

## Chapter 5

### The Collector Revealed!

“AIIIIIIIIII!!!”

Leanne was at the very point of blacking out from the Serpent’s deadly embrace when the terrible screech filled the air. A shadow fell across her face and she saw the silhouetted fingers of a Shade stretching down towards her... and then reaching instead for the scaly flesh of the reptile! The monster let out a roar of pain as the Shade’s hands clawed at its body.

Leanne gasped for breath as the demon released its hold on her. She staggered to her feet, barely keeping her grip on the sword. She watched as two more Shades swept in, screaming and slashing at the writhing demon.

“YOU DARE ATTACK ME?” the Serpent bellowed, thrashing its tail through one of the Shades, obliterating it completely. It opened its jaws and closed them around another of the ghostly shadows, but now more were rushing across the roof from below. “WE

SERVE THE SAME MASTER!” boomed the demon.

Leanne looked on in amazement as the Shades continued their attack. None of them seemed to have even noticed she was there.

Hamid ran onto the roof, his face glistening with sweat from the battle below.

“The Shades had us surrounded,” Hamid explained breathlessly. “Then you cried out and they flew up here!”

“But why?” said Leanne. “And where’s Sol?”

Hamid shook his head as another Shade was destroyed by the Serpent. “We got separated.” His voice faltered. “I... I think the Shades got him!”

Leanne was seized by the urge to run down the building to rescue Sol, but she knew what he would say: *defeating the demon is more important.*

She turned her attention back to the ongoing battle. Despite the Shades’ superior numbers, the super-powered Serpent clearly had the upper hand, picking the shadowy ghosts off one by one. But this had come at a price – there was no doubt that the demon was weakened... and distracted. Leanne saw her chance.

With a cry, she sprinted forward with the sword raised high.... Aiming for an exposed spot on the Serpent’s body....

“NOT SO FASSSST!” it hissed, bringing its massive head round at the very last minute and slamming Leanne hard. She hurtled back across the roof. The sword flew from her grasp and skittered

away.

“NOW YOU’RE MINE!” gloated the Serpent, rising above her and slashing apart the remaining Shades with a casual flick of its tail. “THESE LESSSSSER SPIRITSSSS HAVE MERELY POSTPONED YOUR DESSSSTRUCTION!”

Leanne crawled back as the head of the demon arched above her. Its jaws opened, exposing two gleaming fangs ready to strike....

“Leanne!” Hamid’s voice cried. “Catch!”

From the corner of her eye, she saw her friend pick up her fallen sword and heave it in her direction. The blade glittered in the air as the Serpent struck.

Leanne reached for the sword as she rolled under the descending fangs.... Her hand closed around the handle and she brought the weapon round, plunging it into the demon....

“AAAARRRGH!” screamed the Serpent as the sword struck deep. Its entire body went rigid. A cracking sound split the air and the giant snake’s body split down the middle, crumbling into dust as the two pieces fell away. The demon was defeated!

“Unbelievable!” cried Hamid, running to help Leanne up. “You took that snake down!”

Leanne grinned at him. “*We* took it down.”

Hamid reached into the pile of dust and picked out an object. “The last piece of the Amulet of Shang!” he said triumphantly, holding it up for Leanne to see.

She reached into her backpack to retrieve the other two thirds, but froze as she became aware of more Shades approaching across the roof. They stopped a few metres away, spreading out to block their escape back into the tower.

Hamid looked at Leanne questioningly. “They’re not attacking. What are they waiting for?”

“They saved me from the Serpent,” she said, still tensed for an attack at any second. “Perhaps they’re on our side now.”

There was movement on the other side of the roof and the Shades twisted their heads in the direction. A dark figure stepped off the fire escape ladder onto the roof. Leanne almost cried out with relief when she saw who it was.

“Sol!” she called. “You’re alive!”

But as the old man raised his head, Leanne realized that something was terribly wrong.... His eyes were shining with a dark red light that seemed to pierce her soul.

“THANK YOU FOR DESTROYING THE DEMONS,” said Sol, his voice booming like those of the evil creatures themselves. “I KNEW I WAS RIGHT... THAT YOU WOULD BE THE ONE TO DESTROY THEM... WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY SHADES, OF COURSE.”

“*Your* Shades?” asked Leanne.

“YES, SADLY THE TIME HAS COME TO REVEAL MY TRUE SELF,” said Sol. “I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST THE EVIL FOR SOME SIXTY YEARS, BUT... IN ORDER TO SAVE YOU JUST NOW,

LEANNE... I HAD TO GIVE IN."

"Give in to what?" said Leanne, confused.

"TO THE EVIL THAT I UNLEASHED," sighed Sol. "FOR YOU SEE... I WAS THE ONE WHO STARTED ALL THIS!"

"He's..." Hamid began, his voice breaking. "*He's... the Collector....* Leanne, it was him all along!"

Leanne shook her head in disbelief. Could it be that through all their adventures the Collector had been the one guiding them? *No, it couldn't be Sol!*

But the words of Jing Shi came back to her: *the power of the demons corrupts all who come into contact with them.*

"I'M AFRAID HAMID'S RIGHT," boomed Sol. "I TOOK THE URN FROM ITS RESTING PLACE IN CHINA... I RELEASED ITS POWER HERE IN THE SHANG TOWER."

"But why?" gasped Leanne, filled with a terrible sense of desperation. If Sol could be corrupted by the evil, what hope did she have of defeating it?

"I DIDN'T MEAN TO, NOT THAT IT MATTERS NOW..." the old man paused. "THE AMULET OF SHANG," he said, stretching out his hand as he approached. The Shades backed away submissively, clearly under his control. "GIVE IT TO ME."

Leanne fitted the final piece of the amulet together. The stone circle glowed blue in her hands and she felt a surge of energy run through her body. She looked at Sol, who gave her a sly smile, his

eyes manic and power-hungry, completely unlike those of the man she knew.

Leanne backed away, holding the amulet in front of her. "You have to fight this, Sol!"

"THE HUMAN YOU CALL SOL WILL SOON BE NO MORE," he rasped, seeming to grow in size as he approached. "THERE WILL ONLY BE... THE COLLECTOR!"

He threw his arms wide and a blast of air swept across the roof, driving Leanne and Hamid to the very edge of the building. Even the Shades cowered away from it.

Hamid looked at the forty-storey drop to the ground and then at Leanne. "We can't let him have the amulet!"

"I don't intend to," replied Leanne, removing the portal key from her pocket.

"GIVE ME THE AMULET OR I'LL BE FORCED TO SET MY SHADES ON YOU," threatened the Collector.

Leanne saw the ghostly shadows closing in on them now, blocking any escape route back across the roof. She looked over the side of the building.

Hamid said, "Perhaps we could just jump!"

Concentrating hard, Leanne waved the key over the side of the building. A swirling portal formed just a couple of metres below them. She grabbed Hamid's arm....

"I was joking!" he protested as she pulled him over the edge.

Leanne and Hamid fell through space.... Into the portal and through the time stream. Seconds later, they were thrown out the other side.

They tumbled across a smooth hard floor, coming to rest in a heap.

"We're back in the 1950sn the lobby of the Shang Tower!" exclaimed Hamid, seeing the polished floor and the bright clean walls. He pulled out the pocket watch. "And it's 5:52 am! We've got less than ten minutes until this place is blown up in our time!"

There was a screech from the direction of the portal, which hovered a few metres away. The spindle fingers of a Shade appeared through the spinning vortex.

"Come on!" she exclaimed as she pushed herself up, trying to ignore the exhaustion from her latest battle. "We have to find the urn and put an end to all this!"

She bolted towards the stairs leading down to the basement, the screaming of the Shades echoing across the lobby.

"Slow down!" said Hamid as they took the stairs two at a time. "Shouldn't we be searching Sol's apartment? The urn has to be there!"

"No," replied Leanne, scanning the basement. "Sol wouldn't be that stupid. This is the perfect place to hide it."

Leanne started searching the basement. "It*has* to be here. Ground zero at 6 am. The perfect place to destroy..." She stopped

short as she saw an object covered in a tarpaulin right next to one of the columns. She pulled the cover away sharply. "The urn!"

A metre high, the urn was made of a dull green stone and covered in intricate Chinese carvings. The Dragon was depicted there. And the Spider and Serpent. *Time to seal you up for good*, thought Leanne as she removed the Amulet of Shang from her backpack.

"Now how do I use this thing?" she wondered aloud.

"EXCELLENT QUESTION," the booming voice of the Collector made the walls of the basement vibrate. "AND ONE I HAVE NO INTENTION OF ANSWERING. GIVE ME THE AMULET!"

"I'll keep him busy while you work out what to do!" Hamid said to Leanne.

Before she could stop him, Hamid threw himself at the Collector. But the frail form of the old man now possessed an inhuman strength. He grabbed Hamid, lifted him clean off the floor and then threw him across the basement. Hamid landed with a thud against one of the columns.

"THREE MINUTES UNTIL THIS BUILDING IS DESTROYED AND THE URN WITH IT!" The Collector gloated, blocking Leanne's way to help Hamid. "THEN I WILL BE FREE TO ENSLAVE THE WORLD WITH MY SHADES!"

"I still don't understand," Leanne said, playing for time. "Why did you help us to destroy the demons?"

“WITH YOUR HELP, I THOUGHT I COULD FIGHT THE EVIL INSIDE ME!” The Collector’s face twisted into an evil smile, so unlike Sol. “BUT I WAS WRONG! NOW I AM STRONGER THAN I HAVE EVER BEEN... AND WITH THE AMULET... WHICH NOW CONTAINS THE POWER OF ALL THREE DEMONS... I’LL BE INVINCIBLE!”

The Collector’s hand shot out and closed around Leanne’s throat, squeezing like a steel trap. She gasped for breath as he lifted her off her feet. Her vision swam as she looked into those blazing red eyes.... And for a moment she thought she heard the Sol she knew, whispering to her....

*“Destroy the amulet!”*

Leanne held the Amulet of Shang up in her hands. The Collector’s blazing eyes widened. And she threw it down with all her might....

The amulet smashed into a thousand pieces, casting a wave of energy as it did so. A massive crack formed, splitting the floor of the basement in two.

Leanne fell to the ground beside the crack, turning to see the urn tumble into it. It fell into the depths of the earth, flames rising up to engulf it.

Beside her, bathed in the released energy from the amulet the Collector had crashed to the ground and now lay still.

Leanne rose slowly, relieved to see that Hamid was getting to

his feet on the other side of the basement. She moved towards the fallen body of the Collector.... His eyes were no longer glowing and she sensed that the evil had been driven out of Sol. She knelt at his side and he looked at her with vague recognition.

“Sol!” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to hurt you!”

“You saved me!” he said, his voice almost too weak to hear. “Now get out of here! Use the key to escape.”

Hamid tapped her urgently on the shoulder, shoving the pocket watch in front of her eyes. “This place is about to blow in 10... 9... 8!”

Leanne rose and waved the portal key before her one last time. The glowing circle of light appeared.

“6... 5... 4...”

Leanne took Hamid’s hand and pulled him through the portal...

...into daylight. A cool breeze touched Leanne’s cheeks and she realized they were standing outside, some distance from the Shang Tower. A number of other people were crowded nearby behind a yellow safety barrier, wrapped up against the morning air.

“3... 2... 1...”

Leanne looked at the Shang Tower, stark against the dawn sky, one last time.

*BOOM!*

Despite the incredible noise of the explosion and the smoke

rising from the base, the tower stood motionless for a moment. Then its structure seemed to crumple all at once, walls and balconies collapsing straight down. Only as the top floors fell did it start to list, crashing to the right and sending a thick cloud across the open ground. The dust reminded Leanne of the remains of the demons they'd battled over the course of that night... as the tower and its darkness fell into rubble forever.

"I can't believe it's gone," Hamid said at her side.

Leanne looked up at the clear morning sky. No demons. No Shades. She allowed herself a smile. "It's finally over," she said.

As the ruin of the Shang Tower settled, the assembled spectators began to move away. Leanne found she recognized many of the faces as former residents of the tower! There was the man from the Spider's dungeon, smartly dressed and with his arm around a woman. The family from the colourful apartment was there, the parents now lined and grey and beside them the twins, more than twice her own age.

She spotted other faces from the photographs in Sol's apartment... except now they were smiling. In fact, there was almost a party atmosphere, as if the crowd realized that the destruction of the Shang Tower was a cause for celebration.

"Jing Shi!" gasped Hamid.

Leanne turned and saw the little Chinese woman approaching through the dispersing throng. Amazingly, she didn't look a day

older than when they had met her over sixty years earlier... and she was elderly then.

"You have triumphed over the evil of the Collector," she said, smiling warmly. "Just as I knew you would."

"How... how are you here?" Leanne asked.

Jing Shi shrugged. "I have my ways. And I could not resist being here to see the tower destroyed... and to congratulate you both. Look around..." She indicated the familiar faces in the crowd. "Your defeat of the Collector has changed the timeline. These people had another chance at life... a happier life without darkness."

Leanne shook her head in disbelief, but was struck by a sudden thought. "What about Sol?"

Jing Shi touched her arm and nodded towards the yellow barrier. A slender-framed man was standing there, wispy white hair blowing in the breeze, his tweed jacket pulled tightly around him. Leanne's heart leaped as she recognized Sol.

Leanne turned back to ask the old woman a question, but she had disappeared.

Then the old man Leanne had called her friend approached. "Excuse me," said Sol's familiar voice. "But have we... met somewhere before?"

Leanne smiled up at him. "No... I don't think so," she said. "Did you live here in the Shang Tower?"

“I believe so,” he said with a frown. “But my memory isn’t what it used to be.” His eyes widened with interest. “My goodness! That’s quite an interesting artefact you have there!”

It took a second for Leanne to realize he was referring to the portal key, which was still clenched in her hand. She held it out so he could take a better look.

“Sixteenth-century Chinese, I’d say,” murmured Sol, turning it over in his hands. “Could be worth a pretty penny. Wherever did you get it?”

Leanne and Hamid exchanged amused glances.

“A collector gave it to us,” they said.

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