

The Spider Hospital

By Mary Pringle

Tulip fastened the last web line to a wall in the large room. She had learned to spin when she was just a baby spider and after years of practice, she was now an expert.

The web had a nice spring to it, just the right amount of flexibility and tension. She positioned herself near the center and waited for her lunch.

Suddenly, there was a SMACK! and the web shook. A big white thing had hit the web and one of the lines was now hanging loose. Tulip swayed with the web and waited. She wanted to make sure that the thing, whatever it was, had moved on before she scuttled out to make repairs.

But then came another great SMACK! and several more lines broke. Tulip quickly ran to the side of the web still fastened to the wall. Then THWACK! THWACK! The web was destroyed and Tulip fell.

She threw lines out to catch herself, but they connected to nothing and with a small ‘pip!’ sound, she landed hard on the rug.

Later that day, Carlos came home from school. He ate an apple and then laid on his bedroom floor, staring up at the ceiling. He lifted his feet and legs into the air and imagined walking up there. There was so much room on the ceiling, and no furniture in his way. If only he could lay out his train tracks up there, no one would tell him to pick them up.

Carlos rolled onto his stomach and his eye caught a small movement on the rug. He pushed his glasses up on his nose and peered closer. It was a spider! It seemed to be trying to walk but had something wrong with its legs.

He spoke softly to it. "Hello, little spider!" he said. "My name is Carlos." He wondered if the spider understood him, but then he continued, "I think you have some broken legs. Would you let me help you?"

Tulip heard his great booming voice and squeezed her tiny eyes shut. After a minute, she opened a few of them, looked up at Carlos and said, "Yes".

Carlos smiled. He had never talked to a spider before.

He stood up slowly, taking care not to step on the spider. He rustled under his bed and found a shoebox and a piece of paper with an old math test on it. As he turned, he imagined that each one of his footsteps must feel like a giant earthquake to the small spider, and so he tip-toed as quietly as he could back to where Tulip lay on the rug. Then he knelt down and gently scooped her up with the math paper and placed her into the shoebox.

He looked down at Tulip, who was now curled up into a ball. "I'm going to put the lid on," Carlos said, "and I'm going to take you to the Spider Hospital."

He tied the shoebox closed with a piece of string he'd found on his closet floor, and then he grabbed a bungee cord from the coat rack and strapped the shoebox onto his bike seat.

Then he stood on the pedals, reminded himself not to sit on the box, and peddled down to the Spider Hospital.

It wasn't far, just a few blocks.

He parked his bike and holding the box carefully, he pushed open the door to the Spider Hospital.

Two women stood behind the reception counter. One had black hair and a long blue jacket and the other had very large and bright green glasses.

They nodded at Carlos and he set down the box and removed the lid.

“What’s her name?” the black haired woman asked, peering into the box.

“Oh!” said Carlos, “I didn’t know she was a girl! I will ask her.”

“Excuse me,” Carlos whispered, “would you please tell me your name?”

Tulip, the little spider was silent.

“We are at the Spider Hospital,” Carlos explained. “They will fix your broken legs.”

Tulip wiggled a couple of her good legs. Then she said, “Tulip” in a very tiny voice. It sounded more like a squeak than a word.

“It’s nice to meet you, Tulip,” Carlos said.

Carlos wasn’t sure if the women had heard Tulip, so he told them, “Her name is Tulip.”

The blacked haired woman asked Carlos his name and address and Carlos told her. She typed into her computer.

The woman with the large glasses took them off and put her face close to the box.

“I think she’s shy,” Carlos said about Tulip.

“She’s probably scared,” the woman said, “but I think she’ll be fine.”

She came around from behind the desk. “I’m Dr. Archer, the orthopedist. It’s very kind of you to bring her in. Why don’t you talk to her while I get a room ready.”

Carlos found a seat in the empty waiting room and held the shoebox on his lap. Tulip was curled up very tight. Carlos thought she looked scared.

“It’s all right, Tulip,” Carlos said, trying to imitate the voice his mother used when he was sick.

Tulip blinked all her eyes, but said nothing.

“The doctor says you are going to be fine,” Carlos told her. He remembered something he could tell her. “I had to go to the doctor once.”

She moved her head a little bit and Carlos thought he should keep talking, so she wouldn’t think about her legs too much.

“I had to go to the doctor,” he explained, “because I fell off the swing and I landed on top of my arm.... “

Tulip didn’t know what he meant. She asked in her small squeaky voice, “What’s a swing?”

“A swing? Well, it’s a very tall chair held up by two chains. It doesn’t have a back or front. A chair is a thing you sit on but on a swing you feel like you’re flying and....what’s that? What’s flying? Well, it’s when you let go of everything and you don’t hang onto anything but you don’t fall. Well, not usually anyway....”

“You don’t have a web line?” Tulip asked.

“Nope, no web line.” Carlos replied. He imagined what it would be like to have web lines. He could play on the ceiling if he had those.

“Oooooooooeeeeee,” Tulip squeaked, she shook her head back and forth, trembling at the idea of falling again.

“Kids like swings.” Carlos tried to explain. “They aren’t scary or dangerous. I fell because I let go but I was supposed to hang on.”

Tulip continued to shake her head and Carlos tried to think of something else to say that would make her feel better. He hadn’t meant to scare her.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “the doctors at this hospital are very good with spiders.”

There were a few magazines laying on the table. He looked at Insect Engineering, then City Bugs, and The Spider Chronicles. There weren’t many pictures in those, and he didn’t think Tulip would be very interested in magazines right now. Then, he saw a poster on the wall behind the reception desk.

“Why, look over there at that sign,” he said, pointing, “it says Ten Rules for the Protection of Spiders.”

“What are rules?” asked Tulip.

“Rules are things you’re supposed to do,” said Carlos.

Tulip started to raise her head up, but then sank back down as if the effort to see was too much work.

Carlos said, “I will read them to you.”

He began: “Rule Number:

1. If a spider has a broken leg, use very tiny tape to form a cast. Spider Hospital doctors are very gentle and use just their pinky fingers to prevent harm to the other legs.
2. Always give spiders lots of rest and plenty of water. But don’t place a spider in the water as he may not know how to swim.

3. Always look down when you are walking. If a spider is in your way, put your hand down and ask the spider to hop on. Then make your hand an elevator and place the spider in a protected place, maybe on the lampshade.
4. If a spider is in a drain, pick her up gently and place her where she is safe.
5. If you have a book and a spider is on it and you close the book, the spider will be squished, so don't close the book! Let the spider finish reading and then he will move.
6. If a spider crawls into the fire, get something long that the spider can hold on to. Then she can climb out of the fire.
7. If you are baking muffins or cookies, look to be sure no spiders are hanging onto the pan before you put it in the oven.
8. Sometimes, spiders need a drink very badly and they crawl inside the tea kettle. Once inside, they think they are safe because the kettle is dark and quiet and there is plenty of water. If you plan to boil water for tea, look inside the kettle before you turn on the stove.
9. If a spider is bleeding, take a very small piece of a cotton ball and using just your pinky fingers, gently place the cotton ball on the spider. Be very gentle so you don't hurt the spider and then bring the spider to the hospital.
10. If you are painting and a spider walks across the painting, don't paint him! Just lift him up and put him out of the way of your work."

Carlos looked down at Tulip, "I think those are pretty good rules."

"Yes," said Tulip. "Those sound good."

Doctor Archer called to them. “We are ready for Tulip now,” she said.

Tulip squeaked up at Carlos, “Will you stay with me?”

“Of course,” Carlos replied. He turned to Doctor Archer, “I would like to come too,” he said.

“Certainly,” the doctor said, “This way.”

They followed her down a hallway and into a warm room. Dr. Archer cautiously transferred Tulip from the math paper to a clean sheet of paper. She switched on a small lamp and adjusted it so the light shone right on Tulip’s broken legs. Then she picked up a very small roll of white tape and using only her pinky fingers, she formed a cast around one broken leg, and quick as a hummingbird, she did the same to the second leg. Then she gently touched each of Tulip’s six other legs with her pinky finger. She stepped back and wiped her forehead.

“There!” Dr. Archer said. “Two legs are broken; the others are just strained. Now, no walking for ten days, Tulip!”

Tulip squeaked, and the doctor accepted that as agreement.

Doctor Archer lined the shoebox with a large sheet of soft cotton gauze. She carefully picked up Tulip, using only her pinky fingers, and placed her in the center of the box.

Tulip sat calmly with six of her legs tucked under her, and two legs sticking straight out, wrapped in their tiny casts.

“You can take Tulip home now,” the doctor said.

“Thank you,” said Carlos. “I will take good care of her.”

The doctor smiled. “She’s lucky to have you as a friend. Bring her back in ten days and I’ll remove the casts.”

“I will,” said Carlos, picking up the box. The woman at the reception desk gave him a copy of the Ten Rules for the Protection of Spiders.

At home, Carlos told his parents he would clean his own room from now on, and they were happy to hear that. His mother said she had just knocked down dozens of webs all over his ceiling with her dish towel, so he needed to be sure he cleaned the ceiling as well.

Carlos brought Tulip flies and pieces of fruit to eat. In only a few days, she climbed out of the box, and Carlos had to remind her that she shouldn't be walking. She said she felt stronger and better. Soon there were web lines on the ceiling of Carlos's room, and Tulip slept up there in a web hammock. Carlos hoped his mother would not notice.

After ten days, Carlos took Tulip back to the hospital where her casts were removed and she was as good as new.

The next day, Tulip asked Carlos to write a letter to the Spider Hospital. “I've been thinking,” she said. “No, don't write that part, write this:

Dear Doctor Archer,

Thank you very much for fixing my broken legs. I don't know what I would have done if not for your care and my friend Carlos's help.

I thought of a rule to be added to the Ten Rules for the Protection of Spiders. I think this rule may help others. If you agree, it would be rule number:

11. Some children will help you. A good way to know if a child will help you when you are hurt is if they talk to you and ask you if you need help. But, if they scream and run around when they see you, you do not want that child to help you and you should hide.

With sincere thanks,

Tulip A. Spider”

Carlos wrote this down and smiled because he was mentioned in the letter. He mailed it to the Spider Hospital that afternoon. Just two days later, Tulip received a reply and Carlos read it aloud. It said:

“Dear Tulip:

Thank you for your letter and the suggestion to add an eleventh rule to our Ten Rules for the Protection of Spiders. We think, as you do, that it will help others.

Also, we wondered if you and Carlos would consider volunteering at the Spider Hospital. We could certainly use the help. You have experiences to share with others and Carlos’s shows kindness not often exhibited by humans in encounters with spiders.

Yours Sincerely,

Doctor Winifred Archer”

Carlos and Tulip were happy to help. Carlos put Tulip on his shoulder, and they walked down to the hospital to see what they could do.

They volunteer every Saturday at the Spider Hospital where there are now Eleven Rules for the Protection of Spiders.