

## Part II

# The People of the Darkness



## Chapter 5

### Treachery in the shadows

A lone door opened in the deserted corridors of *Palatul Victoria* (Victoria Palace), in Bucharest. A casual observer would find it uncommon, as it was well into the night, and not even the most hard-working people usually stayed much late. However, since Aurel Becali had become the official spokesperson of the Prime Minister, he had made it a practice of leaving only an hour or two past midnight. Thus, the security paid little notice when the door silently closed, although no one had actually entered.

The office inside was rather basic: Romania had just come out of a severe economic crisis and the use of political funds was strictly monitored. There was just a worm-holed desk with a computer that was at least ten years old, two wobbly office chairs and a tall, metallic stand. Posters with faded colors adorned the walls, and a window looked onto the *Piața Victoriei* (Victory Square). Illumination was provided only by two table lamps.

Aurel Becali sat at his table. He was a well-built man in his fifties, and his brown hair had almost completely turned white. His face was wrinkled, a mark of a life spent entirely doing politics, and his eyes were covered by a pair of sunglasses. Aurel never took them off, not even at night: the press said he wanted to hide a disfiguring injury he had suffered from when he was young. He was wearing a simple yet elegant grey suit.

A moment later another man emerged from the shadows. It was Nindech, even though he looked different from when he had awakened, before he had left Languedoc with Chadim. He had cut his hair short and trimmed his beard, and somehow he seemed more muscular and athletic. His clothes were old-fashioned and resembled the ones used by the eighteenth-century royalty. They were woven with silk and gold threads, so perfect to be almost unnatural.

"You should be more cautious," Aurel said. "Sooner or later someone will find that a door moving on its own is suspicious."

"I do not want to take any risks by being seen, not when I am so close," Nindech replied. "Has the parliament voted yet?"

"Not yet. But the motion that will grant more self-government to the county of Braşov, in order to protect ethnic minorities, should be approved the next time the *Senat* will be brought together. Most members are favorable, but some have spoken against it, saying that it's just a way to divide our country. Of course I *convinced* most of them."

"Excellent. And about the raids? Has anyone suspected anything?"

"No. They thought they were episodes of widespread racism due to the birth of a new Nazi organization. Hence, the need for more firm measures. As you can see, no one has escaped from my puppetry. Even the Prime Minister believes that we're doing this for Romania's greater good."

Nindech smiled in satisfaction. "Once the motion is approved, I will be able to put the finishing touches to my plan."

"Don't forget our agreement," Aurel added. "You promised to make me the King of this country, and to give me eternal life."

"Ah, yes." Nindech gave a sharp look at the other man. "I will honor our agreement in due time. For now, make sure everything goes well, and please send me more *material*."

"It will be done."

"Good. I will contact you again after the vote. Till next time." Darkness engulfed Nindech and he disappeared.

Aurel shrugged and resumed his work at the computer. Several minutes later, he was aware of another presence in the room. He could not see anyone, but he already knew who it was.

"You are good at lying," a voice said.

Aurel did not move his gaze from the monitor. "I'll take that as a compliment. However, are you really sure about this? This will bring the chaos you loathe."

"It is a small price to pay to achieve the perfect Order. Did you find out their whereabouts?"

"That Nindech and his friend Chadim are really hardcases. Despite all I've done for them, they still don't trust me completely. But this one-sided law will probably break the diffidence down."

"There's still the matter with the companions they left behind when they awakened. As a matter of fact, I sense they're spreading Chaos: I have to go and stop them. You know what to do in the meantime."

Aurel took off his glasses, revealing a pair of elliptic, yellow eyes that would never belong to a creature of this world.

"It will be my pleasure."

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A day after Dario, Mei and Jason had left for France, Satsuki and her group completed their preparations and were off to Bran. After a few hours of flight, they arrived at Henri Coandă International Airport, where a car had been made available by the local S.T.E.A.L. branch, and drove directly to Bran without any further stops.

A small town, Bran was located in a hollow around several hills and tree-covered mountains. Most of the houses, white-plastered and with brown wooden roofs, were short and had a medieval feel to them, even though most of them had been thoroughly renovated. A castle was not too far from the town center, a sturdy fortification whose majesty dominated the surroundings. Such a place was a refreshing break from the heavily industrialised area of Braşov, a corner of purity in a corrupted universe.

As soon as they arrived, the three searched for a suitable accommodation, and found a quiet pension not too far from the town center. To conceal their identities, they used fake names and ID cards. Once the formalities were over, Satsuki and her companions decided to take a walk around the town to assess the situation.

Everyone was pretty friendly - after all it was a touristic place - and gave them a lot of information on the area and its surroundings. Apparently no one knew about destroyed villages or other catastrophic events, because when asked they firmly denied anything of the sort had happened. Everything had been going on smoothly, they said. However, despite the smiling faces, the laughter in the streets and the nice atmosphere, Satsuki felt uneasy. Something did not seem quite right, like a wrongly placed jigsaw piece. She tried to tell her friends about it, but her efforts were frustrated by their attitude: Klaus was mostly interested in souvenirs for his daughter, and Jim attempted to flirt with every good-looking woman who came near.

It was late in the evening when they finally returned to their hotel. Despite the easygoing attitude, Satsuki managed to arrange a meeting in her room. At the settled time, Jim and Klaus walked in and sat around a small circular table.

"Let's try to assess the situation seriously, ok?" Satsuki started, a hint of stress in her voice.

"Are you jealous of my natural charm?" Jim answered.

Satsuki gave him an angry stare. "We're not here on a school trip. We have business to attend to."

"Ok, ok, I'm sorry..."

The woman turned to Klaus. "This applies to you too."



The German man muttered an apology under his breath and did not look at her in the face.

"Good." Satsuki ran a hand through her long hair. "What do you think of this place?"

A puzzled look appeared on Jim's face. "It's strange. Everyone was rather friendly... I'd say *too* friendly. They were very interested in us as foreigners, even though many come and pass here during the year. And I suspect it's not just simple curiosity."

"I felt spied myself." Klaus echoed his companion. "Most of the people *wanted* to have conversations with us."

"I've been sensing the same." Satsuki added. "For being a nice and quiet resort, there is something that doesn't fit. I feel the Darkness behind those happy smiling faces... and also a lot of hatred."

"Basically, you say the town is full of double-crossers." Jim commented, rather displeased. "Getting information will be difficult."

"Can't we gain their trust?" Klaus asked.

Satsuki shook her head. "That's probably *their* strategy, not ours. That's why they were so friendly. You trust a smiling face more than an angry one. By the way, Klaus... did you take the necessary measures?"

"Yes. This room is safe."

"Ok, now..."

They were interrupted by the sound of knocking at the door.

"Miss Kaarsemaker, there is a phone call for you. Please come to the reception." a masculine voice said from the other side.

"No thanks." Satsuki replied.

"Why? The person said it was urgent."

"Because we have a direct phone line in the room. Why would anyone come here to announce a call?"

There was no answer, and a moment later the door opened violently, coming off its hinges.

"Be on your guard!" Satsuki shouted to her companions.

A man appeared at entrance. He was tall and dressed with the pale-colored uniform of the pension staff. To the casual observer, he would seem just another ordinary person: however a closer inspection would reveal uncommon features. His eyes had irises of flaming red, his long black hair flowed in the air with a will of its own and his canine teeth were unnaturally long.

"Yes, it wasn't the best excuse in the world." the newcomer said. "However I don't need an excuse to get rid of your pathetic existences."

"Oh, a vampire..." Jim stated, unimpressed. "Where are the mummies and the creatures from the black lagoon?"

The statement made the vampire furious. "You shall regret that!" he exclaimed.

The moment he moved forward, he heard a loud click and he realized he had stepped on a plate that had been concealed on the floor. He tried to move away before the trap could spring, but his movements became slower and slower, until he was completely paralyzed, almost like a living statue. Only then he noticed a large glyph that had been painted on the ceiling.

"What... is that?" he muttered.

"Just a simple Seal of Confinement to make sure you don't go around killing people," Jim explained.

"You need to refine your planning." Klaus addressed him as if he were a child. "Not only your excuse was lame, but you even thought we weren't prepared for an assault."

The man clenched his teeth. "I may not be able to move, but this will not be enough to harm me in any way."

"That's the point." Satsuki interjected. "We *don't* want to kill you, just to ask a few questions."

The vampire's eyes widened. "Do you mean... that you lured me here?"

"Yes." Klaus added. "You fell for it without even suspecting anything."

"What *are* you!?"

"Sorry, but it's our turn to make questions." Jim said. "We know about the raided villages, and by your presence here we see that your kin is involved. What has become of the people?"

"You can't help them now... they've already given up their lives for our great plan."

"A great plan?"

The man chuckled. "Hell is coming to this land, and you won't be able to stop it. The seed has already been planted in *Piatra Craiului*..."

Suddenly, Satsuki sensed immense evil coming from the man, so strong that she made her dizzy.

He smirked. "However, you will not live to see the rest."

The vampire clenched his fists with an enormous effort as he tensed all his muscles. With a scream, he broke free from the unearthly bonds that restrained him.

"Did you really believe something like this would stop me?" he yelled, breaking into hysterical laughter. "I will bring your severed heads to Master Nindech!"

Jim drew out his gun and fired repeatedly. Despite hitting his opponent straight in the chest, he didn't even falter. He cursed under his breath: he had not brought anti-vampire equipment with him.

"Normal weapons don't work against vampires," the vampire teased him. "You can't kill them with a gun."

Without losing heart, Jim punched him in the face. As the creature staggered, the man stuck a piece of inscribed parchment on his chest. The arcane writings lit up and the paper exploded, knocking the vampire away. Ignoring the large hole in his torso, he quickly got to his feet again. A second later the wound closed completely.

Satsuki took the offensive and recited a spell. A bright sphere darted towards the creature, who parried it with his arms with no visible effort. The woman took a step back, surprised by that display of power.

Her doubts made the vampire defiant. "You underestimated me, and you will pay the price now!"

He spread his arms wide and Jim and Satsuki were slammed against the wall by an unearthly force. Caught by surprise, there was no way they could break free.

The creature licked his lips. "I think I will crush your bones one by one... then I will drink your blood."

The pressure on Jim and Satsuki increased and the two gave muffled groans.

"But I have no hurry..." the vampire continued. "These things can be..."

There was a loud sound and his left arm was completely mashed. At the same time, the force that was holding Jim and Satsuki disappeared and they both fell to the ground, coughing. Upset, the vampire looked at Klaus, who had a shotgun pointed at him.

Klaus reloaded his weapon. "Didn't you forget about me?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Sooner or later, you will join their ranks," the creature said as the pieces of his dismembered arm slowly got together.

"Annoying," Klaus commented, irritated, and fired a few more shots.

Each hit caused terrible wounds and made the other man stagger back, but despite everything he kept a smile on his face. As soon as Klaus ceased shooting, the vampire's tortured body began to heal at an incredibly fast rate.

"You should have realized it by now," he sneered.

Klaus was expressionless. "Yes. I realize you are exactly where I wanted you to be."

"What?"

"You see, that seal..." Klaus pointed at the ceiling. "It's not just meant for confinement."

The creature laughed. "But I can see you don't know how to use it."

"I can't... but she can."

When the vampire noticed Satsuki, it was too late: the woman had already slammed her right hand on the floor. Like ink on a parchment, a red trail moved from her fingers over the ceiling until it connected with the symbol. The circle lit up and a large spike came out of it, piercing the creature's head and going through all the way to his heart. He squirmed in agony for an instant, then crumbled to dust.

"Good job, Klaus." Jim said as he got up, breathing heavily. "I almost thought we were going to die."

"I hope you're all right." he answered.

Satsuki massaged her neck. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"So it was a vampire... aren't them just blood suckers?" Klaus asked.

"Not quite, there are many of them." Jim explained. "According to the S.T.E.A.L. records, vampires evolved out of a race that was not of this world. Depending on who controls them or on their own power, vampires can be either mindless drones, like dogs, or truly evil masterminds. If vampires are really involved in this matter, they're the smart types."

"I didn't like the reference to hell." Satsuki added. "I'll have to ask for reinforcements."

Jim grumbled. "You *know* I'm against it, but if it's truly necessary..."

"It *is*."

Noticing the firm look in the woman's eyes, Jim decided to change topic. "All right, all right... Klaus, that guy mentioned a place before going crazy... can you look it up?"

Klaus took a glance at his portable GPS unit. "Piatra Craiului, it's a mountain range not too far from here. There is also a national park and several small villages, that coincidentally were the first which were wiped."

"Interesting. We finally have some hints. What do you think, Satsuki?"

The woman stared blankly and did not answer.

"Satsuki?"

Suddenly she grabbed a chair and threw it against one of the windows, breaking the glass to pieces.

"Satsuki, what the hell is going on?"

Showing more strength than expected, Satsuki grabbed both Klaus and Jim with her arms.

"Satsuki! Are you crazy?" Jim yelled.

"Why did you do this?" Klaus said, slightly embarrassed.

"No time for explanations!" she answered as she ran and jumped out of the window with her companions.

Jim and Klaus shouted, but Satsuki paid no attention to them. Part of her shirt was torn away as two large, bat-like wings emerged from her back. She quickly flapped them and their fall stopped as the three flew away from the hotel. A second later an explosion shook the place and the whole building was engulfed by flames.

"No!" Klaus cried. "My souvenirs!"

"Whoever behind this must be really desperate to blow an entire building up." Jim stated.

"We'd better land and report to the police, otherwise our presence will raise suspicions." Satsuki advised.

Holding Jim and Klaus tightly, she flew in a small alley near the now destroyed hotel.

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Police had already arrived on the site of the blast, and since Jim and the others were the only survivors they were brought to the local police station to be questioned as "informed people".

The chief's office was small and cramped, with a desk and a dust-filled bookcase taking up most of the space. Many posters were on the walls: most of them were touristic in nature but there were also some related to political movements.

Sitting at the table, the chief officer addressed the three. He was on his fifties and not very attractive. His face was wrinkled and bore the marks of an irregular life, and his hair was already white. His uniform was too tight for his body, and almost seemed ready to tear up at any moment.

"So," he started in a hoarse voice. "It seems that you're the only ones who survived from this bombing. I'd like to know what you have seen."

Satsuki knew Romanian best, so she was the mouthpiece of the whole group. "We were walking back after being out when we saw the entire building blow up. As we were afraid, we hid in a nearby alley."

"And that's where we found you. You didn't see anyone else around?"

"No one."

The man typed something at the computer on his desk. "I see... so far we haven't got a claiming of responsibility. However, I think we may be very close to identifying the culprits."

"Really?"

"According to an Interpol report, this bombing shares some features with others that happened in the past year. It may be the doing of a small, well organized extremist political group. And their identities are known as well."

He paused for a moment then pointed at the three. "To be precise, *you*."

Satsuki frowned. "This must be a mistake."

The policeman paid no attention to her words at all. "All evidence is against you. You thought you could come here under false names and fool us? Since you had arrived in town, we kept an eye on you. We weren't fast enough to save the hotel, but at least now you won't be killing anymore people soon!"

He clapped his hands and two agents came inside. "You are under arrest!"

Klaus stared at them in disbelief. "We're innocent!"

"We aren't soft with terrorists..." the chief whispered threateningly.

"Nor are we with second-rate policemen like you." Jim replied.

Before anyone could make a move, the man punched the nearest policeman and kicked the other in the face. The chief pulled out a pistol from a drawer, but Jim wrestled the weapon out of his hands.

"How about clearing the charges and letting us go?" Jim asked, pushing the pistol against the officer's head.

The other gulped as sweat ran down his forehead, but he did not speak.

"Oh, you are tough. It is unfortunate." Jim set off the safety catch.

The man turned pale. "All right, all right! Just don't kill me."

"Good."

Jim waited until the officer completed his report, then he made a gesture and the man fell on the desk, unconscious.

"What did you do to him?" Klaus asked.

"Nothing, just a simple spell." Jim answered. "This will make sure he won't set the alarm off once we leave."

Satsuki sighed. "Now that we've done it, we'd better hurry, or someone will notice. Let's make haste and get out of here."

\* \* \*

Outside of Bran, just inside the woods, there was a half ruined barn, a remain from centuries already past. Most people avoided the place like a plague, because it had a really bad reputation. A Satanist sect had chosen it as their headquarters in the sixteenth century, and fifty years later they had all perished in a fire that had broken out without a natural explanation. It was now rumored that their spirits,

after the Great Cataclysm, had began roaming the nearby land to kill the living who came too near.

The building itself was in bad shape: the roof had collapsed, most walls had crumbled and vegetation had covered everything. However a careful observer would notice a slight projection on the ground near the entrance. Only skillful eyes would guess that it was in fact a steel trap door concealed almost perfectly. A long ladder led below into a surprisingly modern shelter, a refuge that S.T.E.A.L. had built years before. It was well equipped, and about twenty people could live there for a month without the need for more supplies.

However, only Satsuki, Jim and Klaus were there, sitting around a table in a small meeting room.

"Jim, why are you so reckless?" Satsuki exclaimed, bringing her fist down on the table. "Look at what mess we're in now! We're being hunted down, and S.T.E.A.L. can't help us at all, otherwise they'd get discovered. Basically we're on our own."

"All right, I'm sorry, Satsuki." Jim replied. "However I don't think we'd have many other choices... Do you think we would have ended up having tea with that stupid policeman if we had let him go on?"

"Still, there were better ways to handle that situation."

"Perhaps, but I'm pretty sure we would have died in an... accident just after being imprisoned."

Klaus gave a grim look to both. "What will my daughter do, now that I'm a terrorist?"

"She will be proud of you." Jim said. "She has a father who's good at blowing things up!"

The German man glared at him and Satsuki tried to divert the attention to more pressing topics.

"I see that they must be very well organized." she observed. "To pull off what they did, they must be infiltrated quite well in the institutions and places of power."

"I've checked a few things here and there," Klaus intervened. "According to the S.T.E.A.L. records, there is going to be a motion in the *Senat* two days from now. It will grant more powers to the government of this county and has sparked protests all around Romania. However, it looks like there will be no objections during the vote."

"Perhaps someone was threatened or bribed?" Jim suggested.

"I can't say for sure, but probably. The records mention a strong supporter of this bill, Aurel Becali. He was seen with many so-called *activists* for the independence of this region. And not only that... He's going to the Piatra Craiului



tomorrow. Of course all these information were erased from public records. The media is getting a different version on the situation, much more reassuring.”

”There are too many coincidences.” Satsuki commented.

”Do you think Becali may be the mastermind behind everything?” Jim asked.

”I am not certain about that: that vampire at the hotel mentioned someone else, a certain Nindech.”

”Perhaps Nindech is just his real name.”

The woman shook her head. ”I think the real mastermind is much more intelligent. Despite the manipulation of the media, Becali is still a *public figure* and a pretty prominent person. I bet Nindech, whoever it is, is actually pulling the strings out of the public light to avoid being spotted. That said, Becali is most likely involved in this plan. We need to keep an eye on him.”

”What do you suggest to do?”

”Our only option: we’ll go to the Piatra Craiului and see for ourselves what is going on.” Satsuki slammed her right fist into her left palm. ”And bring an end to whatever evil plan has been laid out.”

Jim grinned. ”A little reckless... but I like these things.”

”I’ve got no objections.” Klaus said.

Satsuki looked at a map laid out on the table. All roads led to the Piatra Craiului... the answers they were seeking laid there.

”Good!” she exclaimed. ”We will set off tomorrow morning. Let’s get ready, we have a lot to do.”