

I speak the Word from the hidden gulfs that never knew the sun,  
Send me a servant for my hate, o scaled and shining One!

*The Phoenix on the Sword*, 1932  
(a tribute to Robert Ervin Howard)



Part I  
The Old Folk



# Chapter 1

## Old and new friends

Dario Ravicini got off his car and looked at the building in front of him, the main seat of the well-known insurance company "Assicurazioni Riunite S.p.A.", in Vatican City. It was old, dating at least to two centuries before, but completely renovated. The front was decorated with nineteenth-century patterns, and several statues occupied alcoves in the walls. No one knew how a private company had managed to establish their headquarters there: rumors about a "secret Catholic society" floated around, but no one had been confirmed.

Standing before the main entrance, Dario adjusted his tie to be sure everything was in order. He was a rather handsome man, tall and in his thirties. His short dark hair was in perfect order and his brown eyes had a somewhat enigmatic aura. The blue business suit he was wearing was quite elegant, but nevertheless his athletic build stood out.

As he walked in, many people smiled and waved at him. He replied with a movement of his hand, without saying a word, and headed for a small elevator almost hidden around a corner. A sign on the door said "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY". Dario pulled out a magnetic card from his jacket and inserted it into a small slot in the wall next to him. Silently, the elevator opened.

Once inside, the man pushed the buttons in a complicated sequence that would seem random for any occasional watcher. After he had finished, a bell rang three times and the lift moved downwards. In less than a minute an indicator lit up, showing that he had reached the bottom floor, but the descent continued. Some more time passed before the elevator eventually stopped on an uncharted story. The light inside flickered briefly.

"Identity confirmed, front line agent Dario Ravicini. You can proceed," a synthetic voice stated.

The elevator doors opened on a small hall, with corridors branching in different direction. Illumination was provided by many fluorescent lamps on the ceiling. A careful observer would have noticed the lack of any type of decorative items or furniture: everything was basic and without frills, almost dull-looking. No one

was around, but voices and typing sounds filtered through the walls.

Dario walked out without hesitation, as he knew exactly where he was going to. He took one of the corridors and sped up his pace. He passed by several doors, but he ignored them all until he found the one he was looking for. It was sturdy, made of solid wood and had a plaque with "Satsuki Ford" written on it. The man pushed a doorbell next to the entrance and waited.

"Come in," a woman's voice said.

When Dario stepped in, he found himself in a large and modern office. Many bookshelves were on the walls, carrying either books or strange artifacts with curious shapes: despite the sheer number of items, they were all placed neatly, in arrangements pleasant to the eye. A large and fine-looking desk in the center of the room was partially occupied by a computer and other hi-tech equipment along with old and thick tomes.

There were two people next to the table. One was a woman of great beauty, with long dark hair and big brown eyes. A short red shirt, which exposed the navel, and tight dark green trousers made her statuesque figure stand out, and were in deep contrast with the serious, business-like atmosphere of the place. She had a pair of small glasses on her face.

Her companion was a man that looked dishevelled. He had a white shirt and simple, worn-out jeans on. His chestnut hair was long and tied in a short ponytail, and a look at his face showed many signs of unkempt beard. Nevertheless his eyes showed intelligence and a strong will, and iron muscles showed under his skin.

As Dario saw them, he saluted.

"Dario Ravicini reporting, commander Ford." he exclaimed, addressing the woman.

Satsuki chuckled, waving her hand. "Easy, easy, Dario. We may have ranks, but we're not military."

"I still need to address you as my capable commanding officer."

The other man put up a sardonic smile and walked next to Dario.

"You military types are always too stiff," he commented. "You should get more fun."

Satsuki frowned and put her hands on her hips. "Jim Clark! Has anyone ever taught you basic manners?"

"I was just joking, Satsuki!"

"It is ok, commander. I have not taken offense," Dario said.

"Very well. What do you have to report, Dario?" Satsuki asked.

"Since the Great Cataclysm, the rate of abnormal events has slowly decreased, and so far most of the reports proved to be just superstition without any real

grounds. As far as I can tell, the situation from my report area is completely normal.”

The woman nodded. A year before, the world had been on the brink of an apocalypse due to the plans devised by a creature of the extracosmic space called Asgaroth. Undead and other monstrous creatures had walked on Earth, wreaking havoc and killing many people, until the secret organization called S.T.E.A.L. (Special Tactics and Equipment Against evil) had put an end to that scheme. Since then, the rate of unnatural events happening around the world had almost disappeared. Still, there were still many areas that were not deemed secure.

”I could have just sent you a report,” the man continued. ”Is there a precise reason why I have been called here directly? Has it to do with the *problem*?”

Satsuki’s eyes widened for an instant, then they were back to normal. ”No, it has no relation to that.”

”We have called you to brief you on something important,” Jim interjected, suddenly serious.

”I understand,” Dario replied. ”However, there was no need to call me here, I could have...”

”Yes, there is!” a voice behind him said.

Another woman with marked Eastern features had walked inside the office. She was so beautiful that even Satsuki looked pale in comparison. Her body seemed carved out of living marble, and it was just barely hidden by her dress, an extremely short *cheongsam*<sup>1</sup> showing a plunging neckline. She was wearing small gloves on her hands, and long and tight boots covered her slender legs. Her dark hair was tied in braids rolled up on two sides of her head, while two fascinating black eyes kept on staring at Dario.

”Hello there, Dario!” the woman exclaimed. ”I can see you are like wine... the older you get, the prettier you become.”

Dario couldn’t repress an exclamation of displeasure. ”Ran Mei<sup>2</sup>... At least you could use some more composure in front of our commanders.”

”I’m merely happy to see my loved one here. And let’s not be too formal... just call me Mei.”

”We actually wanted Mei next to you,” Jim added with a grin on his face. ”That’s why we called for her as well.”

”That’s right, that’s right,” Mei nodded.

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<sup>1</sup>Traditional Chinese dress.

<sup>2</sup>As this name is Chinese, the family name goes first.



Satsuki coughed. "We should not waste time talking about personal matters... Follow me. You will be briefed in the Meeting Room."

Dario, Jim and Mei exchanged embarrassed looks and followed Satsuki out of the office without saying a word. The woman led them through the corridors until they reached a very large room on the opposite side of the building. A table, long enough to accommodate at least ten people, was in its center. One of the walls looked different from the others: a closer examination revealed that it was a large screen instead. An electronic blackboard displaying many diagrams stood in one of the corners, and there were many pieces of audio and video equipment stored in a rack.

There were also two more people inside. Dario recognized them instantly: they were Jason Derrick and Klaus Werner.

Jason Derrick was the last heir of an English noble family, and he made no effort to hide his heritage, as he seemed to spread a strong aristocratic aura. Only slightly shorter than Dario, he wore clothes of exquisite workmanship, probably tailor-made, and golden sleeve links glittered over the cuffs of his silken shirt. His hair was reddish, short and perfectly arranged. Grey eyes examined the newcomers with severity.

Klaus was a completely different person. He had a gigantic build, and everyone looked like dwarfs in comparison. The man appeared almost like a stereotypical German, as he had short blonde hair and deep blue eyes. His clothes, a simple shirt and a pair of jeans, were basic and slightly crumpled. A long brown trenchcoat, his favorite, was hanging on a chair next to him. Waving at Satsuki and the others, Klaus ate a sandwich while he was examining carefully some of the electronic equipment.

"At last, the ones we were waiting for arrived," Jason said, carefully choosing his words.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Satsuki replied. "Dario and Mei have arrived just now."

"It's not a big deal," Klaus added, speaking English with a noticeable German accent. "I have just finished downloading the data."

"Good. Then, let's begin."

As Dario and the others sat around the table, the lights dimmed and the screen on the wall lit up, showing a world map. Wiping his mouth with a linen napkin, Klaus took the floor.

"I will review briefly the state of S.T.E.A.L. around the world," the man explained. "As you all know, Asgaroth is dead. However it doesn't mean we get to

relax: as far as we know, many minor entities are plotting to take his place. They aren't as powerful as him, but they are a threat. This is why in the past months we still had reports of unnatural phenomena..."

Dario listened unwillingly: he already knew much of the story. He glanced at Mei, who noticed and blew a kiss in his direction. That woman's attitude had always puzzled him. She had fallen in love with him since they had started working together, several years before, and she had always been open and upfront about it. Dario didn't like beating around the bush either, and had told her that he had no interest in any relationship. Nevertheless, Mei had not shown the slightest sign of discouragement and kept on trying to find her way into his heart.

"...many of these events are minor and were solved without many problems. But we have bigger trouble on the horizon," Klaus concluded, drawing Dario away from his thoughts.

"What would the problem be?" Jason asked. "As far as I can tell, the Darkness has lost much of its strength. Our spirits are no match for their fiendish minions."

"I will let Satsuki..." the man coughed and looked embarrassed. "I mean, our commander will explain the rest."

Satsuki stood up. "Unclear events have taken place in two different areas of the world, and they are unlike to anything that happened in the past six months. It is something we have to investigate immediately."

The map on the screen zoomed in to France.

"First of all, in the Languedoc a large number of people has gone missing. They were all foreign, mostly campers on holiday."

"Didn't they just get lost?" Mei suggested.

Satsuki shook her head. "We can rule that out. Most of them had GPS receivers, and according to the records, the signal simply disappeared. Also, fifteen people have gone missing in less than two weeks... too many to be a coincidence."

Jason rubbed his chin with a finger. "Do you mean that forces not belonging this world have taken them away?"

A circle formed on a small area on the chart.

"As you can see, the disappearances have taken in a rather circumscribed area. This is something that has to do with the Darkness."

"With all due respect, I disagree," Dario said. "There may be natural causes behind these events... like a serial murderer, or some religious cult."

"Good point, Dario," Satsuki observed. "But you will see why this can't be traced back to anything from this world."

France disappeared from the screen, replaced by pictures of dead people. The corpses were unnaturally thin, blackened and appeared completely dried out. The

eyes had been gouged out, and the faces were twisted and contorted in expressions of extreme terror. It was a terrifying and disgusting sight.

"They look like mummies." Mei whispered.

"Except that they aren't." Jim interjected. "Those are all that is left of the missing people."

An eerie silence invaded the whole room. Everyone was too shocked to say a word.

"Autopsies say that the bodies are completely dehydrated. The causes of death are uncertain, but it is sure that those people had died some days before. All of them were no more than thirty years old," Klaus said at last, reading a medical report.

"There is also a local legend that talks about a *dévorateur des âmes*, a soul eater that lures his victims during the day and eats their souls at night when they are asleep," Satsuki continued. "So there is no doubt that the Darkness is plotting something."

Jason slammed his hand against the table. "Such evil deeds must be stopped! We must move at once to stop this menace."

"Easy, easy." Jim said as he stood up. "You haven't heard the best part yet."

"There is more than that?" Mei asked.

"Yes. As Satsuki said when we started, this is only a part of the whole picture."

Satsuki sat down as Jim continued talking. A map of Romania appeared on the screen.

"Around the same time of the disappearances in France, strange news have been arriving from Romania," the man explained. "Many villages in the county of Braşov, in Transylvania, have been razed to the ground. There have been many casualties."

"What is the government's stance on that?" Dario inquired.

Jim sighed. "There is no stance at all, only generic promises that the matter will be investigated. And no one knows about it outside Romania... the information are simply being omitted."

"I think they're covering this up," Mei commented. "Either because they want to solve the problems themselves... or because they're part of it."

"Satellite data show that neither chemical nor mass destruction weapons were used." Klaus added. "And of course, the weather was fine when the villages were destroyed."

Jason stared at the screen. "How are these related with the events in France?"

In response, an image of a complex curved symbol appeared on the screen. It was a bizarre, contorted shape that no human hands would be able to draw.

"This is a symbol associated with the *dévorateur des âmes* according to ancient historical records." Klaus said.

Another emblem appeared. Although it looked different, it had something in common with the one that had been shown before.

"And this was what our agent in Romania discovered in the destroyed areas... before he was found dead somewhere."

"They look similar." Jason commented.

"They are. Watch."

The two figures appeared at the same time and slowly superimposed: the differences were minimal.

Satsuki stood from her chair again. "Now you see why I called you here. We were aware that there was turmoil within the Darkness since the death of Asgaroth... but this is more serious. There is no doubt that these events are connected. We must find out what is going on and stop it. Another Great Cataclysm should not happen."

"Understood." Dario responded. "What will be our course of action?"

"You, Mei and Jason will investigate the matter in France."

Mei cheered, while Jason gave a disapproving look.

"I'm glad!" the woman exclaimed. "We will get to work together, dear Dario!"

Jim smirked but Satsuki's face was firm. "Mei, remember this is an important mission, more than an outing."

"I'm sorry commander, I was just overjoyed." Mei apologized and saluted. "I, Ran Mei, will carry out your orders without any hesitation or doubt!"

"Glad to hear it," Satsuki smiled as she continued. "You will disguise as traveling tourists, and reach the small settlement of Aumont-Aubrac, as some disappearances have occurred near there. It is a small town whose population halved after the Great Cataclysm. Recently, thanks also to the ancient ruins and natural formations around it, it has become a magnet for people interested in the occult. You will certainly find some clues there. Once you find the culprits, make sure they will never be able to pursue their plans. Have you got any questions?"

"Thanks, commander. I've got no questions." Dario said. "I will do an accurate study of the area, and will discuss an actual strategy with my team members later."

"What about Romania?" Jason asked.

"Another team will try to gather information there. The initial plan is to investigate the town of Bran. And about who will be part of this team... Jim, myself and Klaus will go." Satsuki replied.

Klaus stared wide-eyed at the woman. "Me? Why?"

Jim patted him on the back. "Because you're good at things that blow up. I remember what you did in New York and it was truly amazing!"

The German looked away, embarrassed. "I just threw a few things here and there..."

"Commander," Dario intervened. "I don't think that you should be personally involved with this. You have an important role in the whole organization."

The woman shook her head. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't want to be someone locked in an office while others risk their lives for me. Besides, I don't want another incident like with Masefield to happen again."

Dario understood clearly his commander's choice: during the Great Cataclysm S.T.E.A.L. had nearly collapsed since John Masefield, at the time commanding officer, had been killed and replaced by a pawn of the Darkness.

"I see," he said. "You have a point."

"Commander, I do not believe it is necessary to work in teams," Jason commented. "We will be more vulnerable."

"I'm sure your skills will be helpful to your other team members," Jim said in an abrasive tone.

Jason glared at the man, but before he could say anything, their attention was drawn to Satsuki, who had finished her explanation.

"That's all. Unless you need more time to prepare, I want you to commence operations by tomorrow. You are dismissed now... Good luck."

As Klaus sighed and muttered something about "lying again to his wife", everyone stood up and said goodbye to the two commanders. As they were walking outside, Dario approached Jason and Mei.

"I would like us to meet after dinner to draw out a detailed plan," he suggested. "In the mean time, I'll be exercising in the gym for a while."

"I will go too! I want to show Dario how much I have improved!" Mei exclaimed enthusiastically.

"No, thanks. I have my own business to attend to," Jason said. Although the tone was formal, there was a slight hint of irritation in his voice.

"All right. We will meet at 21.00 in the operations room," Dario concluded.

Jason waved and walked away. As he watched him leave, Dario wondered if the proposal of working in a team had been a good idea after all. That Englishman was good-hearted, but also a prisoner of his legacy. He considered fighting the Darkness as a mission, and believed only himself to be fit for that purpose.

"Hey Dario!" Mei's angry voice drew the man away from his thoughts. "What are you doing, staring at the outer space? Let's go!"

Before Dario could reply, she grabbed his arm and dragged him away in anger.

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Satsuki leaned back on a chair in her office, letting out a disgruntled exclamation.

"The joys of being in charge." Jim said with a smirk on his face.

The woman stared at him with a tired expression. "I hate to admit it, but sometimes you are right. We have a hard row to hoe now. And on top of that, I have to make sure everyone works well together."

"They will have to. You've stressed the importance of working in a team since you have been in charge."

"True, but I have always hoped it would be easier. Not to mention they don't even know what they would have to face."

Jim put a hand on Satsuki's shoulder. "You've done your best, don't worry about it. They're all exceptional agents, and I'm sure they will do fine."

Satsuki gave a look at her desk: next to her computer, there was a simple frame containing a photograph depicting two people. One of them was Satsuki, the other was a girl that was noticeably younger, with brown hair and deep blue eyes. Both Satsuki and the other person were smiling. The woman let out a small sigh.

"It has already been a year..." she whispered.

"Do you think she is related to what's happening?" Jim asked.

"In all honesty, I doubt it. She may be powerful, but she can't be in two places at the same time. And it's not her...style, as well. I can *feel* she's not involved in this matter, at least directly."

"But it doesn't mean we will not see her again," Jim muttered, becoming serious all of a sudden.

"We will see her again for sure. For all the past year I have wished that such a thing would not happen..."

"It is not your fault, Satsuki."

"I know, but I can't help it, Jim. Even though there was nothing I could do to prevent what has happened, I still feel responsible for her fate."

Jim found himself at a loss of words and did not answer. Satsuki clung to him, her eyes still fixed on the photograph.

*Yumiko...*

\* \* \*

"Dario, are you ready for the show?" Mei exclaimed as she walked out of the changing room.



The S.T.E.A.L. training area was located in the basement of the building and was comprised essentially by one very large and high room. Many kinds of weights were in a corner, neatly arranged, and exercise mats were scattered around on the floor. A vaulting horse was on a side, along with many treadmills. Next to a wall, a punching bag hung from the ceiling. No one was around except for Dario, who was doing squats. When he saw Mei, he stopped for a moment.

*Now is my chance!* the woman thought as she adjusted her suit. It was black and tight, showing her generous curves without leaving much to imagination. However, she could not tell if Dario had noticed it or not. The man was like an impenetrable wall: he showed what he was thinking only when he wanted to.

"Here I go!" Mei shouted.

She jumped forward, kicking at the air, then landed by rolling on the floor, swept at an invisible enemy on her left and punched forward, in a sort of simulated combat very reminiscent of the *kata* of karate. The style was unique, unlike any other technique, a mixture of the ancient martial arts she had learnt when little and her own personal additions. She kept on going through the forms, moving arms and legs at incredible speed, then she backflipped, kicked high in the air and froze in position.

"Done! What do you think?" she asked, breathing heavily.

"Not bad," Dario said as he was walking her. "But you show uncertainty while jumping and punching."

Mei grumbled and stared him, clearly annoyed by his reply. "Can't you say something *nice* for a change? Aren't Italians supposed to be sentimental and hot-blooded?"

"Italians aren't what you see on TV." Dario replied. "Besides, isn't training a way to become better and more efficient?"

"Even love needs efficiency, and compliments are the best way to do that!"

"I don't recall being in a relationship with you, Mei."

She wanted to tear her hair out. Dario was so *insensitive*! He had a beautiful and intelligent woman before him, yet he refused to give in. At the same time, Mei liked that side of his personality. It would make conquering his heart much more interesting.

"So... what are you doing before leaving tomorrow?" Mei muttered, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I'll be probably reviewing maps, reading about local folklore and writing lists of needed equipment."

She stared at him, puzzled. "For heaven's sake, Dario... don't you ever get out in your life?"

The man put up a slight smile. "I do, from time to time. I don't have many acquaintances, but I always try to meet with them when I can."

"Then why don't you..." Mei started, but she stopped as soon as she gave a look to her companion.

At first sight, Dario didn't look any different than usual. He had changed his clothes to a pair of gym trousers and a shirt with short sleeves. His iron muscles rippled under his skin, but they weren't the target of Mei's attention. Instead, she stared at his right arm: there was a long and large scar that ran through the whole forearm.

"Is there something wrong?" Dario's question brought the woman back to reality.

"Uh, no, not really..." she replied, embarrassed.

"Is it because of this scar?" Dario raised his arm in front of Mei. "I believe you have seen it before."

Mei nodded. "Yes, and I wonder how you got it. Did you cut yourself, or something like that?"

Dario's eyes clouded for a moment, but they were back to normal before she could notice it. "It's just a... memento of when I was working in the GIS<sup>3</sup>."

"Gis? Oh, I remember. That's where you were taught not to disclose personal information when on the field, right?"

"Precisely."

"Well... I've been wanting to ask you since a long time, but why did you leave them?"

Dario stiffened and stayed silent.

"Did I... say something wrong?" Mei asked, suddenly worried.

"It's a personal matter that I don't prefer discussing."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. No offense taken." Dario looked at a large clock on one of the walls. "It's late. Mei, I'm going for a shower then for some planning. See you at 21.00."

As he walked away, Mei stared at him. *What have I just done?* she thought furiously. *Will I ever learn to keep my stupid mouth shut?*

Of course, there was nothing she could do. She should just avoid returning to the topic. In the end, what had happened had taught her a lesson: never meddle too much in other people's affairs. After all.. if Dario had asked about her nightmarish past, would she have reacted differently?

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<sup>3</sup>Gruppo Intervento Speciale (Special intervention group), one of the two Italian anti-terrorist units

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Two days after the meeting, Dario and his team mates were ready to leave. While they were waiting for their flight in a large hall in Fiumicino Airport, they took the opportunity to briefly review their plan.

"Our flight should bring us to Marseilles," Dario explained. "Once there, we will get a car, or a camper. After that, we will look for clues."

"I still think that it would be better to see if we can sense the Darkness, instead of playing actors," Jason said with an almost hidden dose of disgust in his voice.

"You know it wouldn't work, Jason," Mei commented. "It's true that we would find them... but they would also spot *us*. We must be stealthy, even if it's not particularly chivalric."

Jason shrugged and did not reply.

"Mei, you said you were doing some research... what are your results?" Dario asked, completely unaffected by the other man's attitude.

The woman nodded. "According to reports gathered by our French contacts, among the many tricksters in Aumont-Aubrac there is one that possesses a true second sight. We should contact this person as soon as we can."

"Definitely. You did a good job."

Mei giggled, while Jason's face darkened.

Seeing that the English man's mood was getting worse, Mei tried to shift the conversation to more trivial matters, but without much success. While she was beating her brains out to find a way to dissipate that unpleasant atmosphere, a voice announced their flight's imminent departure. Interrupting their conversation, they hurriedly headed for the gate.

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*I'm late!*

Franco was running through the halls of the airport as fast as he could. He had just been given an important task abroad a sales representative, and he already risked missing his flight! He cursed under his breath. Perhaps he should have not partied the night before...

His flow of thoughts was interrupted as he violently bumped into someone. He tumbled on the floor, and his suitcase opened instantly, spreading its contents around him. Franco looked for them frantically, but his glasses had fallen off and he couldn't see well. Then he realized that the person he he had hit was still in front of him. As much as he could tell from his blurred vision, it was a very tall man with a huge build.

"Oh, I'm so sorry..." Franco apologized. "I'm such an absent-minded person..."

The other man's words were calm and measured. "It is ok. Just remember... Order is the essence of everything."

Before Franco could say anything more, he had gone. Still puzzled by that cryptic response, the man felt the ground until he found his glasses. As soon as he put them on, he stood open-mouthed with amazement.

His suitcase had all its contents properly in place... no, it was more than just that. He could not arrange them so well, the placement was so perfect it almost seemed unnatural.

Franco's amazement didn't last long. He had a plane to catch and he was late! Grabbing his suitcase, he ran off.

Hidden in a corner, the other man watched him run away, amused. Even with unimportant matters, Order had to be enforced. And his only mission was to bring Order...

He smiled.

*Soon.*