

## Chapter 4

### An unexpected return

Dario, Mei and Jason kept on descending for what seemed to be at least half an hour. There was no clear indication on where the stairs were leading them: they were just barely being aware of being in a tunnel dug into the rock. The steps were small and mildewed, and the total lack of light, save for their flashlights, made going forward a dangerous task.

Just as they thought that their descent was almost endless, they became aware of a feeble, pale blue luminescence coming from below. As they got closer, they realized that the stairs ended up in an underground hall of some sort. It wasn't particularly large, but it was definitely the product of skillful hands. The walls were built out of large stone blocks decorated with complex engravings, loosely resembling Celtic runes, which were also the source of the light. A bizarre and twisted structure hung from the ceiling, and while its patterns looked random at first, a closer examination showed that they had been arranged with a precise logic. The many colors which adorned it shifted and changed depending on the point of view, creating a suggestive effect. Despite being uncommon to anything in the world, it was a work of art.

"Beautiful..." Mei whispered as she looked around.

"I didn't expect to find this under the village, and the S.T.E.A.L. records didn't mention anything," Dario added. "I wonder what it is."

"Perhaps the diary has some information." Jason suggested.

The Englishman opened the book and skimmed through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

"All right," he said as he read the worn out pages. "According to the author, this place was a settlement of the *Taur-phon*, an ancient race that briefly inhabited parts of our planet while our ancestors were still in the first stages of evolution. The *Taur-phon* were extremely versed in art, literature and magic and their civilization flourished. While walking outside caused them no harm, for some bizarre reason they always built their cities underground. There they refined their knowledge up to the point of being able of controlling everything with raw will power."

"What do you mean exactly by controlling everything?" Dario asked.

Jason continued reading. "See those three symbols on the left wall? The brightest ones."

Dario stared at the wall and noticed that three shapes were shining stronger than the others. "Yes, I see them."

"They are, as the author calls them, Power Crests. By imprinting them on their minds and concentrating, the Taur-phon were able to control the other runes and perform all sorts of magic, like this lighting."

"If they were so powerful and advanced, why did they die out?" Mei interjected.

"The author says it was a very strange end." Jason explained. "Once at the peak of their civilization, the Taur-phon became indolent and their artistic ability dwindled, until it was just a pale shadow of its former self. Then, they simply disappeared. It wasn't an extinction, more like a mass slaughter by some unknown force. Apparently, the whole race died from a day to another."

"How odd."

"In any case, I wonder how this relates with the disappearances and what we have seen at the village right now, not to mention the soul eaters." Dario commented.

"The diary does not say if the soul eaters are related to the Taur-phon or not," Jason said. "They may be their descendants, or just other beings that are using this place after the original builders passed away. I'm inclined to believe the latter explanation."

While Jason and Dario were discussing on what to do next, Mei walked around the room, amazed. The beauty of those interwoven patterns amazed her and touched her soul. Perhaps more wonders were waiting further ahead...

She glanced at an archway and repressed an exclamation of horror.

"Jason, Dario!" she exclaimed. "Come here at once!"

Dario ran to her. "What is going on, Mei?"

"Look!"

The sight before them was horrifying. Several blackened, completely dried out corpses similar to mummies were stacked in a pile on a side of the corridor, while other bodies, partially decomposed, were inside large cages that resembled tools of torture, and many of them bore disfiguring mutilations. Despite his hardened spirit, Dario couldn't help but letting out an exclamation of disgust.

"They're like the images we have seen, and the diary says the same..." Jason murmured. "This is the doing of the soul eaters..."

"Exactly." a voice behind them said.

The three spun round: a woman and a man, dressed with old-fashioned clothes, had appeared in the middle of the room. A third figure was next to them, but the countours were blurred and indefinite. As a matter of fact, it looked like a man-shaped gas cloud.

Lamyon sneered. "However, you have seen too much already."

"You have stepped on our sacred grounds and discovered our secrets." Lisim echoed him. "For this act of sacrilege, your punishment will be exemplary: this place will be your prison... and your tomb."

Mei pointed her finger at her. "What makes you think we will just let you do as you please?"

"As a matter of fact, it is unlikely you will cooperate. But we have *other means...*" Lamyon snapped his fingers.

In response, the gaseous creature flew through the air at incredible speed and engulfed the group. Dario, Mei and Jason coughed and gasped for air as they realized they couldn't breathe. Their faces turned cyanotic, and one after another, they fell on the floor.

"Good job, Sanddactl." Lamyon commented as the ethereal figure flew back to his side.

"Finally they are in our hands." Lisim said.

Lamyon smiled, and hell was in his smile. "Make sure they're brought to the altar room. they have a lot of questions to answer... then we will see how we can dispose of them."

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Dario opened his eyes slowly. His body ached and he felt his limbs numb. He tried to move them in a more comfortable position, but he noticed he couldn't. As his vision got back into focus, he understood why.

He hung from the ceiling of a large room, restrained by a thick cobweb of metallic chains. As far as he could see, the place was very similar to the one he had been in, but carried signs of rearrangements and changes: strange tapestries and other bizarre-shaped items were on the walls. Below, many figures wearing long robes moving busily around a large stone altar, surrounded by tall oil lamps. A knife with a curved blade was placed on its surface.

Dario realized that all his weapons had been taken away. *They took their precautions this time*, he thought. As he glanced around as much as his limited mobility permitted, he noticed that his backpack, along with Jason's and Mei's equipment, had been stacked in a corner.

He heard groans coming from his left. Mei and Jason were next to him, tied in the exact same way.

"Looks like we are in trouble..." Mei observed.

"How foolish of us!" Jason sighed. "We let our guard down."

Lisim walked into the room and stood right below the group. She looked at them with a hint of satisfaction on her face.

"Do you think so?" she said. "Fools! You thought you were better than us... but Sandaccl has been following you since you have arrived here."

"Who are you?" Dario asked.

Lisim made a gesture in the air and Dario stiffened as pain exploded in his back, as if he had received a whipstroke.

"Silence!" Lisim ordered. "We are the ones who will make questions."

Mei struggled to break free, but there was no way she could break the metal binding her. Lisim laughed at the sight of her unsuccessful efforts.

"Don't touch Dario!" she burst out.

"You should stay quiet, woman." Lisim whispered, her voice sharp as a razor. "Otherwise you'll get the same treatment."

At that very moment Lamyon strode in, wearing a a pendant of white gold. It bore the symbol Dario and the others had seen during their briefing in Rome.

"Here are the ones who dared to trespass our grounds." he said. "You were tougher than I expected, but you are in our hands now."

"You caught us only because we walked right into your den." Jason murmured. "Don't mistake luck for skill."

The Englishman clenched his teeth as the ethereal whip hit him on the chest several times, leaving a series of red marks.

"Stop playing with us." Lamyon continued. "Just answer. You are from El-logha, aren't you? Why were you sent here? What is the plan of your Master?"

Dario shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Lying is useless. We have seen you dispose of our minions with ease. No one from this world could do that. However, you have failed."

Lamyon waved the diary in the air so the three could see it. "We have found this on you, which we have been seeking for a long time! With its notes, we will be able to master the Taur-phon magic, and we will be invincible. Our ancient ruler will be proud of us!"

"Under His command, we are your Lords." Lisim added. "If you cooperate and give us all the details of your conspiracy, we will let you live as our perpetual slaves. Otherwise, you will meet a sad fate."



"Again, I don't know what you're talking about," Dario repeated. "How can we confess? What is this Ellogha?"

Lisim's face writhed in anger. "After we have shown you mercy, you still try to deceive us?"

"And you call that mercy?" Mei exclaimed. "Ending up like a soulless drone for whatever you have in mind? Hardly a display of compassion."

Lisim stared at her. "Woman... you lack proper respect. Now you will experience what a soul eater does with her prey..."

The woman walked to the altar, picked up the knife and swung it in the air. A hidden mechanism set off and Mei started to descend. She doubled her efforts to wriggle out, but the more she moved, the tighter the chains became. Lisim broke into a scornful laughter.

"You are a coward!" Jason yelled, but his voice died in his throat as an invisible hand tightened around his neck.

"Be quiet." Lamyon said. "Just watch the play as it unfolds."

As Mei got nearer and nearer to Lisim, Dario frantically tried to find a way to help her. The chains were too strong, and even if he had managed to break them, he would have been killed immediately afterwards. As he looked around the room, his gaze fell on the symbols engraved in the stones. Jason had mentioned them to him before: the Taur-phon's Power Crests. If he could activate them...

Dario had no experience with the occult, or with magic, but it was his only chance. He focused his mind on the three shapes, imprinting them in his mind, and gave out an order: *Break free.*

Nothing happened. Dario tried again, with no success. Again he attempted, and again he failed. There was something wrong in what he was doing, but he had no idea of what.

Mei was almost on the ground level. She closed her eyes as Lisim prepared to bring the dagger down.

Time was running out. Dario gathered all the mental strength he could find. He would not permit Mei to fall into the hands of those depraved entities! Concentrating on the symbols, he let them fill his mind as he repeated the order obsessively.

*Break free...free...FREE!*

The runes on the walls shone brightly.

Lamyon shielded his eyes, surprised. "What's going on?"

A moment later part of a wall exploded, throwing stone blocks all around: many robed figures were torn away, while others got crushed. Then chaos broke out. Unable to understand what had just happened, the survivors ran around frantically,

while their wounded companions screamed in pain or pleaded for help. Lamyon and Lisim shouted commands confusedly trying to regroup their forces, but their underlings ignored them.

The chains binding Mei, Dario and Jason loosened. Upon hearing the sound of broken metal, Lisim turned, but too slowly: Mei's kick hit her straight in the face. Her nose crushed, the woman fell back muttering obscene curses. Seeing their master in danger, some hooded figures freed themselves of the confusion that had plagued them and put themselves between the two.

"It's payback time!" Mei snarled as she cracked her knuckles.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, Dario made a run for his backpack. The task proved to be easier than expected: there was still much confusion going on and Mei had attracted most of the attention. When he finally got hold of the knapsack, he pulled out his *trump card*, something he had been keeping for difficult situations: a machine gun. He immediately opened fire, riddling with bullets most of the figures that advanced towards Mei. Jason jumped next to him, his rapier singing a melody of death among the servants.

Lamyon stared at the scene, speechless. He thought he had them in his power... yet those wretched lifeforms had managed to fight back!

"You dare to confront us in front of our ruler..." he muttered, clenching his fists. "Don't think you can survive this! Sandacctl!"

The gaseous being emerged from the ground.

"Kill them all!" Lamyon shouted.

While Dario fired at Lamyon, forcing him to jump away, Jason swung his sword at Sandacctl. However, the blade did not wound the creature at all, as if it went through air. The monster let out a squeaky laughter and prepared to dive on the Englishman's head.

"Creature of Evil, you will cease to prey on innocents right now..." Jason declared. "The Derrick family once dealt with your kin, and we know your weakness! Witness now... a magic far superior to yours!"

Slowly, he chanted the words of a terrible and cryptic spell. Sandacctl let out a cry of pain as his body began to change, becoming solid. Within seconds, he had turned into a mixture of a monkey and a horse, with bulky legs, large hoofs and disproportionate arms of different length. His head resembled a crushed human skull.

"Now, you're subject to the laws of this world," Jason continued. "You will not be able to escape the spell, unless you kill me. So, get ready!"

Meanwhile, Mei looked around for Lisim, who had disappeared from sight. Suddenly she sensed danger and jumped sideways, barely avoiding a knife thrown

at her. As she stood up, Mei saw the woman in front of her. Blood trickled down from Lisim's nose and her face showed an uncontrollable anger.

"You won't get away with what you have done to me!" she cried out.

The woman snapped her fingers and a long whip materialized in her hands. She lashed furiously at Mei, who dodged the attack and jumped forward, hitting Lisim in the chest with a flying kick. Caught by surprise, she lost her balance and fell clumsily to the ground.

"Your form is rather awkward for being an all powerful being." Mei taunted her.

"You little..."

Lisim got back on her feet and lashed her whip again, tying it around Mei's right arm.

"No more games now!" she exclaimed. "You are mine!"

Mei smirked and ran towards her at full speed. Only then Lisim realized her error: at close range her weapon was useless and now she had no way to stop the Chinese woman's advance. She dropped the whip and started chanting in a strange language, but before the incantation could be completed Mei brought her palms together and slammed them into Lisim's abdomen

Light sparked out of her hands and Lisim flew backwards, crashing into the altar. Blood spurted out from her mouth as she keeled over.

Not too far away, Sandacctl tried to back off, bleeding from several wounds. Without his supernatural powers he had been an easy prey for Jason, who evaded his weak attacks with ease. In a last attempt to overturn the situation, he jumped on his opponent. Jason's sword pierced his left hand side to side, but he ignored the pain and caught the Englishman by the throat with his other hand. A smile of satisfaction appeared on his face.

"Creature of Evil..." Jason murmured strugglingly. "Your time has come. The netherworld has open its doors for you."

Judging Jason's words as ravings of a dying man, Sandacctl tightened his grip. Just as he was about to crush the man's neck, the rapier's blade shone brightly and the creature's hand disintegrated into nothingness. Screaming, he backed away, letting Jason go: the man counterattacked and the monster's head flew in the air, away from its body. Without a sound, Sandacctl dissolved.

Lamyon was the only one in the room that was still standing. He gave Dario a defiant look and shook his hand in the air. A long sword appeared next to him.

He got hold of the weapon and squared up. "So Ellogha has sent out formidable Champions... but you will die by my hand."

Dario replied with several rounds of machine gun fire. Rolling his weapon so fast that it couldn't be seen, Lamyon deflected all the bullets, then moved on to attack. He ran towards Dario and slashed at his head before he could shoot again. However, the man sidestepped in time and the blade slid against the rock, raising sparks. Lamyon swung his sword again, but Dario was faster and ducked as it whistled over him. His knife flashed in his left hand as he thrust at Lamyon.

Unimpressed, Lamyon parried the blow with extreme ease. A second later, the stock of Dario's machine gun hit him in the face and he clumsily dropped to the ground, losing the hold of his weapon. As he tried to stand up, he found Jason's blade pointed at his throat.

"It's over," the Englishman said.

"How can this be..." Lisim groaned as she sat down, still in pain.

"Spare us such rhetoric." Dario reprimanded them. "Now that the sides have reversed, you will tell us everything you have been doing here."

Lamyon stared at the three in disbelief, his eyes wide open. "You... you don't know anything?"

"It was you who thought we knew something in the first place," Mei commented. "We don't even know what this Ellogha is."

"It does not matter anyway. You have accomplished nothing," Lisim affirmed. "Even if you think you have defeated us... others will continue it, and the Ritual will be performed!"

Worry showed on Dario's face. "Ritual? And who are these others?"

Lisim chuckled. "A dying man does not need to know."

She made a gesture and all the runes on the walls turned red. Dario, Jason and Mei screamed as an excruciating pain swept through their bodies, as if millions of hot needles had dug into their skin. At the sight of their suffering, Lisim burst into a hysterical laughter.

"Die, die, die!" she screamed.

Just as Dario felt his consciousness slipping away, there was a flick in the air and the room was back to normal. He leaned against a wall, shaking. The whole ordeal had left him breathless.

"That was close..." Mei panted. "If it had lasted for longer..."

Dario nodded. "But what happened?"

There was a scream, and Lisim fell down, her legs suddenly cut off. Lamyon stared at her in horror.

"La..myon..." she spluttered. "Help me..."

Her companion took a step forward and again something moved in the air. His left arm fell off and at the same time Lisim's head was dismembered. Dario, Mei

and Jason stood speechless: everything had happened so fast they could barely realize what had happened.

Lamyon stared at the dead, disfigured body of Lisim for an instant, almost on the verge of crying. Then, sadness turned into fury.

"Bastards!" he yelled, holding the stump on his left shoulder. "I will get my revenge!"

He touched one of the stone blocks behind him and a whole section of the wall rotated, revealing a small passageway. Showing unexpected agility, Lamyon jumped in and the secret door closed behind him.

"He escaped." Jason stated, propping himself against his sword. "We need to pursue him as soon as we can."

"We can't," Dario said while staring at something behind his two allies.

"Why?" Mei asked.

"We have found *the problem*."

A voice rose from the shadows. "Finally you have noticed me."

Dario sent a mental order and the runes' light became stronger, illuminating a woman knelt on a side of the room. She was completely naked, and her body was perfect in every single detail. Her skin was white and soft, and long brown hair fell on her shoulders. She resembled a goddess, but a single glance at her eyes would dispel such an impression. They were yellow, similar in shape to a cat's, and emanated an aura of pure evil.

Jason's eyes narrowed until they became two slits. "*The problem...* Yumiko Hasegawa."

Yumiko stood up and glared at him. "Yumiko was what I was called once. But I have no name now. Does it really matter?"

She walked forward as an evil smile appeared on her face.

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Lamyon ran through a narrow corridor, trying to ignore the pain that came from his left shoulder. His face was contorted in fury. Those little, insignificant beings! Not only he had been defeated and humiliated by them in front of his god, but now Lisim was dead and he had been crippled! However, he still had an ace up his sleeve...

He stopped in a small circular room. A large octagonal shape was dug into one of the walls, and a strange conical apparatus was in the center. Lamyon dragged himself up to the device and brushed its smooth surface in precise spots. Every



time his fingers touched the stone, a vertex of the octagon lit up. When he completed the sequence, the wall inside the perimeter faded away, replaced with an opening that seemed to lead to eternal emptiness.

"Done," Lamyon whispered. "Now I'll just blow everything up..."

"You will not do anything of the sort," a man's voice echoed from behind.

Lamyon spun round, suddenly aware of an enormous power. "Who's there?"

There was no response. Lamyon looked in the direction where the sound had come from and noticed a huge man hidden in the shadows. He could not make out his facial features: all he could see was a broadsword in one of the intruder's hands.

He tried to sound threatening. "Go away or I will destroy you!"

"Destroy? Do you want to bring even more Chaos to this rotten world?" the mysterious man replied. "Order is the essence of everything, and you always tried to subvert it. But now I will put an end to that."

The figure took a step forward, and the light of the room illuminated his head. Upon gazing on that face, Lamyon felt his blood running cold and an uncontrollable terror got hold of him.

"*You!* You are..."

His voice turned into a scream of agony as the other man's sword cut him in half.

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As Yumiko got closer to the group, Jason pointed his rapier at her.

"Do not come any closer, evil creature," he said. "Otherwise I'll be forced to destroy you."

"I'm not scared." Yumiko shrugged and continued walking. "With people like you, I do not even need to put some effort."

In the blink of an eye, she stood in front of him. Caught by surprise, Jason raised his sword, but the woman punched him in the stomach before he could do anything: with a muffled sound, he collapsed on the floor.

Yumiko moved her head sideways, barely enough to avoid a flying kick from Mei. The Chinese woman was still in the air when Yumiko grabbed her leg and threw her against a wall.

"Is that all you can do?" she exclaimed tauntingly.

"No," Dario replied, opening fire.

Despite his excellent marksmanship, not even a single bullet hit the woman. She moved extremely fast and in random patterns, making aiming correctly impossi-

ble. He paused for an instant to reload, and suddenly realized she was nowhere in sight. Where had she gone?

"I'm here!" Yumiko screamed as she dropped from the ceiling, clawing at the man's head.

Dario turned on one foot and Yumiko landed on his side. Before she could react, the man kicked her in the back. The attack didn't cause any damage to her, but she lost her balance and fell to her knees. She tried to get up, but she stopped as soon as she felt a gun's barrel pressed against the back of her head.

"Do you think that something like that could kill me?" she hissed.

"Why don't we try?" Dario answered.

He was about to pull the trigger when Yumiko rolled on the floor and jumped away, disappearing into the shadows.

"I've wasted enough time with you," she said teasingly. "I've been following my prey for weeks and I don't want to miss the opportunity to put an end to his life. Bring my greetings to Satsuki."

She was gone. Dario did not pursue her, as he had to worry about his companions. He quickly checked on them: despite the blows they had suffered, they bore no serious injuries.

"Ow." Mei groaned. "She was strong."

"Far stronger than I had expected." Jason echoed her.

"In any case, we'll worry about her later," Dario said. "If you can walk, we need to find where that soul eater has gone before he can escape."

"What about *the problem*?"

"If we find her again, we'll have to return to the surface and ask for reinforcements. We can't fight her alone."

It took them several minutes to find the hidden mechanism Lamyon had used, but eventually their efforts were rewarded as the entrance to the passageway opened. Within a minute, they reached the circular room Lamyon had been in. He was lying next to the conical device, dead.

Mei cursed. "Did Yumiko beat us to that?"

"No." Jason knelt over the two halves of the corpse. "This cut was made by a blade, not by claws."

He drew the diary out of one of Lamyon's pockets. "At least we got this back."

"Who could have done that?" Mei wondered. "I haven't sensed anyone else."

"I really have no idea. Remember that the woman mentioned 'others'? Probably his allies decided he was no longer useful, but I'm just speculating. For sure, the plot thickens."

“Not to mention they talked about a Ritual... I don’t know what it is for, but surely not to grow pretty flowers.”

“In any case,” Dario interjected. “What is this room, anyway?”

Jason looked through the diary’s pages. “I’m not sure, but from what I can gather it seems a teleportation room. The Taur-phon used similar devices to connect their underground settlements. If one crosses that threshold when the device is active, he will find himself instantly transported to another place.”

“Do you think that whoever did this, let’s say the allies of the soul eaters, may have escaped from there?” Mei asked.

“There isn’t much evidence, but it’s probably the most sensible explanation.”

“So if we want to find out, we have to go to the other side.” Dario commented. “It may be dangerous.”

Mei clung to his arm. “I don’t mind... as long as I go with you!”

“I can not let Evil go around as it pleases,” Jason stated. “Those fiendish creatures need to be vanquished.”

Dario smiled. “Looks like you want to go anyway... however we need to do something first.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Taur-phon magic is too powerful. What if anyone from the Darkness takes hold of it?”

“We could seal it off with their own magic. The Power Crests will help us.”

The Englishman closed his eyes, concentrating. A distant rumble echoed through the dungeon.

“No one will be able to enter, or even find this place now,” he said.

“Good. Let’s set out, then.”

The three stared at the dark portal for an instant. The soul eaters had been formidable opponents, but their mysterious allies were still at large. What were they seeking? And what was that mysterious Ritual?

To find out the truth and to stop them, they had to go forward.

Showing no trace of fear, they jumped into the opening.

END OF PART ONE

