

Chapter 3

Spider's Web

"No!" cried Leanne as Sol leaped after the fleeing Shade. There was a flash of light and he let out a cry of anguish as the portal snapped shut behind him. Sol, the Shade and the key were gone!

"Watch out!" shouted Hamid, pointing to the other side of the basement. The gang members had all come round and fled from the Shade, making for the exit. Now the monster was turning its attention to Hamid and Leanne. Blocking their path, it floated across the basement, shadowy fingers outstretched.

Hamid ran to the smouldering remains of the Dragon's furnace. "Jing Shi used bright light to fight that Shade!" he cried, pulling two burning pieces of wood from the flames. "Maybe we can do the same with fire."

As the Shade pounced, Leanne grabbed one of the torches and thrust it towards the creature's grasping hands. The Shade recoiled with a high-pitched squeal. Hamid joined her, slashing the air with

his torch. The Shade shrank away from the arc of fire.

"Let's get out of here!" exclaimed Leanne and they started backing towards the stairs, grabbing her backpack on the way. Snarling now, their attacker followed at some distance. As Leanne put her foot on the first step, she threw the torch hard at the Shade. "Run!"

They took the stairs two at a time, slamming the door shut behind them when they reached the top. Looking around, Leanne realized they were standing in the lobby of the Shang Tower. The walls were bright, clean and graffiti-free. A couple walking in the direction of the lifts gave them a puzzled glance, no doubt at their soot-smearred clothes.

"We've lost Sol *and* the portal key!" said Hamid. "Does this mean we're stuck in the 1950s? My mum and dad aren't even born yet!"

Hearing the desperation in his voice, Leanne placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "I think I know someone who can help. Come on!"

They raced back up the tower. Jing Shi answered her apartment door on the second knock.

"I knew I was right to have faith in you," she said with a smile, as if unsurprised to see Leanne. Then she glanced at Hamid. "But where is your other companion?"

Hurrying into the apartment, Leanne explained what had

happened to Sol and the portal key. With a grim expression, Jing Shi led them to a twelve-sided table with the animals of the Chinese zodiac carved into its surface. Leanne stared at them as she tried to identify each animal.

Jing Shi placed an ornate metal bowl in the centre of the table, clear water glistening inside. She motioned them forward as she cast a handful of sweet-smelling powder across the surface of the liquid.

"These waters show many things," she said softly. "The past. The future. Distant places."

"Sol," whispered Leanne, leaning in closer. Sure enough, an image was starting to form in the water.

She saw the flickering shape of the Shade, the key clutched in its hand. This faded and was quickly replaced with Sol's face. Leanne stifled a cry as she saw that he was pinned to the ground by a hairy brown leg. A dark shape descended towards him.... Two gleaming white fangs and a dozen eyes blocked Sol from view....

"What *is* that?" asked Hamid, struggling to keep his voice calm as the image faded.

"It seems your friend has found the next demon you must face – the Spider!" Jing Shi replied. "Beware, it is more powerful than the Dragon! It controls a twisted version of the Shang Tower, full of tricks and traps for the unwary."

"What sort of twisted version?" asked Leanne.

"The Spider's realm is another dimension, somewhere between our reality and the world of darkness," Jing Shi explained, her eyes shining with concern. "If I send you, there will be no coming back until you have defeated the demon."

The words of the Chinese woman sent a spear of dread through Leanne's heart, but she nodded resolutely. "Send me. I'll take the risk alone."

"No way," cried Hamid.

"It's going to be really dangerous," said Leanne.

"I know, but we need to stick together. Send both of us," demanded Hamid, turning to Jing Shi. "Uh... please," he added as the elderly lady glared at him sternly.

"Are you sure you are both up to the task," she asked, turning her gaze on Leanne.

She remembered Jing Shi's former words about trusting no one. "Yes," she replied. "I trust Hamid with my life."

"We're in this together to the end," Hamid added. "Which might be pretty soon if we can't beat this Spider."

Without another word, Jing Shi walked to the centre of the room and drew a circle on the floorboards with white chalk. She motioned for Leanne and Hamid to stand inside.

"I cannot give you a weapon against this demon," she said as they took their positions. "But I have heard a rumour..." she sighed. "The answer is in the demon's legs."

“What does that mean?” asked Leanne.

“Alas, that is all I can tell you,” Jing Shi said sadly. “I pray we shall meet again!”

With that, Jing Shi threw a glass bottle at their feet. As it shattered, a brilliant wall of light enveloped them. Hamid grabbed Leanne’s hand. The floor dropped from under their feet. A cry caught in Leanne’s throat at the sensation of falling... fast!

Then her feet hit ground with a bone-shaking impact. Both she and Hamid rolled forward, landing in a heap.

With a groan, Leanne pressed her hand to a cold stone floor and pushed herself into a sitting position. In the semi-darkness she could make out a large circular room. It reminded her of a fairytale dungeon. High above them a circular opening in the ceiling let in a little light.

“This doesn’t look anything like the Shang Tower!” whispered Hamid.

“I guess that means we’re in the realm of the Spider,” said Leanne, shuddering involuntarily.

A scuttling noise echoed from above as a shadowy bulk crossed the opening, momentarily blocking out all the light.

“This might be a bad time to admit it,” Hamid whispered in the darkness. “But I’m arachnophobic.”

“I’m not keen on spiders myself,” admitted Leanne, turning her attention to the demon as it crawled down the wall and into

the room. Its body was bloated and covered in brown and orange hair. Eight armoured legs twitched on either side of its body. The Spider’s head bore the massive fangs of a tarantula, topped by a dozen unblinking eyes. It was staring down directly at her with a deadly cunning.

“FOOLISH CHILDREN,” the Spider’s voice drifted down. Its tone was silky soft, with a deadly edge of menace. “FEW MORTALS ENTER THIS DUNGEON OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL. EVEN FEWER LEAVE.”

Leanne walked into the centre of the chamber and looked up. “We’ve come for our friend!”

“IS THAT SO?” the Spider said. “AND HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO FIND THE OLD MAN?”

“I’ll find a way,” she said, her voice faltering only a little. “Even if I have to destroy *you* to do it!”

The Spider gave a soft chuckle that made her flesh crawl. “BEWARE CHILD, THE COLLECTOR MAY FEAR YOU BUT *I* DO NOT! I AM NOT AS EASILY DEFEATED AS THE DRAGON!”

There was an odd humming sound as the insect’s dozen eyes considered Leanne. “WHY DON’T WE PLAY A LITTLE GAME? IF YOU MANAGE TO FIND YOUR FRIEND, I’LL LET YOU ALL GO FREE.”

“And if we don’t?” asked Leanne.

“THEN YOU’LL STAY HERE WITH ME FOR A VERY, VERY

LONG TIME!” The Spider laughed sickeningly.

Leanne looked at Hamid, who shook his head and hissed, “It’s a trap!”

She shrugged back at him, remembering Jing Shi’s warnings. Of course it was all a trap... but what choice did they have?

“We’ll play!” she shouted.

The eyes of the Spider sparkled with glee. “EXCELLENT! There was a creak as a heavy door on the far side of the room swung open. “THE CLOCK IS TICKING.”

“The pocket watch!” whispered Hamid, reminded by the words of the Spider. He checked the watch. “It’s 2:30 am in our time! Less than four hours until the Shang Tower is blown up!”

Leanne looked up again. “How do we know you’ll hand Sol over when we find him?”

The Spider snapped, “I ALWAYS KEEP MY WORD... JUST ASK MY CHILDREN!”

The sound of hundreds of armoured feet on stone rose from above. Hamid gasped as a black wave spread down the curved walls from the window above.

“M-more spiders!” he choked.

The Spider demon’s children were each the size of a man’s hand. And there were thousands of them.

Leanne grabbed Hamid and pulled him towards the door as the wave hit the ground and surged towards them. They slammed it

shut just in time.

“They’re eating their way through!” cried Hamid as a frantic scratching began on the other side.

Backing away, Leanne took stock of their surroundings. They were in a long corridor with many closed doors leading off. Each door was identical to those in the Shang Tower and bore an apartment number, though the walls looked to be made of ancient stone. Here and there moving residents of the tower flickered in the corridor, as if part of another world... *Or more likely a different dimension*, thought Leanne, struggling to take it all in.

“This is insane,” muttered Hamid. “Where should we go?”

Behind them the wooden door splintered and the first of the spiders scuttled through. Leanne kicked it back with her foot and opened the nearest door, stepping into...

“No!” screamed Hamid, catching her rucksack just in time and pulling her back. Gasping, Leanne saw that the door had opened onto a hundred-metre drop.

The amused voice of the Spider vibrated through the dungeon. “BE CAREFUL WHICH DOOR YOU CHOOSE. ALL MY CHAMBERS ARE DANGEROUS... MOST ARE DEADLY!”

Hamid tugged on Leanne’s arm. “More spiders coming through!”

Leanne saw that the door holding them back had all but fallen apart. The insect wave was flooding towards them. They started

running down the corridor, past randomly numbered doors... 78... 125...

Suddenly a man appeared in the corridor ahead. He looked more solid, more real, than the other figures they'd seen... and there was something familiar about his face.

He pointed to the door labelled 96. Then he too flickered and vanished. With no better option, Leanne yanked open the door.

Once they were safely through, Hamid gasped, "That was the man... the man from the second picture in Sol's apartment."

Leanne nodded, recalling the black and white photograph, the man's eyes staring intently at her. "Whatever happened, we were supposed to find our way here," she said. "Let's just hope he was helping us!"

They found themselves standing inside a well-furnished apartment that looked almost exactly like Sol's. The only difference was that three numbered doors were set into the far wall where the window should have been.

Hamid read the door numbers aloud as he moved across the room. "118... 154... 176... Which one do we choose?"

"Hamid, watch out!" Leanne cried, lurching forward.

Hamid's foot brushed the tripwire that was strung between the sofas. THUNK! A circular blade the size of a dinner table swooped down from the ceiling....

Leanne collided with Hamid and they crashed to the floor as

the blade passed within a whisker. It shot upwards and fell back again in a decreasing arc.

"Remember, every room is a trap!" said Leanne, pulling Hamid to his feet. "The Spider told us so."

Hamid nodded, shakily. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Leanne studied the numbers on the doors. The words of Jing Shi came back to her... *'The answer is in the demon's legs!*

"You're good at maths, Hamid," she said. "Which of those numbers is a multiple of 8?"

Hamid pointed to the door on the left. "176."

"That's our door," said Leanne, leading the way through into an almost identical apartment. This time they saw two tripwires and avoided them. Three more doors stood before them... 264... 326... 222....

"264!" exclaimed Hamid after some mental calculation. They passed into another room, avoiding a rug in the middle that covered a pit of spikes.

"Why 8?" asked Hamid as they chose a door numbered 488.

Leanne grinned at him. "How many legs does a spider have?"

They followed through more doors... 568... 648... 736....

"Uh-oh," said Hamid as they reached a circular room with twelve doors... and no numbers. Each door bore the image of a different animal.... A tiger.... A dog.... A rabbit....

The gloating voice of the Spider rang out. "YOU HAVE DONE

WELL TO GET SO FAR... BUT ONLY ONE DOOR LEADS TO YOUR FRIEND.”

Hamid looked at Leanne. “12 in 1 odds of guessing the right door!”

Leanne gave him a wink. “I don’t need to guess.”

She approached one of the doors and placed her hand on the handle. She looked back at Hamid and said, “The twelve animals are from the Chinese zodiac. I saw it in Jing Shi’s apartment. And the eighth animal is the Goat....”

Holding her breath, she turned the handle and stepped through into a much larger area. The Spider was there, its massive bulk sat atop a spiderweb that stretched across the entire chamber. Wrapped inside a cocoon of green spider silk, Sol dangled from the ceiling amidst hundreds of other objects... swords... shields... and the armour of warriors Leanne assumed had faced the Spider and failed....

“WELL, WELL!” screeched the Spider as it saw her enter. “YOU *HAVE* EXCEEDED MY EXPECTATIONS!”

Leanne smiled at the demon triumphantly. “We passed your test! Now give us Sol!”

The many eyes of the Spider glared at her with malice, but it slashed a strand of silk holding the cocoon. Sol crashed to the ground.

“TAKE HIM,” the Spider said.

Leanne stepped forward, but Hamid pulled her back. “Wait,” he urged. “To get to Sol, we have to pass right under the Spider.” He pointed up at the monstrous creature overhead.

“But we need Sol’s help to get out of this,” hissed Leanne.

They watched as Sol rolled onto his side, desperation in his eyes. He stared intently on the far side of the room as if signalling to something. In the corner, Leanne saw that the portal key was dangling from a thread high above their heads. To Hamid’s left, she spotted a shield hanging low enough for him to reach.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” the Spider asked, taking a step forward in its web.

And now you decide...
What happens next?

A) Leanne and Hamid rush to help Sol

B) Leanne sends Hamid after the key while she tries to rescue Sol

C) Leanne and Hamid both head for the key

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