

## Chapter 4

### Lair of the Serpent

“Look, Hamid, we’re going to have to split up,” Leanne whispered. “There’s no other choice. You go for the key. I’ll free Sol! Just remember, only the coils of the spiderweb are sticky. Try to avoid those!”

With a determined nod, Hamid made towards the dangling portal key. As the Spider’s piercing eyes followed him, Leanne started advancing to where Sol lay, still bound and struggling on the floor of the chamber. But the Spider had anticipated this. With a scuttling of its clawed feet, the arachnid spun on its web and started towards her.

“NOW YOU’RE BOTH MINE!” it hissed.

*Not if I can help it!* thought Leanne, the massive bulk looming menacingly above her. She put on a burst of speed and rolled as the Spider lurched forwards. The demon let out a screech of frustration. With her path to Sol blocked, Leanne cast about for

another plan of action. Seeing no other way to free her friend, she jumped onto the web and deftly started climbing the thick strands towards the weapons hanging overhead.

The Spider laughed gleefully as the web began to shake. Leanne glanced sideways to see the demon hammering on the threads she was clinging to. Unable to keep her balance she fell, hitting the ground with a thud and landing painfully on her left arm.

“Leanne!” cried Hamid from the other side of the room. “Are you OK?”

“Yes, just about,” replied Leanne getting to her feet and flexing her arm to check nothing was broken. Meanwhile, thinking her badly wounded, the Spider had turned its attentions to Hamid. Scuttling forward it began shaking the spiderweb strands beneath his feet.

“Hold on!” shouted Leanne. “And keep moving.” With that, she leaped back onto the web, forcing her injured arm to pull her upwards. Torn between its two potential victims, the Spider finally turned and hurried back towards her.

Leanne grabbed the edge of a bronze shield dangling above her head, yanking it down hard. As it came free of the sticky material, she spun and brought it up....

CLANG!

One of the Spider’s razor-clawed legs glanced off the shield,

knocking Leanne back onto the web. She tried in vain to free herself, her body sticking to the tacky strands.

“DON’T YOU KNOW HOW SPIDERWEBS WORK, LITTLE FLY?” hissed the demon, gleefully. “THE MORE YOU STRUGGLE, THE MORE TRAPPED YOU BECOME!”

‘We’ll see about that!’ cried Leanne. With a burst of strength she pulled herself back onto her feet, ripping the silky strands that held her down.

The Spider let out a yell of frustration and shot out another leg towards her. Keeping her balance, Leanne swung the shield to meet her attacker.

CLANG!

This time the Spider was unbalanced as the shield connected. Seeing her chance, Leanne clambered on to another silken web strand. The jewelled hilt of a sword hung just out of reach above her head.

Taking a breath, she jumped and grabbed the sword handle....

For a terrifying moment, Leanne dangled from the sword as it held fast. Then, as the Spider prepared to pounce on her, the sword slid free. Leanne dropped through the web, landing deftly on the stone floor as the Spider flew past.

Seeing that Sol was still some distance from her, Leanne looked about desperately for a way to stop the demon. She saw that four thick, sickly green strands suspended the web from each

corner of the room. An idea began to form in her mind.

She ran for the first supporting strand and slashed it with the sword. The entire web shook. On the other side of the chamber, she was relieved to see that Hamid had moved off the web and was now scaling the stone wall. He had already neared the high point where the portal key dangled from the ceiling. Above her, the Spider followed her gaze.

“THE KEY!” it boomed. “THAT’S WHAT YOU WANT IS IT? WELL, THAT KEY IS MINE... AND SO ARE YOU!”

“Hamid, watch out!” cried Leanne as the Spider lurched in his direction.

An armoured foot swiped out at his leg, but Hamid was just out of reach. It struck the wall below his feet, gouging a great lump from the stone. Hamid cried out, almost losing his grip. Leanne raced forward, slashing the second of the supporting strands. The Spider’s head jerked round at her.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” it snarled.

Hurrying past Sol, Leanne reached the third support and sliced it in two with the sword. She danced back as the Spider flipped underneath the web and crawled towards her.

“MY BEAUTIFUL WEB!” it screamed, frantically trying to repair the nearest broken support with silk from its abdomen. The entire web was sagging now. Leanne backed towards the final thick strand and raised the sword high.

“This is for Sol,” she said.

The Spider’s dozen eyes widened as it saw what she was about to do.

“NOOOOOOOOO!”

Leanne swiped the blade through the strand. The web came crashing down, the weight pinning its maker to the ground.

On the other side of the chamber, Hamid gave an elated whoop. He snatched the portal key and climbed hurriedly back down to the ground as Leanne approached the writhing body of the Spider. Its legs were tangled within the silk and it was desperately trying to cut free with its massive mandibles.

“Remember,” said Leanne with a mocking tone, “the more you struggle, the more trapped you become!”

The Spider cringed as Leanne held the sword aloft.

“PLEASE!” it whined. “SPARE ME! I WILL HELP YOU DEFEAT THE NEXT DEMON!”

Leanne looked at Hamid. “No way,” he said. “We can’t trust this monster!”

Leanne nodded in response, but wondered...

“Watch out!” shouted Hamid.

The Spider had cut a leg free and was aiming for Leanne’s head! She ducked, rolled and brought the sword down fast. As the blade pierced the demon's body it, and its web, crumbled into a dust that blew across the chamber.

“The Amulet of Shang!” cried Hamid, stepping forward and retrieving another stone piece from the dust. He handed it to Leanne, who pulled the first piece from her pocket. They slotted together perfectly, forming two-thirds of a circle.

Leanne grinned at him. “We did it!”

On the other side of the room, Sol rose stiffly to his feet. The thick green silk that had bound him had also disappeared. “Once again, you’ve shown great bravery, Leanne,” he said, smiling at her. “You really are a marvel.”

Leanne felt a blush rising in her cheeks, so she turned away. “How long do we have until the tower is destroyed?” she asked Hamid.

Hamid looked at the pocket watch. “It’s 4 am!” he exclaimed. “Just two hours to go!”

Leanne shook her head as she took the portal key from him. “And we don’t even know where the next demon is!”

“Yes we do,” said Hamid. “Sol have you still got those three pictures you showed us back in your flat?”

“Yes,” said Sol, pulling three crumpled photographs from his inside jacket pocket. “I thought it would be best to remove them from their frames,” he explained.

“Great,” said Hamid, taking the pictures from Sol and placing them on the floor. “The first photo led us to Jing Shi’s apartment, and then we saw this guy in the corridor here,” he said, pointing to

the staring man.

“You did?” asked Sol, sounding surprised.

“Yes,” said Leanne, “or at least some version of him. He helped us to find you.”

“Well, well,” said Sol shaking his head.

“So,” continued Hamid. “There’s only one place left to go....”

The three friends studied the family portrait – the mother, father and two boys. Then Leanne turned, considering the sword and shield. They’d been decisive in the battle, and she had a feeling they would help out again, even if they were a bit medieval. She slid the sword through her belt and grabbed the shield, holding out the portal key with her other hand.

As before, the picture expanded to envelop her. There was the now familiar lightshow as she was pulled down into a tunnel, closely followed by Hamid and Sol. Then it was over, and they stumbled forward into a new time and place.

They were standing in a brightly-decorated flat. Family photographs hung on the walls, flowery curtains covered the windows and colourful cushions were scattered across the comfy-looking sofas.

In the centre of the room stood a man, woman and twin boys. In contrast to the vibrant surroundings, they were ghostly in appearance, their faces drawn and pained.

“The family from the picture,” whispered Hamid.

The twin boys stepped forward, arms outstretched. Instinctively Leanne reached out to touch one of them, but her fingers passed right through his ghostly hand.

“The creature you seek dwells on the roof of the tower,” said the boy, his voice so faint it seemed to be a whisper of wind.

“Please set us free!” breathed his twin.

With that, their image faded and disappeared. Leanne looked up and saw that the parents had gone as well. *I’ll free you all*, she thought resolutely, wondering how many innocent people had been trapped by the Collector and his demons over the years.

“Looks like we’re going up,” said Hamid, heading out of the flat and down the corridor towards the lift. Unlike the 1950s tower, this version was grimy, with peeling paint on the apartment doors and mould on the walls.

A sign announced that the lift was out of order. “Typical,” muttered Sol.

“The stairs it is,” said Leanne, pushing open the stairwell door.

“Great,” said Hamid, grimacing as he remembered the last time that he and Leanne had climbed the stairs in the Shang Tower. Only a few hours earlier, it now seemed like days ago.

Leanne spotted the first Shade five floors up – a dark shape lurking in the corner of the stairwell. Holding her breath, she motioned for the others to stop and eventually the Shade moved on, unaware of their presence.

Keeping as quiet as possible they encountered several more Shades as they ascended the tower, managing to avoid detection each time. It felt as if the shadowy figures were waiting for something... and Leanne couldn't help wondering if that 'something' was *her*.

Finally they reached the top floor and Leanne peered through the window in the stairwell door to see six Shades roaming the corridor beyond. Halfway along she spotted the emergency exit that led onto the roof.

"The Shades are converging," whispered Sol joining her at the window. "A sign that the evil is getting stronger."

"How do we get past them?" asked Leanne.

"*We* don't," said Hamid, reaching inside his pocket and removing his phone. He turned on the torch app, shining the bright light at Leanne and Sol. "I'm betting this will work almost as well as fire. Give your phone to Sol, Leanne, and we'll hold them off while you go for the roof."

Leanne was about to protest, but Sol placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Hamid is right. It's most important that you make it. We'll clear your path."

Seeing the sense of the plan, she nodded, handing her phone to Sol. "Just be careful," she whispered as she prepared to move. "Both of you."

"You look after yourself too," said Hamid, as Sol turned on his

torch.

Without another word, Leanne burst through the stairwell door and into the corridor. The Shades screeched and moved to intercept her, but Hamid and Sol hurried behind her, phones raised.

"Back!" yelled Hamid as a Shade cringed away from the bright torch beam.

Leanne pushed the bar to open the emergency exit and took a quick look back. She smiled a little. Her friend's plan was working! The Shades were being held at bay.

Not wasting another second, she hurried out onto a fire escape with ladders leading both up and down the side of the tower. She paused, surprised to see that it was nighttime, the faint light of the moon shining through thin cloud. Without thinking, she looked down and her stomach lurched. The ground was a long way below.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a movement – a Shade was rushing at her, fingers outstretched. She dodged and leaped onto the upwards ladder, pulling her focus back to her goal.

She had almost reached the roof... but the Shades were waiting for her. Eight of them formed a hissing circle around the top of the ladder. Spindly shadow hands stretched out for her. Leanne withdrew the sword from her belt, although she knew the steel would probably be useless against these shadow monsters. The nearest Shade rushed forward....

“STOP!” boomed a voice from above. “SHE’S MINE!”

The Shades cowered away at the command.

“ASCEND!” the voice boomed again, and Leanne realized that this time it was speaking to her. Slowly she climbed the final steps to the roof.

A fierce cross-wind blasted her as she stepped onto the top of the Shang Tower. The sky above glittered with stars.

*TSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS*

Leanne gasped at the rasping, reptilian sound. That was no ordinary snake’s hiss! The volume suggested something immense! The moon appeared behind a cloud and in the silvery light she saw it....

The Serpent’s sleek body was as wide as a car and twenty metres long. Its green and red scales glistened in the moonlight as it uncoiled on the far side of the roof and glided silently towards her. Its head was raised and opened like a hooded cobra, revealing sharp cruel eyes and a mouth with two gleaming white fangs.

“THE COLLECTOR WARNED ME OF YOUR COMING,” it hissed, a purple forked tongue flicking in and out as it spoke. “BUT YOU DON’T LOOK DANGEROUSSSS TO ME.”

As Leanne held its gaze, she felt her legs weakening and she remembered how a snake could mesmerize its prey. *Look away!* her mind screamed.

With great effort, she wrenched her eyes from the Serpent’s.

“That’s what the Dragon and the Spider thought,” she said, trying to sound brave. “And now they’re... now they’re gone.”

The Serpent’s forked tongue flickered in a gesture of annoyance. “YOU COMPARE ME TO THOSE LESSER DEMONS?” it said. “LET ME SHOW YOU THE POWER OF THE SSSSSERPENT!”

Its body whipped forward like an uncoiled spring. Leanne barely had time to raise the shield as its mouth opened.

SNAP! Those deadly jaws closed like a mousetrap.

One of the curved fangs had pierced the metal of the shield just above her arm. The Serpent twisted its head, wrenching the shield out of Leanne’s hands. As it sailed across the top of the tower, she backed away with the sword raised, ready for the next attack.

“THAT PUNY BLADE CAN’T HURT ME!” the Serpent sneered.

The demon started moving in a wide circle around her. Too late Leanne realized its plan.... The giant snake was surrounding her with its body! With a deadly hiss, it tightened the circle. Leanne gave a cry as the huge coils wrapped around her, pinning one of her arms.

The hooded head of the Serpent rose above Leanne as it began to squeeze the breath from her body.

“MY EMBRACE IS DEADLY!” it gloated, baring its fangs ready to strike. “AND SO IS MY KISSSSSS!”

Gasping for air, Leanne flailed uselessly with the sword, but

the blade bounced off the thick scales. As her vision began to swim from lack of breath, she cried out for help....

**And now you decide...**  
**What happens next?**

A) Hamid appears and attacks the demon

B) A gang of Shades appears and attacks the demon

C) Jing Shi appears to help Leanne

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