

Chapter 6

A new ally

A lone village emerged from a clearing in the Piatra Craiului, amidst pines and other evergreen trees. Its existence was a mystery: the national park had been ravaged during the Great Cataclysm and every kind of human activity there had been forbidden to let nature heal its wounds. In sheer contrast with the beautiful scenery, a large medieval castle dominated the small wooden houses. It was old, built out of large stone blocks now weatherbeaten, with four tall towers and a huge central keep. Monstrous and deformed figures adorned its walls. No one knew its name, and even if its presence there was somewhat unnatural, no one questioned it. To everyone, the building had stood there for centuries.

It was an extraordinary sight, but the whole place only conveyed a feeling of decadence. The inhabitants of the village were crippled and hunchbacked, and communicated mostly with grunts and gestures. The flame of intelligence had never burnt in their eyes, and they moved like robots, executing actions thought by a mind that was not their own.

The settlement was bustling with activity as people hurried from one place to another bringing all sorts of equipment. On the outskirts there were signs of something being built, though it was at an early stage and neither its purpose nor its shape could be identified.

Hidden by the cover of the trees, three people were watching.

"It took a while to find out where Becali was headed," Jim said, passing a pair of binoculars to Satsuki. "However we were right on the mark. This place looks *definitely* suspicious."

The woman took a look. "Those people were never human to begin with. They are from the Darkness, and they were moulded in human shape. But their substance is too vile to encase their nature, that's why they're so twisted."

"Basically it's just a bad front," Klaus commented.

"Exactly. Since everything is out in the open, I assume they are extremely confident of not being discovered. In any case, we need to think of a way to get

to the castle. I sense a great power coming from there: probably Becali, Nindech and all the answers we are seeking lie there.”

”Shouldn’t we wait for the night?”

”With ordinary people, it would be a good idea,” Jim interjected. ”However, we’re talking about vampires. They’re obviously stronger during the night. Actually, they would not dare moving out when the sun is out, so it would put us at an advantage..”

”I see.” Klaus replied. ”What about our ally?”

Jim grumbled and looked away.

”I’ve sent my requests for assistance,” Satsuki added hurriedly. ”But I haven’t got any answer.”

”We’re stuck here, it seems.” Klaus observed. ”I wonder what my wife and my daughter are doing right now...”

”Anything is better than being here doing nothing.” Jim observed.

”We could try to sneak past them before the sun sets,” Satsuki proposed.

Jim nodded. ”It sounds hard, but possible. Let’s see if we can come up with a good plan.”

The three had been discussing for about half an hour when the ground shook violently.

”What’s going on?” Satsuki asked, struggling to keep on her feet.

”Something’s happening in the village!” Jim exclaimed, pointing at the settlement.

Satsuki looked through the binoculars and saw a house crashing on the ground. It was quickly followed by another, and at the same time high-pitched screams rose from the village. They were so loud the three could hear them at such a distance.

A sudden anger got hold of Satsuki and she almost crushed the binoculars.

”For heaven’s sake!” she shouted. ”It’s that stupid woman!”

”I warned you...” Jim commented sarcastically. ”All breakages must be paid for.”

”Who is this woman?” Klaus asked, confused.

Satsuki made an irritated gesture. ”Our contact... one of the world’s craziest people! And she decided to attack the village single-handedly!”

”Wouldn’t she be in danger?”

”Not at all. The only ones being in danger are the people there.”

”Look, this may come in our aid.” Jim observed. ”With all the ruckus she’s causing, we may be able to slip in the castle unnoticed.”

Satsuki sighed. "I would have preferred more subtle ways, but you are right. Let's go."

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"What happened? Answer me!" Nindech shouted.

He was in what used to be the throne room: it was large and tall, with several finely-carved columns supporting the elaborate ceiling painted with war scenes. Many tapestries were on the walls, displaying crests of Houses now disappeared into oblivion, and large candlesticks, along with oil lamps, illuminated the place. Gold-trimmed carpets covered the cold, stone floor. The throne itself was a high backed wooden chair, almost sober despite being made for a king. In his fury, Nindech had turned it over a side.

"We have been attacked." Chadim said, trying to calm him down. She wore a long green dress moulded to her body, with a plunging neckline that left very little to the imagination. Complex pins with gold and gems adorned her hair. "But we have already prepared a defense."

Instead of reassuring him, the remark angered Nindech more. He turned to Aurel, who was also present. "You told me no one had followed you! How do you explain this?"

"I've got nothing to explain, *no one* followed me," the other replied, upset as well. "Do you really think it is the doing of those people? Even though they survived the bomb attack I set up, they are being hunted down. They can't escape hundreds of policemen. They could be *your* enemies, instead. Haven't you made many during these centuries?"

"It does not matter now. All interference will be dealt with in the fiercest way possible." Nindech clapped his hands. "Mand!"

Hundreds of bats flew from nowhere, forming a cloud in front of him. The cloud of animals coalesced and its shape became dim, then it was replaced by the figure of a man. He was short, with brown hair, seemingly ageless. He was completely covered in sturdy chain mail and a short sword was strapped on his waist. His manners were fascinating, but his red eyes had not trace of humanity.

"At your service, my Master." His voice was soapy, yet firm. "How can I serve you?"

"Get the best warriors we have and gather them in the courtyard. If you spot any intruders, kill them. Show no mercy, we're too close to success to fail now."

"It will be done." Mand bowed, then his body began again a flight of bats, which flew out of a door.

"Good move, Nindech." Chadim commented.

"You are ruthless yet cunning." Aurel added. "I admit I'm impressed."

"Of course." Nindech walked in front of the man. "That is why double-crossers such as you can't fool me."

Aurel scowled. "Are you crazy? How could I *ever* think of betraying you?"

"Spare me your lies. Do you really think I don't know who you *really* are? I sensed your stench since the first time we have met. But I realized you could be useful to me, so I simply let you live until I saw fit. Now, your usefulness ends here."

The other man threw away his glasses and stared at him with his strange yellow eyes. "You were more cunning than I thought. But wits alone don't make you..."

With unexpected speed, Nindech clawed at Aurel, opening a huge gash in the man's chest. As he fell to the ground, a terrifying metamorphosis took place. The body which touched the ground wasn't the one of a man... it was a monstrous shape emerged from the deepest pits of hell, a fragment of dark universes forgotten by mankind, a blasphemous act against every law of nature.

"How..." Aurel stuttered as a viscous ichor came out of his deformed mouth.

"My traitorous friend, I have more than wits... I have *power*. Whoever sent you has underestimated me. I will crush everyone who will get in the way between me and my goal!"

"Fool..." Aurel gurgled. "How dare you put yourself against..."

Nindech brought his foot down on him, crushing his head. The horrendous body trembled, then lay still.

He turned to Chadim, who instinctively took a step back. "Bring this trash away. Remember, this is what happens to those who defy me."

The woman trembled, horrified. "I will keep that in mind."

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Jim, Satsuki and Klaus moved like furtive shadows as they made their way to the castle. By the time they had arrived to the village, they had found themselves in front of a scene of extreme devastation. Most of the houses had been razed to the ground, and the few ones that remained were about to collapse at any minute, their wood splintered and broken. Only the strange unfinished construction was still in good shape.

Soon the three realized that precautions were no longer necessary: there was not a single villager left alive. Most of them bore large cuts over their bodies, and occasionally some whiplashes. Their dying expressions showed that most of them

had been killed without realizing what had happened. Still, there was no trace of the culprit.

Klaus let out an exclamation of surprise. "What a slaughter."

"If it's *her*, you can't expect anything less." Jim said with a note of irritation in his voice.

Satsuki urged them to move forward and the two hurried after her. Shortly afterwards, they found themselves in front of the castle. At close distance, the ramparts looked even more imposing and solid despite their age. The gargoyles and the other statues which decorated the walls were so detailed to be almost alive, and by some bizarre light play their stone eyes seemed always fixed on the group. The road ended right in front of the main gate, whose access was blocked by a sturdy iron grating.

Jim pointed at the fortification. "Here it is, the castle of Vlad III *Dracul*."

"This one?" Klaus asked. "I thought it was in town."

"It's just a marketing ploy. Legends say Vlad built this castle from one day to another, and that shortly after he was killed it vanished without a trace. That is, until now."

Klaus turned on a small device resembling a beeper, then looked at it with disappointment. "It looks like it's shielded by some unnatural force: I can't gather data about the interior at all. How do we plan on getting inside?"

"That won't be a problem," Satsuki said.

She held her hand in front of the entrance and let out a single, curt sound. The iron bars became orange, then white and eventually melted like snow in the sun.

Weapons in hand, the three advanced cautiously inside. In front of the keep there was a large courtyard, empty and deserted. No items associated with human activity were present, as if the place had never been used.

Without any warning, the light dimmed and weakened as a dark veil covered the sun. Jim took a step forward and an arrow stuck in front of him, very close to his foot.

"Finally someone shows up," he commented. "It was getting boring."

A voice rose from nowhere. "Worry not...you will all soon be experiencing the excitement of a violent death."

Countless arrows shot out of nowhere, directed at the group. Unimpressed, Satsuki made an angry gesture and they all turned to ashes.

"Spare us these tricks," she said defiantly. "You should know that they can't work with us."

"Indeed, it was as I expected," her mysterious interlocutor replied. "But more traditional means will suffice."

Bats swarmed from everywhere, forming many whirlwinds in front of the keep's entrance. They coalesced and disappeared: in their place there were at least ten vampires, including Mand. They all wore sturdy padded armor and long mantles. Steel swords shimmered in their hands.

Their leader bowed. "I am Mand, and Master Nindech gave me the order of guarding this place."

"Nice to meet you," Jim replied sarcastically. "Do you mind if we have a talk with your boss? There is a lot we need to... discuss."

The man's sarcasm did not trouble the vampire at all. "I appreciate your boldness, but you cannot proceed further. Or go back, for that matter. Master Nindech does not tolerate interferences in his plan: all that is left for you is to surrender, or to die and suffer atrocious torments. "

The sound of gunfire echoed all around, and Mand watched his own left arm fall on the ground with amusement, then picked it up and reattached it to his shoulder. He looked at Klaus, who had a rifle pointed at him.

"I don't like your options," Klaus said in a surprisingly dark tone.

"And we'll take neither," Satsuki added. "Let us pass and we'll spare your lives!"

Mand sighed. "You are unreasonable. So be it, then. Kill them, my soldiers!"

He made an authoritarian gesture and his followers rushed towards the three. Jim quickly pulled out his gun and fired at the nearest one. The bullets hit his enemy in the chest and apparently caused no damage. The vampire smiled evilly, but the smile quickly turned into an expression of horror as his body turned into sand which was blown away by the wind.

Jim had no time to rejoice, as two warriors swung furiously at him. He back flipped, avoiding them by a hair's breadth and threw an ampulla at them. One ducked, but the other was not fast enough and the container broke against his face: he rolled on the floor screaming as holy water burnt through his flesh like acid. Before the survivor could do anything, Jim kicked his sword out of his hands.

The vampire's face became feral and he underwent a metamorphosis. He got down on all fours as his body grew and covered with fur. Within seconds, he had become a wolf: howling, he jumped at Jim's throat. Caught by surprise, he barely managed to hold the creature's neck as the assault brought him to the ground. That move saved his life, as the animal's jaws snapped very close to his face. Using his free hand, Jim pushed his gun against the animal's abdomen and fired repeatedly. With a yelp, the wolf fell dead.

"What a tough bunch!" Jim exclaimed as he stood up.

While he faced another assault, Satsuki ran towards Mand. If he was the leader,

surely he would know something about the mysterious plan laid out by Nindech: she had to defeat him without killing him. She jumped at the vampire but her flying kick only went through air as Mand disappeared a second before getting hit. He appeared behind her a moment later, but Satsuki was fast enough to block a punch directed at her.

"You're strong." Mand whispered in her ear. "Don't you want to be my bride for all eternity?"

"Not even in Hell!" Satsuki shouted, kicking him in the stomach.

Taking a step backwards, the man drew his sword. "I'm sure I can make you reconsider..."

Showing out of the ordinary fencing skill, Mand feinted and slashed, trying to catch the woman off guard. Satsuki avoided the blade at the last moment and counterattacked with a series of punches: the vampire dissolved into a cloud of gas and flew above her. Then he became solid again and he brought his sword down on her. Satsuki jumped backwards and sparks rose in the air as the blade collided with the stone.

"You're recalcitrant, I see..." Mand hissed. "But I'm not in a hurry."

Elsewhere, Klaus was in the middle of a fierce battle. He hadn't received the formal training of Jim and Satsuki, so the best he could do was to keep his opponents far enough to use his weapons. His shotgun, equipped with special bullets, had already maimed two of them. He fired at another, but the vampire avoided the blast and jumped in front of him before he could reload. He grabbed the barrel of Klaus's rifle and the two engaged in a trial of strength, each one trying to snatch the weapon out of the hands of the other.

While their confrontation went on, a whip lashed out of nowhere, tying tightly around the vampire's neck. He let go and frantically gasped for air as his skin became ashen. His efforts were in vain, as his body continued to dry out. Now an incredibly thin figure, he rose a hand to call for help before breaking into minute fragments.

The fighting paused for a moment while everyone stared at the remains of the warrior.

"You always put your underlings in danger, Satsuki," a woman's voice said from the battlements. "Thankfully, *I* have arrived."

A beautiful woman stood there. She had long blonde hair which flowed in the wind, and deep blue eyes. Her build was minute, but well-proportioned, and her skin was strangely pale. She wore sturdy, green colored padded armor, which surprisingly did not hide her form, and long boots. A sword was strapped to her waist, and she held a whip on her left hand. Three small daggers were tied on her



right hip.

"Sarah Glashow, vampire hunter, has come here to save the day!"

"Who the hell are you?" Mand shouted. "Do not interfere!"

Sarah's face contorted in anger and her eyes slowly faded from blue to red. "Scum like you does not deserve an answer... all I will give you is a painful death!"

She jumped down and landed next to Klaus. "Move away," she stated firmly. "It will get rough in a second."

"O..ok." Impressed by her commanding voice, Klaus stepped aside.

Two vampires dashed towards Sarah. She lashed her whip again and the nearest one was thrown backwards, severed in two. Sarah then drew her sword just in time to parry the survivor's attack: the sound of clashing steel echoed in the courtyard. The two exchanged blows so fast they couldn't be seen, but after a short time it was clear that the vampire hunter's skill was much greater. She was avoiding the incoming blade and counterattacking with the grace of a dancer, while her opponent struggled to keep her pace. Then he lost his balance for a fraction of a second, and Sarah's sword landed in his chest. With a muffled curse, the vampire collapsed.

The woman looked around. She was sure there was another. Where...

As the thought left her mind, the last vampire materialized behind her and bit her on the neck before she could move.

For a moment, Sarah stood still, then she looked at the creature gnawing at her throat with disdain.

She let out an exclamation of disgust. "Can't suck blood out of me, eh? Too bad."

Her punch crushed his face and she threw away the body like garbage.

Now the only vampire left standing, Mand glanced at the corpses of his comrades with a hint of worry on his face.

Satsuki stared at him. "You'd better surrender now."

"Don't act as if you had already won!" he replied as he tried to hit the woman.

Satsuki blocked his blade with her right hand. No blood came out: it was as if it had hit a solid wall. Mand was suddenly aware of a strange symbol on the left side of her neck and he trembled in fear as he realized its true meaning. A moment later the woman punched him in the face, sending him flying against one of the walls of the courtyard.

"It appears even you aren't what you seem..." Mand stammered as he attempted to stand up.

Satsuki made a gesture, and dark tendrils shout out of the stone, tying Mand up completely.

"You would deserve to die," she started. "However I need to ask you several things."

She walked up to him, quickly followed by Jim, Sarah and a confused Klaus.

"If you're so eager to know, I'll tell you. It's not like you can stop us, anyway." Mand replied firmly.

"Answer me, now," she ordered. "What is the plan of your master? What did you do with the raided villages?"

The vampire spat on the ground. "Master Nindech just wants to let us walk again under the sun... to reclaim the world that has rejected us! And to do so... we needed tools. Tools like those worthless people in the villages, who gave their lives, willingly or unwillingly, for a higher purpose!"

Satsuki took a great effort to prevent herself from killing that abominable man on the spot. "What is the higher purpose you speak of?"

"A magic whose power is unmatched to anything in this world... the forbidden incantation every vampire knows about... the Ritual of Hell!"

Jim's eyes widened. "You can't be serious! It is a folly!"

"Oh yes, I am! We almost got enough souls now. The folly is now reality. And you will just watch as your pitiful world will come down in flames and our race will be hailed as the new conquerors!"

"We will not let this happen." Klaus interjected.

Mand looked at him mockingly. "You may be strong enough do defeat me... but not Master Nindech. He is not like us... he's much more powerful. No matter how hard you try, you are doomed."

Jim exchanged looks with his companions. "Looks like we've got enough information from this guy. Before we move on, what do we do with him?"

Mand burst out into laughter. "Do whatever you want, I do not care. You have just delayed the inevitable end!"

"If you say you don't care..." Sarah whispered, then she suddenly raised her voice. "I'll shut your mouth *now* and forever!"

She grabbed his head with a swift movement. Mand's eyes widened when realized what she was doing, but he kept on laughing. With a terrifying sound of cracked bones and lacerated muscles, Sarah ripped the vampire's head off his body and his laughter trailed off with a gurgle. She looked at the severed head's dying eyes for an instant, then she crushed it, caught by uncontrollable anger. Jim and Klaus stared at her, horrified.

"Sarah!" Satsuki shouted.

The other woman did not answer: her gaze was riveted on her blood-stained hands. She punched the wall in frustration.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed. "Nothing yet!"

"Sarah, why did you do that..." Klaus said, horrified and confused at the same time.

Sarah glanced at him and smiled: her eyes had become blue again. "So, what do we have to do? Do we have to stop some cosmic conspiracy or something?"

Klaus stood silent, shocked. The woman's personality had changed in a matter of seconds... from furious and vengeful to cheerful and overly radiant. To make matters worse, neither Jim nor Satsuki seemed particularly impressed.

"Here we go again..." was Jim's terse comment.

However, Satsuki was still in anger. "There was no need to kill him, Sarah! I could have at least purified his spirit."

Sarah shrugged. "He was worse than a person at a garage sale, anyway. Very boring."

Satsuki wanted to hit her, but she made herself calm. The situation was too serious to allow petty conflicts.

"At least now we know what this Nindech was planning," she stated. "Now we need to find him as soon as possible, and put an end to this madness."

"Easier said than done," Jim commented. "He could be anywhere in this castle, and it's not like we can go around asking for information."

"I know of a way," Sarah proposed.

Satsuki put her hands on her hips and looked at her diffidently. "What would that be?"

"He's probably in the throne room. High ranked vampires like surrounding themselves with something that reminds them of authority. Even the most cunning masterminds have their weak spots."

Satsuki nodded, but she was still doubtful. "Your knowledge of vampires is very vast, so you may be correct. However, I don't think we can get there that easily. At the very least I expect a fierce resistance."

"I know a little *secret*... there is a hidden passage in the dungeons that goes straight to the top chambers. it was used as a means to escape, but we'll use it in the opposite way."

"As much as I hate your rashness, Sarah, your proposal is good enough."

Jim snorted and gave a questioning look to Satsuki, while Klaus just stared at her speechless, utterly confused.

"So," Sarah said. " Shall we make our way? We don't want to disappoint our hosts..."

* * *

The keep's doors opened with a loud squeak and the group walked inside. They found themselves in a large hall, imposing but bare. Everything was built out of large stone blocks, and there was a distinct lack of decorations. Actually, it looked as if everything inside had been looted, as there were empty alcoves and spots which suggested the presence of paintings. All that was left was just a series of oil lamps hung on the ceiling. Two flight of stairs, worn and half broken, led upstairs.

Sarah ignored them and instead walked to a small niche on one of the sides. In silence, she moved her fingers over the cold stone until she found an apparently random unevenness. She then rotated her index finger over it and a section of the floor moved aside, revealing a ladder that led further below.

"You seem to know a lot about this place." Klaus noticed.

"Yes, I do," Sarah replied absentmindedly. "I used to live here a while ago."

Her answer puzzled him. How could have she lived there? Hadn't the castle disappeared after Vlad III was slain? Also, that vampire's bite had no effect on her. Doubts about her humanity filled his mind.

The others had already started to climb down the pit, so he tossed his thoughts aside and hurried behind them. The place was narrow and humid, without any trace of light. A few times Klaus missed a step, and he would have fallen to his doom had it not been for the help from Sarah.

Several minutes later, they reached the bottom. The darkness disoriented Klaus, but the sensation quickly faded as Sarah lit a torch she had found on a wall. In front of them there were several corridors which spread like a spider's web under the castle's foundations. Everything seemed very ancient, way older than the building itself, and there was a thick layer of dust on the floor, a sign that no human foot had walked there for centuries.

Sarah pointed at one of the entrances. "This way."

The corridor was long and winding and apparently turned in random directions, but after a while Klaus realized there was a pattern in these abrupt turns. He once had read on the S.T.E.A.L. records that certain shapes converged unnatural forces better than others, and that dungeon looked like a perfect example. He also noticed that even if the place was deserted, he couldn't help feeling a sense of alien life in those dark stones. Whether it was a sparkle imbued by their builders or a remains of the builders themselves, he could not tell.

As they followed Sarah, Klaus wondered why no one wanted to talk. Jim was usually a talkative person, but since Sarah had arrived he had retreated in silence

and even Satsuki did not say anything at all. Was it because of their new ally? What had she done to agitate them?

"Ah, I see!" Sarah exclaimed as they stopped next to a metallic double door. "Some *precautions* have been left even here."

"I bet it has some horrible, nasty-looking trap." Jim said wryly.

"No need to worry, I bet it's broken by now!"

Sarah slammed the doors open, and a second later a long spear sprung out of nowhere, hitting her in the chest.

Horrified, Klaus was about to run to her when, much to his amazement, Sarah pulled the weapon out of her body and threw it away like a broken toy. Immediately afterwards, her wound closed at an incredibly fast rate, leaving only a hole in her armor.

"Just a spear." she commented. "Nothing to worry about."

Caught by a fit of anger, Satsuki grabbed her by her armor.

"Stop being so reckless," she scolded her. "You have to care about yourself."

Sarah stared at her with a serious expression on her face.

"You know how I am. Why bothering about that if death is unknown to me?"

"Do you want to be regarded as a monster forever, Sarah? We..."

The vampire hunter pushed Satsuki aside and stepped away, her fists clenched in frustration.

"I appreciate your concern," she replied bitterly. "But I don't think you fully understand. My destiny has been already written."

Jim puffed, but stayed silent.

Klaus did not understand anything anymore, but the atmosphere was too gloomy for him to speak, so he just followed Sarah and the others as they proceeded forward.

Shortly afterwards, they reached a small circular room, completely empty. On the opposite side there was a gilded door, its surface carved with floral patterns arranged in complex shapes and forms whose logic was impossible to grasp. Jim tried to open it, but it did not bulge.

"You can't open it, or even break it down." Sarah said in a pedantic tone. "There's a powerful seal keeping it shut. Not only that, but if we attempt to break it by force it will explode and will most likely bury us under many tonnes of rocks."

Jim crossed his arms. "So what do you suggest, Professor Glashow?"

She winked. "I know how to undo it, of course!"

"How long will it take to break it?" Satsuki asked, doing her best to bear with the vampire hunter's attitude.

"Not too much... ten minutes at best."

"All right. I and Jim will scout the surroundings. After all, we may have been followed."

Jim and Satsuki walked away and Sarah placed herself in front of the entrance and picked a pouch from her belt and she poured the contents, a strange powder similar to sand, around her. She then slowly moved her arms over her head and joined her palms in front of her chest, as if she was meditating. As time passed, the decorations started to withdraw, like plants that had dried out.

Sarah glanced at Klaus, who was next to her. "Don't worry, you won't disturb me."

"What are you doing?" Klaus asked shyly.

"It's way too complicated to explain, I'd take a few hours just for the basics."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine."

"Are you sure? My daughter sometimes acts like that even when there's a problem. Perhaps you should talk about it."

"Really, I'm fine."

Even if she had frustrated his attempts at starting a conversation, Klaus did not give up. "For how long have you been fighting vampires?"

She shrugged and continued the incantation. "I lost count, but I think six hundred years, more or less."

Klaus gaped, speechless. She looked no more than twenty-five years old!

Sarah noticed his surprise and smiled bitterly. "It may be strange, but it's the truth. Once I was called Stéphanie-Thérèse. As a noblewoman of the times, I was betrothed to a foreign noble. He was even cute, as far as I can remember. Unfortunately, he was a vampire. To make a long story short, I became a vampire too. But he didn't want me to have a will, so I just became his watchdog."

"However, you don't look like a vampire now."

"A man helped me out, and I became what I am now. And to thank him... I killed him."

Klaus looked away from her. "I'm sorry."

"Since then, I cannot die," Sarah continued. "I can't... at least until I have exterminated every vampire in this world. At least that is what I believe. Until then..."

She paused for a moment and picked up a rock. Her eyes turned red and she crushed it with ease.

"... I will keep on being like this," she concluded.

Klaus put a hand on her shoulder in a kind manner. "It is really sad... however, I don't think you need to do so alone."

Sarah looked away. "Well... let me finish now. This part is difficult and I need concentration."

As he stepped back, puzzled by her reaction, Sarah tried to concentrate on the last part of the incantation. The task proved to be more difficult than she had thought: Klaus's words kept on echoing in her mind. What did he mean with that? She furiously tried to keep away the questions that were nagging her.

Not too far from the room, Satsuki and Jim had completed their search without finding any nearby threats.

"All done." Jim said. "Now we have to go back..."

"You don't seem very happy about it." Satsuki observed.

"Not until she's there."

"Don't behave in such a way. She's still our ally and helped us quite a bit."

"I don't like her attitude."

"I know, she can be irritating..."

Jim looked at Satsuki straight in the eyes. "I don't mean that, Satsuki. It's her own vision of the world. Because of what she had endured and lost, she started playing a role in order to preserve her sanity. But times have changed now... yet she didn't. She's still a prisoner of the cage she has built herself. And... I don't want you to become like this, as well."

Sadness showed up on Satsuki's face. "I'm sorry Jim. I didn't mean to worry you. It's just..."

"I know, Satsuki. Your sister... and Yumiko. Just like Sarah, you feel responsible for that. You need to get over that, however. Guilt won't make time go back. And in all honesty, you can't think you can move the world on your own."

Satsuki did not answer as conflicting feelings ran through her. Jim had been very blunt... however what he had said was true. She was trying to make time go back... something that could have never happened. She tried to reply, but her attention was drawn away by a loud sound.

"I'm done!" Sarah exclaimed.

As the two returned to her and Klaus, they saw that the door was open. They walked past the threshold and found themselves in another, smaller room. Unlike what they had seen elsewhere in the dungeon, it bore no sign of the passing of time. The stone was smooth and without imperfections, and the floor was completely free of dust. In the center there was a strange conical apparatus with no discernible function. An extremely large octagonal shape decorated a wall, and another exit was on the opposite side of the entrance.

"What's this?" Jim asked.

"A device made by the first builders of this castle, Taur...something." Sarah explained. "However it's so old I doubt it's working now."

"I wouldn't try if I were you." Satsuki warned her.

Sarah patted the conical device. "You worry too much, my dear Satsuki! How could..."

A low buzz interrupted her and she stared at the object, puzzled.

"Too much, eh?" Jim commented.

The area inside the octagon in the wall faded away, replaced by pitch black darkness.

"I sense someone coming." Satsuki stated. "Let's be on our guard."

As they got ready to confront a possible menace, Mei, Dario and Jason jumped out of the newly formed opening. The surprise of seeing their comrades was so great they almost tumbled on the floor.

"Excuse me..." Mei said, looking at Satsuki and the others. "What are *you* doing here?"

