I felt Dreamcatchers consciousness scratching at the walls of my psyche, smashing through the mental barriers I had constructed to stop him from invading my thoughts. "My how your world is different now ... so much time ... so much change ..." he said quickly shuffling from one memory to another. "JHALLAN!" Dreamcatcher shouted. My mind flashed painful images of the frozen mahjarrat into my vision. "ZEMOUREGAL!" the spider chanted again, probing further, I closed my eyes and tried to



aggressively shake the pain out of my head whilst dreaming the visions Dreamcatcher wanted to see. "LUCIEN!" Dreamcatcher angrily screamed as loud as he possibly could, manipulating my memories and replaying the sorcerer effortlessly casting down Sloane. The pain ceased suddenly, my cheeks were burning and I could taste the blood running down from my nose into my mouth. My thoughts were at his mercy; I could only think about the image of the stone of Jas etched so clearly in my mind, his control over my thoughts were fixated on this single image. For a brief moment it felt like our emotions connected, as though we were both simultaneously awe-struck. "A relic of wisdom and authority" Dreamcatcher quietly gasped. "I... I touched it..." I uncontrollably replied, as I watched the memory of myself cautiously approaching the mysterious oval artefact and embrace its ancient power. The spider's eyes glared at me once more from within the darkness, his stare was undying and unblinking. He moved to my right then began to speak again. "I can see... So much change ... and yet, you are completely oblivious..." I felt uneasy at Dreamcatcher's words; his eyes grew wider each time he spoke whilst he peered into mine with an unquestionable faith. The focus of my thoughts changed, it felt like a weight had been lifted, as though I'd been released from the grasps of his scrutiny. "What is this?" he questioned, tampering with my imagination. My vision flashed a familiar landscape, a field of lush green grass and the crisp, hazel brown shade of autumn touched leaves in the casted shadow of the nearby mountain. "Your wandering mind has seen enough..." Dreamcatcher thundered, concealing the thought and then turning away from me to talk to himself. "A trinket...? A key...? An item cast away?" he said angrily arguing with himself, quickly spinning around to face me again. "The currents of time trickle around you; have been commanded by your will and have flowed through you... yet you are insignificant... how can you do this...?" Dreamcatcher unexpectedly stopped, turning his back towards me again. "A door once sealed can be opened again!" Dreamcatcher furiously shouted, "The lost has been found! My kin shall be strong again! We will rejoice in your bloodshed!" Dreamcatcher called out, empowered and jubilant. The spider stopped his inspiring sermon, "Time to set you free..." the spider said calmly, but threatening. The spider's eyes flourished in a crystalline blood red. Before I could question his intentions my head began to pound in agony again. I mustered the strength to quickly look at the webbing that had me bound and it too began to burn a dark ruby red, flowing through the web towards my wrists. "Let me go! Let me go!" I screamed trying to pull my hands free. As the aura touched my skin it felt like a warhammer blow had been inflicted to the back of my head, my vision blurred and I became disorientated, I screamed in pain and began to slur my words of anger. My vision gradually changed to a brilliant white as I faded out of consciousness. "No! How are you? ... Arrrrgh" Dreamcatchers voiced called out, gradually fading into the overwhelming sounds of pain inside of my head. He sounded panicked and confused, I finally felt my legs give way and then I blanked out completely.

I awoke lying face down with my cheek pressed against an unfamiliar surface; I lethargically looked at the walls to notice I was in a different room. I exhaustingly spun around to see the rest of the room, despite the resistance from the warm blankets I was wrapped in. The ceiling was unusual, yet still built out of stone. I lay still for a few moments to gather my thoughts, gradually summoning the strength to lift myself into a sitting position. The room was dimly lit by a single, vibrant light placed explicitly in the middle of the floor; it flickered like a candle but beamed like a solid lantern light. The bliss of being out of the restraints was invigorating, but it also triggered memories of the ordeal I had been through. I quickly grabbed my wrists, tenderly rubbing them to ease the burning pain caused by those sharp, biting binds. The pain felt like rope burn, but I looked closer and could see the deep cuts the webbing scraped out of my wrists. I slowly reached towards the back of my neck to feel the

stinger wound I had sustained from 'Animus', but the sudden loud clang of the door opening caused me to jump in surprise. Before I had thought about it I had already dived across the floor, grabbing my lonely sword out of the pile of my possessions in the process. I stood shakily and fatigued, but I was ready to fight. This was the weakest I had felt for a while, I struggled to keep grasping the sword and I had to prop myself up with one hand against the rocky wall. Eight short, thin black spider legs slowly crawled from behind the door, "Ahh you are awake!" A more joyous, female voice called out from outside the room, seemingly noticing where I lay was empty. "You won't torture me again!" I threatened, "I won't let you!" I warned, manically waving my sword around in the air. I couldn't stand on my legs anymore; I collapsed to my knees quickly stopping myself from falling flat on my face by leaning on my sword. "There, there, human" the spider empathically said, it was in full view now, this spider was smaller than the others, black and dark orange stripes stretched from either side of its abdomen, similar to the fever spiders. "Who are you?" I quietly asked, allowing my arms to flop by my side, unable to hold my sword up anymore. "Help" she said kindly, "I can promise you we're not going to hurt you anymore. My name is Ancilla and I'm the grand chamberlain of the web" she said proudly and compassionately. "It's nice to hear a kind voice" I replied smiling, it was relieving to think she might actually be a nice spider. "Do you serve the queen?" I asked, "Yes, that is the reason I am here" she said happily, eager to serve. "First, we must stress that you rest a little more. Please. Replenish your hunger and thirst with your provisions" she stressed, seemingly worried for my well being. "Once, you feel well enough the queen has requested council with you" she added. I was surprised, but I also felt vindicated. "I would be honoured" I replied smugly. "Excellent! She will be most pleased. Animus, one of the generals of the teeming horde will escort you and inform you of our etiquette. Animus will not hurt you again, you must understand, we don't see a lot of humans around here. Animus was following orders" she explained as she quickly glanced around the room trying to find something to fix or to do for me. "Is there anything else I can do?" she politely asked. I thought about my stock of food and water for a moment, quickly glancing over to my rucksack. "I think I'll be okay for now..." I said still pondering if there was anything else. "Excellent!" she exclaimed again, turning around to leave the room. "Oh!" I called out to grab her attention. "Yes?" she asked turning around. "Dreamcatcher ... where is he? I think I have a few words I'd like to say to him" I scolded, Ancilla was silent, unsure of what to say. "You will be informed in due course" She swiftly replied. "Don't worry. We know you are not responsible for certain criminals being loose" she replied, I wanted to angrily inform her of what that monster, Dreamcatcher did to me. I felt insulted that after all of the pain he inflicted he left me to die in that chamber. I bit my tongue and contained my rage, "Thank you" I replied with a gritted smile. "You are most welcome Adventurer!" Ancilla said just before she left the room, the heavy stone door slowly shutting behind her. Even though she comforted me, I still felt like I was being imprisoned, as though they still wanted to keep their eyes on me.

I lost track of time, hungrily munching on some exquisitely self-cooked lobsters and satisfyingly downing a fully filled water skin without pausing for a breath. I returned to rest on my bestowed bed, falling in and out of a restless sleep, although my mind was unsettled, I physically felt like I was starting to slowly heal. The acute pains in my neck and head became dull aches and my body felt warm again, I could see the paleness of my skin fading. I was startled by a loud bang on the rocky door, "Be prepared in fifteen minutes. The council is being summoned" a low sturdy voice called out. I lazily forced myself onto my feet and began to organize my things. I clumsily slipped into my armour, repeatedly catching the cloth from my ragged trousers on the inside of my plate legs. I

sheathed my sword and tried to make myself look somewhat presentable. My physical trauma was probably obvious for all to see, but I swiftly whisked my fingers through my hair to try to improve my appearance and enhance my self esteem. As I finally neatened my backpack the door slowly swung open again, revealing another large, hairy spider adorned in elegant silver armour. "Come adventure, we cannot dawdle" his voice commanded. I didn't speak; I simply nodded and followed his lead, intimidated by his presence. Its brilliant white armour glistened in the lights we passed and its golden trim was constantly illuminated, it was distracting, but not off-putting enough to notice my own armours blue mystic quality had faded and dirtied from my travels and encounters. "You must be ..." I murmured only to be interrupted by the spider, "Animus. Yes. General of the teeming horde. Army of the arachnids" he said emphasising his importance. He never looked at me once, he eyes were engrossed with what was ahead of him and he didn't falter or slow down for anything. "The queen felt it appropriate that I accompany you to the council. I'm sure there's time to answer a few more of your questions, however I must first lay down the ground rules" the spider clearly explained, but didn't wait for my reply. "You must only address her as often as you can as 'your highness' or 'your royalty' and you must not at any turn your back to the queen at all. It is considered very insulting" Animus listed sternly. "I understand" I confidently replied. "Then, you will leave the chamber in one piece" he said in a threatening tone, his fangs more prominent, as though he was smiling at his own comment. I didn't speak for some time, allowing my eyes to wander around my surroundings; I couldn't help but gormlessly look at the architecture of the corridors. It was interesting and unlike anything I'd heard of, hundreds of webbed threads all intertwined around each other ran along the walls acting like corridors, "it must have taken hundreds of spiders to build this place!" I exclaimed, impressed by the craftsmanship and dedication it would have required to fully construct. "Thousands. Over a very long period of time" Animus replied, "There was once a great flood here and we sought refuge in the trees, building a new colony, to escape the water" he revealed. "Is it all connected?" I continued to ask. "Yes, everything from the royal quarters, right through to the prison is all connected." Animus replied. "Where are we now then?" I asked; Animus seemed neglecting to answer the question. "I have brought you the longer, but quiet route to the royal court, on the edge of the colony. As you may or may not be aware, there is still some prejudice towards humans that stretches throughout the entire arachnid civilisation", his remark scared me, "Why did you hate us?" I curiously asked. He quietly paused thinking about the answer, but I could tell he wasn't going to answer truthfully, "Honestly, I don't know, it all happened such a great time ago that some of us have forgot, I have more pressing issues than to waste my breath cursing the past" he insisted. I quickly caught Animus scoping behind us, followed by quiet muttering, "It's him! It's the ape!" I overheard one of them whisper. "Ignore it." Animus growled angrily, stomping his long thing legs as he picked up speed. "What were you doing in the forest when you found me?" I asked, it was a question that I had been waiting to ask him since we left. "I was out on patrol, one of our most dangerous convicts had escaped recently and we were out searching for him. You happened to show up when I was about to indulge in some food, that was very unfortunate for you" he said sniggering. "Regardless, my actions were just, we don't usually get many humans here" he said trying to make me understand. As we turned another webbed corner the space opened out into a towering set of wooden doors that stretched far above my head. "We are here... I must depart you for a moment. I must report elsewhere. Remember what I said to you adventurer!" Animus quickly advised before swiftly sneaking off to the left of the doors without giving me a chance to thank him. "So you must be him..." a fresh voice said from behind me as I watched Animus leave.

I quickly turned around, the spider stood uncomfortably close to me inspecting my hair. "Yes...?" I cautiously replied, "And who may you be?" I quizzed the spider. "I am the spider herald. I shall be your guide... You humans all look the same!" he smirked, insultingly looking me up and down. I was beginning to become frustrated with the ambiguity and the way I was being passed around between different spiders as if none of them wanted the burden of supervising me. "You seem displeased stranger?" the herald asked me. "I'm just tired." I replied with a sigh. "I understand. We have put you through a lot for which we are most apologetic for. Answers are waiting on the other side of this door" he said anxiously, turning around to face it. "The final preparations are being made. New issues have arisen and the queen respectfully desires that you attend a small audience as her guest of honour, I believe she has a few important questions for you." The herald told me, I had an inkling this was related to Dreamcatcher. "Where is the spider that tortured me?" I asked the herald, hoping he would be able to answer. He turned his gaze off the door to quickly look at me and then looked back at it. "I have heard your story... It is interesting how you ended up here and what you found in that tunnel" he chattered, changing the subject. "The eight fold seal... broken again. It is not good news for any of us" he said aloud, restlessly swaying whilst glaring at the door. "I had nothing to do with it" I argued, "We know. Hopefully we are not too late..." he speculated. "Too late for?" the gigantic doors clunked and slowly began to grind open, stopping my questioning. "You must come with me now" he insisted. The opening of the doors blew a warm breeze through my loose hair, causing it to flutter and flap around uncontrollably. The herald walked forward into the room, it was a large lobby, with various, curious seats placed neatly in circles across the rocky floor. They were strangely modified in shape and size to allow spiders to be seated comfortably. A few small groups of spiders were loitering around at the other end of the lobby; they were all watching me walk through the hall; whispering amongst themselves. "Filthy ape!" one called out, encouraged by laughter from the other spiders. I ignored it and turned back to the herald, he didn't stop to allow me to view the surroundings, "You seem to be in a rush" I exclaimed, "Has something happened?" I asked the nervous herald. "We cannot discuss this here... too many eyes. Too many ears" he quietly replied as he nodded to the guards of another set of doors, parallel to where we entered. They had their tall, silver halberds crossed in front of the door, which they moved at the command of the herald, bowing to us both as we passed through. The thick silver doors had strange engravings and markings spanning the height of the door, some engraved with a golden trim. The grumbles and echoes of voices from the previous room instantly faded behind me as the heavy doors locked shut, the room was smaller in comparison, but decorated with luxurious carpet. Gold and silver fabrics were draped over the elegant furniture. I noticed another small group of spiders that had congregated in the corner opposite us, instantly recognising Animus towering over the others. The spider herald looked back at me, inviting me to join them before he joined the circle himself. I walked over to the group and squeezed into the conversation. "How long has he been missing?" Animus angrily questioned. "I'm not sure sir; he reported the events with the adventurer and then returned to his quarters... He hasn't been seen since" the royal guard answered. "Surely, surveillance caught something?" the herald openly asked. "I'm afraid not" the other guard reluctantly answered. "Who spoke to him last?" one of the other spiders asked, interrupting the flow of the conversation. All of the spiders simultaneously looked at me silently as though I had just insulted the queen herself, "Well?" I requested, daunted by their stare. "You" Animus said. "What are you not telling me? I'm beginning to grow tired of all these secrets!" I ranted, finally releasing some of the frustration that had been burning inside of me for a while. "Adventurer... we think..."

Animus was interrupted by the doors to our left beginning to open. "The queen will see us now" the herald said, looking around the circle of spiders and then finally at me.

We slowly passed through the door in single file, filling the seats furthest away from the door first. I was the last to sit, directly opposite the golden, regal throne where the queen was already seated next to a smaller, muddy coloured spider. It stood up next to the armrest of the throne. It was momentarily quiet whilst everyone adjusted themselves for comfort; my attention remained on the queen in anticipation of answers. She was of similar height to animus, her dark red body seemed unfitting to her purple head. "It has come to the attention of the court that the recent events have begun to show intention, scheming and treason" the queen urgently announced looking around the table, she then addressed me directly, "I'm afraid we have failed you... more than once today, adventurer. Suspicion surrounding Dreamcatcher's intentions has been under scrutiny for some time; however we have never been able to tell for sure, his supposed loyalties and usefulness till now has protected him" she explained. "Animus, tell me, have we found his whereabouts?" she politely asked. "No, ma'am, his location is currently unknown; it is possible he may have slipped away after he interrogated the human. He may have left here altogether" Animus replied seriously. "There are only a given number of ways of leaving our domain, is there any indication which route he may have taken?" an unfamiliar spider to my left asked. He appeared smaller than the other spiders, but he looked just as dangerous, his black and red markings made him appear threatening. "There is." Animus replied, "I've already despatched guards to where we believe he may have went". "I beg your pardon your highness" the herald quietly mumbled, trying not to rudely interrupt, "I would kindly like to request permission to introduce the attendees of this meeting to the human... he will need understanding if he is going to aid us" the herald inquired, bowing his head. "Of course... I'm being far too rash today it seems" the queen responded frustratingly. The herald gestured towards each spider present around the table; motioning clockwise he individually introduced them. "This is the master web spinner" the herald said gesturing towards the red and black spider. "Unfortunately, he has been particularly busy recently, restructuring the prison and some of the surrounding area of the colony. Most of what you see here is either his by design or by creation" the spider herald complimented and then continued to introduce the remainder of the council. "Animus, you have already become acquainted with and his second in command, the knight of the eight fold seal, our most noble and honoured knight, he will be leaving to join up with the search party after our meeting." The knight was almost identical to Animus, he wore heavy looking armour which covered his body entirely and was decorated with shimmering jewel-like medals. Although it appeared like steel in the light, his armour looked in pristine condition; even his full helm was immaculate, stretching across his face only allowing room for his fangs to protrude and his chin to move when speaking. "Courtiers, for the queen, they handle politics, official arachnid business and government of the colony" the herald continued, I counted four in number, they looked indistinguishable, each were a vivid black in colour and partially blended into the shadows behind them. They were silent and intently listening to the herald as he announced who they were. "And finally, Suasor, advisor to the queen" I had already noticed him leaning over to offer whispers of wisdom to the queen whilst we were being seated. I imagined that he was under a great deal of pressure, however he looked remarkably calm. He reminded me of Dreamcatcher, his feeble looking appearance not aided by the towering size of the queen whom he shadowed by. "Thank you, herald" the queen said expressing her gratitude, "Now, for the benefit of those attending, what exactly

happened that allowed you passage to our realm adventurer?" the queen asked me. I smiled; it had been a long journey this far, "Where would you like me to begin. Your highness?" I smugly replied.

"Wherever you feel ideal" the queen softly replied. It felt as though everyone around the table leaned closer in, intrigued by what I might have to say. "Well..." I stuttered searching for a place to begin, "my path here was not through a spell, but through a portal, well concealed from the eye..." two of the couriers gasped, infringing my explanation. "I simply fell through and crashed landed here..." my description had made me recall some of the pain in my lower back. "You are delusional! Ape! You cannot simply open a portal here by command!" one of the couriers demanded, slightly raising his voice. I breathed in to reply but the queen was too quick; "No, I'm afraid he is correct" she said accounting for my experience and then turning to enlighten me, "There is something you have yet to realise adventurer. Our realm is quite simply cut off from all the others. No persistent portals ... no ancient obelisks... not even the magical fairy mushrooms grow here. We have thrived through obedience to the edicts and that is how we must continue" she implied, strongly highlighting that it should have been more difficult for me to stumble upon their land. "However..." she paused, briefly glancing over at the master web spinner, "despite being almost impossible to travel here directly, it is... *difficult*... to travel from our plain to yours..." she said, subtly insinuating a different source to the portals. "Your highness!" one of the couriers called, "are you suggesting that the portal that the human used originated here?" he questioned. "Yes." Animus answered sternly. "It would take someone with an adept knowledge of the magicks to generate a portal to Gielinor. There are some in our order with the potential to do this..." Animus outlined. "Dreamcatcher...!" I exclaimed, finally realising the magnitude of the situation. "Very clever adventurer..." Animus said somewhat sarcastically, praising my quick conclusion. "What would Dreamcatcher require that lies in Gielinor?" the knight requested, his tough voice sounding as equally low as Animus's. "My sister" the queen said, her words filled with sorrow. "Your *sister*...? *She*...? The Widow...? Your majesty?" I stuttered confusingly. "Yes... She was my sister. She was once beautiful and regal..." the queen explained despairingly. "That is until her love was lost and she fell into darkness." I felt her resentment as she said the words. The herald continued explaining on the queen's behalf whilst her advisor tried to offer calming words. "The account of the princess's husband has now all but vanished into legend like the princess herself. No one knows exactly what happened to him, but what little traces that were found suggested that some magically gifted humans managed to manipulate their way here. The princess's husband was very fond of exploring the dense forest for clarity and peace. On this occasion he never returned." The herald paused as the queen explained further. "She always swore to me that she knew he was murdered. He was a great hunter; bound by the rules of Guthix. I knew him, he wouldn't have provoked it. He would have tried to reason with his attackers." She said speaking softly. "Your royalty... in the defence of my race, if I encountered any one of you before I discovered you were peaceful, I feel through fear alone, I would be reaching for my sword..." I argued, trying to offer an explanation. "Yes... I had not ignored that possibility, but the way he was killed always seemed too well orchestrated even for the most intelligent of humans." The queen responded. "We searched from darkness to twilight" the knight of the eight fold seal told me, "We even scoured the surface of chasm for a carcass. We found nothing ... not even footprints, just items of discarded human armour without any indication of their return to Gielinor" he said before the queen spoke again. "It was an act of pure hatred; they completely destroyed him, they left nothing of him. That doesn't sound like self defence to me..." the queen scolded bitterly. Those present fell silent again, although the room felt tense to me, I felt obliged to dig further and grasp a deeper

understanding. "What happened to *her* ... the princess?" I queried the herald not expecting an answer.

"She retreated into the shadows, overcome with grief and dismay" the queen replied, "She became un-talkative and indulged in the mysteries of the dark arts, trying to carve a path into your realm, fuelled by the pains of her loneliness and her rage towards your race" the queen assumed, "At first I thought nothing of it, but she continued to dangerously open herself to whispers of the night, the demons of corruption... obsessed with revenge and vengeance. She gradually became an unpredictable threat, to us and unknowingly to you. Through the weakness of our colony she began to gain power, stature and influence. I was left with no other option than to imprison her here for the safety of both our races..." the queen said, her distress now visible for everyone to see. "Never have we ever dealt with a civil revolt like that." one of the spider courtiers reminisced, "So many empathised with the desire to hunt and kill your kind again." The queen responded furiously at the couriers comment, "I vowed all those ages ago to never reverse our society back to that of our primitive forefathers!" she snapped. We fell silent again, allowing the queen to recompose herself. "As you can imagine, adventurer, with her imprisonment followed the conflict. Lead by her cultist backing... The first battle that was witnessed here for thousands of years broke out. We descended into anarchy, to the very low of a golden age. But..." the queen said resolutely, "We recovered and arose above those foolish to resist what was morally right. Peace was restored... at a cost" the queen murmured sadly. "Your highness... At what cost? Your realm seems peaceful, well guarded and in a state of prosperity?" I thoughtlessly asked. "The respect from our people shattered by the loss of our majesties kin" the advisor said quietly, his voice sounding very soft, almost as though it hurt him to talk. "After the civil clash our lands were calm and gentle, those who openly and aggressively expressed loyalties to my sister were imprisoned for treason. The corruption however, stretched throughout the order and it wasn't long before devious scheming began to take place. By those faithful to my kin and those whom would see a return to our sinister past. It is not a crime to have an opinion, it is a crime to act upon it" the queen's words caused distress to the master web spinner. "I apologise for my failures that day your majesty, that event was unprecedented" the spider seemed to cower with regret, his hostile ambience yielding with him. "I do not blame you; you are wise, you could not have stopped it. Not a single soul had escaped your prison prior, which alone is testament to your reliability" the queen empathically said, noticing his genuine feelings of self-guilt. "How did *she* escape?" I asked the self pitying arachnid, putting the pieces of the story together. "I could never tell... we never found out either. I examined, then studied, then analyzed and then investigated the architecture a thousand times over!" he said frustratingly, recalling all of the spent hours he wasted. "I even rebuilt some areas for precaution! Clearly, there is a weakness somewhere in its architecture. It is also likely that both of our escaped convicts had some form of aid..." he suggested.

"Dreamcatcher?" I proposed, trying to place reason into the crafty spider's past, "It's looking increasingly so..." the master web spinner jadedly admitted. "So, Dreamcatcher releases the Widow and then takes her to Gielinor... How did she become so powerful?" I questioned. "Devoured by the hatred of your race and the agony of being imprisoned for an age, she immediately swore allegiance to that serpent Zamarok. She knew I couldn't follow her, so she allowed his minion brothers to carve and etch her into a new face of fear. Seduced by the promise of more power and strength she acted as a weapon in his 'war for power'. Bearing his mark and defiled by their dark magic, she mutated into the creature that once again crawls free today." The queen grew increasingly bereaved the

more of the legend she told. "She was ruthless, indiscriminate and merciless. She took great pleasure from abolishing the weak and feasting on the torment of the humans that she was set upon. Zamarok, that fool, used her like fire on a steel leash to achieve his own selfish goals of treachery" The queen stopped again, I quickly glanced around the table and her story had clearly administered a response with all those present. "I felt it happen... my heart grew cold, freezing as though a blizzard swept throughout my body. A collection of Guthixians and Saradominists made a truce to communally dispatch her, knowing they could not defeat her; they devised a plan to contain her, constricting her flesh in ice. It troubles me to this day how they possessed the knowledge to do this, yet it bore success." The queen explained. "Your highness, I found notes describing the mark of Saradomin as the source of her cage ... was this part of the spells power?" I asked despite now being familiar with the spell, perhaps I had overlooked the necessity to bless the gems. "Ha ha, through the power of a devout saradominist's blessing alone...?" the spiders were amused by my lack of understanding, chuckling at my words. "Your race and your obsession with 'the gods'" one of the couriers mocked, "Those Saradominist fascists took advantage of the glory, staking a false claim, announcing it was all their own doing ... puerile children" the courier scorned. "Yet... they achieved what we could not...? The eight fold seal bound her solid in place" the queen uttered, interrupting the couriers brief sneering. "She patiently watched the sands of time trickle away from within her icy prison since your third age, and then he awoke and forbid us to ever step foot in your land again" the queen stated. "We burned and broke every connection to your realm to bare true to our new edicts. Yet she remained there, immaculately preserved, full of youth, waiting for one of her disciples to liberate her." the queen said whilst pondering the possibilities. "Perhaps Dreamcatcher's ambition is to annihilate Gielinor with the aid of the widow?" Animus's voice thundered, "What is his gain? What is his Purpose?" Suasor quietly questioned, arguing with Animus, "To spread fear amongst the humans and to hunt them like we once did, *she* wouldn't argue against that" Animus proposed. "I fear Animus may be right" I said agreeing with him, regurgitating what the insane spider preached. The queen stood up clearly angered by Dreamcatchers words, "It is clear that Dreamcatchers loyalties belong to the widow, responding to her call to consume your race." the queen declared. "So is Velox just a tool in all of this?" Animus daringly called out. "I understand, once being the knight of the eight fold seal, you will have emotional connection to Velox, Animus. He was a great general, but he plotted against the queen. That is why he was imprisoned and was stripped of his rank. But his escape, fits with Dreamcatchers plan, he has the Widow and the Hunter by his side in Gielinor, ready to claim lives for their beliefs" the herald pleaded with Animus. "He has committed high treason and betrayed the sacred vows of our people. He has practised his knowledge of realm transversal and has used it to lure humans here, causing potential risk to the colony itself. It is also plausible that he has influenced the escape of at least one convict from this realm and released the widow from her bonds in Gielnior. His plans to ally with the widow, sworn enemy of our race, and to the Hunter, are to eventually commit the genocide of the human race. He is an extremely dangerous individual, henceforth; he is banished from returning to our lands under pain of death" she boldly announced, her voice bouncing off the regal walls around the room.

The couriers vocally expressed their concurrence by standing and clapping the queen's dictation; however neither Animus nor the knight were visibly animated by her words. The queen was re-seated; the couriers hastily recomposed themselves and quietened down. The queen looked at me and then glanced at the herald as well. "I know what you are thinking. I shall not let you stand alone in this fight, adventurer" the queen offered, "That deceiving serpent, Dreamcatcher, my sister, the



Widow and her loyal servant, the hunter must be stopped in whichever way that is necessary.” The queen professed. “But, your majesty? How can we accomplish this without contravening the edicts?” the herald asked. “Through our drifter” she said, looking down the table at me. “Through the human?!” one of the couriers disputed. “Me? You highness?” I scoffed, glaring back and forth between Animus and the herald. “Do you question my reason?” the queen retorted, projecting her authority at the courier. “No, your royal majesty” he replied, bowing his head. “You are the only one who can do it, adventurer.” Animus implored, “We are forbidden to step into your realm. However, we have the advantage... we have what *she* will fear the most...” Animus said alluding to a weapon in our possession. “What?” I blurted out of fear and confusion. “What do I have that I could use to defeat the widow herself? I barely defeated the tarantula. You, yourself have already caught me off-guard, Animus. How can I possibly triumph?” I beseeched, despairing at the overwhelming odds. “The binding stone...” the queen replied, “We have asked much of you already adventurer. It troubles me that we must request this of you, but if you cannot find a way, then no one else will” the queen said empathically. “I... I wouldn’t know what to do!” I stammered, trying to find the right words to talk myself out of the task. “The eight fold seal... there are eight sealing stones; sapphires that must be enchanted to cast the spell. I know they cannot be removed from their prison, only scattered, they will still be at the prison site. Once the sealing stones are replaced, the binding stone must be anchored into the centre of the hex, completing the ceremony” the queen said explaining the ritual. “Then does *she* just freeze up...?” I asked imagining casting the ritual would be similar to how I did it for Jhallan. “She will have to be in the ritual circle... when it is committed into the ground” the queen added. “So not only do I have to match her strength and speed, I also have to trick her or lure her somehow...?” I sarcastically mocked, “Yes” the queen sternly answered, “Adventurer! Do not take this task lightly...” Animus angrily growled, “If the queen did not have faith in your abilities, then she would not ask you to do this ... you should be honoured ...” he said trying to keep his cool. “I am sorry” I apologised to Animus. “It looks as though we have no other choice... I am forced to do it!” I said regrettably. “Hopefully this will also signal the beginning of trust between our two species, your highness” I said, offering my opinion on the matter. “Yes, we are indebted to you adventurer, although, for now, not many will know of your courageous actions on this day, but I assure you it will have its place eternally in our folklore. We thank you.” The couriers bowed to me as the queen curtsied in her spider-like fashion. “We have little time to lose. I hereby announce this council adjourned until we learn of the success of our human knight” the queen announced, signalling the ending of the meeting and expressing permission for everyone to depart. All of the members present at the meeting stood up as a mark of respect, as the queen left with her advisor. “Adventurer! I will escort you back to your items and inform you of the preparations that have been made” the herald called out from across the table, “I too shall walk with you” Animus stated. The rest of the attendants departed out of different doorways, only the master web spinner approached me. “Good luck adventurer, hopefully we will see your face here again...” he said somewhat empathetically, before leaving me with Animus and the herald. “Come. Follow me” the herald softly spoke.

“How am I going to accomplish this?” I moaned to Animus seeking his sympathy. “You will have to find that out yourself, however this plays out...” Animus replied. I stopped in my tracks, in the middle of the empty, royal chamber. “What do you mean?” I questioned, shocked to hear there was more they were not telling me. “Do you expect to simply walk into her cavern and freeze her?” the herald laughed at my ignorance, frustratingly gesturing for me to walk again. “I’m sure

Dreamcatcher will have a plan for how he wants this to end... With blood." Animus snarled, as I quickened my walking pace to catch up to him. We passed back through the set of tall double doors, the room was completely empty now, the groups of spiders had retired to their occupations. "The queen will be agile and lightning fast" the herald spoke quickly shuffling forwards, "But, you will be able to slow her down with water spells. Although not by much, it will be advantageous none the less." Animus added, hastily ending the herald's sentence for him. "No one knows the condition of the ritual... you may need to replace none or all of the sealing stones first. Only when all of the stones are set and enchanted will the ritual be ready" the herald said continuing the rushed pep talk. "My queen's royal bloodline is blessed with an aptitude for many unnatural abilities; it has been some time since any of royals have been in the face of combat. I would only expect the unexpected, adventurer..." Animus desperately offered. I was beginning to feel overwhelmed with the task and advice that was being offered, only taking comfort from the thoughts of peace if I was able to defeat the widow. In my heart I wished it was Dreamcatcher that I was seeking to defeat, "Do you think Dreamcatcher will be there?" I asked Animus hoping for a chance to extract revenge. "I cannot say. He is a manipulative, devious traitor. He should have been born as a snake rather than a spider! Whether he would risk combat is a question I cannot answer, adventurer" Animus replied apologetically. We continued to hurriedly pass through the deserted corridors of the great spider colony, the occasional raised voice could be heard when we passed over the tunnel crossings, but no more spiders had gathered to hurl abuse at me. "We took the binding stone from your possessions whilst you were attending the council... we had to be sure it was *the* stone" the herald admitted to me, "And?" I replied, curious to see if the gem was a fake, possibly meaning I wouldn't have to risk my life. "It's legitimate" the herald replied dashing my hopes. We stepped out into a long winding corridor that lead directly back to the resting quarters, "Take heed. Some of the general populous learnt of your whereabouts. There will be an air of hostility." Animus informed me. His words made more sense the closer we walked to my chamber. As we turned the final corner I saw the mob being held back by guards several feet away from the door to my chamber. They chanted a chorus of derogatory names and slurs. "Filthy ape!", "Mud monkey!" they roared even louder as I emerged, the herald quickly ushered me into my room, leaving Animus to stand guard outside and signalling for the door to be closed behind us. "Gather your things and prepare to take leave" he said quietly without making eye contact. I followed his order and quickly stuffed my rucksack, recklessly messing up the neat piles of my possessions. It felt overwhelmingly relieving to climb back into my armour, it made me feel more secure and safe. "I can tell you are a warrior by the way you seek refuge in your armour, I would imagine we have made you feel vulnerable, stripping you of your defences" the herald said apologetically. "I understand" I said untruthfully, faking a smile. "A warrior's lie" the herald chuckled. The loud clunking of the stone door being dragged open interrupted our conversation; it allowed the undecipherable noise to pour into the room. Sausors small body scuttled into the room, "Ah! Adventurer you'll be needing this..." he softly said, I struggled to hear him over the rioting masses outside. He raised his fore legs and presented an object covered by a brown rag. I pulled it away to reveal the binding stone. It appeared more transparent and polished since I'd last held it. "The enchantment has been enhanced; she doesn't want *her* escaping again..." he said quietly offering the stone to me. I clutched the gem with both my hands, delicately removing it from his grasp and then sensitively concealing it in my rucksack. "Are you about ready to go?" the muted spider questioned as I stuffed the last of my possessions away. "I think that's everything..." I said, hoisting my rucksack over my shoulders and quickly glancing around the room for anything else. Suasor moved closer to me, "The queen apologises again, for many things, for what is, what

was and what is ahead. You have her and our eternal gratitude” the advisor kindly said before turning back to the herald and quickly whispering something to him. “Good luck” he muttered under the shouting before leaving.

The herald turned to look at me, “Shall we go now?” he slowly asked. I nodded and walked out of the room. The volume of the crowd increased again, as did their anger, it intensified my own frustrations, “If only you knew!” I wanted to shout at them, but I was escorted away forcibly by Animus’s sturdy might. Animus looked incensed, “Their mindless hate exasperates me. They haven’t a clue that it is one of our own that has betrayed us.” he said walking behind me. “We are taking him to the porter; he will be able to achieve some precision” the herald told Animus. “The Porter? What is he going to do to me?” I asked worryingly. “He holds items of great value and interest to our race; he was the one who confirmed the gem...” the herald told me. “He also has mastery of the magical arts, specifically teleportation; he will be able to return you to Gielinor, although his services are very rarely required.” Animus said as he led our group into a different corridor, muting the voices. We continued to walk for some time, “How far is it?” I asked impatiently, the spiders continued to ignore my questioning, neglecting to tell me where exactly we were bearing. Animus led us into a corridor where the webbing faded from a fleshy crème to a light black, the tunnel became narrower and closed in as we approached the door. Animus beat on the door with his thin legs. I was surprised by how much force he could muster, the wooden door shook as though it was hit by a fist. “Enter...” A groggy, hoarse voice commanded. Animus slowly opened the door allowing it to loudly creak and groan. He politely held the door open for me allowing me to squeeze in. The room was deceptively taller on the inside with wooden bookcase shelves stretching up a great distance above me; each shelf was individually filled with strange and mysterious objects, they were only reachable by scaling the walls with the thick strands of spider web that dangled from the ceiling. “Is this him?” the croaking voice bellowed from somewhere in the room, “Yes. We need you to teleport him back to Gielinor, the ...” the herald turned to face me trying to jog his memory, “Falador? District...” he queried without knowledge of the city. “Falador... hmm ... I’ve never had to send anything there” the voice said, now originating from above me, I noticed a shadowy movement to my right from in-between a series of shelves, two legs gradually extended from within the gap, pulling the spider into view. It gripped tightly onto the dangling web strand, lying motionless for a second and then quickly slipped down the web, greeting us face to face. “So you’re going to defeat the widow?” he asked staring down at me, his yellow eyes were very prominent. “We have no time for this!” Animus angrily growled pushing the porter to do his will, “Alright...!” the porter said expressing surprise at Animus’s reaction, “He’s going to need something if he’s going to break into that cavern successfully...” the spider explained, turning his back to me and zipping up a different web strand. “Where is it...” he pondered aloud intricately checking each of the shelves one by one, raising higher and higher. I could tell Animus was beginning to get fed up; it looked like he was grinding his fangs in frustration. “Aha!” the porter exclaimed aloud, disappearing into the tight space between a pair of shelves. The porter zipped back down the web as fast as he had climbed it, bearing a coil of snow white rope. “This webbing is very special; contrived from the master web spinner himself, it has special abilities of elongation when its owner is at the end of the web. Although it looks like your primitive fibre rope, it will stretch up to four times its length and still sustain the weight it carries. Very strong. Very useful” he assured, offering the rope to me. I neglected at first, “Go on... take it...” he said happily, persuading me to take it from his thin black legs. I inspected it closer, noticing the fine weaving pattern which made spider silk so strong. “Right!” the porter shouted, startling me,

“Falador you say?” he asked the herald. “Yes.” the herald replied nodding once. The porter shuffled his legs around in a toughened silk white box looking for something, only pausing to offer a last request. “Any last words?” he said before turning around to face me. Animus crawled around next to the porter, “Should this be the last time I see you alive, I wish you glory and honour in the face of death, adventurer” he said nobly, valiantly bowing his head. I turned to the herald, hoping he too would offer some advice. “I can only offer you good luck... the queen’s faith has been placed upon you, hopefully it has not been misplaced” he said quietly. I turned back to the porter, “I’m ready” I said sincerely, “Hopefully we will see you again, stranger” he said before there was a dim black flash in the room. I smiled at Animus overwhelmed by the feeling of going back to Gielinor. A tube of shimmering purple light descended around me, then sucked me upwards like water through a straw. I closed my eyes praying that it wasn’t another trick. The brief moment of flashing silvery, grey light passed, I could hear birds happily chirping, singing their songs. I could feel the warm wind gently flowing through my hair again. I opened my eyes to see an empty plinth and I started to laugh. I was home.

I mentally forced myself out of my deserved moment of peace and began to sprint eastwards towards the bank. I quickly passed the Rising sun tavern. Even though I was parched, I was more focused on quenching my thirst for Dreamcatcher’s blood. “Hear ye! Hear ye!” the town crier bawled as I darted past him, waving his arm around, allowing his hand bell to gloriously ring out. I rushed towards the thick, sturdy wooden doors of Falador bank and exerted them open forcefully. Two bearded gentleman seated next to the bank booth momentarily raised their heads out of curiosity, distracted from inspecting their financial documentation. I casually approached the glass and politely requested to access my possessions. “Certainly, sir.” the woman kind-heartedly replied. I carefully began to reiterate over the necessities I needed, counting each item with my fingers. “I require my dragon medium helmet and my obsidian cape, please” I called out to the banker as I unfastened my cape and slowly removed my runite full helm from the rucksack. Several items in my bag thudded as I dropped it on the floor, forgetting it was holding items of significant value. I kneeled down below the booth and began to empty out the items I would no longer require; noticing that a large cluster of loose gold coins had gathered at the very bottom of my bag. I snatched them all with my right hand and then reached up to the counter, mistakenly dropped them blindly. I allowed them to spin and roll around on the thin wood whilst making a recognisable clanging racket. The banker returned with the items I requested, leaving just as quickly to deposit the other items and coins. I held my helmet between my hands to gaze upon its intense red shine again. Its two horns symmetrically protruded either side of the medium helmet, still sharp and still as white as bone. I slowly lowered the helmet onto my head, confident of its defensive toughness, excelling even that of my rune full helm. I whipped my cape around my body and fastened it to the back of my armour. I had paid a great financial price for this cape, made purely out of glassy obsidian its metallic texture was capable of deflecting even the strongest of blows, combined with its light weight it lived up to my expectations of armour that is forged in the fiery pits of the Tzhaar city. “Thank you” I said showing my gratitude, before vacating the bank booth. I stepped outside of the bank doors and walked west towards the city walls, ensuring I was out of the way of any passersby. I fished out my dragon stone amulet from underneath my armour and rubbed the gem, clearing my thoughts so that I focused solely on Edgeville. My body felt a familiar feeling of weightlessness followed by dancing green and gold lights. My instant arrival in Edgeville was met by its usual busyness, absent of a mourning mother this time. I approached the wilderness wall stopping next to

the smouldering warning beacon. I quickly searched my bag lifting the oversized ocean blue binding stone out with both hands. "I'd best not be forgetting this" I said to myself, relieving my worries. I gently placed the stone back into my rucksack and then hopped over the wall, bearing north towards the widow's nest.

I decided to take the scenic north western route around the wilderness volcano, reducing the risk of bumping into anything undesirable. I passed the bubbling magma pools of the bandit camp and smelt its putrid green, swamp like water. Brittle pieces of black ash would occasionally be blown past me and then get caught in my cape, only to disintegrate into black dust. I was unsure where the ash came from at first, but as I past a small huddled bunch of black trees I could see the wind was blowing the fragile, crumbling bark right off the tree trunks, polluting the air. I continued to head north without stopping until the lava maze was in sight; the heat from the bubbling rivers of lava that flowed around the tiny path into the maze distorted my vision. I began to head east, but I was cautious of stumbling across any drifting green dragons in the area, without my dragon fire shield I knew I would be flambéed into a kebab, so I stuck close to the edge of the stifling flow of lava until the land permitted to continue north. Each footstep made me more anxious; I was fully aware a horde of revenants, demons and other horrific creatures roam freely at this depth, snagging their victims when they don't suspect it. I muttered a protective prayer under my breath to ease my anxiety and maintained a leery eye whilst heading towards the fabled fence of cessation. I was relieved to see it, the rusting iron fence, creaked and groaned in the violent gusts of wind. Each sharp, extending rail head had a different skull firmly nested on its spiky point, cracking the bone. It stretched as far west and east as I could see, spanning the entire width of the cursed earth. The fence acted as a boundary to those who were brave enough to enter the wilderness and as a milestone for those insane enough to explore what lay beyond, there is nothing but a toxic concoction of flame, ice and death waiting. Although the legends of the awe inspiring sights of ancient temples, magical arenas and unforgiving, active volcanoes are all true; the lure of such a seducing sight can only ever be rewarded with the peril of the abominations that watch over them. I took heed of the warnings dotted across the wilderness wall; I only entered the most northern wilderness when I absolutely had to. I knew the fence would lead me to where I had to be without needing to cross it. I used it like a handrail, occasionally grabbing the iron rails and pulling myself eastwards, inching closer towards the spider hive. Several solid chunks of rust caught on my slayer gloves, snapping and crumbling in my grasp. I shook my hands aggressively to remove the last latching flakes of rust as the hive came into view out of the black night. It reminded me of an ant hill; despite looking deteriorated, countless spiders crawled and scurried across its surface, infrequently disappearing into and emerging from the hive. Its surface was awash with warped mouth-like entrances, swallowing the spider's whole into its depths and then spitting them back out again. On top, I caught the glint of a sparkling blue light, a forfeited sapphire lay half encased in the hive shell, shining to those whom pass, a warning and an enigmatic signal to what lay below. "This is it" I said aloud to myself, raising my shield and gripping my sword tighter. I slowly approached the hive like the countless times I had past it before, but I felt different, I felt a grave fear of what was about to happen.

I silently inched closer to the hive, whilst studying the behaviour of the spiders; they appeared to be repairing the integrity of the structure as it was battered and abused by the harsh wind. There was a fell, hissing whistle on the air, like a choir of crickets singing together. I slowly took another step, hearing the crumble of the tarnished, blackened earth beneath me and then the chorus of hissing

abruptly stopped. I raised my head, alert to the danger, the spider's had stopped working and began raising their front, prominent legs towards me. Their hissing restarted; it was louder, more threatening and unsynchronized. I daringly took another step closer and they all began to rush at me as a single horde. My sword had begun to bathe in spider haemolymph once more, I instantly slay the first spiders that reached me, slicing their bodies in half and piercing another with a downward thrust. I could feel them moving all around me, they were almost overwhelming with their numbers, but my faith was protecting me for now, their insignificant attacks couldn't even scratch my armour. It was too easy to slash and dice the spiders apart; they were practically lining up to be slain. Another small group began to manically file out of the holes of the hive; I swung my way to the closest entrance and mercilessly killed everything that made the mistake of scuttling out. I now stood alone, wading amongst a sea of dead spider carcasses, a step closer to the ancient cavern that waited beneath my feet. I pulled my extinguished lantern out of my rucksack and ignited its flickering light, shining it into the hole of the hive. I couldn't see inside clearly, it was too dark and the glinting spider webs obscured my vision. "I'm sure there are more of you waiting in there!" I heckled into the spiders abode, wary of a spider jumping out at me. I quickly walked around the mound, noting the different sizes of the entrances and pondering how I was going to break in. "Through the front door then..." I smirked. I felt an energy surge away from me just as I was about to face the spiders dwelling within the hive, my faith and prayers had finally run their course. The crisp blaze of the fire within my lantern burned clearer as I hunched my head under the entrance archway and gingerly headed into the hive. My vision was a smudge of silvery, glistening white combined with a shadowy black, which wandered and strayed with the movement of my lantern. I poked and tore the thick web that clung to the inside of the walls with the edge of my dragon blade, walking deeper inside. I heard a noise behind me, like the sliding of rope between hands. I swiftly spun around whilst slashing at my waist height; I felt the tug of spider webbing on the edge of my sword followed by a black object thudding to the ground. "Aiyaa" it cried, jumping onto my arm, I dropped my lantern, startled by its attack and began to grapple with the spiders strong grasp. It frantically tried to bite through my metallic blue armour; venom spilt and flowed down my arm, dripping off my elbow. I dropped to my knees and smashed the spider's body off the decrepit floor with my arm. It cried out in pain, finally letting go and falling onto its back. I had enough time to follow through with my sword, skewing the spider and penetrating the floor causing it to crack uncontrollably around my feet. The spider's legs continued to move aimlessly for a few moments before they succumbed. I caught the sight of more shadowy movements directly in front me, quivering in the light of the lantern. I let go of the hilt of my sword and reached around to my backpack, grabbing a couple of runes with each hand as the shades sneaked closer. I quickly glanced down to see if they were the ones I required, dropping an odd water rune which wasn't necessary and then I clasped my hands together. My hands were pushed apart by the summoned ball of fire I could manipulate. I could see the entire room clearly now, apart from the webbing that was cast across the walls and the floor, it didn't look any different inside. The warm fiery glow highlighted the frailness of the structure, clearly displaying the cracks leading up to the roof and emphasising the floors dusty, withering state. The shadows had merged themselves together into a group of six spiders, stampeding forward lead by the physically strongest. They looked like shadow spiders, but their cumulative attempt at triumph had made them weaker. I pulled my arms back and pushed the magic projectile into the path of the charging spiders, their momentum sent them storming into the blazing gambit, torching them all on impact. They scattered in different directions as the fire spread across their abdomen and onto their legs, until they slowly came to a standstill. It was almost silent now;

the dull groan of the wind on the outside of the hive and the crackling of the scorched spider corpses was all that I could hear. I walked back to my lantern and picked it up whilst grabbing my sword as well. There was a small hole, the width of my blade in the floor where my sword had pierced the spider; I rolled off one of my slayer gloves and past my hand over the hole. "There's cold air coming through here..." I pondered whilst quickly glancing around. I lowered my face to the breach so I could inhale a lung full of aroma, "Dampness..." I called aloud whilst stumbling across the room to the centre. I couldn't see any entrance like the stranger had mentioned in his notes. I speculatively shone the bright light of the lantern directly at the floor noticing the discolouration of the earth and the miniscule ridge of an opening, covered up like a plaster over a wound. "I've found you" I said happily, dropping my rucksack on the floor and hauling my pickaxe out.

I turned around, pushing the stuffed bag backwards with the sole of my boot and then placed the blazing lantern next to it. The room was beginning to darken again as the spider carcasses extinguished. I quickly spun the pickaxe around at the hilt to find a comfortable grip and then raised it high above my head. "Please don't collapse!" I pleaded aloud to whichever god looked over me, hammering down onto the floor. It crunched and cracked around the radius of the former opening, but stayed intact. I manically begin to smash open the floor with the pickaxe, repeatedly striking the ground, scattering bits of earth, dust and rubble everywhere. The gap deepened and widened until I broke through completely. A gust of cold wind surged up through the gap carrying the overwhelming stench of dampness and stagnated water. Loose rocks fell and disappeared into the waiting darkness, I didn't even hear them strike the floor below. I sneakily peaked over the edge aiming my lantern into the darkness; I couldn't see anything other than darkness and shadow. I waited a moment for any kind of noise or movement of something waiting for me below, but it was eerily peaceful. "Looks like I'm abseiling again..." I said sarcastically whilst rustling through my bag for the spider rope I was gifted. I delicately lifted it out and moved it into the light to inspect it closely again, "You'd better not break!" I warned the lifeless rope, untying it to see its full length. It appeared to be long enough to dangle some distance into the cavern. "This floor won't hold my weight..." I stated whilst looking around for a suitable spot to tie the rope around or to hammer a steel nail into. The ground felt uneven in some places and appeared to be falling apart in others. I snatched one end of the web rope and dragged it just outside of the hive, "Aha!" I happily exclaimed, pulling the rope to the trunk of a nearby dead tree and tightly tying it up around its trunk. Bits of the bark broke away and blew into the wind like paper whilst I fiddled with the knot. "You may be decaying, but your roots run deep!" I stated, as I happily critiqued my knotting skills. I tightly grabbed hold of the rope and pulled it with all of my strength, the tree was concealing any signs of frailty. I lifted the rope over my shoulder and strolled back into the hive. The only light inside the room now was from my lantern and it was pointing directly to where I didn't want to venture. "This is it..." I calmly affirmed, taking slower, deeper breaths, trying to remove the anxiety I could feel in my stomach. The potions I had brought were poking out of the top of my bag; one by one I popped the corks of the different coloured liquids and threw back a large swig. I felt physically amazing; I was stronger, faster and sharper. My spirit was lifted and I even braved a mouthful of my bitterly tasting super anti-poison potion, just to be safe. I anxiously threw the remainder of the web rope into the hole and hoisted my rucksack on to my back. I threw my shield over my left shoulder and gripped my lantern in-between my teeth. I briefly tasted the dirty metal handle of my lantern as I lowered my body into the hole and began to climb down into the Widows former prison. The light from my lantern wasn't any help, I couldn't see anything with it, I was breathing deeper under the strain of the weight, each breath

caused the naked flame to glimmer and fluctuate. Every arm's length of rope I climbed down lured me into the deeper, thicker darkness, to a point where I couldn't see much of the rope above my head. I quickly looked down to see how much rope was left, feeling the lantern handle gently glide through my lips, eventually slipping out of mouth. I watched in horror as the light helplessly spun into the gloom.

I saw it crash into the floor as it bounced off the rocky deposits, thumping and loudly pounding before finally resting in-between two smaller rocks. The noise echoed for a while, alternating from each side of the cavern. I began to rapidly slide down the rope in desperation until I reached the end, the floor wasn't too far away, but I knew if I let go I wouldn't be able to climb back out. I loosened my hands and fell for a second before making a balanced, agile landing on a smooth section of the rough floor. I almost slipped, the floor was wet, a layer of green moss had uncontrollably flourished in patches and the air smelt humid. I steadily shifted over to where my lantern lay and swiftly investigated my surroundings. The floor was covered in rocks of different sizes; some looked loose while others extended from the jagged floor itself, like sharp pointed teeth. I was genuinely surprised that a spider army had not already bore down to confront me, it felt uncomfortably tranquil. "I need more light..." I whispered to myself, I almost stumbled across the slippery rocks, kicking and shoving them out of my path with my feet. It was drenched, water trickled down the sides of the cavern from above and pooled down onto the floor. "I need light ... Where is it..?" I softly questioned under my breath, remembering the words of the fallen adventurer. I walked around the edge of the cavern, tripping and climbing over rubble, spotting a rocky outcrop at the base of the wall. Its bowl-like structure was carefully sculpted out of the rock to hold a liquid, intended to be set alight and resemble a cauldron of fire. I dropped my rucksack on the floor and rummaged through it, retrieving my tinderbox. I ripped a small piece of cloth from the top of my rucksack and began hammering the fire striker in the light of my lantern. The light flashed momentarily each time it sparked until the cloth caught ablaze. "I hope this works!" I said as I tossed the flaming material into the liquid. The rock roared alight, bursting with a huge cloud of fire that swirled upwards. The force of the heat made me stumble backwards in surprise. A small section of the cave became visible, the ground around me was littered with rocks, but I could see a platform in the centre. I grabbed my lantern and cautiously approached it. It was fashioned out of the rocky floor itself; it was circular in shape and had three steps leading up to the main platform itself. I looked down onto the platform; there were holes etched into the platform itself with grooves leading from each one, directly in the centre there was a larger hole, it looked to be a perfect fit for the binding stone. "There must be more cauldrons..." I said as I crossed the central platform to the other side of the vast cavern. I was right; three more were extinguished, patiently waiting to be re-kindled again. They each gushed, spitting a fireball when they were ignited, lighting more of the cavern. Black smoke began to rise from the embers that occasionally leapt out of the fire cauldrons, they landed on the watery floor only to be smothered and extinguished. As I lit the final beacon of flame I heard the sound of rocks falling behind me, they clattered and ricocheted off the other rocks already on the floor. I spun around to face my enemy, but nothing stood before me, not even the hint of a shadowy figure. I guardedly walked around the platform, dropping my lantern next to my rucksack and wielding my shield. The ambience was still undisturbed; the sound of the giant burning flames was calming. A strong breeze gusted past behind me; I instantly spun around again, becoming disorientated by the curious sounds. "I know your here!" I uncontrollably shouted out, frustrated by



the absence of Dreamcatcher. "I told you. You will be stalked..." a voice I was familiar with threatened.

"You are all the council could muster? Cowardice. Fear. Impotence...?" the hunter spoke slowly. His low voice booming; it felt like it shook the cave. "I must admit I am a little... disappointed. Certainly since you've fled each time we have met" he growled, reminiscing our previous encounters. "You stole a child! To feed the widow, *she* is nothing but a monster... like you" I snarled, hoping insults would aggravate him enough to reveal where he was. "*She*. Walks again! Ready to unleash her wrath on your pathetic, mud-monkey race!" he bellowed, shaking the cavern again. I heard large thuds behind me; I slowly turned around to face the hunter. He towered above me, his red eyes glared with hatred and anger. "I will devour you... you and the rest of the monkeys..." he said as he slowly crawled towards me. He lowered his body closer to the floor and appeared to be sucking air into his lungs. I struggled to start moving on the slippery floor as I saw a dark energy began to build up in front of his face, it swirled and congregated, continuing to swell. I narrowly dodged the black projectile the spider unleashed, it blasted the rocks where it collided, propelling a shower of stones into the air. "I am more powerful than the others..." the spider laughed as I moved and attempted to dodge his attacks. He unleashed a volley of spines which whistled as they accelerated towards me; I cowered behind my shield and felt the spines beat against the runite metal. The spider jumped high across the cavern landing adjacent to where I was kneeling, on the other side of the platform. "I will tear you apart!" he scorned as he charged across the raised platform. I had enough time to adjust and brace for his attack, his head clattered into my shield, knocking me flying backwards through the air. I pulled myself onto my feet and counter attacked the spider, swinging and stabbing my sword with precision. The spider moved too quickly, it was like I was attacking his shadow, as soon as I thought I had landed a blow the spider was stood elsewhere. "Pathetic!" the spider screamed at my face, barging me backwards onto the platform. I quickly got back onto my feet and hid behind my shield again. I felt another barrage of spines deflect off my shield, "I need my magic" I announced to myself, searching for my rucksack. "Pray to your 'gods'" the hunter barked, standing over me. He beat me across the platform, the wet surface made me slide on my back until I reached the steps. I rolled backwards landing on my feet and grabbed my rucksack. "Is that where you are keeping it?" he questioned as I frantically ransacked the bag for my runes. "No! I just need this" I shouted, throwing my sword like a javelin at him. I saw it sail through the air, pointing towards the giant spider, but he disappeared out of the way of it and re-materialised to my left. I smiled as I drove a ball of rippling water towards him; it splashed over his body knocking him over onto his back. "Arrrgh!" the spider grunted, re-establishing his balance and charging towards me again. I dashed towards the spider, stopping just before we collided and began a frantic, adrenaline charged brawl. He chomped and barged into my shield whilst he deflected and defended my punches. I riskily rolled underneath his tall, long legs positioning myself underneath his body. I threw my shield up, landing a blow on its abdomen, but then he collapsed on top of me, crushing me under his weight and pinning me down underneath my shield. His back legs pulled me out by my feet, dangling me upside down, before throwing me towards one of the fiery bowls. I spun around in the air; my vision was a blur of orange fire and dark grey rock. I landed facing the ignited fuel basin, smashing through a protruding rock with my back turned to the spider, "Slowing me down won't help you cheat death" the spider mocked. I glimpsed a blue shine reflecting the flame from within the rock I had demolished. I tried to pull it out of the rock, but the spider crawled over me, restraining my legs and squeezing my arms until I dropped my shield. I quickly muttered a prayer to make me invulnerable to his magic attacks.

“You humans and your faith in the gods... I know your prayers. Can you protect yourself from the harm of all of my abilities?” he questioned as he began to pull my arms and legs away from my body. I screamed in agony from the intense pain that rushed through my joints. The spider laughed at me as he began to charge another sphere of dark energy directly in front of my face. “And now you will perish” the hunter gloated, savouring my final moments. I managed to mutter another prayer, relieving the physical pain I was feeling, but I winced in black light of the mage attack, I couldn’t stop him.

As the spider arched backwards to discharge his mage attack I heard the ominous sound of a different magic attack coming from my right. I felt the spider tremble; it released me from its grasp and fell to the floor with force. The spider hurtled into the rocky wall, pushed by a similar dark energy as he was aiming at me. I glanced across the cavern to see another spider standing tall, adorned in majestic white armour; Animus had rescued me from certain death. “Animus!” I happily called out, relieved to see the spider again. “Animus!” the hunter called angrily, “Velox... it’s nice to see you again” Animus boasted in his low, unforgiving voice. “Biding your time till my back was turned, you are a coward... that’s why you spent all those years in my shadow” the hunter growled as he rebalanced himself and proceeded to walk around the platform towards Animus. “Oh and I see the ‘queen’ despatched your slave too...” Velox scorned the sight of the knight of the eight fold seal; he was hidden from my vision by the platform. “You are too late... knight, the seal was broken some time ago. Not that you care much for the meaningless title anyway!” Velox laughed. “This ends today” Animus warned, hissing and crawling towards Velox in a more aggravated manner. “I shall strike you down in the name of the queen!” the knight boldly warned also preparing for combat. His voice sounded higher than Animus’s, but rang out with a sense of purpose and intelligence. “Ha ha! You fools! I shall enjoy tearing the legs off your cold, dead carcasses!” he manically shouted before firing his lethal spines without warning. I saw Animus’s shadow dash towards me whilst the knight engaged Velox. I could hear their hissing and cries amongst their frenzied exchange of fortified attacks. “Adventurer, you must prepare the ritual, a prisoner is destined for these walls and its numbing chill must be felt once again! The sealing stones are still here but keep your wits, Velox is a skilled fighter. It’s going to take all of our strength just to distract him...” Animus’s speech was rudely interrupted by a stray swerving mage attack; it narrowly scraped past his face then tore into the ground. “Search... Now!” he yelled at me before returning to the battle. I turned around knowing where I could find the first one, the rocks had formed around the gem, protecting them from falling debris and hiding them from immoral eyes. I swung my sword into it trying to cut my way into the rock; a tiny spark was the only sign that I had damaged it. “I have my pickaxe!” I sneered to myself; the thrill of the battle was clearly having an effect on my thinking. I scampered across the wet floor, trying not to slip up, yet maintaining a cautious eye on the brawl that was unfolding opposite me. I dived to reach my bag, seeing a burst of spines heading in my direction; my pickaxe fell out, clunking on the floor. I laid my sword across my bag and stood up with my pickaxe in hand; the two spiders were attacking Velox from either side, the hunter was starting to struggle against the might of the two spiders combined. I slid back across the soaking floor and smashed the rock that held the gem. It fell to the floor, rolling with the rest of the crumbled stone. I quickly picked up the gem to examine it, almost letting it glide through my soaked grasp. The sapphire was shimmering with a shade of deep sea blue and a fiery yellow glow from the flaming cauldron. I climbed the small steps onto the central platform and fixed the jewel into one of the smaller holes in the floor. The gem was unnaturally drawn into the hole from my hands, becoming securely affixed. “Seven more, come on” I

called out, psyching myself up whilst looking for more suspicious rocks. "Is this the best you can muster, Animus? I remember training you a lot better!" Velox taunted, before unleashing another colossal mage attack. The spiders dodged out of the way, clearing the path for the magical force to bear towards me.

I stumbled backwards, tangling my feet together and tripping off the platform out of harm's way. I crashed into the ground; my head narrowly missing a collection of sharp rocks. Sparkles of blue twinkled through the blackened rocks, I gratefully smashed open the rock; collecting another gem. There were more rocky outcrops in my vicinity; I swept through the area obliterating the boulders and reducing the stone to rubble. The majority of the rocky deposits were natural; disintegrating into granules of slag, but three more surrendered their precious blue, gemstone hearts. I collected the four sapphires together and clutched them close to my chest, tentatively tiptoeing my way back onto the platform. I fell to my knees, scattering the gems onto the floor as though I was sowing seeds in a farming patch. One by one I made my way around the platform snugly placing each of the gems in place. "The ritual will never work; I am too strong for you!" Velox called out as he physically overpowered the knight, throwing him aside into the rocky wall. He turned to Animus and barged his way through his defences, bundling the large spider to the ground. "You are weak Animus!" he mocked as he loomed over the floored spider. I quickly dashed off the platform to try and help Animus, I swung my pickaxe with all my strength, Velox had taken no notice of me and my pickaxe pierced through the side of his body. "Eeeeeaarrgh" the spider cried out wincing from the pain, I dislodged the tip of the pickaxe from the spider's body and retreated around the platform. "Humans!" the spider spat on the floor expressing his disgust, "Is our great society going to ally ourselves with them again? Let them corrupt and taint all that we hold?" Velox questioned as he approached me. "I will not allow it!" the spider bellowed, his first attack was swift, but I managed to avert it with my arms. The second attack was quicker and it connected with my abdomen; launching me across the room. I smashed through the rocks that were behind me, I heard the sound of glass clinking on the floor, my cape wrapped around my back, cushioning the impact, but it still hurt me. "Arrgh" I muttered, curling up on the floor clutching my chest, I felt sick, the spiders strike was so powerful that it had dented my armour. "Such a waste..." the spider spoke whilst holding one of the sapphires I required. "My title! My Duty!" the knight of the eight fold seal cried out as he lunged at the dominating spider. He knocked the gem out of the Velox's arms, the sapphire slid towards me, absconding away from the nefarious spider. I grabbed the gemstone, watching on powerlessly as the two spiders battled again. "I must say! You certainly have the potency of your predecessors... and the desire. I shall grant you your wish" Velox jeered. The knight was fluid, he relentlessly followed each attack with another, but Velox was equally quick. The hunter dodged one of the knight's attacks and struck with precision at his head. The spider looked dazed, his body shook and even his helmet couldn't withstand the brunt of the fierce blow. Velox mercilessly knocked the spider down; the hunter picked the knight up with four of his arms and carried the spider off the platform. "Noo!" I cried, struggling to move, I was still gasping for air, I attempted to throw my pickaxe but I only managed a few feet, the spiders blow had completely debilitated me. Velox held the knight aloft, soaring high above a large extended rock. "For your queen?" he laughed, before he cast the defenceless spider down. The rock pierced through the knight's armour, passing straight through his body and emerging just below the spiders chin. The knight was deathly silent; he made no cry or hiss of pain or any notion that he was alive.

Velox's laughing rang out in the cavern, "Too long it has been..." he said. Animus had reinvigorated himself on the opposite side of the platform, gazing at the knight's motionless body. "Does this anger you Animus? Have I taken a step too far?" the hunter aggressively declared. "You will lose" Animus quietly replied, purposefully crawling up onto the platform. "The world will cower in my shadow, you will see..." Velox declared, imitating Animus's movements onto the platform. I felt uncomfortable, I faced directly between the two feuding spiders and the room throbbed with fury and hatred. The two spiders stood silently, looking into one another, I could hear the sizzling pop of the large fires burning around the room. Velox roared and hissed at Animus before charging towards him, their initial collision felt like it shook the entire cave again. I slowly made my way back onto my feet without looking at the knight's body, I blamed myself. The spiders were interlocked in a wrath fuelled, archaic conflict in the middle of the platform, precisely where I needed to be. I staggered forward still clutching at the left side of my chest; it felt like my heart had been squeezed dry. I picked up my pickaxe and wandered over to the final area of the cave I had not excavated. The roars of anger and the pounding of their attacks were distracting; I was alert to any wayward strikes from range or driven casts of magic. The rocks were smaller in this area, huddled and collected in groups of three and four. I found the second last gem, but finished clearing the area, there were no more rocks to break open and I still needed one more. A monstrous explosion startled me, I looked up and the spiders had thrown each other into one of the fiery bowls cracking the stone. The oil spilled across the already damp floor, igniting the rock as it freely pooled and separating the two spiders by a wall of fire. They continued to engage, throwing magic and spines across the flaming barrier. I navigated the steps of the platform and placed the sapphires in place, "One more... One more..." I whispered to myself, spinning around trying to spot where the last gem might be hiding. I stopped. I felt my stomach turn as I realised where the sapphire was. My heart began to beat slower with an incredible sorrow, the weapon used to slay the knight of the eight fold seal was where the gem was hidden and I could feel it. It felt like time slowed down, the sound of the battle died out and muffled as I approached the lifeless figure of the glorious knight. I looked down at his face, "You're still alive!" I exclaimed, overcome with joy. "Yes..." he struggled to utter, "But I can feel the cold chill of death rousing... I welcome him, I did my purpose" he sputtered, struggling to breathe. I slowly pulled his helmet off and dropped it on the floor. "You must animate the eight fold seal, *she* must be defeated. I authorize you to accomplish this task ... knight" he said, stuttering and spitting hemolymph. Without warning the spider started to move, pushing his body upwards. I backed away watching the spider rise up off the spike with determination and without a hint of the excruciating pain he was feeling being revealed on his face. "Do this. For the queen..." he declared before taking his final breathe and collapsing to the floor.

I stared at his body for a moment, lost amongst his final words, struggling to pull myself together. The arrow-like rock had hemolymph trickling down it that amplified the glistening gem buried inside of it. I gripped the hilt of the pickaxe tightly and advanced towards the final gem. I hit the rock at its base, causing the rest of it to topple down, smashing upon impact with the floor. The gem lay still amongst the fragments of rock, "The last one..." I said, as I knelt down to pick it up. I turned around to face the spiders; they had manoeuvred around the shattered, flaming oil cauldron, but continued to hail blows on each other on the opposite side of the platform to me. I sneaked up onto the platform and placed the last gem into the beckoning hole. The platform momentarily flashed with a brilliant white light, "The ritual needs enchanting!" Animus called out, becoming distracted and receiving a blow which knocked him up onto the platform. Velox quickly scuttled up after him,

sensing he was exposed. I quickly ran off the platform, back to my bag as Animus continued to wrestle with Velox. "Cosmic ... water" I repeated, sifting through the remaining possessions contained in my bag. I grabbed the runes and turned back to the platform. The two spiders were face to face now; I summoned the spells energy containing it in my hands and fired it towards the platform. The platform flashed a cold, icy blue then sparked with blue and white light. "It's ready!" I called out to Animus as I ran up the steps to help him. I struck Velox in his abdomen with my fists; he exerted his strength on Animus pushing him across the surface of the platform and then fired spines at me. I shielded my face with my forearms, I felt the spines penetrate my armour, prickling and stinging my arms. "You fool! You really think the queen will return to walk into your trap?" the hunter demanded as he crawled towards me again. "It's not for her..." Animus leapt high and landed on Velox, restraining him to the ground. "QUICKLY!" he boomed, his voice made me tremble with fear. I jumped off the platform and retrieved the large binding stone. "Animus the fool? I shall win!" Velox shouted, demanding answers. I carried the heavy sapphire up the steps, seeing Animus struggle to resist the spider's strength. They both grunted and hissed as they contended for dominance over one another. Velox nudged Animus making him vulnerable and then threw him off the platform. The hunter swiftly got to his feet and desperately sprung toward me.

"Too late..." I muttered, locking the binding stone in place. A blast of air from the platform propelled me backwards off the platform, "What? Noooo!" Velox screamed as a wide beam of white light ascended upwards from the jewel, reaching up to the top of the cavern. I saw the fading outline of the massive spider's body being consumed by the thickening light, he began to thin and stretch as it pulled his body upwards. "*She* will have her revenge!" he cried out as his voice began to fade under the trembling of the cavern. The temperature in the room dropped dramatically, even the fires began to burn with a cooler blue glow. The white light blurred and blended into a mix of peaceful ocean and light sky blue. I heard the sound of frost forming from above; its crunching sound became more intense as the thickening layer of ice continued to spread across the roof and down onto the cavern walls; imprisoning the hunter within. I noticed that the platform had also begun to freeze over, it's layer of ice separated only by the individual glowing lights of the gems, now illuminating majestically. The gems were linked by beams of divine blue light which shone through the ice, illustrating a perfect symbol of Saradomin and feeding the throbbing beam that stretched to the ceiling. It was an awe inspiring sight.

I saw Animus's head pop up from the other side of the platform, he was staring down. I quickly grabbed my shield and then walked around the frozen platform to where Animus stood, noticing he was tending to the knights carcass. "I'm sorry... I couldn't help him anymore" I said sympathetically, "He knew what he came here for... he sacrificed his life to complete his calling... the eight fold seal has been restored" Animus spoke quietly without looking at me. "And now that's a title you bear, *knight of the eight fold seal*, he was a knight of honour and glory. I'm sure you too will rise to the occasion" Animus said, passing me the knight's armour and lifting his body, cradling it in his frontal arms. "We came in through a narrow passage from the east; it leads to the tunnel with the portal you used to reach our plane. We should head back there. The herald is waiting for you with a message" Animus ordered, delicately carrying the knight back towards the exit. "And. What of *her* now?" I asked as I delicately placed the knight's armour on the floor and quickly sorted my possessions together. "I'm sure the widow will have sensed her prison has been reactivated, whether or not she knows Velox is contained within I do not know, but I'm certain she will not risk breaking the prison open again" he explained, "She will return to this cavern... you too should

return, but amass a selected group of your most noble and experienced warriors, it will take more than strength and courage to slay her. *She*, is still dangerous and *she* will be close by, probably navigating the caves to the west of the cavern as we speak, it leads to where she keeps her prey” Animus said. I slid my sword back into its sheath and fixed my shield onto my back. I threw my rucksack over my shoulder and began to follow behind Animus. “We broke many decrees by coming here and our edicts dictated we were forbidden to step foot here. I’m afraid we cannot stay. We have already risked enough” Animus told me. I had noticed some of the areas of the wall were dimly lit, but I had failed to see the opening that was carefully concealed behind a wall of rock. “What about Dreamcatcher?” I asked, containing my feelings towards him. “Dreamcatcher’s plans have been thwarted, we don’t know where he is, but I’m certain he will have something else planned, he is cunning like that and he displays traits that are unnatural to the spiders. He is a bit of an enigma.” Animus informed me, much to my disappointment. We passed through a dark, dusty tunnel, lit by the dimming light of my lantern. The walls gradually became less rocky and exhibited signs of thirst, indicating we were moving south below the wilderness. We eventually arrived at the cave in caused by the adventurer that had started everything. The dust in the air had cleared and the spiders had trenched their way through the rocks that blocked the passage. The herald stood in front of two spider guards that stood next to the opening of the portal. “Animus!” he called out, “Adventurer! You are alive” he said happily, yet I could tell he was somewhat surprised. He scuttled towards us relieved by our sight, stopping in his tracks when he realised Animus was carrying the dead knight. “Oh no...” he muttered. “Velox. The hunter’s final kill. He’s locked away for eternity now” Animus announced to the herald. “And the widow?” he replied. “AWOL, she didn’t appear, neither did Dreamcatcher” Animus reported. “Take him through the portal, we’ll make sure he receives a soldiers’ burial” the herald said staring at the body as Animus walked past him. Animus gently placed the knight’s body on the ground and turned to face me. “This may not be the last we see of each other adventurer, but I do hope it is later rather than sooner” he said sternly. I laughed, “I’ll miss you too” I replied sarcastically. “You fought well today, you were brave and fearless. Much like a true spider warrior ought to be. The council and the populous will be informed we have a new knight. The title has passed down generations to those who earn it. Its meaning was somewhat undermined when we were banished from here. It is a fitting title and you will serve it well! Until then... this is farewell!” Animus said unemotionally, holding out his hands so I could pass him the knight’s armour. He split the armour between the two guards, pointing them through the portal and then picked up the knight, passing through the portal himself. “I was told you had something to tell me herald...?” I asked turning the smaller spider.

“Yes... Firstly. An apology. We weren’t sure of Dreamcatchers whereabouts or his intentions, if we informed you of our plan to aid, had he manipulated his way into your thoughts again he could have acted against us. We could not risk this.” The herald declared as he fumbled with a satchel he had draped across his body. “I understand” I replied, nodding. “Secondly, I carry a message written by the queen herself, she expressed that it bears the penalty of death should anyone but you read it. It is exclusively for you.” The herald explained, handing me a neatly rolled, royal scroll, fastened together by a red bow. “Finally, I also have this...” he said ambiguously as he reached into his pouch again. He revealed a small glass orb, not much bigger than a rune stone in diameter, but it was deceptively heavy. “This is with regards from the porter. This portal must be sealed to ensure the safety of our realm and yours. The politics will continue, but with a member of our royal guard now here it is only a matter of time before relations are reinitialized. This orb will signify the reactivation

of this permanent portal granting you passage back to our plane. You have my promise that we will never venture here again." The herald finished, running out of gifts to shower me with. "The knight will be honoured; he served with dignity and valour. Thank you adventurer, you have saved a lot of lives." The herald said, bowing to me. "Farewell!" he announced before skipping through the pulsating portal. For a moment the portal remained solid, but then it began to flicker and wobble, until it finally vanished. I was alone again, victorious in the face of evil, but isolated from the world. I began to head back towards the opening of the cave, I was briefly concerned I had forgotten to bring my grappling hook, but I quickly patted the bottom of my rucksack to feel it metallic hooks protruding out of the side. I untied the ribbon and unravelled the scroll, reading the words aloud to myself as I slowly walked back out of the wilderness:

*"Dear Adventurer, if you are reading this then you have successfully re-engaged the eight fold seal and have stopped the plight of at least one of the most dangerous spiders to have ever lived. I am not writing to congratulate you however; you must take heed of my warnings.*

*I sense a great shadow descending upon the worlds. The scales of balance have begun to tip. The darkness has begun to surround us, diminishing the light remaining. If we falter, old powers will rise again and those seeking to corrupt will rule.*

*More than one evil stirs in the gloom and a new time is upon us. A time of great sacrifice and of rebirth.*

*May you find peace in the face of what has yet to pass."*

The queen's words made little sense to me, I was more frustrated by the fact that I couldn't even pass through the portal to ask her for clarity. "At least Reldo will be pleased!" I thought, accepting I had accomplished something else.

I made my way back to Varrock to the pass on the good news, confidently striding through the castle gates; towards the library. I stopped myself from entering, remembering the note I had read on Reldo's table. I pressed my ear against the wooden door, listening out for any voices or indication that would confirm the conspiracy against me. I could hear the shuffling of scrolls and the creaking of an old wooden chair. I chose to ignore my own warnings and knocked loudly on the door. "Who is it?" Reldo's familiar voice rang out, "I have returned with good news!" I gloriously announced. "Adventurer? Come in! Come in!" the librarians voice kindly insisted. I slowly opened the door; nothing had changed in the room. It was still incredibly messy; books lay open and face down, hidden under collections of scrolls. "It's good to see you alive!" he remarked happily, standing to greet me with his arms wide open. "It's good to be alive!" I replied happily, "The deed? Is it done?" Reldo asked, his voice couldn't conceal his excitement and relief. "Measures are in place. There's still one, tiny, little detail I need to take care of though..." I said, bending the truth. "Something you can handle?" he asked, sitting back down again. "I've got a few plans..." I smirked. "Our borders are safe again! The king will be most pleased!" he exclaimed. Reldo stood up and walked over to a low wooden table that sat in front of the fireplace. "Did you perform the cryostasis spell then? Did it all fit together?" he asked as he rummaged around in one of the table's draws. "Yes! It worked! You were most helpful. That kind of magic... the sapphires looked ancient. I couldn't decipher the marks; I can't tell you its origins..." I lied, trying to avoid the topic of conversation. "That's quite alright, there wasn't a lot I could recover and once you left I was satisfied that I had helped. I had confidence

in your ability to work things out” he said as he approached me with a small bag of gold. “On behalf of the king, we are very appreciative...” he insisted, clasping my hand and forcing the bag into my grasp. “Thank you...” I replied, looking him in the eyes to convey my gratitude. He turned his back to me and walked back to the desk he was working at. I quickly glanced down onto the table next to me; although it wasn’t purposeful, my sight caught a glimpse of an envelope with my name on it. “There was this one thing troubling me though...” Reldo declared as he massaged his forehead with his hand. “Oh?” I said, looking closer at the envelope. “For days now I’ve felt like there’s been this... hole or a gap in my memory... it’s so odd, like I was meant to tell you something...” Reldo added as he relaxed back into his creaking chair, continuing to read where he’d left off. “What’s this envelope then?” I announced angrily, rolling the scrolls that lay on top of it aside and picking it up to show him. “Envelope?” Reldo replied, confused by my question. “It has my name on it...” I remarked, unnerved by Reldos possession. He stood up quickly and walked over to me, his hand outstretched. “Let me see...” he said, his facial expressions suggested he was worried. I wanted to refuse and to argue over its meaning, but Reldo made me feel sympathetic. The librarian took the envelope off me and placed it under the candle lamp that was standing on the table. “This is my writing... I have no memory of writing this...” he concluded as he inspected the writing, looking back at me. “I feel disorientated. I feel like I should remember this...” he asserted, tapping the envelope off his fingers. “But... If I have put your name on it... Then, it’s something I want you to see...” he proclaimed as he handed it back to me and then returned to his desk. “Should I open it here?” I asked, hoping for advice. “There’s a part of me that wants to know. But there’s doubt in my mind. I don’t think I should see it...” he said, looking up at me again. “Before you leave... make sure you don’t go far... We may need you again...” he mentioned, focusing his attention back onto the scroll. I left without speaking; my trust in Varrock had been shaken. I was certain Reldo wouldn’t be pulling the strings, but I was doubtful that I was walking Varrock freely, without someone maintaining an eye on me.

I disobeyed Reldo’s direct order and teleported to Falador as soon as I had escaped the castle walls. I stared down at the envelope, walking east into the park. I skimmed around the park looking for a suitable, peaceful place to sit. There was space next to Sir Tiffy Cashien, but it looked as though he had nodded off and I didn’t want to be disturbed by his persistent questioning, so I took a seat overlooking the pond and opened the envelope:

*“Erysail, Twenty Forse Novtumber, Year 145*

*I cower in the darkest corners of my own home, alone, with just the flicker of a lonely candle light keeping me sane. I can hear the sound of thunder shaking the very foundations of the castle, the constant barrage of relentless rain pounds against my frail glass windows. The water is seeping in now, even the cracks of my stone walls weep this night. What have we done to anger the gods? Only the warm kiss of the sun’s gentle radiance will harbour the end of this terrible nightmare for me. I fear what may yet come... I fear most for whom this heinous wrath is being exhibited for.*

*I saw a flash of unnatural purple and the sound of the damned yearning for release from their pain. Is anyone else watching? Can anyone else hear? I can barely see through this fountain of rain that falls down the thin shield of glass that protects me from natures onslaught. The heavens are descending, the clouds twist and coil around one another. Entwining. Mating. Another flash, a cold icy blue, the clouds are charged and emanate with electricity. I can hear the sounds of swords clashing, the crunching of broken shields and the choir of a thousand tormented souls. It sounds like some delight*



*and indulge in a forbidden pleasure whilst others writhe in an eternal agony. The clouds have parted; a dark swirling funnel has begun to snake away from the clouds, led by a black gaping orifice. It is as though it stretches and twists to escape from the bounds of its cloudy body; an abyss of untold hunger reaching out from the womb of skies. Outstretching veins of blood red lightning have begun to coil around the black clouds, tightly gripping them in place; they throb with light pumped from the heart of the inferno. I swear the fractures of the storm are now bleeding fire and the sky above me burns with a fiery, orange glow. The orifice has opened wider! It began to spit droplets of flame and exhale a cloud of red venom before regurgitating a fiery object. Steam is rising from the pools of water on the floor as the rain gradually extinguishes the light from the tainted, falling star.*

*I cannot see the object hurtling towards our land anymore, but I can feel it drawing closer.*

*The tempest has begun to subside, the skies have blackened and the lightning still licks the top of our roofs, but I could still hear and feel the impact of the exiled beast crashing down outside the walls of the city.*

*I swear for a moment, as I gazed into the deepest bowels of the chaos, that I could see through into a different plane of existence. One riddled with death, where a landscape of skulls, steel and brass is soaked in the blood of an undying war that scorches the skies and boils the seas. What has been out casted from a place like this? I pray that no one else witnessed the blasphemy that unravelled before me. I intend to claim whatever fell for my own..."*

"Saradomins's Beard!" I gasped, as I read the last line of the firsthand account. "That date would make it... roughly twenty five years ago..." I said to myself confusingly. "Varrock... hmm... surely it... it can't be related to... Tolna?" I struggled to grasp at anything; there were so many things that didn't make sense. There were so many questions unanswered. It felt like an invisible force had been conspiring against me for a while, but fate always placed me in the middle of it.