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“Of Pickle Barrels and Tarantula Hawks”

I knew my end would come soon. I even knew it would end this way. Knowing doesn't make it any easier though. I don't know where this compulsion to tell you (whoever *you* may be) about it came from, but I just feel the need to tell someone. And, well, I haven't seen another tarantula in many years. Anyway, I guess I should start where the end began, with those two cowboys and their damn pickles.

I remember the day those two cowboys clopped into my little slice of paradise, a medium sized pickle barrel strapped to each of their horses. They looked like your standard cowboys: leather Stetsons, leather dusters, cowhide chaps, and a six-shooter strapped around each of their waists. They both had cold blue eyes and five o'clock shadows upon their chins. When they entered the town, they came straight for the saloon where I had taken up residence under the boards of the front porch. I was sunning myself near the steps when they hitched their horses and went inside. What was odd about the two, besides their pickle barrels, were their words:

“Well Jed, this looks like a fine town for us and our pickles.”

“I do say, I'll have to agree with you there Clem. This'll make a fine home for us and our pickles.”

If I had known the importance of these barrels to the cowboys, and what came in on those barrels, I would have skittered out of town as fast as my eight hairy legs could

skitter. Then again, I may not have, seeing as how the creature that stowed away on the pickle barrels and I were destined by nature to do battle. When it comes to instinct, we creatures that crawl on the earth don't really have a choice.

They staggered out of the saloon about an hour later and unloaded their bedrolls and pickle barrels, and that is when I saw her. I knew it was female. She was jet black with long spindly legs and large, bright orange wings. Her antennae twitched, and her multi-faceted eyes flashed in the sun. She flew off of the one named Clem's barrel, and I knew she saw me. As soon as I saw her I skittered into my burrow under the planks of the sidewalk, but I knew it was too late. I knew she had seen me. A female tarantula hawk. I knew my end would come soon.

We tarantulas have been at war, as humans might say, with the tarantula hawks since Anansi created us. I had never seen one myself before now, but I had heard the legends. The skittering bards, who claimed no burrow as their home, told tall tales of battles past. Having no hierarchy amongst us, these battles are always glorious one on one fights to the death. Though none of them had ever killed their enemy. We may not be praised for our beauty or merciful ways, but we sure as hell can "spin" a tale. It was my time to join all the legendary tarantulas of yore.

I hid in my burrow for about six days, praying that maybe, just maybe, the tarantula hawk had forgotten my existence. My burrow was similar to what the long-eared fluffy-ones had for homes, though mine was much smaller. Luckily she hadn't

tried to follow down to my burrow and try to dig me up as the legends say they have a notion to do.

During my time tucked away in my burrow I was fortunate enough to overhear the cowboys' conversations while they built a pickle stand at which to sell their beloved pickles. Thankfully it was located just across the street. It only took them about a day to build the stand, but the one called Jed appeared to enjoy it immensely:

"I tell you what, I do enjoy sawing and nailing wood. Pass me that board would ya," said Jed.

"Yeah, you've always been quite the handyman. Gimme those nails. Just don't forget why we came here," grumbled Clem

"Pass me the saw. Don't worry; I'd never abandon the pickle stand. We've put our all into it," said Jed.

"All right, just don't forget it," said Clem. There was a look of tentative relief on his face.

"Woodworking's fun, but nothing can beat the thrill of raising and selling pickles. Pass me another board."

I wish I could have seen their pickle stand before I died, but sadly it was not meant to be. I'm sure it was something great to behold. The greatest pickle stand to be crafted by mortal hands.

Being in my burrow for six days also gave me time to reflect on my past. And what brought me to this place. I was born with a couple hundred siblings. And a mother who devoured our father as soon as we were born. While she was a hideous excuse for a parent, she was a perfect tarantula. She gave herself fully to instinct. She didn't suffer

the fool she thought Father was. He was a former bard after all. He had decided to settle down after seeing the known world, even though he knew what would happen after the birth of his children. It seems even the free roaming bards aren't free from the instinct that drives us all.

My siblings all scattered as soon as we were able to. We had to hunt and grow on our own, and find our own burrows to call home. I thought of trying my fang at being a bard, but soon decided to find a burrow where I could live peacefully and still observe the humans I had come to find so intriguing in my short travels. I had followed a redheaded man, who could have been a female tarantula in a past life, to the town that I now call home. He was then leeching off a pretty little human who he had threatened at gunpoint. I'd rather not dwell on such a sad tale. I'll just say that he ate well for a time and she died. Now I lived under the boards where she died.

Near the point of starvation at the end of the sixth day, I had to exit my burrow to hunt for food. Thankfully a tasty little field mouse had unknowingly found its way into the killing ground near my burrow. Instinct warned that it was a trick of the she-wasp. My great hunger forced me to ignore it. You don't ignore instinct.

Near the end of my meal I saw something out of the corner of one of my many eyes. Something was blocking the sunlight coming in through the hole in the steps to the saloon. I knew instantly that it wasn't the boot of some intoxicated ruffian, because light was still filtering through. A tarantula such as myself would know the outline silhouetted there anywhere. We're programmed to. It had six legs, and twitching antennae that foretold of doom. I'd known she would find me. I wasn't surprised. I just reared up on

my hind four legs, bared my poison-less yet deadly fangs, and braced for the impact I knew was coming.

She hit me like lighting, and all I heard was thunder. Her stinger pierced my body with deadly precision, hitting in the soft place between my vital organs. Right where nature intended. I didn't know if I would feel the egg entering my body, and I didn't. But I knew it was there. I knew the sting and insertion of the egg wouldn't kill me so I fought back. I fought harder than any tarantula had before me. We circled the earth around my burrow in an unholy embrace for what felt like days: only a matter of seconds. Only a small puff of dust signaled to the larger world that nature was taking its course. She would die shortly after stinging me anyway, so I decided not to give her the satisfaction of dying naturally. The legends don't tell of any tarantulas killing their foes after being impregnated with their foe's spawn. I hope I became the first.

After becoming a legend, soon to die, I devoured her corpse. I wanted to experience the "sweet taste" of victory in *every* sense of the phrase. We tarantulas aren't known for being pleasant, especially after being forced to incubate some other creature's young.

I knew I didn't have long to live then, so I decided to live out my final days near the steps of the saloon and take in the humans and all their civility. And why shouldn't I. I had traveled for years looking for a mate, never to find one. Not that I was disappointed. It is not a pleasant thing, the mating of tarantulas. I can still remember the vampiric monster that my mother was after all. That all female tarantulas are. I wanted to see what humans truly were. And I soon learned that I wouldn't be the only creature who would die, in that place in front of the saloon.

“I’m telling you, selling our pickles in this town could really incite some positive change,” Clem said, as he furrowed his brow and frowned.

“I’m still not so sure. People just don’t give two shits about pickles. At least not the way we do. The way you do,” said Jed.

“Ain’t nothing to be sure about. We already got us a nice cucumber patch and a stand, so all we need are some more barrels,” said Clem

“I know all that, but something just feels off. And you’ve put all our money into it. We barely got enough to eat on,” said Jed.

“It’ll all be fine once we sell our first batch of pickles. Then we’ll be eating like kings. Don’t you worry Jed.”

“If you say so Clem...”

The cowboys came and went at semi-regular intervals throughout my dying days. I couldn’t tell you how many times I saw them or how many days passed before the foe-spawn burst from my stomach. My body was paralyzed (I couldn’t move, yet I could still feel pain and other sensations), and I was in and out of consciousness. I did enjoy watching the cowboys’ partnership degrade over my last days. Hey, I’m still a tarantula after all. They were arguing every time I saw them together, over this and that. Mostly over their pickles. Those damn pickles. If I didn’t know any better, I would say they were possessed by them. Especially the one called Clem.

Clem was the greedier of the two, and was convinced that the pickles would eventually make them rich. Jed on the other hand - I liked him - just seemed content with the pickles they came into town with and with doing odd jobs for the locals. He became quite the popular handyman during my days of having my insides gnawed on by the foe-

spawn. I could feel the enemy's young eating me on the inside as it grew. By the time the one called Jed worked up the gumption to confront the one called Clem about his newfound love, the young tarantula hawk had reached its full size and was starting to eat through my skin. When he decided to bring up the issue, I could already tell that he wanted to be a handyman and not a pickle salesman. I heard them begin their discussion while they were standing on the porch in front of the saloon:

“Clem, there is something that I need to discuss with you, if you don't mind jawing for a spell.”

“Not at all Jed. Jaw away.”

“Well, ya see, I kinda of don't wanta do the pickle stand anymo...”

“What do ya mean Jed, that's the whole reason we came to this gawdamned town!”

“I know that Clem! I know. Its just that I been working all these odd jobs to help pay for the stand, and I've come to really like doing the work. And I'm getting pretty good at it. What do ya think?”

“I think you need to stick to the damn plan we decided on when we became partners!”

“Now Clem, there is no need to yell. I just don't care about the pickles so much anymore.”

I don't know how I knew, but I did. At first I thought I saw it in his eyes, but it was just the sunlight reflecting in the one called Clem's eyes as he looked to the sky. Something inside him snapped like one of his beloved pickles.

“You. Don't. Care. About. The. Pickles. I... I don't...”

“Now Clem, I know we can discuss this ratio...”

I saw it before the one called Jed did. The one called Clem had reached for his six-shooter. He slowly pulled it from the holster and gestured the one called Jed into the dusty street with it. A thin line of sunlight trickled into my body.

“Come on Clem! There’s no need for this!”

“Oh but there is Jed. I gave up *everything* for you and them pickles! We was going to become wealthy men together! Those pickles was going’ to do it! You can’t walk away now. Oh no sir.”

Poor Jed was weeping then. I wanted to look away, but I was paralyzed. I had to look on. Sunlight began pouring in.

“Clem please! It don’t have to be this way!”

“Shut up Jed. Get ready to draw. If you can shoot me, you can be a fucking handyman. If I shoot you I’ll be joining ya a few seconds later. I hope they got pickles in heaven. Or hell. Don’t make no difference to me.”

Jed reached for his six-shooter, but I knew he didn’t want to shoot Clem. I also knew, however, that he wouldn’t be able not to shoot Clem. He ran on instinct like me. Like we all do. I grow a wasp head.

“Clem please...”

“Too late Jed.”

“Clem...”

“DRAW!”

Their bullets hit each other with the sound of thunder. Clem shot Jed clean through the heart, but not before Jed clipped Clem's shoulder. Instinct. Clem was left alone. The foe-spawn materialized from my body. Clem cried:

“Jed! Where are you? Don't leave without me!”

More lightning. More thunder. The foe-spawn flew away. I saw it was smaller. A male. At least I didn't incubate another tarantula killer. Praise Anansi.

So here we are again at the end. With my organs gone I'll only last a little longer. My body is strangely warm on the inside. I suppose it was instinct that brought me here, but I'd like to think that it was at least some of my choices that brought me here. If instinct (or I) hadn't, I never would have learned the truth; that we all fall to instinct in the end. We are all equal in the end. I was as human as Jed and he was as tarantula as me. If only I could share all this with someone. If only I had been a bard, spinning tales as beautiful as the silken webs my smaller cousins weave. If... aw hell. I feel myself slipping now. Is that lightning in the distance? Soon I'll hear the thunder.