

# A CROWN OF COBWEBS



J. DARRIS MITCHELL

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Version 1.0

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Published July 2020

by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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ISBN: 978-1-64456-112-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020932485



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

[www.indiesunited.net](http://www.indiesunited.net)

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# Crown of Cobwebs

J. Darris Mitchell



*This one's for Cole*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# BOOK 1

## An Engagement of Abominations

# Chapter 1

*Adrianna*

On the day of her wedding, the spider princess wore a silk dress for her webmother, dagger for her fiancé, and a scowl because she couldn't help herself. Adrianna Morticia scowled at the rickety rope bridge beneath her feet and the cursed castle ahead of her, floating above a caldera of lava. She scowled at her long-dead ancestors, who got her into this mess when they lost a castle they had helped build millennia ago. She scowled because seven generations of spiderfolk had lived in caves instead of the castle, snatching up unwary mortals so that one day, the eighth daughter of the eighth daughter could stand in front of The Lich and a bunch of draconic mongrels and marry some monstrous bastard she didn't even know to fulfill a pact she hadn't even made, take back a castle she'd never been to and prevent a war that no one—least of all the spider princess—wanted. Adrianna also scowled because her feet ached.

For every step of her Path of Cleansing the spider princess wore black shoes with daggers for heels. They were horribly uncomfortable, even for a princess of the spiderfolk. Adrianna wanted to hurl the shoes into the lava below the rope bridge along with her white dress.

The spider princess took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Her abdominal vents felt stifled in the silk dress, despite the airholes she'd woven into the fabric, but she didn't want to destroy it. Her webmother's face when she saw it would make the time it took to spin the thing worth it.

*It's going to be fine, she told herself.* She would marry the prince of the castle, war would be prevented and her webmother would be appeased. Then some knight in shining armor would come along and slay Adrianna and spill her ichor all over her ancestral home and the prince could go back to whatever he was doing before a swarm of spiderfolk invaded the

castle he'd lived in his entire life and forced him to marry a waif of a princess. Adrianna had always wanted to be a hero, now she'd probably be killed by one.

Adrianna sighed and continued across the rope bridge towards the crumbling castle. It had been symmetrical once, it must have been, but right now it looked as if some rampaging demigod had smashed half of it away along with Adrianna's dreams of enjoying her twenties and thirties. Inside the castle was a cathedral that her ancestors had designed and built. In that cathedral, the interior of which Adrianna had never seen, she was to marry a man whose ancestors had broken their pact and forced the spiderfolk underground for millennia. Her webmother had told her that this was her birthright, that her destiny was to take back her family's inheritance by marrying a stranger.

The inheritance, Krag's Doom as the current inhabitants styled the castle, floated above the volcano because of a spell purported to have taken thirteen sorcerers thirteen months to cast. Eruptions from times past had spewed magma that had cooled on the bottom of the castle like roots or, in her eyes, the legs of a massive spider. She watched as one of the lava legs seemed to take a step towards her before collapsing into segments and falling away into the pool of molten lava below. Adrianna felt like her legs were going to do the same thing.

She made it across the rickety rope bridge without incident. The doors to the castle opened.

A mess of arachnid eyes, clicking chelicera and grasping pedipalps greeted her. *Etterqueen*, Adrianna cursed in her head. She'd have preferred the door to be answered by one of the draconic mongrels—flamehearts, her tutors said the army of draconic women called themselves—instead of her own sister.

'Adrianna, finally! Just like the spider princess to be late to her own wedding. We thought you'd finally decided to eat that thrall of a boyfriend of yours and let him fertilize your egg sack.'

'Asakusa is *not* my boyfriend, Lutecia. And I am *not* late. This wedding wasn't supposed to happen for decades yet.' Adrianna replied.

'The castle won't last decades, something you'd have noticed if you'd been here to help prepare instead of waiting for the last possible moment to arrive. And I'm Ismina, you insect, don't you know the face of your own sister?'

Adrianna blanched. She *didn't* know the face of her sisters. She had left home when she was nine years old, at her webmother's insistence, and never come home. Adrianna had seven sisters, and each of their bodies were variations on a theme: human and spider monstrosity. Only Adrianna was gifted with a human face and a human body, and only when she Folded away her spider form. As eighth daughter of a Mortician, the ability to Fold into a true human form (except for her abdominal vents) was her gift. The problem was that, as the only one of her sisters with a passably human form, she was expected to marry someone outside the species and procreate.

She had accepted that—her tutors in S'kar-Vozi had drilled it into her daily—but she'd thought she had more time. Krag's Doom had lasted millennia, surely it could have lasted another century. But Adrianna knew enough of architecture to know that it couldn't have. One of the halls had collapsed into the lava below. If another did, the spell holding it up might become unbalanced and topple the entire thing into the volcano. If that happened the Valkannas would burn the entire Archipelago in their rage and the Morticians' chance of moving to the surface would literally go up in smoke. She was doing *good* by agreeing to this marriage, good for her family, good for the people of S'kar-Vozi she'd spent the last decade with, and good for the Valkannas. It was probably the most noble thing she'd do with her entire life, and yet she felt horrible.

She wanted to be a *hero*, not princess of the spiderfolk. She'd worked hard to earn her meager reputation in S'kar-Vozi, harder than most because of what she was, and that would all be undone with this marriage. Humans could stomach spiderfolk, Adrianna had proven that, but she'd lose what credibility she had if her husband was... well, a Valkanna.

'I'm sorry, Ismina,' Adrianna said, confused and embarrassed. She had been *certain* this was Lutecia.

'I am Lutecia you roach,' Lutecia laughed, a gesture that involved far too many mouthparts. 'Now come here and let me fix your hair. You have exoskeleton showing.' Lutecia had a human torso, four human arms and four spider legs. Every inch of her was covered in coarse, spider hair and her face was an absolute wreck. Ismina was identical except she had spider arms and human legs. They had pulled the name trick on Adrianna every day of her life for nine years. And they had been the nice ones. Her

sisters had spent the first nine years of Adrianna's life torturing her (spider legs would grow back in a molt, something Adrianna's sisters proved to her), trying to get her killed by creatures that made it inside their subterranean complex of caves ('No Webmother, I don't know how the Deurg-Demon got past our webs'), and (like many older siblings) ruthlessly insulting and berating her until she believed all of the horrible things they said.

They were right really, Adrianna was disgusting for a spiderfolk. She was skinny, bony more like, with black eyes (only six of them when she wasn't Folded), a pert nose and a small mouth. Her bony body felt far more comfortable under black leather armor than a silk dress. Her hair was her only attractive feature. White and silky, it hung to her waist when it wasn't tied up. Other than that, she was as her sisters had taught her, a bony wretch of a human. At least they respected her in her spider form. To insult *that* body would be to insult their own webmother.

'The dress isn't terrible,' Lutecia said. That was about as close to a compliment as any of her sisters had ever given her.

'Thank you, this is the eighth version.'

Lutecia nodded in approval as her four arms fussed with Adrianna's hair. Adrianna could feel her skin tighten as Lutecia pulled her long white hair into an elaborate pattern of braids.

'And you followed mother's design?'

Adrianna nodded. The dress would see her through the night. It would Unfold with her, and when the marriage was done and consummated, it would hold the eggs. Adrianna shuddered at the thought.

'Nervous?' Lutecia chittered. 'I was too on my wedding day, long ago as it was, but you needn't be. The bedding takes less time than the ceremony, and then there's always breakfast in bed. Herman *was* delicious.'

'Don't be so cruel, Lutecia,' said another of Adrianna's sisters. Marliana, Adrianna knew, the oldest. Her face was pretty enough but it was stuck on the abdomen of a fat brown tarantula the size of a war-pig. She crawled down a wall of the castle and went about raising the hem of Adrianna's dress to reveal her thighs.

Adrianna had made the dress to *not* reveal as much skin as her webmother had insisted, but of course, she wouldn't get to make that

decision. She hadn't made *any* decisions for the wedding. She'd been doing her best to willfully ignore the whole thing for as long as she had been able. She'd been hoping to ignore it for years, but the crumbling walls and worn-through pillars of the room around them spoke of the urgency of the needed repairs to the castle.

'You know pretty Adrianna won't be feasting upon her husband's ichor. She's soft,' Mariana said, prodding Adrianna in the thigh with a barbed leg. 'And he's tough. Even your little band of—what are you, questers? —wouldn't be a match for Prince Valkanna.'

'We're *adventurers*, Mariana, and we've made a name for ourselves in the free city of S'kar-vozi.' Adrianna wanted to say more, that Magnus himself had sent them on a quest to rescue a family of shipwrecked islanders, but the dress and the weight of what Mariana said took her breath away. *My friends didn't come?* The wedding would start at sunset, which was only a few minutes away. Her friends should have been here already.

'Yes, we've heard of you. Even up here at Krag's Doom we've heard of the Slaves to the Spider Princess,' Mariana said, her voice laden with venom. 'A little much, considering our webmother is still alive and you're not yet married. Did you order them to stay away, or are they as scared of your family as you are?'

Adrianna scowled. Mariana was goading her. She wouldn't let it get to her; not today, there was enough else on her web. And it wasn't like she'd actually *invited* them. Right now, surrounded by her sisters, she wished she had, but she *couldn't*.

It would have been a disaster.

Ebbo would have been a liability with all the magick around, and that was if her sisters didn't try to eat him. Clayton didn't do well around heat, but he had been so supportive. She should have at least shown him her dress. And Asakusa... Adrianna fumed as she thought of the Gatekeeper's thrall. *He* should be here! He'd been avoiding her, spending the last month under an umbrella on the beach, rubbing ointment on his Corruption and refusing to talk about the wedding. And why? The contract that allowed him to open Gates to the Ways of the Dead meant he couldn't be cornered. Not by her webmother or her soon-to-be oathfather.

Sure, she didn't invite them, but they hadn't been invited to the sea witch's seaweed palace either, nor to the gnoll stronghold to drive out the

cannibals. Her friends were heroes! They saved people they hadn't known from dire threats, so why not Adrianna? She was a princess, after all, much as she hated to admit it. She knew they couldn't save her, though. Not from two families as dangerous as the Morticians and Valkannas. But they could have come to say good-bye.

That was why she was in such a foul mood. The fate of two ancient families had conspired to ruin her life, and her friends weren't even here to joke about *what* she was marrying. Adrianna shuddered at the thought, earning a curse from Marliana as the claws at the tips of her tarantula arms worked at her hem. As much as Adrianna hated to admit it, she wasn't in a bad mood because of *who* her fiancé was. By all accounts, he was rich, handsome, and a sharp dresser. He treated his servants well enough, cared for his family, and *actually agreed* to marry a skinny spider princess, and yet, the idea of marrying *what* he was made her stomach churn.

It did not much help her mood that the groom to be was a dragon.

# Chapter 2

*Ebbo*

On the day Ebbo Brandoak stepped out from under his oak tree of a home and into adventure, he never thought he'd find himself strolling toward a Gate to the Ways of the Dead, but he had to look casual if he was going to pinch some magick before Adrianna's wedding. He needed to hurry, but he had time to score, especially in the bustling Farmer's Market. Ebbo definitely didn't need any magick, he just really wanted some; really, really bad. That desire, scratching at the back of his mind like a cat teasing a wounded bird, kept his keen eyes on distracted shoppers and his hands in unguarded pockets.

Ebbo sniffed at the air. Nutmeg, thyme, curry. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of raw sewage from Bog's Bay. Apple and barley cobbler, roast corn. Then he smelled it: magick. The smell of magick was different to every islander. Some of them, the lucky ones, hardly noticed it at all, but to Ebbo it smelled of acorn mash and cold well water, of cinnamon scones like his gran used to make and Ol' Burba's smokeleaf. The familiar smell of magic wafted from a crowd of shoppers gathered around an elvish bard with swept-back yellow hair playing an accordion.

Ebbo went to work.

He ignored the humans. Most of them worked and lived in the free city of S'kar-Vozi and wouldn't have two pieces of silver in their pockets. Ebbo's fellow short-statured islanders weren't much better targets. Those with coins would be tourists from the Co-op, the co-operative of farms spread out across the Archipelago that had flourished in the last few decades, and Ebbo didn't want to steal from them. It would be like stealing from his own family, and besides, islanders that lived in the Co-op didn't use magick, period. Ebbo told himself that wasn't one of the reasons he left, but he knew that for the lie that it was.

A dwarf drank from a stone flagon filled with acorn brandy. Ebbo recognized the smell; it had been brewed by his family on Strong Oak Isle.

Liquor wasn't magick, but the dwarf looked as if he'd been charmed by the potent drink all the same. Ebbo reached past the dwarf's beard without tickling it, under his chain mail without clinking it, and found a few coppers in a purse. Coppers, basically worthless, but practically useful.

Ebbo took the stolen coins to the bard's tip jar and let them drop in with a clink. He felt for any paper packets or vials in the jar, but again found only coin. The bard languidly watched Ebbo check the jar. His neutral gaze was enough to tell Ebbo he shouldn't have bothered to check for magick. Elves cared little for anything that couldn't make music. Coins were as beneath their notice as islanders were. If there had been something in tip that the elf could use to augment his accordion, he wouldn't have let a skinny islander get so close.

Ebbo sniffed the air again. It was strong magick, possibly draconic. That should have meant something to Ebbo, he was sure, but he couldn't get over the potency of the aroma. Ebbo sniffed again and withdrew his hand from the tip jar, but he had lingered too long.

'Watch where you're putting your hands, you curly-headed little twerp,' a blue skinned woman yelled. She had slimy gills on her neck, fins on her head, and an axe strapped over her green robe. Probably a warrior from the Cthult of Cthulu. Ebbo should have tried her pocket instead of the elf's tip jar. Too late, she'd alerted her band and they came for the islander.

'If I catch you, I'll smash your head like one of your rotten pumpkins!' said a warrior with a mustache the color of kelp. He shrugged off a robe, revealing hard muscles and tattooed blue skin that had been greased up with stinking fish oil. Ebbo vanished into the crowd, reminding himself that he had a wedding to get to.

It was easy for Ebbo to slip away. He was half the height of most of the shoppers, and his bare feet could move soundlessly over the multicolored cobblestones. His mop of hair was curly and blond, almost silver, a fairly uncommon color, but the hood of his home-spun tunic was a greyish green and hid his hair easily enough. The ornate dagger at his belt might have let the Cthultists identify him, but he kept it hidden under his cloak as he stepped from shadow to shadow almost without thinking, staying in the peripheries of the larger shoppers all around him. He couldn't be blamed for checking their pockets for magick. Big people

could be painfully oblivious.

He smelled it again. He was getting closer.

One day, Ebbo thought as he made his way toward a bearded man in a sky-blue robe who positively reeked of magick, he wouldn't have to worry about Cthultists or anyone else roughing him up. He would be as famous as Vecnos, the only islander anyone knew by name. That Vecnos was an infamous assassin who killed those who dared insult his name didn't bother Ebbo in the slightest. Better than being seen as a meal, as most islanders were.

Ebbo silently approached the robed man and sniffed at his pockets. The smell of magick was overpowering. Definitely draconic. Ebbo hadn't done anything this strong since he'd met Adrianna. The thought snapped him back to the wedding. He had to hurry. If it wasn't for Adrianna, he might have Transcended and left his body in a comatose state, like so many islanders had. Because of the spider princess and a bowl of soup, he'd come back from the brink and learned his limits. Magick was just something fun to pass the time. Ebbo knew he could quit it if he wanted to. He wouldn't Transcend. Not Ebbo Brandyoak.

Carefully, Ebbo wrapped his fingers around the envelope in the old man's pocket. It radiated potency, but that just meant it would last him a long time. Ebbo began to slowly withdraw the envelope when the pocket snapped shut on his hand.

Ebbo pulled, but he couldn't remove his hand from the pocket. It was as if the sleeve of his tunic had been stitched to the pocket of the robe. As the owner of the blue robe turned to face the tiny pickpocket, Ebbo realized with growing dread that he was trapped. He didn't know if he was more afraid of the bearded old man—a wizard! Ebbo realized—or of Adrianna Morticia, the spider princess whose wedding he was supposed to be crashing.

# Acknowledgments

First off, I'd like to thank Meghan and the Austin Writers Meetup Group, who were the first to lay eyes upon this book. Y'all were so patient with a fantasy writer! I'd also like to thank the Wendy and the entire Austin Slug Tribe. The Slug Tribe is a long-running SFF critique group, and a vital organ of the Austin SFF writing community. My book is stronger because of them, as is the weirdo culture of my hometown.

My deepest gratitude to Angela, Ben, Brian and Tiffany who all read every single word of this book and challenged me to make it better, week after week. Your critiques were invaluable, snails. All my characters are deeper thanks to them, and all sections that still seem shallow are because they were ignored. Thanks, y'all!

As for the *book* itself. Thanks to Sonya Bateman for editing my poor, use, of, commas. Thanks to Lisa at Indies United, who heard my pitch for my last novel about 500 times and still asked me to come join her awesome organization! And A HUGE THANKS to the brilliant Nat Bradford, who designed the amazing cover based on the emails of a madman!

Experience should be awarded to Esker, Ulthos, Theron, Snow and Sophie, who all explored many of the nooks and crannies of the Archipelago long before the spider princess's wedding.

To everyone that supports me on Patreon despite me not posting as much you deserve, a thousand thank-you's! During this cursed pandemic, no one has bothered me about posting doodles every day, which is your right, and yet you continue your support. There are generous people in the world. I'm glad to have some in my corner.

I'd like to call out my mom Zena, who has always been incredibly supportive of the bizarre worlds I get lost in, and who calls me after every chapter she reads. Thanks to my dad for showing me bizarre worlds.

Most vitally, I'd like to thank my amazing wife, who has a fancy tech job with healthcare and a paycheck that allows to still live in our

hometown. As I write this, she has a baby balanced on one arm while she chases our three-year-old through our vegetable patch. I love the future we're growing together, darling! Thanks for the time to make this insane book part of it!

And lastly, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for taking a chance on an independent author and reading all the way through the acknowledgments. You rule, friend. Thanks for your support!