

Chapter 2

The soul eaters

Aumont-Aubrac had all the features a nice, quiet holiday resort should have. It was set among the hills of the French countryside, a landscape divided among large woods and small fields. The village itself wasn't a large settlement, and comprised only a small number of houses, all rather tiny, white-plastered and with grey or brown roofs. In the middle of the town, the ancient church of Saint Etienne stood out as the tallest among all the buildings. In the far distance, cattle was pasturing.

It was a sight that would bring calm and serenity. However, the atmosphere inside the town was completely different: people hurried to their houses as soon as the sun set, they always talked in a low voice and looked at any newcomer with a mixture of fear and worry. Dario, Mei and Jason found themselves the object of such unwanted attention the moment they got off their car. They were all dressed like campers, with shirts and short trousers, with the exception of Mei, who wore her usual outfit.

"The reception is certainly not heart-warming," Jason said wryly.

"You have to understand them," Mei replied. "The already small population suffered a lot because of the Great Cataclysm, and now the disappearances are scaring tourists away. And I haven't mentioned the proliferation of so-called foretellers yet. I bet a lot of... out of the ordinary people are visiting this place nowadays."

"As a matter of fact, Mei, you're the only one who looks out of the ordinary," Dario observed.

The woman chuckled. "I do? Oh, but you know that the more noticeable you are, the less you attract attention!"

"Let's just get ready before people ask questions." Jason suggested as he pulled out a long item wrapped into a white cloth out of the car's trunk.

"What is that?" Dario asked.

"My sword."

"If we have to act undercover, I don't think it's a good idea to bring it with you."

"Yeah, why do you need a sword here anyway?" Mei added.

"This rapier has been handed down by generations in my family, and I always bring it with me when the Darkness is near, so..."

"All right," Dario cut the conversation short. "As long as you disguise it as some souvenir, it shouldn't be a problem. Mei, what's the name of the foreteller we want to contact?"

Mei turned a small palm computer on and read through her notes. "Let me see... *Agathos the Magnificent*, real name Joel Labrousse, 40, divorced and with some precedents for attempted fraud. He is mostly regarded as a charlatan, but a small portion of his prophecies were actually true. This suggests that he may have some latent foretelling powers."

"Fake tourists for a fake wizard... a fitting match, I'd say," Jason commented.

"In any case, let's go and find him before it gets too late," Dario concluded.

The inhabitants proved to be helpful despite their initial diffidence, and after a few questions the group knew where to go. As they moved towards their destination, they noticed a change in the surroundings. At first the streets were small and winding, very characteristic, but as they went further in the direction they had been told, multicolored tents became more and more frequent on the sides of the road.

Then they found what they had been looking for. On the front of a short, tiny house there was a large sign. Abstract forms were painted over it, but the hand that had done the work had no skill, and the shapes lacked symmetry, artistic sense and in general were rather *kitsch*. "Agathos le Magnifique" was written in the center, using irregularly shaped characters.

"I can see why people call him a charlatan," Dario muttered.

"But he's the only one who doesn't use a tent," Mei noticed. "It means he's getting more money, probably because of his... successful prophecies."

"Let's see if, unlike his artistic skill, he is truly magnificent or not." Jason pulled a cord tied to a small bell over the entrance. A small and soft sound echoed around.

"*Entrez, s'il vous plaît.*" a voice coming from inside said.

Without further ado, the group opened the door and went inside. "Chaos" was the only word they could find to describe the interior. It was a rather small room filled with all sorts of artifacts, from animal bones to worn-out pieces of parchment. They were everywhere: on long wooden shelves on the walls, over dust-filled tables and even on the floor. All the windows were closed and lighting was provided only by a few reddish candles.

However, all those details were pushed into the background by the man who sat at a worm-eaten table. He was short and very thin, with a long, bushy black

beard whose half was dyed in white. He wore a reddish turban and an overly large silken robe that almost made him trip at every step, and his hands were adorned with many rings.

He glanced at the newcomers with his two small dark eyes.

"*Bonjour, mes amis!* What can I do for you?" he exclaimed with a high-pitched, squeaky voice.

"We're here for..." Dario started.

"Oh, don't tell me anything! I can see you're travellers coming from afar, judging from your accent. Has my fame even reached the distant lands?"

The three stared at him, speechless.

Agathos paid no attention and continued his speech. "How can my marvellous powers serve you? You need a love spell, am I right?"

He stared at Mei and the woman giggled for an instant, but she regained her composure after Dario gave her a dirty look.

"Or perhaps this mysterious young man with..." Agathos pointed at Jason.

The Englishman shrugged. "It's just a souvenir."

"... Do you need a blessing? My holy benediction will make it a perfect good luck charm."

"Excuse me, *monsieur* Agathos..." Mei tried to hide her discomfort. "We don't need anything of that. We just need a foretelling..."

The man rolled his eyes and gave a cold stare to the woman. "Why didn't you say that earlier?"

"Because we were impressed by your person," Dario interjected. "In any case, we want to camp in the woods near here, where some people have disappeared. Can you use your... *divine sight* to see if it is safe?"

Such flattery had a powerful effect on Agathos. He put up a large smile, overjoyed.

He chuckled. "There is nothing my *divine sight* can't miss! Be warned, it won't be cheap!"

"Money is no problem for us," Dario replied.

"Very well... I will show you what you seek!"

Agathos jumped in the middle of the room and kicked many items away. He pulled out two necklaces out of his robe and held them above his head. Then the man started moving in an apparently random dance as he twirled the two pendants and shouted unintelligible words.

"What a lame attempt at playing shaman..." Jason whispered, disgusted.

"Wait." Mei said. "I can see that the *Chi*¹ around him is shifting."

Neither Dario nor Jason objected: they both knew that Mei could easily see, and in some cases even manipulate, the *Chi* flows around her.

"Ah... I see... I see!" Agathos shouted. His voice was remarkably different, deeper and croaking. "I see a village..." the man continued. "A village that should not exist... putrefaction and plague are its only dwellers, but fools see things that aren't..."

Mei, Jason and Dario gaped. They hadn't just heard the words spoken by the hermit... their *meaning* had been fed directly to their minds as a series of images of undescrivable horror.

Agathos threw one of the necklaces on the ground in fury and his face twitched. It seemed as if he was speaking against his own will.

"Must... not... continue..." he muttered. "But... no... too strong... *dévorateur des âmes*... they are here... near the wood... they look, and prey..."

The man's face became pale.

"Stop!" he yelled. "I have said too much... they will find me!"

A whistle echoed in Jason's mind as he felt his wrapped-up sword vibrating.

"Evil is here, watch out," he said under his breath.

Suddenly all the candles blew out and the door slammed shut, leaving everyone in the dark.

"What's going on?" Mei exclaimed.

"It's *them*!" Agathos screamed.

A loud thud was heard against one of the windows. Agathos looked in the direction of the sound, caught by uncontrollable terror.

There was a second thud and the window bent inwards with a sound of cracked wood. Sanity left Agathos completely as he cried like a small children and foamed at the mouth.

"Our naked souls will be offered in a great banquet and generations of our descendants will be cursed!" he burst out. "My flesh is theirs now!"

Suddenly all the windows slammed open and light filled the room. As he shielded his eyes, Dario was barely aware of something brushing his face. A moment later, a cry caught his attention: a huge swarm of insects was flying around Agathos, who frantically waved his hands in an effort to keep them away. Moving as a whole, the cloud dived into the man's mouth, nose and ears. Agathos yelped and shook up, then he flew into the air and crashed into his desk, where he stood still.

¹The "life force" that permeates everything, according to Chinese culture.

Mei looked at the man with a mixture of surprise and horror.

"I can't see his *Chi* flowing in his body," she stated, speaking in a low voice. "He's dead."

"I think we have hit the nail right on its head," Dario commented. "It's obvious that someone wants to avoid being discovered. We must be on guard, as we have been probably spotted."

"I'm not so sure, because..."

Mei's words died in her throat as she heard a muffled sound coming from Agathos. The man was trying to stand up, but his movements were slow and uncoordinated, like the ones of a puppet. She couldn't help screaming when she saw his face.

His eyes had been devoured, or had fallen off. A myriad of insects crawled in the now empty cavities and out of his nose. Limping, he stretched his hands forward as his lips twitched into an evil smile.

Dario was the first to react: he drew out a gun hidden in one of his boots and fired several rounds at Agathos. The former foreteller staggered but did not stop his advance.

"Mei!" Dario shouted.

The woman sprang forward before he could finish calling her out. She took a deep breath and let all the air out of her lungs as she slammed her right palm over Agathos's chest. There was a flash and for an instant a shockwave spread throughout his body: he flew backwards as if he had been hit by a hammer. The man collided against the wall and the insects swarmed out of his body, aiming for Mei's head.

However, Jason had already unwrapped his rapier. It was a sword of superb workmanship with an elaborate hilt and a finely decorated scabbard. As he pulled it out of its sheath, several runes engraved on the blade lit up.

"Begone, seeds of Evil!" he exclaimed as he swung his weapon in the air.

A strong wind blew out of nowhere and engulfed the swarm: when it dissipated, there was nothing left of those fiendish creatures.

"I think we have just got involved into something serious," Jason commented, breathing heavily.

"No doubt about that." Dario put his gun back in its hiding place. "We need to keep a low profile, or they may come at us again."

"As I said before, I don't think this was for us, Dario," Mei observed.

"Why do you say so?"

"The *Chi* flowing around those things... it was quite rough and unrefined. It was probably some kind of spell that activated automatically to prevent anyone

from gathering information.”

”We shouldn’t stay here.” Jason opened the door. ”We must take our leave as soon as possible.”

He stopped as soon as he looked outside. The colorful tents were broken or in disarray, and many people were on the ground dead, their bodies almost completely stripped of their flesh.

”It is too late, apparently,” Dario added bitterly.

The Englishman clenched his fists. ”Killing innocents is unforgivable!”

”Don’t worry.” Mei said firmly. ”Whoever caused this will get the right punishment.”

”At any rate,” Dario continued, ”we should go back to our car and avoid crowded places for now, or others may be harmed again. I will also ask headquarters for help with what has just happened, in order to avoid... unnecessary questions. We’ll sleep outside the town and tomorrow we’ll search the nearest woods.”

A look from Mei and Jason confirmed that there were no objections to the plan. Quietly, the three walked away.

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Somewhere deep underground, in a large room carved out of the rock, Lamyon and Lisim were having a conversation. They were no longer wearing the light summer clothes of their *shells*: Lisim had a long dark dress decorated with emerald green geometric patterns on, while her companion had chosen a hand-made linen shirt embroidered with gold and finely made, old-fashioned trousers.

”Did you feel it?” Lamyon asked.

”Of course I did,” Lisim answered. ”The defensive enchantment activated not too long ago. But I didn’t sense any *confirmation* from it. Do you think something might have interfered?”

”It may as well be. Normal humans should be powerless against such a spell.”

”What if it was due to that *disturbance* we sensed a week and a half ago? Despite our powers, it eluded all attempts of identification, and we don’t know where it is and what its intentions are.”

Lamyon stroke his chin. ”I don’t think so. By looking at the Weave of Reality, I see that our servants have been destroyed, while that *disturbance* wanted to be unseen. This may be the work of our ancestral enemies, the inhabitants of Ellogha.”

”You’re mistaken.” Lisim shook her head. ”They will notice our return only in a hundred years’ time.”

"In any case, we must be cautious and act like furtive shadows. For now, we should get less prey."

"Good idea, but I fear this may hinder our plans. The Ritual must be performed."

"Mature wine has a much better savour. We should not let haste get in the way; like that, anyone who tries to oppose us will discover the truth too late... and we will walk on this land as kings, feasting on every soul. A true Eden."

The sound of a bell echoed in the room. Lisim smiled as soon as she noticed.

"Speaking of prey, it seems like we're ready for another one."

Lamyon clapped his hands in a commanding manner. "Bring the prey inside, faithful slaves!" he shouted.

In response to his order, a robed figure walked in. It looked like a man, but it was hard to make out his features as his clothes were extremely loose and did not show much of the wearer's body. The newcomer was dragging a man in his twenties, completely tied up. The prisoner's eyes glittered with terror.

"Place him on the altar," Lisim ordered.

Despite the prisoner's efforts to wriggle out, the hooded figure placed him on the stone altar that stood out in the middle of the room and walked away. Lisim unsheathed a dagger with a curved blade, its hilt decorated with creatures not from this world, and handed it to her companion.

With a smile on his lips, Lamyon walked up to the terrified man and with a swift motion he dug the blade into his heart. Blood poured out of the victim's mouth then he began to wizen, his skin cracking and getting dry. In a matter of seconds, he no longer looked like a man in the first flush of youth, but instead like a blackened and unrecognizable mummy.

"A good soul." Lisim commented, licking her lips as she took the bloody dagger from her companion's hand.

"Indeed. But we need many more."

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Dario, Jason and Mei set off in their search the following day. Agathos had not been able to give many details before death had caught him, so their only possible option was to search the woods around the town thoroughly. However, after many hours they still had not found any traces of supernatural origins. Frustrated but not discouraged, they decided to continue their investigation until sunset.

Mei sighed. Dark clouds had covered the sky and it looked like it could rain at any minute. *Not exactly the best day for a hike*, she thought. For a moment she



let her mind go free, and imagined herself and Dario alone in the forest. Oh, that would have been so nice! She forced herself not to giggle.

As they were driving along the road, trees became more sparse until they found themselves next to a field. In the distance they could see a lone man hoeing.

"That man surely has some guts to work here, seeing what has happened these days," Dario commented.

"Perhaps he's just insane," Jason added.

Mei didn't say anything: her eyes were fixed on the distant figure.

"Please stop, Dario," she said.

The man drove the car to a halt and looked at her, puzzled.

"Why, Mei?"

"There is no man there."

"What do you mean?" Jason exclaimed.

"As you know, all living beings have a *Chi* of their own, and I can see that. I don't see any *Chi* flowing inside that man, only around him. It's just a shell, an illusion made by someone else."

The Englishman gripped the hilt of his sword. "Do you think it will be dangerous to approach him?"

"I don't think so. The weave of *Chi* around that person is very simplistic and rather weak. I'd say it's more like a puppet programmed to say or do certain things."

A glimpse of intuition appeared in Dario's eyes. "I see now. This is probably how people disappeared. Illusions such as that man are some kind of bait to lure people."

"We should be the bait for now... until they will reel us in." Jason proposed.

"I agree," Mei said. "However I don't think we should approach that man without caution."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because we may be identified, Jason. We have auras that are different from normal people. Therefore I think that they may get noticed, and our cover will be blown. Luckily, there is a solution: I can manipulate the flows of *Chi* around us to shield our presence. It's totally useless against intelligent creatures, but as we're dealing with a brainless drone, it will be fine."

Dario turned towards the woman. "Very well. Let's do it as soon as possible, before we get noticed."

Mei nodded. She got off and stood next to the car, followed by her companions. The woman closed her eyes and started breathing in a slow, regular pattern: even

if he could not see it, Dario was aware that some kind of change was taking place around them. The woman then placed her hands on the foreheads of the two men. They both shivered as they felt cold spreading through their skin, but that sensation faded away quickly.

"Done." Mei declared. "Let's come closer now."

Suddenly, she lost her balance and she leaned against the car to avoid falling down.

"Are you all right?" Dario asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I have just tripped," she replied.

As Dario helped her to stand up, he noticed that the woman's face was pale, and that beads of perspiration had formed on her forehead. The trick she had performed didn't seem particularly complex, yet Mei looked tired. It had always happened when she manipulated *Chi*.

"What are you staring at?" Mei asked suddenly, drawing him away from his thoughts. "Did you finally notice my beauty?"

Dario shook his head. "No, it's nothing."

Ignoring the angry stares from her, Dario drove the car next to the man. He looked in his forties, and his skin was dark, probably a result of working in the sun every day. He wore a simple shirt and jeans with many mud stains, and held a hoe with both hands. He stopped as soon as he saw them.

"Good day!" he said in a friendly tone.

"Good day to you!" Mei replied as she got off.

"I haven't seen you around, are you foreigners?"

"Yes, we are. We are traveling around and we are searching for good places to visit."

The man smiled. "I know the right place for you. There is a small village further down the road, and I'm sure you will like it. Since it's about to rain, I suggest you go to the inn there. It's a nice place."

"*Merci*. You've been very helpful. We will go and take a look." Mei waved and got into the car.

While they were moving away from the man, the three kept an eye on him through the driving mirror: his figure faded progressively until there was no sign of him anymore. The field had changed as well: instead of a lush crop there was only barren, sterile land.

"As we expected, it was just an illusion," Jason observed. "I wonder how many people have been fooled like this."

"Who would suspect of a casual suggestion from a bystander?" Mei added. "However, this time the bait might bite..."



"We have an important advantage." Dario stated. "Our enemy doesn't know that we're aware of the trap. Once we're at the village, we will probably be able to discover the truth behind the disappearances."

"How long do you think we should keep our cover?" Jason asked.

"As long as possible. The less we attract attention, the more we can investigate."

Mei poked Dario on the shoulder. "Why are you driving so slowly? Let's hurry to the village!"

The car accelerated and took a turn, disappearing from sight. On a tree, a shadowed figure watched in silence.