

The S.T.E.A.L. Saga

Book Two

People of the Darkness

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Illustrated by Too

Current revision: October 13, 2007



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Marco and Luca Beltrame

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Foreword

After the (rather long) development of *Lost Innocence*, one may wonder why we chose to continue the story. Back then, plans for a sequel of the story were actually created, but we didn't have time to put them into practice until now. Thanks to Too's support, the opportunity of develop the full story as I envisioned it ten years ago is finally at hand. *People of the Darkness* is somewhat different from the original, but it still keeps the same ideas that were the basis of *Lost Innocence*. And, of course, you can expect Too's wonderful artwork to accompany the narration. If you have enjoyed *Lost Innocence*, I hope you will enjoy this book as well.

Marco Beltrame

Artist's note

Well, here it is, the sequel to *Lost Innocence*! This book really took a tow on my personal styles, I tried my very best to explain the scenario and different composition, concepts, and interesting placement of characters and some patterns, while making every scene clear and at the same time artistic. It was also more hectic in this book since the art here was more detailed and I had to meet datelines. Nonetheless I enjoyed this, and I hope you like it!

Too

Prologue

A gentle breeze stormed through a forest in Languedoc¹, giving relief to the plants and animals exhausted by the late summer sun. The place was unusually quiet: aside from a few daring birds chirping from the trees, the whisper of the wind was the only sound. It seemed a scene from a forgotten, bucolic past, when mankind was yet to appear in this world.

The silence was broken by the sound of a car's engine. An off-road vehicle appeared on the small and barren road that ran through the forest. Two men and two women were inside and they were having an argument about their route.

"Listen" the man driving said. "It's not my fault if we took longer than expected."

He was tall and very thin, almost bony. He had blonde hair, tied on a ponytail, and short beard. A pair of small and round sunglasses covered his eyes.

"We know, we know Gerard!" one of the two women replied, trying to hide her irritation. She had a round face framed by short brown hair, and would have looked extremely ordinary, even dull, if it hadn't been for her eyes. Green and beautiful, they seemed to irradiate a distinctive, fascinating aura.

The other woman patted her on the shoulder. Unlike her companion, her appearance stood out immediately. Her athletic body bubbled with energy and looked strong and feminine at the same time. Long black hair flowed down her back, and firm brown eyes showed an iron will.

"Come on, Ilse. You should relax. After all we're on holiday!" she exclaimed.

The other gave a disapproving stare. "Liese... we were supposed to arrive at our destination yesterday."

Still focused on driving, Gerard shrugged. "We can't help it. All the maps are outdated since the Great Cataclysm. And our GPS isn't working well in this area... there is no signal."

"Are you telling me we *don't* know where we are going?" Ilse asked angrily. They had left Germany to have a holiday around Europe, but since they had arrived in France their trip had been plagued with all sorts of problems. They had

¹ a region in southern France

been going around almost randomly for almost two days. She couldn't stand it anymore.

"No, I'm not saying that. It's just that it'll take longer. Right, Norbert?"

The man who Gerard had addressed nodded. Slim but somewhat out of shape, he was the most ordinary-looking of the group. His face was square and not particularly graceful. He had short black hair and wore a small earring on the lobe of his right ear.

"She may be too much emotional, but she has a point." Liese commented. "It's already past six, and we need to find a place to sleep, at least."

"I wouldn't mind a camping, instead of sleeping in this car again." Ilse added.

Norbert looked at a map. "I don't think we'll get near one until late at night... assuming it is still there."

While Ilse kept on complaining about "poor planning", the road led them out of the forest and ran next to a large field. On the side there was a farmer leaning against an agrimotor. He was thin and looked very old: his face, burnt by the summer sun, was full of wrinkles and his arms trembled occasionally. He wore simple and brightly colored clothes, and he was waving a wide-brimmed hat to get some fresh air on his face.

"Let's ask this person." Gerard suggested. "Perhaps he can help us."

They stopped right next to him and Liese leaned out of a window.

"Excuse me..." she said, speaking French with a thick German accent. "We have lost our way. Do you know if there is a place nearby where we can spend the night?"

"Certainly." the man muttered, staring at the woman somewhat longer than necessary. "My own village is not far from here, and you can find a good pension there. Just follow the road and you'll find it."

"Thank you very much."

Liese quickly told her friends about what she had learnt and they unanimously decided to go to the village. The sun was going down towards the horizon, and they wanted to find a place before nightfall. With a screech, the off-road vehicle resumed its course.

The farmer stared at the car, puzzled, until it disappeared from sight. Then his body became more and more transparent. Within seconds, there were no traces of either him or his agrimotor.

* * *

As soon as the group came out of the forest they found the village. It was set in a depression between two nearby hills, and was quite small, just as the farmer

had said. Short wooden houses decorated with multicolored flowers and plants comprised the majority of the buildings. A clock tower, the only construction built on stone, rose up on the town center, a round plaza. Despite the size, the place was bustling with activity: many people were walking in the narrow streets, occupied with their daily businesses. Others sat outside their homes and talked merrily to their neighbors.

Ilse sighed in relief. "Just in time. I was afraid we were lost again."

"And it doesn't look too bad." Norbert added.

"Well then, let's go without wasting any more time!"

By the time they had descended down the hill, the sun had disappeared from the sky, replaced by a full moon, and lights had appeared in many of the windows. As the road that crossed the village was too narrow, Gerard parked the car and the group got off. While the girls stretched their legs, he gave a look around. While the place seemed lively, there were no signs pointing to a pension. He quickly approached a middle-aged man nearby and asked for directions.

"A pension..." he said. "Oh yeah, you mean Francois's place? Go down this road, you won't miss it."

The four people slowly walked in the direction they had been shown, enjoying the atmosphere of the place. Everything seemed pretty lively. The people were always smiling and laughing: they never saw a serious or an angry face. A group of small girls wearing flower necklaces passed by, laughing.

"Very characteristic." Liese commented, taking a look at the wooden houses.

"I agree. Even if we got lost, we have discovered this little gem." Ilse said cheerfully.

"Weren't you the one always complaining?" Norbert stared at the woman mockingly. "In the end, everything turned out for the best!"

Ilse just suppressed a disgruntled exclamation while everyone else laughed.

The street brought them in front of a two-story building, definitely larger than the other houses. The front was painted with intricate floral patterns, and the windows were decorated with nature scenes, whose colors were incredibly bright. The entrance door was adorned with complex iron engravings of exquisite workmanship. Strange, beautiful plants grew on the balconies, making them look like miniature woods. Laughter and music echoed from inside.

Gerard took off his sunglasses. "Looks like it."

"Good!" Liese replied. "Let's go in and see if they have room for us. I really need a shower and some sleep."

Hungry and tired, they opened the front door without further ado and entered. As soon as they stepped past the threshold, the door slammed shut behind them.

The lights turned off in an instant and all the voices faded away, leaving only silence.

“What’s this?” Ilse snapped. “A bad joke? Let’s leave!”

Norbert tried to open the door: it was locked. Gerard and the two women came to help, but even with their combined efforts it would not even bulge. As uneasiness was growing in their minds, they rushed for the nearest window, guided by the faint moonlight. Their amazement was great when they realized that a thick iron grate had taken the place of the painted glass they had seen earlier. Norbert grabbed the metal bars and shook his head. They were too heavy to lift.

“Look...” Liese whispered, pointing out of the window.

As they looked through, their blood ran cold. The happy, lively village had disappeared completely, replaced by decadent, filthy ruins. Most of the houses had turned to piles of rotten wood, and the few ones that still stood looked deserted since centuries. No living person or animal was around, only a handful of blackened and broken bones on the ground showed that someone had lived there in the past.

“What the hell is this place?” Gerard muttered.

“I don’t care!” Ilse screamed. “Let’s just get out of here!”

Liese gave her a disapproving stare, trying to keep her composure. “Calm down! First of all we need to see where we are exactly.”

“You are right.” Norbert said. “There may be an exit somewhere else. I’m glad I brought a torchlight with me.”

The man pulled out a small flashlight from his pockets and turned it on. Moving it around, he was able to get an idea about their surroundings. It looked indeed like a reception of some sort... but everything was decayed or in disarray. What had been a counter, now broken and useless, was right in front of them. The walls had large humidity stains and seemed on the verge of falling. There was a flight of stairs with many steps missing, leading somewhere upstairs. A thick layer of dust and large cobwebs covered everything, and rubble was scattered on the floor. On their sides, two corridors led into the darkness.

“Are we hallucinating? Is this just a dream?” Ilse exclaimed.

Liese did her best to hide the fear that was rising inside her. “I don’t know. But it definitely looks real.”

“There is something there!” Gerard shouted, pointing to one of the rooms. A feeble light was shining in the darkness.

“Should we check it out?” Norbert asked.

“What else can we do?” Liese said angrily. “It’s not like we can do anything else...”

The wooden floor squeaked loudly under their feet as they walked without saying a word. As soon as they were past the door, Gerart felt strong nausea, and he barely prevented himself from vomiting. What had just happened? He turned towards Norbert to see if his friend had felt the same, but the man was not there. He had vanished along with Liese and Ilse.

He quickly glanced around, trying to adjust his eyes to the moonlight coming from outside. He was in a room that used to be richly decorated in the past, as there were remains of torn tapestries hanging from the ceiling. A sagging canopied bed stood in a corner, while what looked like a coffin was leaned against the wall, next to a window.

"Norbert! Liese! Ilse! Where are you?" Gerard shouted.

A creaking sound made his hair stand out. The coffin cover fell to the ground with a loud thud, revealing a half rotten body inside. Gerard stepped back in disgust. What was that *thing* doing there? Was the whole place just a forgotten graveyard?

He shook his head. He had to find his friends, not to waste time dwelling on worthless thoughts! He was about to turn back and leave when the corpse inside opened its eyes and stared at him.

Gerard screamed at the top of his lungs. Memories of the Great Cataclysm flooded over his mind... a time when the dead had risen and set out to devour everyone. And now one of these creatures was in front of him! Completely overcome by terror, he ran through the door that was behind him. He needed to escape!

As soon as he was past the doorstep, he found himself again in front of that decayed mummy. He screamed even louder and ran through the door again, and again. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to leave. In one last effort to get away, he jumped towards the window. Even crashing on the ground would be better than being at the mercy of that abomination.

For no reason, the coffin was in his way. The corpse put up a grotesque parody of a smile and grabbed the man with his bony hands, stopping him in his tracks. Gerard tried to wriggle out of that grasp, but it was too strong. As the mummy drew him closer, his movements became desperate. Then the fetid breath of the creature filled his nostrils, and he passed out.

Letting out a distorted chuckle, the undead dragged him into the casket and closed it behind him.

* * *

Ilse was confused. The moment they had crossed the doorstep, her vision blurred, and she had found herself engulfed in darkness. She had tried to call

out to her friends, but to no avail. She was about to fall victim of desperation when she saw a flickering light, similar to a candle's, in the distance.

The woman didn't spend any time thinking. She was frightened, and she wanted to leave that living nightmare as soon as she could. And that light was her only hope. Cautiously, she stepped forward.

She felt lucky she couldn't *see* anything... because sometimes the floor didn't feel like wood at all. Disgust filled her: she forced herself to focus on the act of walking before the horror would overcome her. When she got closer, Ilse realized that indeed the light came from a long candle placed on a small round table. She couldn't see anything else, as the darkness was too thick, almost solid.

She had not seen anyone. If that was the case... who had lighted it?

"Hello?" Ilse whispered. "Is there anyone here?"

The candle blew out immediately, and a sinister, distorted laughter echoed around her.

"H..help!" the woman screamed. Ilse took a random direction and ran as fast as her legs let her. The laughter grew louder and louder, until she was forced to plug her ears. Then voices echoed in her mind: they were pleasant and alluring... but no human mind could have borne their depraved proposals.

She fell to her knees, completely overwhelmed by what was going on. "Stop it!" she yelled. "Leave me alone!"

The whole floor lit up, forming a complex pattern of symbols and glyphs. Before Ilse could do anything, they fused with her feet and begun spreading over her body. She collapsed on the floor, unable to move or even to speak, as the crimson wave swept through her. She was feeling so tired... Every attempt to remain awake was unsuccessful, and her eyes closed.

The red light burnt through her as fire, until nothing was left.

* * *

Liese looked out of a broken window: she was on the first floor of the building, although she didn't recall climbing any stairs. Of course, there was no trace of her friends. She sighed. The only option she had was to look for them, as her shouts had not received any answers.

She glanced around. Broken bookshelves and decayed books were everywhere. The ink had dried out from many of the pages, making them unreadable. On a dust-filled table there was a single tome that seemed intact, opened on a single page. Moved by curiosity, she took a look, and shivered when she finished reading the first sentence. It said *To whoever is reading this... only death can be the proper reward for what you have done.*



The sound of footsteps brought her to reality. Someone was approaching. Liese immediately got into a fighting stance, ready to fight any opponent: she was pretty confident in her martial arts training, something that she had been practicing for years.

Her surprise was great when the moonlight illuminated the face of Gerard. Nevertheless, she didn't relax as her friend did not look like usual. The man's face was unusually pale, and he walked with difficulty, almost dragging his feet. One of his hands twitched uncontrollably, and part of his shirt had been ripped off, revealing a large cut over his chest. As he got closer, she realized that his eyes were red, instead of the usual green.

"Liese..." Gerard stuttered.

"What is it... Gerard?" she replied, taking a step backwards.

"I need you..."

"What are you talking about?"

"I need your body, Liese..."

Liese tensed every muscle of her body. "You're saying nonsense. Are you Gerard at all?"

The man smiled, revealing two unusually long canine teeth.

"Does it matter? Come on now... let me kill you..."

Showing unexpected agility, he jumped in front of her. However, Liese was expecting the assault and she dodged the hands coming for her throat. Without giving Gerard time to retaliate, she punched towards his face. The man's hands closed on her wrist just a second before she could hit her target and turned her arm sharply. A flick was heard, followed by Liese's scream.

"What.. *are* you?" she exclaimed, holding her broken limb.

"The one who will bring you back." Gerard replied as he grabbed her.

His mouth closed on Liese's neck. The woman screamed in pain as Gerard's teeth dug deeper and deeper into her flesh. She felt violated up to the deepest parts of her soul, victim of a blasphemous act that should have never existed. As her own strength left her body, her movements became slower and slower. Before her consciousness disappeared into nothingness, she barely became aware of a *presence* in her mind, something that had been waiting for a long time...

Her scream faded, and her head hung limp from her body. Gerard gently placed her on the ground and watched the woman's skin turn pale.

Liese shook violently and she opened her eyes again. They were crimson red, just like her companion's, and burned with evil intelligence. She stood up, moving her arm to make sure it had healed completely, and smiled at him.

"It's good to be back." she whispered.

* * *

Feeling cold stone pressing against his face, Norbert woke up. His head was spinning and humidity was so strong he could barely breathe. He groaned and stood up slowly, trying to fight the dizziness that had caught him. What had just happened after he walked in that room? He could only remember a flash of light, then he had fallen unconscious.

As he looked around, Norbert realized he was in some sort of underground room dug into the rock. It was fairly big and relatively bare: there was only one large stone altar of some sort. The walls were painted with a myriad of strange symbols which resembled hieroglyphics and runes, although the shapes were completely alien to him. Illumination was provided by many oil lamps hanging from the ceiling, and an open door led to a long corridor. On a wall there was some kind of statue, its shape hideous and pitiful. It didn't resemble anything Norbert he had seen.

Where am I? he thought. *It doesn't look like that village at all...*

"Finally you're awake, Lamyon." a voice behind him said. It was Liese's.

Norbert spun round. Liese, Gerard and Ilse had appeared in front of the door, even though he had not heard any noise. They were looking at him in contempt.

"Lamyon?" Norbert exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"So you still don't know," Gerard commented. "I guess your *shell* hasn't been emptied yet? I can understand, much time has passed and the knowledge hasn't flowed back to you..."

"I don't understand! Tell me... is this just a bad joke?"

Liese smiled, but only hell could be seen in that smile. "Soon everything will be clear to you."

"Are you sure about it, Chadim?" Gerard asked.

"It won't be a problem, Nindech." Ilse interjected, showing a golden, finely decorated mask to the man. "We will Recall him with this."

She walked towards Norbert. The man looked at her and was caught by uncontrollable terror. No humanity was in her eyes... only an evil will of cosmic proportions. He stepped back, trying to keep what used to be his friend at distance.

"Stay away from me!" he shouted.

As he was backing off, a cold wind blew out of nowhere and a strange, luminescent mist fell over the room. It wrapped around the man as if it had a will of its own. Norbert realized he couldn't move anymore: what had seemed just simple

mist was holding his legs with a strength that had no match in this world. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to break free. He was powerless.

Ilse laughed in scorn. "It is time now." she said as he placed the golden mask on his face.

The man cried in pain as his body was shaken by convulsions, then lightning arched out of nowhere and formed a sort of cage around him. The room trembled and large cracks formed on the walls. As the place was on the verge of collapsing, every phenomenon stopped instantly.

Seemingly unscathed by what had happened, Norbert walked towards the other three people. His bearing was different, very self-confident and almost aristocratic.

"I am what I once were, at last." he said as he took off the mask.

His appearance had changed considerably. His eyes were of a deep, unnatural blue, and his hair had become blonde. Several scars had appeared over his cheeks. Despite looking young, his motions resembled the ones of a person that was much older.

"Now we are all here." Ilse commented.

"Indeed we are, Lisim. However, my memory is still clouded, as if I had just woken up from a dream."

"You have just awakened. Give it time." Liese-Chadim said.

Gerard-Nindech walked around the room, deep in thought. "I was the first to reclaim my former self. And according to the memories of this... host, at least six hundred years have passed."

"I see." Norbert-Lamyon stroke his chin. "Some mighty force has surely interfered, for our spell to have acted just now."

"You do not need to worry. Our powers are returning."

"Yes, I can sense them. And the world around us... is still thriving with life after so many years. I think there will be enough *matter* for what we seek."

"We can finally resume what we have left unfinished." Chadim stated.

"Nindech, I can say I'm impressed: despite the interference, all has played as you had planned back then."

Nindech bowed. "Without false modesty, I can say it was bound to succeed. No one could have expected that."

"Indeed. Will you go to *the other place*?"

"At once. I need to bring back my servants and complete the preparations for the Ritual. As a matter of fact, I and Chadim will take our leave."

The two walked into the corridor without saying a word and disappeared from sight. After a while, Lamyon could not sense their presence in the area anymore.

They had surely moved to *the other place*.

Lisim put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you satisfied with your new body, Master?"

"I am," he replied. "But more importantly, I am impressed with this world... The abundance of human life forces is incredible!"

His body pulsed with a green light and he became transparent for a moment, exposing his internal organs.

"And many souls..." Lisim whispered.

"Yes... so many... to prey and feast upon! Our god will be proud of us!"