

# Futures

## Spider of the cross

A web of deceit. By Deborah Walker



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**E**merging from the overhanging canopy, our ravening eyes consumed a castle wreathed in low mist. Ruined, it rose against a silver sky where ravens screeched, jade retro data glancing off gliding wings.

“That’s Castle Argiope,” says Reverend Gates. He’s a handsome fellow: tall, stern. But everyone’s avatar is attractive, and the reverend has a scandalous reputation.

I murmur, and let my bonnet cover my expression, until a gaggle of more interesting ladies call him over. Dozens of travellers descend upon Castle Argiope from all over the dark web, the pathways disappearing behind us, step by step.

At my side, Lord Shelby says nothing, yet his eyes speak to me. During our ordeals he’s hinted of his burden, but there’s more to be revealed. Lord Shelby: mad, bad and tedious to know.

The taciturn castle servants reluctantly give us sanctuary.

As we’re led to our chambers the Alice twins whisper about the reclusive, cursed Baron Argiope and about Lord Shelby who they think might be an eternal player – his body tranquil in real life, his mind free to play these endless dark-web games.

I search the faded grandeur of my bedchamber. I ignore the partially played chess game and the ancient scroll, barely hidden in the armoire. For a moment, I study the family crest above my bed, the Argiope silver spider on its woven web cross. Then, I push aside a fly-speckled mirror and tap the oak wood panels, until with a long creak, a small door slides open revealing a dark tunnel.

I take the lighted torch from the dusty scone. I walk hesitantly, conscious of the heavy fear subliminals. I hear the whisper of voices. The tunnel is an echo chamber for the bedchambers. If I cared to, I could piece together the stories of the twins, the reverend, Lord Shelby.

Ahead of me, in the shadows, I see a flash

of silver. I walk quickly, but cannot reach my elusive companion. Dusty skeletons in mouldering garments leer at me as I walk past.

I realize I’m walking in a spiral. I think about the Argiope crest, the spider on the web cross. Perhaps a direct route is better than this turning labyrinth. I step into a niche, push aside the skeleton, ignoring its data shrieks, to reveal another narrower passageway. A diagonal of the cross leads me directly to the inner sanctum.

“Never has a player reached me so quickly,” says the figure in a silver cloak and hood. His voice is the buzzing of multitudes. “I applaud your speed, Miss Virginia, but pity your recklessness.” He takes a step towards me. “Will you scream, my pretty fly?” He throws aside his cloak. This is the cursed Baron Argiope, a man with the monstrous head of a spider.

I stand my ground, ignoring surging fear subliminals.

“Miss Virginia, you are bold, perhaps you see beyond this curse I bear.”

"Perhaps."

"Or perhaps you want my biting kiss. To be helpless under my whims, my venom running through your electronic life, keeping you my prisoner."

"That's very inappropriate."

"Your only weapon is your helplessness. Scream, and you may attract a hero to rescue you. Lord Shelby, perhaps?"

The subliminals urge me to release a scream of terror.

"I don't think so," I say, firmly. From my bonnet I take a hatpin, long enough to brandish like a wand.

The Spider Baron laughs, long and loud and arrogant. "Your feeble stinger won't stop me for long, Miss Virginia."

"I'm not Virginia; my name is Sophia."

"Sophia?" says the Baron. For the first time, he's uncertain. "I once knew a girl called Sophia. I ... loved her. I ... left her."

"Yes," I say, wielding my data pin, unweaving the spell of data around his avatar.

"You can't do that, Miss Virginia."

"I am Detective Sophia Carson."

"You are Miss Virginia. I am Castle Argiope. I am Baron Silver Spider."

The castle trembled.

I swipe at his data mask, deleting. "I am Sophia."

"I had a little sister once, her name was ..."

"Her name is knowledge," I scream. With a flourish of my data pin, I delete the final code, unravelling the bonds that tied my brother to his dark-web masters. His spider mask unpeels like an orange to reveal his face, his beloved, very, very confused face.

"I am Baron Silver Spider," he whispers.

"No," I say. "You're not. You're Simon Carson. My brother. You've been a victim, a kidnapped mind running a castle on the dark web, because you're cheaper than an AI."

"What?"

I grab his arm. "Just run, Simon. Before they realize you're free."

We run, as the details dissolve. The castle is quaking. I scream at the guests, who have assembled in the hallway. "The castle is disintegrating. Get back to real life. Avoid illegal games in future!" Startled, the guests wink out

of the dark web.

Simon and I emerge into twilight, as the castle fades into nothingness.

"How long?" he asks.

"Seven years." The rendition team has arrived. "Long enough for me to grow up and become a web officer, and spend all my free time tracing you."

"You're a web cop?"

"I sure am. Let's get you home. You've got a long road ahead, Simon. You've been comatose for seven years."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I'll see you soon." I kiss him on the forehead.

"But where are you going, Sophia?"

"This isn't the only illegal data game on the web." I adjust my bonnet. My avatar switches to another interchangeable, innocent young girl. Looking like prey, I head back into the forest. But I'm nobody's prey.

I adjust my data hatpin.

I'm an avenging avatar with a terminal sting.

Find **Deborah** in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Deborah Walker reveals the inspiration behind *Spider of the cross*.

This was a fun story to write. I had an idea of mashing-up high tech with gothic tropes such as mysterious castles, the host with a terrible secret, mouldering skeletons, spiders and Byronic, theatrical hero types. And of course, it's lots of fun to subvert stereotypes; my heroine was never going to be a screaming victim.

But after more than a year of avoiding Zoom calls, and deciding that something was not better than nothing when it comes to electronic socializing, I can't see myself getting sucked into a virtual immersion world.

Mark Zuckerberg hopes that within the next five years we'll all be embracing virtual interactions for business and for pleasure. But his metaverse iteration left me feeling cold. Perhaps that's because I'm old fashioned. Perhaps youngsters will willingly embrace these virtual experiences. I can only pray that immersions won't, somewhere down the line, be powered by the human mind in such a way as I've imagined in *Spider of the cross*.

