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## Smallest of Heroes

by B. W. Bright

In the heart of the smaller world away from human eyes, where blades of grass towered like mighty trees and the scent of adventure hung in the air, an ant named Alaric found himself entangled in a perilous predicament. His exoskeleton gleamed like polished armor under the warm sun as he ventured through the vast meadow; his tiny steps carried the small scout toward an unknown fate.

In the dirt, his antennae flicked with the scent of something. “An old food store long forgotten?” he asked aloud. Alaric then descended into the depths of an abandoned burrow via a stick poking out of the entrance; a pit within his stomach grew deeper with more than just growls as he climbed into the deep cave. Shadows danced upon the walls, whispering secrets and ancient tales. As his body quivered with unease, he stumbled upon a realization; this place was cleverly disguised beneath a layer of earth and fallen leaves. It was surely a den, but not

forgotten. The air in the room was suddenly suffocating, like a cold blanket that refused to be lifted.

Strands of silver sparkled across the floor. Cold water coursed through Alaric's veins or so he thought, but that scent was strong. The tunnel had a mystery that watered his mouth and with a tentative step, he ventured into the darkness below.

In that very dark, he felt the hairs of something brush over him from above, and he looked up to see twinkling stars stare back at him. Only, they weren't stars. His heart leapt when he realized that they were more effeminate.

She leaned in, eight gleaming eyes that reflected the feeble light of the den's entrance. Eight legs slithered against his body from above. Alaric sensed that she would slip inside his skin if she could.

Her voice echoed with a whispery silkiness. "Welcome, brave one, to my lair. I am Arachne, the trap door spider, for legends among your colony may have spread of me. Yet, you are braver than most; few dare trespass for the fruit I keep to lure them here."

The pit in Alaric's stomach sunk even further as he huddled against the dirt in the bowels of the darkness between them. "Then...what do you want with me? Am I to be your next meal?"

"Mayhap," replied Arachne whose giant fangs salivated, "but I am dreadfully bored. Shall we engage in a contest of wits? If you win, you may return to your hole in the ground, but if I win..."

Alaric's mandibles clicked together; his eyes twinkled with a flicker of apprehension. "I accept your challenge, Arachne. But know that I seek only passage, not a battle or to be your midday's lunch."

The spider's hissy laugh echoed through the chamber. "Very well, ant. I shall grant you safe passage if you can answer my riddle. Fail, and you shall become a morsel in my web."

Alaric steeled himself and nodded. "Proceed, Arachne."

She lowered herself onto her web with calculated grace and as she recited the poem, her feet plucked the strands, and she chimed an alluring song:

"In leafy realms, I dwell unseen,

A master of disguise, nature's queen.

With colors bold, I mimic another,

Beware, for I am no simple brother.

My form deceives, my guise confounds,

A clever trickster, nature astounds.

With wings adorned, I blend with grace,

Guess my name in this hidden place."

Alaric's tiny brain raced, pondering the puzzle before him. The room grew still as he contemplated his answer.

“Do you have the answer?” she asked. “Or do you come to your wits end?”

*She's going to eat me, he thought. I need something, anything, to get away. An escape?*

“Well, what wicked strands do you weave, young one?” she asked. “What thoughts do you pluck from your inner web?”

"I need to make it back to the stick," he said, his voice filled with determination. "I can't guess- "

“What?” she asked.

“The stick!” he said as he lowered his body, prepared to flee.

A glimmer of admiration shone in Arachne's eyes. "Correct, a stick insect. You possess wit sharper than your mandibles. Go forth and may the threads of fate guide you."

With a courteous nod, Alaric scurried away from the spider's domain, his heart a beating drum as he emerged into the sunlight once more.

The world stretched before him, more vibrant than ever. Through forests of emerald blades and across rivers of glistening dew, Alaric ran.

In his wake, Arachne watched the ant disappear into the distance.

And the stick he once climbed like a little ladder opened its iridescent wings and flew away.