

Chapter 3

A hidden reality

The trip to the village took longer than expected: the sun had already set when Dario and his companions arrived. The place looked rather quiet and ordinary. The short buildings' windows had lit up and fragments of happy conversations echoed from inside. Groups of people sat in front of the houses either talking or simply enjoying the fresh air of the night. Dario parked the car in a nearby patch of grass and the three got off, stretching their sore legs.

"It's a rather appeasing place for being a trap." Jason noticed as he gave a look around. "Everything looks peaceful."

"You've picked the right word, Jason." Mei whispered. "It *looks* peaceful, but what I see is just a bunch of ruins, rotten wood and blackened bones."

"A remarkable illusion, nevertheless. I admit I wasn't able to sense anything evil out of it."

"Before we look too suspicious, let's check the inn out." Dario proposed.

As they walked in the streets, the people proved to be particularly friendly. They either offered to invite them in their houses, or gave them flowers and gifts. Despite their senses telling them that everything was real, it didn't take the group long to realize that the men and the women of the village had a somewhat strange behavior. If they spoke to them more than once they would often repeat the same sentences as before, and their movements from and to the houses followed a kind of a predetermined pattern.

Shortly afterwards they arrived at the inn, a large, two-story wooden building painted with bright colors. As they stepped inside, a stout man in his fifties greeted them. He was almost bald, and wore elegant purple clothes. A pair of small, unfashionable glasses was resting on his nose.

He greeted them with a smile. "Hello! What can I do for you?"

"We would like to spend the night. Are there any rooms available?" Dario asked.

"Certainly! Do you need single or double rooms?"

Mei smirked. "One double and one single, please."

"She actually meant *three* single rooms," Dario added hurriedly. "She is still somewhat rusty with her French, so excuse her."

The woman grumbled. "Dario, you're no *fun*! How can we realize our love dream like that!"

"Can you suggest anything noteworthy around here?" Jason inquired, trying to change the subject.

The man paused for a moment, deep in thought. "Yes, I seem to recall the Bergeret castle just north of here, and also the clearing where a revolt took place just a year ago..."

"Thanks."

"Here are your keys." The man handed out three brass keys. "Dinner is ready, so please come to the dining hall. You can leave your baggage here."

The group waved to the innkeeper and made its way towards the dining hall, a small room with several tables laid out orderly. Apparently Dario and his companions were the only guests, because only one of them was properly set for dinner, and no one else was around.

"Appearances can be deceptive indeed." Jason commented in a low voice as he sat down. "That castle was razed six hundred years ago, and that revolt the innkeeper mentioned took place one hundred years later."

Dario nodded. "I glanced around and I have an approximate idea of the layout of this place. It is fairly traditional, but since everything is not as it seems, we should check it tonight."

"And I was thinking I could sleep!" Mei groaned.

"We still don't know for how long we will get unnoticed. We must take our first opportunity."

"Fine, fine. In any case, let us get at least a few hours of sleep. I'll put wards on our doors to be safer."

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a waiter, a thin, white-haired and bony woman wearing a dull colored apron that was too large for her. She put on the table three plates with stew and a bowl of salad, then walked away without saying a word. Mei was about to eat, but Dario stopped her.

"Let me check first." he said.

The man dipped his fork into the stew, then brought it to his mouth and touched it with the tip of his tongue.

"A rather common sedative has been put inside the stew," he observed. "The dose is rather low to avoid knocking us out immediately, but if we ate this, we would probably fall asleep for the whole night."

Jason looked at the dish questioningly. "Which means that tonight they will eventually find out we aren't really the bait we are supposed to be."

"We will have to use our advantage while we still can. We will sleep one, two hours at maximum, then we'll set out to investigate."

"What do we do with our meal? If we don't eat it, it would be suspicious."

"Leave it to me!" Mei exclaimed as she put a small belt pouch on the table. "The pulverized herbs I have inside this pouch will neutralize sedatives. We just need to put a few on our stew and salad, and we will be fine. I brought some with me, just in case we would end up in a situation like this "

"A good move, Mei." Jason stated. "You've been rather provident."

The woman chuckled. "At least *someone* shows some gratitude here, unlike that other cold-hearted guy..."

Dario gave her a questioning look, and that made her furious.

"I'm talking about *you*, big Italian man!" she burst out.

Jason stopped himself from laughing and coughed. "If you keep on arguing, your meal will be cold."

Still glaring at Dario, Mei took out a handful of a grey powder from the pouch and spread it over the stew and the salad. As soon as she was done, the three started eating. The food was good, although somewhat tasteless.

Once their meal was finished, they decided to meet up one hour and a half after going to bed, then their conversation shifted to lighter topics. Jason explained his views of life and nobility, and Mei told old Chinese ghost stories. Even if he participated, Dario kept himself mostly detached from the discussion, his mind already set on the upcoming hours.

The sound of a grandfather clock reminded them that it was already late. The three stood up and headed for their rooms, noticing that no one had come to pick their plates up and that the reception was deserted. As they climbed the narrow stairs to the upper floor and found themselves in a long corridor. It was essential, but not unpleasant to the eye. A simple carpet was on the ground for its entire length, and large lamps hung from the ceiling provided enough lighting. Doors to the rooms were on both sides of the walls. Like downstairs, no one was around and there was no sign of recent human activity.

Mei placed several strips of parchment inscribed with mystic symbols on their doorposts and recited arcane words in a low voice. In response, the writing lit briefly.

"If anyone but us attempts to cross past them, we will hear a high-pitched noise." she explained. "This should keep us safe from an ambush. Any entity that walks on this world, spiritual or physical, will trigger it."

Everything was ready, so the three walked into their rooms for a brief moment of rest.

* * *

Dario opened his eyes in an instant. He had laid down to sleep at least for a short time, but he sensed a displeasing feeling in the air. While he couldn't understand why, he decided to pay heed to his instincts: he had avoided death several times thanks to them. Without moving, he glanced around. The room was dark, and no light came from outside, as clouds had covered the moon. Despite the complete silence, the unpleasantness did not go away.

Suddenly, he was aware of *something* on the ceiling. Acting instinctively, Dario rolled sideways, landing on the floor: a second later his bed disintegrated in a shower of wood splinters. Then he saw a pair of pale blue eyes staring at him, floating in the darkness like cold fireballs. They were multi-faceted like a diamond, shining with intelligent but malignant light.

The man cursed under his breath. They had made a mistake. As the whole village was the product of unnatural force, there was no need to go *through* anything. Anything could just be moulded by the same force and turned into an enemy... like the beams on the roof. And to make matters worse, Dario had left his gun and his flashlight in the baggage, which was on the other side of the room. Still, he wasn't completely unarmed. With a swift motion, he pulled out a knife from his right boot.

The creature made a low, hissing sound and took a step forward, making the floor tremble. At first, Dario thought of throwing his weapon against his enemy, but he quickly discarded the idea. Those eyes were his only way of keep track of whoever was confronting him, and he didn't want to lose his only means of the defense. He held the blade before himself and hoped to find an opening.

With a scream, the monster dashed towards the man. Dario threw himself on the side and slashed blindly at the same time. He felt his knife cutting through something that resembled hardened gelatin. Crying in pain, the creature crashed against one of the walls. A moment later, the flaming eyes were staring at him again.

Dario heard the sound of a hoof against the floor: clearly his opponent was trying to charge at him. Frantically, his mind went through several courses of action. In the darkness he was clearly at the disadvantage, while the mysterious creature was moving with ease. He could not let the fight drag on for too long. He had only one chance... landing a single blow in a vital part. But which would it be?

The monster charged again, but Dario sprang forward as well. Using all the strength he could find, he dug his knife between those two glowing eyes and rolled sideways, but he wasn't fast enough. Something lashed at him and he was knocked against a wall, and the impact almost knocked him out. The creature, apparently unharmed by the attack, stared at the man and a squeaky, perverse laughter filled the room.

As Dario was desperately trying to stand up, his fingers touched a soft, familiar cloth. His backpack! Had he enough time to open it? He fumbled with the strings, while the eyes got nearer and nearer...

There was the sound of gunshots, and the laughter turned into a scream of pain. Dario kept on firing until his gun's chamber was empty. Only then he realized that he could no longer see the two cold eyes: life had left them already. He stood up, trying to ignore the pain that swept through his body, and turned on his flashlight. He gaped.

The room was quite different than when he had gone to sleep. It used to be small and comfortable, but now it was filthy and decadent. Large cobwebs ran on the ceiling from one beam to another, rubble was all around and most of the wood was rotten. A large, black spot was on the floor, probably where the creature had died. Remains of a decayed bedstraw were on the ground among what was left of his bed.

Dario couldn't repress an exclamation of disgust. It had been a very successful illusion, to fool him like that! However, there was no time to think over the matter: even Jason and Mei could get attacked as well. He brought the door down with a kick and ran into the corridor.

Gun in hand, he looked around searching for potential threats. No one was around and there were no sounds, except for the whistling of the wind through cracks in the wood. Dario's flashlight casted bizarre shadows over the walls and the ceiling, and he often pointed his weapon at them, only to realize that nothing was there.

He had taken just a few steps when one of the doors further ahead in the corridor, next to the stairs, came off its hinges with a flash of light. The man was barely aware of a twisted figure flying backwards and out of a window, then Mei appeared on the doorstep.

"Dario!" the woman exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"I was about to say the same thing," he replied. "I'm fine. My back will be sore, but nothing to worry about."

Mei flung her arms around the man. "Oh Dario! I was so worried about you!"

Dario remained impassive. "I'm sorry about that, but you should not be so

emotional now. We're not safe, and we need to look for Jason first."

"Yes, you're right..." The woman stepped back, embarrassed. *But it was such a good occasion!*

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a blade slicing through wood. Another door fell to the ground and Jason ran out, rapier in hand. Instead of his formal attire, he had changed into completely different clothes: he wore a sturdy chain mail, comfortable trousers, black boots and gloves. His sword's scabbard was tied to his waist, and a long cape was on his shoulders.

It was extremely anachronistic, but neither Dario nor Mei paid attention to that: Jason always used to dress like that when he was undertaking a mission.

"Mei, Dario!" Jason said. "Glad to see you are safe."

"We've both been attacked in our rooms." Dario explained. "I assume this has happened to you too."

The Englishman nodded. "A filthy creature from the Darkness tried to surprise me, but it was no match for my blade."

"We should get our stuff and move out quickly." Mei added. "I doubt that whoever has created this place would have problems in finding us by now."

Dario was about to speak when a creaking sound made him spin round. Waves rippled through the wood of the walls as if it were liquid, and several figures slowly emerged out. There were six or seven of them: at first they seemed vaguely humanoid, but the flashlight's beam revealed their true, hideous nature. Their smooth bodies were contorted and limbs were attached randomly, bent in impossible shapes. Their vacuous, vitreous eyes stared at the three with a mixture of anger and hatred.

"I hate being right..." Mei whispered as the creatures ran towards them, screaming.

Jason was the first to react. Dodging the disjointed fingers that tried to grab him, he ducked and slashed upwards. His opponent collapsed on the floor, almost cut in half. The group slowed their advance, surprised by such a reaction, and Dario took the opportunity to fire several rounds at the incoming enemies: with each shot one of them fell screaming in pain.

As two monsters jumped on Mei, she threw herself sideways and the two collided against each other. Before they could regain balance, she sprang forward, landing a high kick in the face of the nearest one. Writhing in pain, the creature stepped backwards and fell down the stairs. The survivor lashed his long arms as if they were whips, but Mei was faster. She joined her palms together and stretched both hands towards him while breathing rhythmically. A beam of white light shot out of them, piercing the monster from side to side. He stood there, staring at the

large hole on his chest with surprise, then death embraced him.

She turned towards her companions, but there were no more enemies: most of them had already dissolved.

"They weren't as bad as I thought," Jason said, putting the rapier back into its sheath.

"They won't be the last ones, however," Dario commented. "Whoever commanded them will be surely sending out stronger enemies soon."

"I'd love to kick them," Mei added. "However this is not what we came for."

Dario nodded. "Yes. We need to investigate this area to find the root cause for everything. Killing mindless drones won't do us any good. Not to mention we won't be always this lucky."

"Let's split up and check the surroundings," Jason proposed. "I will inspect this inn, or whatever it is, thoroughly. You and Mei can investigate the rest of the village."

The other man frowned. "Are you sure it's a good decision?"

"I work best alone, Dario, and not because I underestimate your and Mei's skills. It's the way I do things. Instead, you two are a perfect combination and should go together."

Dario ignored Mei's giggle and gave a firm look to the Englishman.

"I trust your judgment," he stated. "Nevertheless, we will keep in touch for the whole time we are separated."

"How?" Mei asked.

"I have miniaturised radios that can be worn on the ear in my backpack," Dario replied. "We will report at regular intervals, or in case we find clues. In any case, we will regroup after two hours. Is that all right with you, Jason?"

Jason gestured his assent.

"All right. There is a small plaza near this building. We will meet up in two hours from now. Let's get our equipment and get going."

* * *

Dario and Mei said goodbye to Jason and set out to explore the village. Fearing that something might wait for them at the inn's entrance, they decided to slide down from a window: Dario had a rope that was long enough for them to reach the ground level.

Once outside, they glanced at their surroundings. As expected, they had changed considerably since a few hours before. All buildings were in ruin and most of them had partially crumbled. Rubble and rotten wood, along with some

whitened bones, littered the streets and there were no signs of human life at all. Dark clouds had covered the sky, and a cold wind stormed through the debris.

"It's even worse than when we arrived here," Mei said, shivering.

"Is there anything wrong with the flow of *Chi* here?" Dario asked.

The woman closed her eyes for an instant, concentrating. "Yes, definitely. The flows are more irregular, almost arranged in haste... and they seem to converge into a single spot... a building."

"Which building?"

"I believe it's what *seemed* to be the city hall when we arrived. It's not too far from here, I can sense it quite clearly."

"Good, let's go there."

Advancing cautiously, the two made their way towards the former city hall. They often stopped and hid behind broken walls to search for potential threats, but no one came after them: the village was enshrouded in silence, like a huge graveyard. Nevertheless, they kept on feeling a *presence* of some sort looming over them, feeling invisible stares coming from the shadows or the decayed homes.

After a few minutes, they spotted the city hall. It wasn't the tallest building in the village, but definitely the largest, built out of square-shaped, blackened stone blocks. Many windows were broken and part of the roof had been torn off, but it was in far better shape than its surroundings. A partially unhinged double door, its wood completely rotten, led to the entrance. Even in its current state, it conveyed a feeling of importance and authority, also shown by the brightly colored coat of arms on the front, unaffected by the decay: it almost looked painted anew.

"That's the place." Mei said.

The door disintegrated as soon as Dario touched it. Followed by Mei, he advanced cautiously, trying to get a clear view of the surroundings with his flashlight. It was an entrance hall of some sort, but figuring out its original purpose was impossible because of the disarray that was inside. Most of the furniture inside was broken or unrecognizable, some beams had fallen from the ceiling and large cobwebs covered everything. Many pictures were still on the walls, but all of them had been cut in the middle - probably the result of some kind of incursion.

A feeble lament broke the silence and the two stopped in their tracks.

Instinctively, Dario took a step back. "What was that... is it something real?"

Mei focused her mind on the source of the sound. "I can tell it's not fake, but not more than that. We need to get closer."

"We'd better not let our guard down."

"Don't worry, remember I can see through these tricks."

They resumed their walk slowly, trying to keep their senses aware of anything that could pose a threat. Following the voice, the two left the hall and entered a long, L-shaped corridor. The disorder was even greater than at the entrance: broken chairs, fallen chandeliers and rubble were scattered on the floor. Several doors on the sides led to small rooms, but most of them were inaccessible as the roof had collapsed completely, while others were just empty. Remains of unrecognizable frescoes adorned the walls.

As Dario and Mei got nearer, the lament grew into the crying of a woman. When they turned around the corner, they saw a girl giving her back to them. She looked in her twenties and wore only rags. Long but dirty blonde hair fell on her shoulders. She was sitting on the floor and weeping. A small, almost extinguished oil lamp was next to her.

Mei was about to move, but Dario stopped her.

"You need to be careful." he whispered.

Mei stuck out her tongue at him. "Really, you shouldn't worry! I just controlled... it's not an illusion, but something real. And her *Chi* is exactly the one of a living being. It may be someone who got lost from the woods here, and was unfortunate enough to fall for the trap."

"I am still not convinced, so I'll take my precautions." Dario took his gun out of the holster.

"You are just paranoid!"

Mei walked up to the knelt woman and put a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong? Did you get lost or something?" she asked.

The girl twirled round and Mei stepped back, screaming in terror. What was in front of her wasn't a human being... but a creature built out of nightmares and madness. Her face was a mixture of a horse and a bull, with a long tongue that twisted around deformed lips. Her grey eyes were reminiscent of a cat's with two pupils that seemed vertical slits, and her arms were strong and muscular. Before Mei could react, the rags on the creature's back ripped off as two additional limbs emerged from the skin. Lashing out like whips, they closed around the Chinese woman's body with an iron grip.

"Mei!" Dario shouted.

He tried to point his gun at the creature's head, but she kept on moving and putting Mei on the line of fire. She burst out into scornful laughter.

"You will both share the same fate." the monster girl muttered.

The clasp on Mei strengthened and she cried in pain.

Dario clenched his fists in frustration and tried to think of a possible course of action. Of course, freeing Mei was the top priority, and it was not an easy task.



Despite his good marksmanship, Dario did not want to risk hitting her companion. Close combat was not a viable option either: Mei would be crushed before he could get in range.

A sudden sound coming from behind drew him away from his thoughts. A small whirlwind had formed in the corridor, lifting the broken chairs and furniture into the air. Then a change took place: the various pieces of wood fused together, their shapes melted and rearranged... Within a few seconds, a humanoid creature stood before the man. He was short, with disproportioned arms that were much longer than his legs. Two blank eyes stood at the top of a small and flat head, showing only murderous insanity. He moved jerkily and with creaking sounds.

"Kill him." the girl ordered.

However, Dario had already raised his gun and fired. Several bullets hit the creature's wooden body, sending splinters all around. The monster stepped back as the gunfire tore off his right arm. As soon as Dario stopped to reload, that inhuman face contorted in an evil smile. Broken wood flew around him: the wounds closed and his missing limb was restored.

Dario stared at the creature in surprise. How was he supposed to defeat such an opponent? He couldn't afford wasting too much ammunition, as his reserves were limited. He thought about setting a fire, but the risk of getting trapped with no way out was too high. He forced himself to stay calm as he tried to figure out a solution.

Meanwhile, Mei was still struggling against the monster girl. The grasp was strong, and despite her attempts there was no way she could break free with brute force. There was only one way out... it was rather dangerous, but she had no other choice. Tensing her muscles, Mei closed her eyes and started breathing rhythmically. Thinking she was just accepting death, the deformed woman just broke into laughter again.

Mei felt the *Chi* flowing inside her own body as it shifted towards her arms and legs, making them stronger and stronger. When she felt she was ready, she opened her eyes. There was a flash and with a sudden movement she broke free. Her opponent stared at her, surprised by the sudden display of strength. Mei didn't leave her any time to retaliate and punched her repeatedly with incredible speed.

The girl's shook in pain: trails of smoke rose from her body, as if it was being consumed by an invisible flame. With a last effort, Mei kicked her in the stomach. That blasphemous parody of woman flew backwards with a scream as she was engulfed by a blinding light. When it dissipated, there were no more traces of her.

Staggering, Mei struggled to keep herself standing up. She breathed heavily and sweat ran over her forehead. As soon as she saw Dario barely avoiding an

attack of the wooden creature, she limped towards him.

"Don't worry, my Dario..." she murmured, almost delirious. "I will help you now."

In that precise moment, the creature lashed an arm towards the man. Dario quickly ducked, but Mei was right behind him. She tried to dodge the attack, but she was too slow and got hit. With a muffled sound, she collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

Dario noticed what had just happened and reacted in an instant: he pulled out a small sphere from a pocket and threw it against the monster: it shone brilliantly the moment it made contact. The wooden being stepped back, temporarily blinded, and the man took the opportunity to his advantage. He grabbed Mei from the floor and started running down the corridor.

Getting back was impossible, so he needed to find a safe place to check on Mei and handle the situation. He stopped as soon as he noticed a room to his side. It was very similar to the ones he had already seen, in complete disarray, but this one had a metallic door that apparently had resisted the ravages of time. He quickly moved inside and closed it behind him.

He gently placed Mei on the ground, then he pulled four strips of parchment out of his backpack. Satsuki had given those to him for any emergency: unlike Mei's warding seals, these would create a spiritual barrier keeping the Darkness at bay. However, they would only last thirty minutes. *It's better than nothing*, Dario thought as he attached them to the stone and recited the required incantation. Red light shot out of the paper, connecting the four pieces with a complex pattern.

Dario sighed in relief. As long as that was up, they would be safe. Now, he needed to take care of Mei...

He gaped as he turned towards her. The woman's hair had grown longer in a matter of minutes.

What the hell is going on here?

* * *

Silence was the only companion of Jason as he walked through the now deserted inn. As soon as he had left the others, he had been searching every room thoroughly, but without finding anything worth of interest. Shortly after he had started, he sensed that someone was following him. Jason decided to pretend he didn't know yet, as any reaction from his invisible pursuers would prove he was near something interesting.

He stopped for a moment, nauseated. The decay was hardly bearable: the stench of rotten wood was filling his nostrils and everything seemed ready to crumble into

dust at any second. There were several holes in the ceiling, and some walls had fallen down.

Then something caught his attention. Amidst all the destruction, one wall was apparently unscathed and had still a sturdy appearance. As he focused on it, he became aware of an invisible weave that had been traced over in a regular, geometric pattern. Jason immediately recognized it: he had read about it on the ancient books in his mansion. It was a well known sealing spell, used in the seventeenth century to keep important places shielded from the passing of time. Fortunately, he also knew a way to dispel it.

Jason placed himself in front of the wall and slid his hand over it, in a slow, rhythmic motion, while chanting in a low voice. The pattern shone brightly for a second, then disappeared along with the wall itself, revealing a narrow corridor that led into another room.

It was dusty, but as Jason expected, very well preserved. It was a study of some sort, as a large desk was in the middle, covered with old and frail-looking tomes. Several bookshelves were on the walls, filled with books coming from ancient times, and in a corner there were alembics and other glassware, the tools of an alchemist. However what caught the man's attention was a small volume, bound in leather. The word *Journal* (Diary) was engraved on the cover.

Caught by a sudden curiosity, Jason opened it. Some pages were worn out and unreadable, but he managed to catch the general sense of the writing, a rather archaic French. There were notes on alchemic procedures and magic, along with detailed descriptions of the area and the neighboring woods. Jason skimmed through most of the book, but when he saw a section called "Recent accounts on the nature of the soul eaters" he started reading carefully.

May 15

...two weeks have passed since I have come to this region. I had received reports of strange happenings and I wanted to know more. Alas, what a terrible discovery it was! The people were afraid of even taking a step out of their homes, travelers avoided this area and even animals fled from the forest. At first I couldn't understand why, and the villagers were so scared to talk to me. Only by spending some time with them I was able to gain their trust. They said there's another village nearby, but it doesn't really exist. It is destroyed and rebuilt continuously during the course of time by its rulers. And the rulers themselves *are not human at all*. They prey on the souls of innocents

to go on living.

The villagers said that they were cut off from the rest of France for this reason. The "soul eaters" don't want their food to go away. But they require too many lives: there aren't many children and the population is decreasing fast. What will happen when there will be no more prey to feast upon?

I was skeptical at first, but those terrified stares couldn't be the product of a mere invention. As I travelled around France trying to uncover the mystery behind the "soul eaters", I decided to stay here for a while, hoping to see more. The innkeeper graciously provided me with a small room I'm using as study and laboratory. Will I finally get the chance of seeing those "soul eaters"?

May 18

My God, this is even worse than I had imagined!

I have seen the soul eaters. Despite having dealt with *non natural* phenomena all my life, I couldn't help but feeling afraid for my life and my soul. Those creatures seem human, but they are fiendish monsters. At night, they just appeared and took three villagers away. Their screams of agony echoed through the night. While the other peasants were too scared to go outside, I followed the two inside the forest. There I watched a blasphemous ritual took place... where three strong men, still young, were transformed into lifeless corpses, their whole life drained away. Those... things pretended they were performing their unnatural acts to honor some god, but what religion could steep so low as to bring damnation on the souls of innocents?

For a moment I thought they had identified me... but my knowledge of the Dark Arts was good enough to stay undetected. They mentioned "allies" and an "agreement"... Heaven only knows what they're up to! I must find a way to stop their plans, at once!

May 25

After days of tireless work, I have finally found a way to seal these abominations away. I will try to put my plan into practice tonight. I pray to God that I will be successful, or Hell will come to this world. I have overheard their plans, and they're even more terrible than I had

imagined. Also, two more people have joined their ranks, as I feared. I don't think I will return alive... but if someone is reading this, it means I was successful.

I am the last of my kin, and of my family... O reader, please pray for my soul so that I will be able to join my family and ancestors in the afterlife!

The remaining pages were blank. Jason closed the diary, deep in thought. The information he had found were definitely interesting, however the sentence "last of my kin" kept on recurring in his mind. He too, like the anonymous writer, was the last of the Derrick family. Despite being known as an interesting and charming person, Jason had avoided sentimental relationships and had decided not to marry. His family's legacy of fighting against the Darkness was becoming too great to bear. When he would draw his last breath, the burden that had been carried on through generations would finally be cast away.

He focused again on his surroundings as he heard a loud thud coming from the entrance. A quick glance revealed two shapes hidden in the shadows.

Jason grinned. *This must be very important*, he thought as he put the diary in a pocket of his cape. He paused for a second, then he suddenly threw himself forward, rolling on the floor.

He was barely aware of something moving through the air, and the table he had just been in front of was cut in half. He quickly got to his feet and drew his sword. The blade shone brightly, illuminating his pursuers. They were like the creatures he had previously fought with his companions, but they held strange devices resembling crossbows in their hands.

Jason gave them a defiant look. "Creatures of Evil, it would be best if you withdrew. Otherwise I cannot guarantee for your lives."

In response, one of the two pointed his weapon at the man: there was a click, and something shot out towards Jason's head. He moved sideways at the same moment and the invisible projectile just cut a corner of his cape off. Before the creatures could fire again, he threw his sword forward, piercing the throat of the nearest monster from side to side. With a scream, he fell on the floor.

The other stood still, confused and scared by the sudden turn of events, and Jason took that to his advantage. He chanted mystic words and a geometric shape appeared on his right palm. He then jumped forward, placing his hand right on the head of his opponent before landing behind him. In less than a second, the creature's head exploded.

"I hope that you will repent in the afterlife." Jason whispered as he picked up his rapier.

He was about to sheathe it as several doors broke down and more monsters appeared, surrounding him.

"Didn't you see what happened to your two scouts?" Jason said tauntingly. "Do you want to share the same fate?"

The creatures took a step forward.

Jason squared up. "So much the worse for you. *En garde!*"

* * *

Mei opened her eyes slowly, struggling to prevent her eyelids from closing. Her whole body ached and felt like lead, and cold stone pressed against her back. Wearily, she turned her head on a side to get any clues on where she was. All she could see was pitch black darkness.

Where am I? Why can't I see anything?

Her fears quickly dissipated when she saw a light moving towards her. When it got nearer, her vision focused again and she realized she was staring at Dario, holding a flashlight.

"Dario," she said under her breath.

"Finally you're awake." he replied. "How are you feeling?"

Ignoring the pangs from her arms and legs, Mei sat down. "I could be a lot better, but I'll live."

"You may have a cracked bone, but nothing broke. I checked on you when you were asleep."

Mei's cheeks turned red. "You big Italian pervert!"

"Of course not. In any case, we have a problem right now."

"A problem?"

"The creature that knocked you out... it's still around here, and the barrier I put up will wear soon, in a few minutes at best."

Mei looked away from the man. "I'm sorry, Dario. It all happened because I was careless."

"Apology accepted. However, I think that you should give me an explanation about something..."

"What?"

"When you broke free, you were... tired. Also, every time I've seen you use your *Chi* manipulating abilities, you were always exhausted." Dario pointed at the

woman. "Not to mention that your hair and nails have grown longer right now. Why is that, Mei?"

Mei remained silent.

"I can understand it's a personal issue, however failure to disclose a potential weakness may hurt us all."

The woman sighed deeply, her voice cracking with emotion. "It's... what I brought with me when I fled from China years ago. I always had a great potential to control *Chi*. After what happened though... I have a much greater power, but if I exceed my limits I will lose control of my own *Chi*, and I will die. That is why I was so weak after fighting that woman. The sight of you in danger made me so worried that I did not care my own safety at all. It's all because..."

"Don't worry, there's no need to go on, I know it may hurt." Dario said with a smile.

Mei stared at him: in all those years, she had never seen him behave like that.

"Just take care of yourself, from now on." the man continued.

Mei wanted to cry, but she knew Dario would not approve that, so she just smiled in return.

"Since that is settled now, we have to focus on what to do next." Dario stated. "Can you get up?"

"I think I can,"

With some effort, Mei managed to stand up. Her balance was still unstable, however, so she leaned against a wall.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. That creature seems to use the rubble around here to heal its wounds. It doesn't seem to be vulnerable."

"A tough guy, eh?" Mei put a finger on her lips. "But I think I have an idea."

"What do you suggest?"

"Now that I'm fully awake, I can sense his *Chi* just out of the door." she explained. "If I am correct, he needs to concentrate it on the wounds to regenerate. If I can hit him in that precise moment, I can alter that flow strongly enough for him to not be able to keep it under control. At that point he will be consumed by his own life force."

"Wouldn't it be risky for you?"

"A bit, but you come into play here. You need to make sure he remains focused on you only."

"I can do it. But please, don't overdo it."

Mei winked. "Don't worry! It only requires a small amount of power... and I won't worry my man."

"I'm not 'your man' if you mean your sentimental partner." Dario looked at the woman disapprovingly. "However your plan is good."

In that precise moment, the red light in front of the door faded away. There was a thud, and the metal bent inwards.

"Get ready." Mei put up a fighting stance. "Remember, keep him occupied."

Dario loaded a new magazine in his gun. "Leave it to me."

The door fell down with a crash, completely uprooted, and the wooden creatures appeared, his eyes glittering with malevolent happiness.

"Now, Dario!" Mei shouted.

Dario fired without hesitation. The bullets opened several holes in the creature's body, but they closed in an instant. Muttering incoherent sounds, he turned towards the man. Meanwhile Mei was standing still, ready to attack.

"It must be larger or I won't have enough time!" she exclaimed.

The wooden being picked up a large wooden beam from the floor and charged Dario, using it as a rudimentary ram. The man ducked and swept at his opponent's legs. Caught off guard, the monster struggled to keep his balance, but ended up falling on the ground. A moment later he was already standing, caught by a murderous rage.

That gave Dario enough time. As the fiend ran again towards him, he fired several shots, creating a large hole just under the creature's disfigured head. At first he staggered and slowed down, but as the wound started to regenerate, he stared at Dario with defiance, confident of his own invulnerability.

In that precise moment Mei jumped in front of him and punched right through the aperture, her hand in the act of taking hold of something. In response, the monster's body trembled and he stood still. Despite the glares full of hatred he gave Mei, it was evident that he could not move at all. Then she closed her hand shut.

The effect on the creature was shattering: he let out a cursing scream as large cracks formed through his body. He stepped forward, trembling like a broken doll, before breaking up in a pile of rotten wood.

"We did it..." Mei muttered as she fell to her knees. "I almost can't believe it."

"Good job," Dario said. "Now we can finally go back."

"Why?"

"It is evident that this place was just a trap to lure us in. We need to get in contact with Jason and regroup as soon as possible."

"I wonder if he's ok..."

Dario put a small microphone around his left ear. "I'm going to contact him right now."



The man pushed a small button and waited patiently. After a while, he heard Jason's voice.

"Jason, what's the situation there?" Dario asked.

"Not too good. There are countless monsters here. I'm about to make a strategic retreat." the Englishman replied.

There was a scream, then he continued talking. "But I think I have found something really useful. What about you?"

"We almost have fallen into a trap. Our opponents are far more cunning than I expected. Go to the meeting place immediately. We will see you there."

"Roger!"

Dario turned the device off. "Let's go. Can you walk?"

Mei stood up with some difficulty. "I can."

They moved out of the room, through the corridor and out of the building as fast as they could. No one came after them, but the feeling of *presence* was even stronger than the one they had felt when they had entered. Within a few minutes they were in front of the meeting point: a small, round plaza surrounded by ruins. A dry fountain stood in the center, its pond filled with skulls and other human bones.

"Creepy." Mei commented.

Shortly afterwards they saw Jason running towards them. He had several cuts in his mantle, but he appeared unharmed.

"I'm glad you are both all right!" he exclaimed as he saw the two. "I think whoever is behind this has just declared war on us."

"You mentioned something interesting. What is that?" Dario asked.

"It's this," Jason pulled the diary out of his mantle. "It has been written several hundred years ago, but it's filled with information about this place. Perhaps it may give us a clue on what is going on right now. I was attacked right after I found it, so I think this must be very important for our enemy."

Mei was perplexed. "Why an old diary is so important? Over the centuries, this place has changed a lot."

"I'm still not sure. But if we read it, we can probably find out the reason."

The woman did not answer: she felt a will of death looming over the group. Jason had come to the same conclusions and he drew his rapier, and Dario followed suit, readying his gun.

"There is no safe spot, I fear." he said.

"They had no need to follow us." Jason whispered. "They were already here."

An instant later the ground shook violently and they struggled to remain standing. A pair of hands emerged from terrain, quickly followed by another, and

another. Within seconds, dozens of creatures had appeared all around. They were similar to those found in the inn, but their faces were blank, perfectly flat, as if the hands that had created them had deemed such a feature to be unnecessary.

"We need to break our way through!" Dario exclaimed.

Without delay, they dashed towards the monsters and the battle began. Many died under their attacks, but even if they were considerably weaker than the three, they had numbers on their side. No matter how many would fall, they were replaced fairly quickly. Jason and Mei were getting tired, and Dario did not have much ammunition left.

Jason cut off a pair of hands headed at his throat. "At this rate they'll overwhelm us."

"You are right. We can't keep up." Dario added.

Mei landed a roundhouse kick in the face of one of the creatures then she froze, suddenly realizing that she had overlooked something.

"Dario, Jason!" she shouted. "Perhaps there is a way to escape!"

"Are you sure?" Dario asked.

"Yes. It's near here... as a matter of fact, I can *see* it."

She pointed at a house not far from them. It had been practically razed to the ground, but there was a flight of stairs in surprisingly good condition going below.

"I can't sense *anything* coming from there." Mei continued. "*Chi* flows all around except there. I believe it's shielded somehow. I can't guarantee it will be safe but... no harm in trying."

"The only problem is getting there." Jason said.

"We can create a diversion." Dario suggested. "I think I have what we need."

He quickly searched in his backpack and pulled out a small grenade. "Its explosive potential isn't great, but should be enough to create an opening. Once I throw it, count to five and then start running."

Jason and Mei nodded.

Dario released the safety catch then threw his weapon among the assailants, who stopped for an instant as they saw that strange item flying towards them. Five seconds later an explosion threw many of them into the air, dismembered. The survivors wavered, uncertain on what to do.

"Now!" Dario yelled.

Running as fast as they could, the three made their way to the stairs while their attackers tried to stop them confusedly. As soon as they started climbing down, Dario glanced behind to see if any of the creatures were after them.

Much to his surprise, they had stopped on the threshold, waving their deformed hands at the group and making unintelligible sounds. One of them tried to step

forward, but his motion stopped before his foot touched the first step.

"I don't know if this is a good sign or not." Mei stated. "After what we have seen I feel somewhat disturbed by that."

"Perhaps there's a much greater power down there." Jason speculated. "And they're afraid."

"Or the power moving them doesn't work here. Regardless of the reason, we can't go back. We will see where this leads us." Dario said.

The other two had no objections. Regardless of what would lie ahead, they had no other choice but to go forward. Feeling uneasy, they climbed down.