

Chapter 7

A step closer to the truth

In the throne room of the castle, Nindech and Chadim were having an argument. News of Mand's defeat had reached their ears, and Nindech had been caught by anger. Then they had realized their allies they had left behind were no longer in this world, and the man had almost brought a wall down in fury.

"Don't worry." Chadim said reassuringly. "I've given orders. Traps have been set everywhere, and a large group of servants is preparing an ambush in the banquet hall."

Nindech made an angry gesture. "It's not going to help the fact that our allies are dead! And not only we have intruders in our castle, along with them came *another* problem!"

"What is it?"

"Someone who should have died six hundred years ago."

Chadim opened her mouth in amazement. "How can it be? I was sure she had perished!"

"Apparently she was a lot tougher than what you expected. And that means she could interfere with our plan."

"Nindech, you worry too much. Our studies of the Taur-phon's legacy are almost complete. Soon we will have a complete control over their magic. And everything has been set up already for the Ritual of Hell. We just need a few more sacrifices..."

Nindech looked at her, doubtful. "You are too optimistic. Six hundred years ago, we were defeated and almost slain, because we foolishly thought no one had the means to stop us."

"Things are different from then. Our power has grown immensely."

"Despite everything, you still haven't changed, Chadim. If 'our power has grown immensely' why weren't you able to stop those people from getting here in the first place?"

"I..."

The woman gasped for air as an invisible stranglehold tightened around her neck. She moved spasmodically as she was lifted in the air, totally powerless. Nindech gave her a cold stare.

"I... assure you, Nindech..." she muttered. "I did everything... I could..."

The grip on her neck increased and she became blue in the face.

Nindech's voice was sharp as a razor. "No, you were incompetent! In ancient times, you almost lost your own life to the Taur-phon themselves because of your stupid pride! And now you're repeating the same mistake!"

Just as Chadim felt her own life fading away, the grasp on her disappeared and she fell to the ground, breathing heavily.

"Do you remember who saved you back then?" Nindech continued. "*Do you remember, Chadim?*"

She nodded weakly. "Yes..."

"From then you accepted to be my servant. *Do not* fail me a second time, or I will show you a fate much worse than death."

Chadim's terrified eyes showed complete submission. "Yes... my Master."

She hurried away, and Nindech remained alone. The idea that such a woman was still alive bothered him to no end. Also, his followers' numbers, already low, had decreased considerably, and the intruders' interference meant that he would no longer be able to obtain souls for the Ritual. By all the gods, all these problems when he was so close to his goal! But every cloud had a silver lining...

He smirked. Perhaps there could be an use for *her*, after all...

* * *

"I was about to ask the same question." Jim said.

Jason, Mei and Dario, the party which had left for France, were in front of him. They had came out of a strange hole in the wall of the dungeons, which appeared out of nothingness.

"Uh... didn't you three leave for France?" Klaus asked.

"Exactly." Dario replied. "However, there we found a device similar to this one. And since we were pursuing the soul eaters, or their allies, we jumped in. And that is how we arrived here."

"Perhaps it's better if we hear your story from the beginning." Satsuki advised.

Without spending too much time on details, the three explained how they had found the mysterious village in France, their discovery of the Taur-phon dungeon and their fight against the soul eaters. Then Jim told them how he and the rest of the team had ended up there, including the arrival of Sarah.



Satsuki listened in silence. When everyone had finished, she had a worried look on her face.

"As I suspected, the soul eaters and the vampires are in the same league," she commented. "But I don't think the soul eaters were slain by their allies... it makes little sense for such a well thought out plan. I wonder if there is someone else involved."

"We've got to worry about our problem first," Jim added. "We need to stop the madmen here before they start the ritual."

"Why is this ritual so dangerous?" Mei inquired.

"Old tales refer to it as a power that may kill millions of men in less than a day. It was started once, but it was never completed. And it's not like we know much more than that: most of the information come from cryptic sentences in the ancient texts, almost words of a prophecy."

"Always bloodshed and destruction, vampires are really always the same," Sarah commented. "No wonder no one likes them."

"Stopping the Ritual is the only solution," Satsuki concluded. "We need to get going at once."

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From the other open door in the room, the group proceeded into a narrow corridor. According to Sarah, there were no more traps and it was just a matter of time before they would reach the hidden passage to the higher chambers in the keep. The walls were covered in symbols, the same Dario and his companions had seen in France: however, despite using the familiar Taur-phon patterns, the glyphs were irregular, sometimes even misshapen, and showed no artistic sense.

"Those are quite different than the ones we have seen," Jason noticed.

"This was one of the latest Taur...something settlements," Sarah explained. "Their decadence had already started when they finished building this place, and that explains why the symbols are so ugly. And rumors say that their last members died here, when the race disappeared from Earth forever."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

Sarah's face darkened. "Someone I knew told me a great deal."

"Still, they're conserved better than where we were earlier," Mei observed.

"It's because this place was sealed."

Satsuki cut the conversation short. "We'll care about that later. We're here to stop the Darkness, not to play archaeologists."

A few minutes later, the passage came to a dead end. However, a long duct opened on the ceiling, going upwards. It was so long that the other end could not be seen.

"Finally we're here." Sarah said. "Get near the wall."

The rest of the group obeyed and as soon as they did, the woman made a gesture. Strange runes lit up on the walls and everyone was lifted into the air. After the initial disorientation, they realized they were on a sort of invisible lift. The ascent was slow, and everyone was tense, ready to confront any incoming danger. Only Sarah was relaxed, up to the point of whistling.

Minutes passed. At first the duct seemed endless, then they were aware of a small, bright spot above them. As they got nearer, it grew in size until it became a large opening. The moment they passed through, they realized they were in a large hall, richly decorated. A long table covered with a silken tablecloth was in the middle, with gold cutlery and brocades. Many wooden chairs were next to it, enough to seat at least fifteen people. Tapestries and paintings were on the walls.

Everything was sumptuous, but everyone's attention was drawn elsewhere, to a scene of undescrivable horror. Countless corpses lay on the floor, piled up randomly. They were men and women from every social class, from peasants to businessmen. Their eyes were vitreous and lifeless, and their skin was perfectly white. No one had visible wounds.

"This is... the banquet hall," Sarah said. "In word and deed. The vampires usually brought their victims here before drinking their blood."

"And that's where the victims of the raids ended up," Satsuki added bitterly.

Mei pointed at the bodies. "Their *Chi* has been altered... it's like their souls have been also drained out."

Sarah stroke her chin. "That is really odd. Vampires don't waste time for such things."

"It may be related to the Ritual of Hell," Dario suggested.

"Most likely," Jim intervened. "I believe one of the fragments describing the Ritual referred to something like this."

Suddenly, Jason felt a hum coming from his rapier.

"We are in danger." he hissed.

He had just completed his sentence when a large number of vampires dropped from the ceiling, surrounding the group. Physically they were very similar to the ones Satsuki and the others had faced in the castle's courtyard, but they wore only rags and there was no intelligence in their eyes, only incredible ferocity. Some stood on all fours, growling like dogs.

Sarah looked at them in shock. They were...

She jumped over the man and tore his throat up. As soon as she realized he was no longer moving, she trotted back to her Master. "Good job, Stéphanie-Thérèse," he said. "Later I will give you your reward."

Jim opened fire and two of the assailants fell to the ground dead. Another attacked him from behind: He turned just in time to avoid the attack and kicked his enemy repeatedly, smashing his face. Next to him, Jason jumped back and forth, sword in hand. Every time his blade moved, one vampire squirmed on the ground in agony.

Sarah stood still, speechless.

"Poor soul, fate has put you through a lot." the man said. She looked at him with anger mixed with the surprise: she wanted to kill him on the spot, but his smell was different, much different than the ones she had felt before...

Mei joined the fray by jumping among a group of vampires: as their hands clawed at her she slammed her fist on the ground. The floor around her exploded and many figures were maimed and thrown away. More creatures ran towards her, but they were quickly brought down by Dario's machine gun.

Unable to move, Sarah watched the battle unfold before her eyes. Those people...

"May God look upon you, Stéphanie-Thérèse..." the man muttered as blood flowed out of his mouth. Without knowing the reason, she let out a scream of frustration.

Satsuki waved her hands in the air and a series of rock spikes emerged from the ground, impaling the vampires that were not fast enough to avoid them. As she turned to face more opponents, she realized one of them was running towards Sarah.

"Sarah, watch out!" she yelled.

The vampire hunter shook out of her trance and reached for her sword, but her movements were too slow: the vampire grabbed her face and started tightening.

"Let me give you a very special kiss." her husband said. A moment later, he bit Stéphanie-Thérèse's neck.

Caught by surprise, Sarah tried to retaliate. Moving frantically, she managed to draw one of her daggers and stuck it in her opponent's chest several times. However, the vampire had an exceptional vitality and did not let go of her. Then she heard a gunshot and the grasp on her loosened. His head partially blown off, the creature crumpled on the floor. Sarah then noticed Klaus, his rifle pointed in her direction.

"Are you all right?" the man asked.

"Yes..." she stuttered. "Those... those were like me before..."

"I understand, but if past gets in your way, how will you be able to fulfill your goal?"

She stared at him, unable to find the words, as the last vampires' screams of death faded out.

Once they made sure that no more creatures were after them, the group gathered and discussed what to do next.

"What a nice welcome party," Jim commented sarcastically.

"It may have been a trap, but the execution was done rather poorly, almost in haste," Dario observed.

Everyone nodded in agreement: up to that point they had watched a complex plan play out in a very skillful way, a sheer contrast with the blind, careless attack they were victim of. The difference was so great it almost seemed the doing of another person.

"Perhaps Nindech is in a tight corner," Mei proposed.

"Or perhaps it's the doing of someone else," Satsuki suggested. "A quick way to slow us down a bit."

"If that is the case, we must hurry to the throne room," Jason said.

Klaus turned to Sarah: she most likely knew the answer. "Sarah, where's the throne room?"

The vampire hunter did not respond.

"Sarah?"

She shook her head in confusion. "I'm sorry... here, I'll show you the way."

Sarah walked next to one of the doors on the opposite side of the room. "This is the passage we are looking for. It will lead us directly to the throne room."

"It's time to settle the score," Satsuki said. "Everyone, let's go."

She set out and everyone moved behind her, headed to the door. Sarah watched them walk her, her mind still engaged in a furious struggle of conflicting feelings.

Klaus noticed her unusual behavior. "Are you all right?"

Sarah shrugged. "I'm not sure on how to answer. What lies ahead frightens me... I fear I may..."

"Try not to worry too much. I can't guarantee it won't be hard for you, but please keep in mind you have allies that will fight by your side. Don't forget that."

His words made Sarah look at her own situation under a different light. Caught in her own personal crusade, she had never thought of the people next to her as allies... or even friends. She had never given it any serious thought, at least since *that incident...*

Trying to keep her doubts at bay, she followed the others.

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Cautiously, the group walked in the throne room. The place inspired both horror and disgust: since when Nindech and Chadim had taken possession of it, it had undergone a drastic change. The once solemn columns had mutated into deformed, pulsating tendrils, and a liquid similar to blood flowed on them. The paintings on the ceiling had become scenes of unnameable slaughter and torture and the tapestries had been torn away. Many skeletons hung from the wall like the remains of sentenced people, their arms and legs arranged in poses of extreme agony. Symbols resembling the ones shown at the Rome briefing were painted on all the walls.

"Not the place I would like to spend my holidays in," Jim observed.

They continued forward as the sound of their footsteps echoed in the seemingly empty hall. Then they saw Nindech.

He was sitting on the throne like a dissolute monarch, with an expression of satisfaction mixed to contempt on his face. Chadim was next to him, unable to dissimulate her uneasiness. A strange, unnatural litany echoed through the hall, but no there was no one chanting it. It made a chill run down on Satsuki's spine.

"Be on your guard," she whispered.

As soon as he saw Sarah, Nindech stood up.

"We see each other again, Stéphanie-Thérèse Bergeret," Nindech said in an unstressed voice.

Sarah stared at him, surprised. A second later surprise turned into hatred and she clenched her fists in rage, until her knuckles became white.

"I am lucky to see you again," she hissed. "Finally I can kill you. It will be an extremely painful death..."

"For addressing your husband, you surely lack manners," Nindech commented mockingly. "But I still see the legacy of your House in your eyes."

"Spare me your irony!" Sarah retorted. "Everything that has happened is your fault! And I even thought I had found a good husband..."

"For me, you indeed were a good wife... a perfect slave. Until that stupid exorcist came into play..."

"Silence! You have no right to speak about him!"

"Why not? Stéphanie-Thérèse, you are *mine* and I will not relinquish you, *ever*. That man dragged you away from my control, so he was no longer allowed to live."

The woman pointed a finger at the man. "So you admitted it... as soon as I was a human being again, thanks to that medicine, you wanted to kill us both!"

"You are correct, my love."

"Someone like you doesn't even understand the word love! Thanks to your doing... to that false medicine, I killed the man I loved! I will never forgive you for that!"

Nindech clapped his hands. "Indeed, it was all your doing. A fine display of drama, my lady. But I fear the time for chatter has ended."

The chant grew louder.

"I only have one more question," he continued. "How did you survive?"

Sarah glared at him. "During the madness... I broke everything in the laboratory, until there was an explosion... and I found myself like this."

The vampire turned towards Chadim, who had stayed silent during the whole conversation.

He shook his head. "Your failure is complete, then."

Steel flashed in his hand, and a second later Chadim staggered, a dagger stuck into her abdomen. Sarah and the others stared at the two, surprised and terrified at the same time.

"Wh..why?" she stuttered. "You... gave me another opportunity..."

"You already failed when you tried to stop them in the banquet hall. How could you think they would fall for such a badly organized trap? Not to mention that I would have never shared my power with anyone like you."

As she fell to her knees, frustration and bewilderment appeared in Chadim's dying eyes. "You... just used me for thousands of years... how could you..."

"To reach my purpose, I do what I want regardless of anyone else, be it man, beast, or demon. Even our other... *allies* were just pawns in my hands. I'm glad that they died already, actually."

Chadim's voice died in her throat as she collapsed on the ground, blood flowing out of her wound.

Mei got into a fighting stance. "Nice job you do with people who believe in you."

"Does it really matter?" Nindech responded. "One, thousands, millions of lives are insignificant for my goal!"

"But you forgot one thing," Jim interjected. "You know, we aren't really going to stand here and cheer you for completing your Evil Master Plan."

Klaus loaded his rifle. "Exactly."

"Your power is definitely great," Dario observed, "but alone does not guarantee an easy victory. A lot have relied on it, like you... and failed against weaker opponents with open minds."

Jason swung his sword in the air, then pointed it at the vampire. "Your sins are too great for you to atone... you will repent with your life."

"This is your final warning: surrender and return back to the darkness. Otherwise you will be annihilated," Satsuki concluded.

Nindech burst into laughter. "What do you think you are, the warriors of justice? Arrogance is not equal to power. But you will realize that soon enough..."

He grabbed Chadim's body by the neck. "You're not dead yet... your heart is still beating. And now you will serve me in another form."

Nindech threw her into the air. "Carry out your duty, slaves!" he shouted.

With a horrifying scream, ethereal creatures flew out from the dark corners of the hall. One after another they dived inside Chadim's body. When the last one melded with her, the woman let out a cry of pain and desperation. Then she fell on the ground and lay still.

Nindech smiled and pulled a cord next to him. Without a sound, a tapestry behind him moved sideways, revealing an opening. Sarah foresaw his intentions and lashed at him with her whip, but it was too late: he had already disappeared inside.

"I won't let you get away!" she exclaimed as she set off in pursuit.

"We need to follow her, or I fear she may get in trouble," Klaus advised.

"Unfortunately, I think we have ended up in a trap," Satsuki replied.

"What?"

The woman pointed at Chadim, still lying on the floor. She started twitching, and with some difficulty got back on her feet. The group stepped back when they saw her face: her eyes were completely white and she was foaming at the mouth. She contorted again, and her body underwent a monstrous metamorphosis. Disgusting bubbles formed over her skin and burst, revealing the muscles and the bone underneath. A large comb emerged from her back as she grew in size,

becoming twice as big as a normal man. Her hands turned into three fingered claws, her hair fell off her head and her teeth grew long and sharp.

"I... won't forgive you!" she screamed.

Chadim shrieked, and her voice echoed throughout the hall. The whole room shook up and cracks formed on the floor. Eventually the stone broke and large chunk of debris fell down towards the group.

"Watch out!" Satsuki yelled.

Everyone moved away as fast as possible, to avoid being crushed. At that very moment Satsuki tripped: while she didn't lose her balance, she was slowed down and before anyone could ever realize what was going on, she was buried under a heap of rock.

"Satsuki!" Jim burst out.

Chadim laughed in a high pitched tone, her voice no longer resembling the one of a human. "One is already gone. She was lucky... for what you have done to me you will suffer, much, much more!"

A voice rose from the rubble. "Who ever said I was gone?"

Immediately afterwards, a complex pattern of symbols and other glyphs formed around the mound that had covered Satsuki, and a cold wind blew. It grew stronger and stronger, until the skeletons and the tapestries in the room were blown away. Then the pile of stone exploded with a loud thunder, and Satsuki emerged from inside.

Her appearance had changed: she was significantly taller, and most of her clothes had been torn away. Her body was partially covered with scales, her ears were long and pointed, and her eyes had become two fissures. Two horns emerged from her hair on the top of her head, and a pair of large wings, similar to a bat's, were on her back.

Being a Ghu'dharan, an unholy offspring of a man and a creature of the Darkness, Satsuki had drawn from the power of her cursed blood to assume the shape of a demon of the Outer Planes. She did not like it, but after Yumiko had gone missing, she had been training to keep herself in such a state as long as possible, fearing a possible confrontation with her.

Jim sighed in relief. "I'm glad you're ok."

"Something like that won't kill me." Satsuki said, throwing away what was left of her clothing. "And now, let's deal with her."

Chadim took a step forward, enraged. "I don't care about what you are. You will all die now!"

She brought down one of her deformed hands to strike Jim down. He rolled on the floor, avoiding the attack, and fired at the same time, but he could not

aim correctly and only caused superficial wounds. Meanwhile, Mei jumped from behind and landed a flying kick on her face. However, Chadim did not even flinch. Visibly annoyed, she made a gesture and hundreds of needles shot out of her skin, directed at the Chinese woman.

Unable to dodge, Mei brought her palms together and concentrated her own *Chi* to form an invisible shield in front of her, and all the projectiles bounced off the barrier. But to protect herself, she had let her guard down. She would have been torn apart by the creature's claws had not Dario pushed her out of the way. Jason tried to find an opening, but Chadim moved so fast he couldn't get near enough.

"It's worthless to resist." Chadim snarled. "I will not find peace while you are alive!"

"Boy, you are boring," Jim commented.

"Silence! It's all your fault! I was respected... I was appreciated by Master Nindech! Then you came... and I lost everything... to become like this! I will never be able to turn back to what I was, I even feel I will not live long... hours, probably. But I can seek my revenge!"

Caught by her talk, Chadim had not noticed that Satsuki had moved closer. When she realized, it was too late. The woman grabbed both her arms and kicked her in the stomach: Chadim hurled backwards and crashed into a wall.

"Don't play the tragic heroine." Satsuki had no trace of compassion in her eyes. "Instead of crying now, wonder about why did you side with evil in the first place."

Chadim staggered to get on her feet. "What do you know?"

"More than what you do. That's why the lure of the Darkness does not work with me."

"I'll shut your mouth by force!"

As soon as Chadim tried to move, Dario opened fire with his machine gun. She covered her face with her arms and all the bullets were deflected by her strong bones. She smiled. She was invulnerable!

At that very moment Klaus threw something towards her, a square object that slid next to her feet. At first, Chadim did not know what it was, but her eyes widened when she noticed it was a fragmentation grenade. She desperately tried to move away...

An explosion shook the room, and part of Chadim's left leg was severely maimed. Incapable of keeping herself on her feet, she fell to her knees screaming in pain.

Klaus's face was like thunder. "You should have more respect for what you call 'insects' ..."

"I... I was not meant to be defeated by your hands! I was supposed to rule this world!" she shouted, caught by frustration.

Jason pointed his rapier at her. "Ruler or not... your sins lay heavy upon you."

"The judgment of an insect has no meaning!"

Chadim was about to shoot her needles at Jason when the Englishman suddenly disappeared. She looked around, but she didn't find him. Where did he go?

Sharp pain brought her to reality: a bullet shot by Jim had hit her in the shoulder. She lashed out at the man, but her hands only grabbed air. Her wounded leg and arm were slowing her down, and she could no longer react fast enough. Despite the bursts coming from Jim, Dario and Klaus, she managed to stand up with an enormous effort.

It was then that Jason appeared, right above her. Caught off guard, there was nothing she could do: the man thrust his sword in her left eye. The creature was shaken by pain and let out a long cry as her body was shaken by convulsions.

"No!" she yelled in frustration. "I cannot... cannot be defeated!"

"You have used your power to subdue innocents, you took their lives away and not even their souls knew peace." Satsuki declared, like a judge passing a death sentence.

Chadim paid no attention to her. She had completely lost her sanity. "No, no, no!"

One of her arms became unnaturally long and she lashed it as Satsuki, like a whip. But the woman was faster, and brought her hand down on her opponent's arm like a sword: Chadim's severed limb fell to the ground, twitching. A moment later, Satsuki grabbed her neck.

"Return from whence you came," she said coldly.

Her right arm pierced Chadim's chest from side to side. The creature's body shook violently, then became still. Satsuki gently placed it on the ground, and within seconds it changed back to human form.

Jason recovered his sword from the ground and covered Chadim with one of the torn tapestries. "May your soul find peace in the heavens."

"What a psycho," Jim remarked. "Luckily, it was less tough than it looked."

"We have to follow Sarah: she ran after that other vampire." Dario pointed at the passage near the throne.

Mei put a finger over her lips. "Perhaps he actually wanted to separate her from us."

"We need to get back to her as soon as we can." Jason suggested. "Who knows what might happen..."

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Satsuki and the others ran through a narrow corridor: in less than a minute they reached a small square-shaped room. It was bare, completely dug into stone. The only decoration was a large circle on the floor, made up by many bizarre and convoluted shapes. Nindech and Sarah were there, engaged in a fierce battle. The vampire had a long sword in his hand, and his ability was as good as the woman's.

"Stop right there!" Sarah yelled, noticing that her companions had stepped in. "I need to be the one who kills him!"

"Don't be reckless!" Satsuki exclaimed.

Sarah did not pay attention to her. She parried her opponent's slash and kicked him in the stomach. She then held her weapon with both hands and brought it down directly on the vampire's blade. The impact was so strong that Nindech's arm stiffened, and he lowered his guard. She took advantage of that and an instant later Nindech's sword flew out of his hands, away from him.

"It's over," she snarled.

"I see you are a fierce warrior now... exactly how I used to remember you. You gave this stare to your victims... the men, women and children you have slain under my orders," Nindech said calmly.

"I am not what I was!" Sarah shouted.

"Oh, really? Then why are you lusting for my blood? A normal human being would not do so..."

She rose her weapon. "Shut up!"

Realizing Nindech had purposely angered her, Jim opened his mouth to warn her, but Sarah had already moved: her blade opened a large cut on Nindech's chest. However, only a single drop of blood flowed out of it, falling exactly over the patterns on the ground.

"Thank you." Nindech smiled. "Now the Ritual finally begins!"

The entire circle shone of a blinding light, and everyone had to shield their eyes. Outside, lightning arched around the unfinished construction and thunderbolts shot towards the towers of the castle. Dark clouds covered the sky in an instant and the ground shook like in an earthquake.

Sarah had lost sight of Nindech. She was still confused by what had been happening when she found him before her eyes. She readied her sword, but the vampire punched her violently in the stomach, and she collapsed on the floor, unconscious. Satisfied, Nindech put his hands over the mystic symbols.

A huge shockwave hit the rest of the group, slamming them against the walls. Satsuki felt the air being knocked out of her lungs and she desperately tried to

keep herself conscious, but it was a battle she could not win. The last thing she saw was an expression of triumph over Nindech's face. Then she fell into the embrace of the darkness.

