



A Bad Sign

- Dan Smith -

Six and her best friend White Flower slipped into the jungle when the air was still cool and the sun was still rising. A fresh, sweet rain had fallen before dawn, so the trees crackled and dripped with music. Wet leaves glittered like precious stones.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, foraging for herbs and flowers, Six spotted an enormous stone leaning against a sturdy tree. Bigger than she was, the stone was half-hidden by a curtain of vines cascading from above, twisting around it. Roots gripped it from below, trying to drag it down into the rich, dark soil.

‘Leave it,’ White Flower said, but Six pushed away the vines and saw that it wasn’t a stone, but a statue with the hooked-nose of a hag, and a downturned mouth. A coiled snake was carved where there should have been hair.

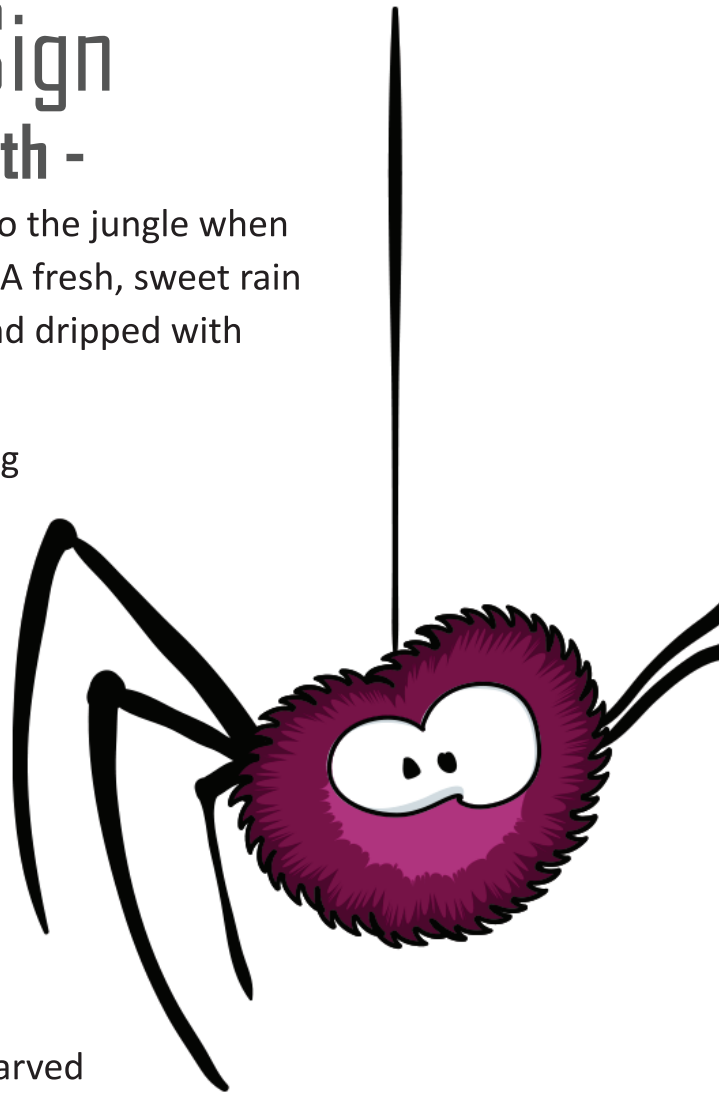
‘It’s Ixchel,’ Six whispered. ‘The jaguar goddess.’

‘I don’t like it,’ White Flower said. ‘And why is it hidden in the forest?’

As she said it, a five-legged spider crawled from behind the statue and scuttled away over the fallen leaves. Six was mesmerised by the lurching, unreal movements.

White Flower held out an arm and stretched her fingers as wide as she could. ‘It’s bigger than my hand,’ she said. ‘And it’s only got five legs, can you see that?’

‘Of course I can see that,’ Six replied.



‘It’s a hunting spider,’ White Flower said. ‘Maybe it lost its legs trying to catch something it should have left alone. I once saw a big wasp kill a spider three times its size. Stung it and dragged it away under the leaves. They lay their eggs inside them you know, and when the babies come out, all the little wasps eat the spider.’ White Flower sounded both disgusted and thrilled.

Six shivered at the thought of it. ‘It’s a sign,’ she whispered. ‘First the statue, and now this. A spider with five legs. It has to be a sign.’

‘Definitely,’ White Flower agreed. ‘But is it a good sign or a bad sign?’

Neither of them knew, but Six couldn’t help thinking it was a bad one. She didn’t say that, though. She didn’t say anything until White Flower nudged her and said, ‘We should go.’

‘We have to cover it up first,’ Six told her. ‘The statue, I mean. It’ll be our secret.’

‘Oh yes, we mustn’t tell anyone we found it,’ White Flower agreed.

Six pulled the vines across the statue and stood back.

‘Come on,’ White Flower said. ‘Let’s go home.’

But when the girls emerged from the jungle and stood on the crop terraces looking down at their village, Six knew she was right. What she saw down there made her realise that finding the statue and seeing the spider was a bad sign.

A very bad sign.



RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. What glittered like precious stones?
2. What were the two doing in the forest?
3. What did Six find behind the vines?
4. What was different about the spider?
5. What had White Flower seen killing a spider before?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S

What was the weather overnight?

V

Find and copy a word that means “hunted or searched for”.

I

What was the statue’s hair made from?

I

How can you tell that White Flower was interested in the information about the wasp?

V

Which word tells you that the girls stepped out of the jungle?