

## Chapter CXXXV: Itsy Bitsy Spider

The name of the new girl sent alarm bells ringing in the back of my head — but I'd barely had a moment to even start thinking of what it might have meant before it was derailed as a wave of *something* washed over that entire little tea party, sweeping out across the grass and the trees in a ripple so faint that it was more conspicuous in its gentle, wispy touch than it could have been if it was a hurricane. It touched each and every one of us, and yet left no mark behind, inflicted no wounds, and had no obvious effect that was immediately noticeable.

The little girl smiled innocently the entire while, passing that cup of tea over to the newcomer, and she gave no indication at all that she'd even done anything, let alone what it was.

"Thank you!" the newcomer said brightly. She accepted her teacup and the saucer it was set on, picked it up, and took a sip. Her delight stretched the scars on her face. "We really like it!"

"I'm glad you do," the little girl said politely. "I poured it extra special, just for you."

My companions seemed less sure of what to think of this, eyeing the newcomer uncertainly — and in the case of the surliest, with open suspicion — but none took an aggressive posture. Guarded, at best, cautious, but not openly hostile. If any of them had noticed what the little girl had done with that wave of whatever-it-was, they didn't show a hint of that either.

Some kind of bounded field? But if that was what it was, then what did it *do*? My bugs, my swarm, the raven puppet still flying overhead, none of those seemed to have been affected by it, and my control over them was just as strong as it had ever been. It had to be something subtler, something that gave her an advantage in a way that wasn't immediately obvious.

Maybe it activated on a contingency, or maybe it was just supposed to prevent the people at the table from fighting.

"Now," said the little girl, "we're only missing one more person. Then, our tea party will be complete!"

"One more person?" the redhead of our group asked.

"Papa, of course!" was the answer. *Silly*, was the unspoken word that followed. "He should be here soon, and then we can all have fun together!"

"Yay!" the newcomer cheered. "What kind of fun? Are we cutting anyone open? Are we going to go and find Mama?"

"Cutting anyone open?" squeaked the armored girl across from me. "W-what?"

"Fou," said the monster sitting on her shoulder.

"I don't think I'd call that fun," the boy next to her mumbled into his teacup.

"Whose Mama?" the redhead asked. "Who *is* Mama, actually, now that I think of it?"

“We don’t know,” said the newcomer, and again with the plural pronouns. “That’s why we have to go and find her.”

Multiple personalities? No, that didn’t quite track, did it? The plural didn’t fit. Schizophrenia? Possible. More likely. If her life was as violent as her scars suggested, then it made sense, too, because mental illness had been poorly understood in this era, and her treatment would have made the situation worse. It explained the sociopathic suggestion of cutting someone open, too.

She reminded me of someone in that regard, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on who. It sat on the tip of my tongue, and I couldn’t get it off.

“Creep,” muttered the blonde in armor, arms folded. “What kinda nutjob makes a game of cutting someone open?”

My brow furrowed. It still wouldn’t come. I couldn’t think of it. The memory was important to me, for all of the worst reasons, but it was still important. There was no way I could have forgotten it. Not when the experience had been seared into my brain. It was unforgettable.

So why couldn’t I remember the damn name?

“Yeah, I’m taking a hard pass,” said the redhead. “I like my insides to be my insides, and if there’s one rule I’ve made sure to always keep in mind, it’s that the funny gal is the first to go.”

“That would require you to actually be funny,” the boy said wryly.

The redhead sulked. “Yeah, well, who even asked you, anyway...”

My heart shuddered. It felt familiar, this sensation. This sense of knowing something, knowing that I knew it, but being unable to actually prove it. Familiar, and also terrifying. Why did I feel so certain that if I picked up a book or looked at a computer screen, the words written on them would be illegible to me?

A voice intruded on my thoughts. *Master? Is everything okay?*

My head turned to meet the worried gaze of the dark-haired, bronze-skinned man who was sitting next to me, and I realized, suddenly, that I couldn’t remember *his* name either. When I cast my gaze around the table, the dread twisting at my gut grew and pulled tighter, because I couldn’t remember any of their names. Not the surly man with the tan and white hair, not the redhead, not the brunette, not the girl in dark armor, and not the blonde in silvery armor. If I reached for their names, my mental grasp slipped off of them like water over a stone.

It hit me like a bolt of lightning, and my gut squirmed.

“You,” I said to the little girl, “what did you do?”

The blonde in armor stilled, and then her arms unfolded as she leaned forward a little, suddenly intensely interested.

The little girl blinked at me innocently. “Me? Why, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Yeah,” said the redhead. “What’s with the sudden hostility, lady?”

The albino with a tan straightened now, too, and next to me, the dark-haired guy’s eyes narrowed as his brow drew down.

“Yes, you do,” I said, and around us, the grass buzzed as the entirety of my swarm expressed the fury slowly boiling in my chest. “I’m not going to ask you again.”

The newcomer with the scars looked around, curious, like she was trying to find the source of the noise. The little girl in her kimono, however, just smiled at me.

“You catch on pretty fast, Miss,” she said. “I thought at least one of you would fade away completely before anyone figured it out.”

The girl in armor with the monster sitting on her shoulder gasped. “F-fade away?”

“Hey, now,” said the blonde. “What’re you saying, here? What’d you do to these guys?”

“I’m not going to tell you,” the little girl said. “Why should I? Servants like you don’t play my games.”

The tan albino scowled and took on an aggressive posture, hands curling around invisible swords. “I don’t remember any of us saying you had a choice in the matter.”

She wasn’t at all intimidated. “Too bad! If you’re not playing with me, then you don’t get any guesses!”

The blonde slammed her hands down on the table hard enough to rattle all of the cups and spill tea all over the white tablecloth, snarling, “Why, you little...!”

The boy with blue eyes took in a sharp breath. “My name. I can’t remember it.”

“Pssh, what?” the redhead laughed. “Are you serious? That’s silly! Who just forgets their name like...”

Her brow furrowed. “W-wait. Isn’t it... But...” She shot up out of her seat, head turning this way and that as though she’d dropped something and couldn’t find it. “I can’t remember mine either!”

The newcomer giggled and rocked in her seat, absolutely delighted. “We’ve never played this game before,” she said, “but it’s a lot of fun!”

“Senpai!” said the armored girl. “Y-you mean to say, you really can’t remember your name?”

“Nope!” answered the little girl. Her cheer was utterly incongruent to the situation. “Here in the Nameless Forest, that’s the first thing that goes! And then you lose your sense of self, and last, you lose your whole being! But there is a way to beat it, you know.”

She smiled a big, bright smile, so big that it threatened to split her face in half.

“All you have to do is remember your name!”

As though it was that simple. I could already see a possible way around it, if we had nametags on our clothing or our names written down on our hands or a piece of paper, but that required us preparing ahead of time for this thing. I had to assume it wasn't as easy as just having any of our companions call our names, or else it would have been hilariously simple to beat it.

But there was an even more obvious option.

*Or, I thought, since this Nameless Forest is yours, all we have to do is kill you, right?*

There was a certainty behind that thought. A weight, like it was a fact, not just me guessing. It was backed up by another certainty, one whose origin I couldn't place but felt just as firm: whatever this girl was, the one thing she wasn't was an ordinary little girl.

An image flashed briefly across my mind, as though to lend more weight to the idea, of a young girl with blond hair and green eyes, dressed in a black gown and veil that glittered as though they were inlaid with thousands of tiny emeralds.

My swarm gathered together, clumping up and buzzing as they formed into groups like battle lines. Through a million faceted eyes, I stared at the little girl in her fancy pink robe, ignoring the newcomer, who watched the entire thing, fascinated, and the boy and girl who, like me, had forgotten their names and my name and climbed up their chairs to avoid my army.

"I've got a better idea," I said as I went to work. Like a reflex, my spiders had set to weaving thin lines of gossamer strand and sneaking up to place them in strategic areas while everyone listened to the flies and gnats and wasps that were so much more obvious. "Either you undo this yourself, or you'll be forced to undo it. I'm not picky about which."

Paradoxically, the girl wasn't threatened at all. She just smiled again, completely unperturbed.

"Oh," she said. "We're going to play this game, now? I know how to play that one! I'm really good at it, too!"

She clapped her hands together, and power gathered, swirling about her body.

"And as if in uffish thought he stood —"

*Shit.*

"Stop her!" I shouted, even as my gathered swarm surged. I wasn't even sure who would obey me, if any of them even would. I just knew that whatever she was about to do was bad and we couldn't let her finish it.

"— the Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, came whiffling through the tulgey wood —"

The table was suddenly upended, exploding upwards, and the abruptness of it had me falling backwards and over my chair — the other two much the same as me — even as I sent in my bugs to bite and sting and do whatever they could. The dark-eyed man in his teal armor stumbled back, the arrow he'd notched on a bow he pulled out of nowhere flying up and into the sky, off course, while the tan albino stumbled and rolled.

The blonde, the one who'd thrown the table up to begin with, manifested a large broadsword and cut the table in half, kicking off the ground towards the little girl.

“— and burbled as it came!”

My bugs stung and bit and buzzed and swarmed, and none of it did anything at all to the girl, who continued on like nothing was happening. They couldn't even find purchase in her flesh. The blonde, who was the only one who would reach the girl in time, angled her arm back and aimed the point of her sword for the girl's throat. Her thrust was lightning fast, heralded by sparks of actual red lightning.

It skidded off, gouging out a chunk of flesh as it went, and purple blood flew through the air, sizzling as it splattered onto the grass. More of it dribbled down the thick, massive arm that had appeared in front of the girl to protect her, running down over the base of the jagged, branch-like spikes that jutted back over the forearm.

Standing over the little girl was a giant. Its fists were the size of small boulders and its body bulged with muscle. The head was vaguely human-shaped, but it was almost entirely smooth except for the jagged, lipless gash that formed its mouth and the round sockets that glowed with yellow light. A lopsided crown of spikes jutted away from its skull, and a pair of even more lopsided wings — far too small for actual flight — with more spikes for feathers protruded from its back, stiff and unmoving.

The presence slammed into me a bare second later, an alien weight that felt like nothing I could remember. My heart beat a rapid tattoo inside my chest. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead, and every part of me *screamed* that this thing was wrong, that it didn't belong, that it was something that shouldn't ever exist.

“What the fuck?” the blonde exclaimed.

The massive creature was so large that it looked like it would lumber about inelegantly, but its fist lashed out with such speed that she didn't react in time to avoid it, and her armor screeched as that enormous hand caught her right across the chest. The force of the blow flung her back and away, and the other armored girl let out a shout as she was nearly bowled over.

“And if we're going to play that game,” said the little girl, “then I just had to invite my friend to play with us! Isn't that right, Jabberwocky?”

*Shit*, I thought again and beat a hasty retreat from them both as my swarm came up to form a smokescreen. One of those massive fists swung around again, and every single bug that came into contact with its skin disintegrated like so much steam.

The tan albino came in with a pair of falchions, one black and one white, sweeping them down across the monster's chest. The wounds they carved were shallow and completely ineffective, and he barely had time to bring his swords up in a guard before the thing's retaliatory blow shattered them like cheap glass.

A flurry of arrows landed in its chest, but a contemptuous swipe of its arm broke the shafts like kindling, and the wounds were already disappearing even by then.

Strong, sturdy, and it even had regenerative powers. The combination twigged onto something, but the memory slipped through my fingers like sand through a sieve, and whatever connection my brain had been trying to make fell away, unrealized. Another thing the little girl's trick had taken from me, and I was getting really fucking tired of that really fucking quickly.

I reached out, fumbling for the thread I could feel, the thing the dark-haired archer must have used a minute ago to contact me, and I pushed every bit of my singular thought down it: *Call my name!*

Halfway through preparing another barrage of arrows, he stopped, eyes flitting over in my direction. Whatever he thought of my Hail Mary play, he didn't let on, and without arguing or hesitating, he opened his mouth and said, "Taylor Hebert!"

And like a film had been removed from my brain, everything cleared. The memory I'd been grasping for a moment ago — of Herakles, storming through everything we'd thrown at him, of Lung, fleshing bubbling as his wounds healed and his body grew, of a great golden man shrugging off everything thrown his way — clicked back into place. The familiarity of that feeling, of slowly losing myself and forgetting the names of my friends, twisted up my stomach, becoming something black and furious.

*Fucker*, I thought viciously. If I could have set that girl on fire with my eyes alone, I would have done it right then and there.

I wasn't sure it was going to work, and I was never so happy that I'd been wrong. This whole thing had already gone to shit, and it would have been even worse if we'd had to try and fight while we couldn't even remember our teammates and what they could do.

Emiya, having caught on, abandoned his attempt to reengage the Jabberwocky long enough to shout, "Fujimaru Rika! Fu —"

But before he could get any farther than that, the Jabberwocky zipped across the distance, and he only barely managed to dodge well enough to avoid a direct hit. Even the glancing blow, however, clipping his ribs with force that would have pulverized mine, was enough to send him sprawling and rolling across the ground.

"No fair!" the little girl said, pouting. "That's cheating! Servants aren't allowed to help if they don't play the game, too!"

"Hey!" Rika protested. "You're the one who didn't tell us the rules until you'd already forced us into playing your stupid game!"

Arash drew back on his bow and took aim at the undefended girl — a Servant, she had to be, if she was pulling monsters like this out of thin air — but the Jabberwocky seemed to teleport to return to her side, blocking them all again. Those that didn't break on the spiky protrusions jutting out from its wrist didn't seem to even hurt it, let alone impede its movement.

"Senpai!" said Mash, huddled defensively in front of the twins. "Master!"

"O-oh!" said Rika. "Right! U-um, Fujimaru Ritsuka!"

And Ritsuka startled as everything rushed back to him. Good. That meant we were all back to normal, so we didn't have to worry about losing anyone to the Nameless Forest anymore.

Mordred suddenly flew across the distance, sparks of red lightning crackling across her body. "I've had enough...of your fucking games!"

She swung down with thunderous force, and the Jabberwocky caught her sword in one of its massive hands, wrapping its thick fingers around the blade and completely ignoring the edge cutting into its flesh. Sizzling blood dribbled down its arm and to the ground, and it left behind blackened, charred patches of grass where it landed.

"That's okay," said the little girl. "Jabberwocky likes this game better anyway, don't you, Jabberwocky?"

The monster didn't answer.

"If she doesn't want to play, go ahead and kill her."

The burning eyes glowed, and the Jabberwocky pulled Mordred forward by her sword. Off balance, she wasn't able to dodge when it reached out with its other hand and wrapped its thumb and index finger around her neck, lifting her up off the ground. She dangled, gurgling for breath and kicking her legs about in a desperate attempt to find leverage that wasn't there.

"Mo-chan!" Rika cried.

*Arash!* I ordered. He predicted me and fired another brace of arrows, aiming for the gaps between the Jabberwocky's joints to try and force it to drop her, but it ignored them the same as it had every other attack we'd thrown its way.

In hindsight, the comparison to Lung wasn't quite so apt as the others. At least you could actually hurt Lung if you wounded him badly enough. Even if it wouldn't keep him down for long, it would still slow him for at least a few seconds.

Shit. What other options did we have to break her free? Arash couldn't hurt the Jabberwocky badly enough to force it to let her go, Mash didn't have the raw strength necessary to do it either — not if it was completely unfazed by Mordred's — and even if we called in backup, I wasn't sure we had anything with enough power behind it without resorting to Noble Phantasms.

Did this thing even have a heart or a brain for us to target?

"Go, Emiya!" Rika shouted.

And he appeared in the air above them, holding another pair of his favored swords.

"Trace, Overedge."

They doubled in size, and the spines fractured and split, forming feathery spikes along the back edge. Emiya brought them down in a single chop, aiming for the sole obvious weak point on the monster's arm: its wrist.

I snapped off a single spell right before they hit. *Momentary Reinforcement!*

The blades bit into the Jabberwocky's flesh, slicing cleanly through the red skin and whatever served as muscles and tendons underneath. Even with my extra spell to give his blow more strength, however, the mutated swords made it only about halfway through before something gave, and the blades cracked and shattered like so much glass.

But it was enough. The fingers wrapped around Mordred's neck loosened, and she wrenched herself free, kicking at its elbow to force the rest of its grip away. The instant she was back on her feet, her own sword lit up with a crimson light, and she yanked the blade down the hand holding it viciously. Two fingers and a thumb went flying, severed — but even this much, the Jabberwocky seemed utterly unconcerned by. It swiped at Mordred as though to grab her again, and when she ducked, it nearly got her just by the ponytail.

Already, its nearly severed wrist was almost fully healed and its fingers had half regrown. Herakles himself would have been jealous of how quickly it regenerated from damage.

Raw strength on a cutting edge wasn't enough. Even what I assumed was Mordred charging up a miniature use of her Noble Phantasm didn't give it a second's pause. So if raw brute force wouldn't bring this thing down and my bugs didn't do anything to it at all, there was still one more thing to try before we called up one of the others to blast it with a Noble Phantasm and try taking it out with overwhelming force.

*Arash*, I began, pushing down the thread connecting us. My hand went for my knife, my Last Resort, which was ironically becoming less and less of a last resort these days. Maybe a swarm of nanomachines could cut through that tough hide better than the edge of a single blade.

Wait, I thought, where did the other one, Jackie, go?

*Something* disturbed the ground behind me in my shadow, and I didn't wait, didn't even take a moment to think about it, I just threw myself out of the way. As I rolled over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse — first with my eyes and then with my bugs — of a large knife that was really closer to a short sword stabbing through the area that would have been one of my kidneys.

I landed in a crouch, one hand still curled around the hilt of my own knife. I wasn't sure how much good it was going to wind up doing me.

“Oh,” said Jackie. Her smile stretched her face, pulling at her scars. “It looks like you know how to play this game, too, don't you, lady? Maybe you'll make a good Mommy, after all.”

Behind me, the Jabberwocky swung wildly at Mordred, who was forced to dodge, and then flung the remains of the table we'd been sitting at into Emiya with enough force to knock him back. Mash was still standing defensively in front of the twins, holding up her shield to protect them while the others engaged the monster directly.

It was Arash who descended upon Jackie with force, wielding one of his arrows like a dagger again, pointed tip gleaming. Jackie dodged back nimbly, taking quick, light swipes at him as she went, and Arash blocked them all as he let her retreat, face hard and stern.

It was obvious now that she was a Servant of some kind. To disappear like that, there were only so many ways it could be done with so little preparation, and going into spirit form as a way to escape notice so cleanly was the only one I could think of for someone apparently so young. That she could slip even from the notice of our Servants at so close a range meant that there was only one class of Servant she could possibly be.

Assassin.

Jackie giggled. “You want to play, too, Mister? That’s not nice. You need to wait your turn!”

Her eyes gleamed.

“We won’t take long. Promise.”

And with all of the other clues, it wasn’t hard to figure out which Heroic Spirit she was. Frankly, running around and calling herself “Jackie” was basically advertising it, and if it hadn’t been for the Nameless Forest messing with my head, I was sure I would have figured it out the instant I heard her name.

“Jack the Ripper.”

Although how and why such a famous serial killer was a little girl who hadn’t even hit puberty yet, I didn’t know, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. It was just another bit of weirdness that didn’t make sense amongst a pile of it that had been stacking up over the course of the last few months.

“That’s us!” Jackie chirped. “We are the fire, the rain, the power... So please, won’t you just die?”

Her body lit up with a dark, fizzling miasma, a seething energy that radiated off of her and filled the air like a grudge. The edges of her knife — knives, it turned out, because she’d drawn another one from underneath the tattered hem of her cloak — shone like freshly polished steel. I didn’t wait any longer to pull out my knife and toss it to Arash, who dropped his arrow and snatched it out of the air, then settled into a defensive stance.

“Maria,” Jackie began lowly, “the Ripper!”

She zipped across the distance, making straight for Arash, and led with her right hand and the knife she held therein. Arash readied himself to block and make a counter blow, his thumb moving towards the switch that would activate the nanothorns.

But at the last second, Jackie jukeed to the side, landing lightly on one foot, and Arash must have realized what I did, because he flung himself between us —

And Jackie jukeed back the other way, leaving him off balance and out of place.

I tried to move, to dodge, to do something, anything, to stop her, but everything moved too slow. My bugs wouldn’t be fast enough to form a screen, my body felt sluggish and slow, and by the time the impulse to dodge made it down to my legs, I knew I would already be dead.

Jackie came towards me, rushing, nothing more than a blur of black and a mass of accumulated hatred. Instinct told me it wouldn't take more than a glancing hit, not for a curse that potent.

“Fou!”

A pair of tiny feet slammed into my side like a freight train, and by the time I registered the blow, I was already flying out of the way. My body tumbled across the grass, my vision flipping and rotating between the greenery, the tree canopy, the sky, and the ground, but through my bugs, I could watch as Jackie's knife made contact, catching the little gremlin midair.

Blood splattered, splashing a red smear across the grass, and Fou went flying, too, looking like nothing so much as a particularly furry baseball as he soared off into the bushes and disappeared from view.

The idea that the thing could be killed so easily was somehow strangely disappointing.

I came to a stop, but the world still spun and my head felt like I'd been stuffed into a washing machine. If I tried to stand up like that, I would probably have pitched over sideways.

That was fine. I didn't need to be standing or use my own body to act.

“Fou! Miss Taylor!” Mash shouted. Jackie swerved around and made to come directly after me, the miasma dissipating from around her body, but Mash came in from the side and swung that massive shield around.

Jackie disengaged, hopping backwards, and eyed both her and Arash. I could almost see her weighing her chances and trying to decide whether she liked her odds of winning enough to stay and try.

After a moment, she smiled. “Oh well. We'll play with you guys again some other time! Bye-bye!”

She gave us all a cheeky wave, and then vanished into spirit form. Arash leapt towards her, my dagger flashing — but Jackie was already gone, and I felt the skin of my prosthetic arm prickle, like a sudden gust of wind had blown past me. Arash and Mash both looked around, eyes searching the trees and the park around us for any sign, but there was none.

Slowly, with my head still a little dizzy, I picked myself up, waiting for her to come back and try again, but she didn't. It seemed like she really had just left, just like that.

It gave us room to turn our focus back to the battle against the Jabberwocky, which hadn't taken a turn in our favor during our fight with Jackie. Emiya and Mordred were still doing their best to whittle away at it, and Emiya had even taken to targeting the little girl specifically, but all that managed to do was to keep the Jabberwocky from moving away from her. It didn't change the fact that the damn thing was still shrugging off everything they could throw at it, including having its head cut off, because Mordred had managed that while we were distracted.

It hadn't worked. Its head had just grown back. I had to assume that meant bringing in Aífe and having her use Gáe Bolg to target its heart and other vital organs would be similarly useless, so it

might be that the only way to kill it was to destroy the whole thing at once. Siegfried and Balmung would do the trick.

The only trouble with that was that there were a bunch of buildings with a lot of people inside them not that far away, the reason, I was assuming, or at least one of them, why Emiya hadn't resorted to his own more destructive tactics. The other was probably because we were all right there and would be caught in the blast.

The little girl peered over at us, head swiveling back and forth, one hand shading her eyes. She made a vague sound of disappointment, like she didn't even notice the brace of arrows from Arash that her monstrosity blocked from hitting her.

"Jackie left?" she asked. "That's too bad. I was looking forward to playing with her some more, too!"

"You keep using that word," Rika complained, "but you have a really weird definition for it!"

"Playing is playing," the little girl said sensibly, like she was stating the obvious. "It's okay. Jabberwocky has plenty of energy left, so we can keep playing for a long, long time! And if you feel like you're being left out..." She smiled. "I have other friends you can play with, too!"

A chill went down my spine. Other friends? If she had the Jabberwocky and Alice's tea party, then would the next thing she pulled out be the Bandersnatch? Would it be just as impossible to kill as the Jabberwocky seemed to be?

From the looks on their faces, the others were wondering much the same thing. Even Emiya, who had confidently faced down Herakles, seemed uncertain about the prospect of facing more monsters out of fairy tales.

"What the hell?" Mordred said. "There's more of the fuckers?"

*B-b-b-be-beep! B-b-b-be-beep! B-b-b-be-beep!*

My brow twitched. My alarm, the one I'd set to let us know we had to drop what we were doing and head back to Jekyll's. I shut it off without saying anything, but...

There was no way. Had we really spent an entire hour and a half out here with her?

"Let's see," the little girl said thoughtfully. The Jabberwocky loomed over her stoically, burning eyes staring out unblinkingly. "Who else should I bring out to join the fun? There are oh so many friends who would like to meet all of you, I'm sure, and it's so hard to pick between them."

"None!" Rika rushed to say. "I-I vote none! I'm fine with just Jabberwocky! There's more than enough of him to go around!"

"Too much, in fact," Emiya murmured.

"But you Masters are being left out," the little girl said. "That's not fair at all. Maybe a few Trump Soldiers will be enough to keep you company for a while!"

“Alice!” a new voice barked, and I startled as something moved in the underbrush, a person that had been close enough to watch the whole thing and who had somehow managed to avoid disturbing my swarm as he came closer. “Stop playing around with them! Finish it already!”

The little girl, Alice, heaved a sigh. “Oh well. If Papa says so, then I guess it’s time to finish you all off. Jabberwocky —”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” I said.

However it was he’d managed to disappear from my notice between entering the park and speaking, the fact that he’d spoken had broken whatever spell he’d been using, which meant I could see him now with my swarm. It was only too easy to surround him with everything that was already in the trees and grass near him, to bring Huginn down and through the leaves, unnoticed, and perch him where I could see the mysterious “Papa” with eyes that were easier to parse with sharper vision.

Funnily enough, he actually could have passed for her father, down to the long, straight black hair and the Japanese robe he wore like a coat over his business suit.

Alice tilted her head curiously. “You wouldn’t?”

I pointed unerringly towards the mysterious man, and as I did, I pulled up my more visible swarm, a writhing mass of flies and mosquitoes and wasps, and had them all fly about, gathering like a cloud around the patch of forest where her “Papa” had been hiding.

The man stilled, eyes darting about, and then visibly calmed himself, taking deep, slow breaths, and for an instant, I almost lost track of him again. It was like he very nearly blended into the scenery.

But Huginn was there, and Huginn did not blink. Whatever spell he was using did not make him *invisible*.

“Unless you don’t care what happens to your Papa, that is.”