

Chapter 8

Beyond the Darkness

In the beginning, there was the Darkness.

I am... but does it really matter to know my name? I have many, some fearful, some joyful, some forgotten, some that will always be remembered. I am just... *me.*

I dwelt in the Darkness since the beginning of time. I had no mother, but the Darkness felt like a mother's womb to me. With me there were others... insignificant, imperfect creatures. Some challenged me, but I devoured them. They tasted *good*, and provided me with the nourishment I required.

Eventually I got tired of such lowly souls. I needed something better, stronger, because my hunger had no limits. Therefore, I walked away from the Darkness that had been my home for aeons...

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Slowly, Satsuki opened her eyes, groaning. Her body ached all over. *What happened?* she thought. Then everything returned to her: the fight with Chadim, Sarah's confrontation with Nindech, and the Ritual of Hell. Then she had fallen unconscious. *And now...*

She suddenly realized that grass, and not cold stone, was pushing against her back. Surprised, she managed to sit down and take a look at the surroundings.

She was in what seemed to be a large, grass covered plain interspersed with hills. The sun was going down in the sky: dusk was not too far away. Large, square-shaped stone blocks were put in apparently random positions all around her. However, a careful examination showed a logic in the placements: they looked like remains of ancient buildings, and judging from the number they used to be part of an extremely large complex which stretched as far as the eye could see. As the conservation was terrible, there was no way of telling their function.

The thought of her companions brought Satsuki away from the view, and she batted her wings nervously. First, she had to find them, then she would try to figure out where they had ended up.

As she was looking around, Jim's voice echoed behind her. "Satsuki! Finally we found you!"

Jim and the others came running at her. They had little bruises, but they bore no serious injuries.

The woman sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. With all that has just happened, I was very worried about you all."

"Looks like we have been teleported away," Jason noticed. "But how far, I don't know."

"The landscape is not Romanian," Dario added. "And it's not even French, for that matter."

"This is a step for the Ritual," Jim explained. "The documents I read about it said something like *And when the last blood will be shed, the Maker shall return to the Origins...* Only, I don't know where the 'Origins' are."

Satsuki turned to Klaus. "Klaus, does your portable GPS unit still work?"

The man nodded. "It took a few hits, but it hasn't been damaged."

"Can you please check our location?"

Klaus pulled out a device similar to a mobile phone and turned it on. The display lit up, showing an approximate location of the group: he stared at it, perplexed.

"No signal?" Jim inquired.

"No... it's working perfectly."

"Then what is the matter?"

"Well... according to the positional data, we ended up in Ireland."

Mei kicked a rock away in frustration. "France first, then an old castle in Romania, and now *Ireland!* I don't understand what's going on anymore!"

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Then, the Maker left the Darkness...

The Darkness was no longer my home. For years I floated in the nameless void, uncertain of my own direction. Then, one day, I landed on a lone world. It was very different than the Darkness which had been my shelter for so long: its inhabitants were simple-minded and completely powerless. They interpreted my coming as a sign of their ancient gods, so they even built a magnificent city for me.

The fools! They wanted a savior... but I was their nemesis. They were different from my companions from the Darkness, but their flesh and souls were exquisite! For millennia I ruled over them, devouring generations of people, until the land was barren and empty.

That had been a delightful experience for me. I wanted to feel again the sensation of inferior lives fading out, and to hear cries of pain and terror. Therefore, I set out again in the nameless void, to find another world to pillage and conquer. I did not want to stop...

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"It may be absurd, but this is proof that the Ritual is taking place," Jim affirmed.

Mei groaned. "But it feels like we're jerked from one place to another and we still don't have a clue."

"Well, at least we know the Ritual. It mentions that after returning to the Origins, the Maker will reclaim what had been lost. Then life as we know it will end in a crimson holocaust. From what we know, the soul eaters wanted to complete it to get more... stuff to eat. But I doubt they really knew the real meaning of the Ritual."

"But how could one recover anything from a bunch of broken rocks?"

"These rocks should not be there," Klaus interjected. "I mean, I know they were part of buildings, but the topographic data don't show anything of the sort for this location. They materialized out of thin air."

"Perhaps this ruin is what has been lost," Dario proposed.

Satsuki gave him a worried look. "Somehow I doubt it. I don't sense anything unnatural coming from these stones. They're just rocks."

"But then why summoning something that's just a worthless ravine?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. There must be something else we are not aware of."

Jason looked around. "Where's Sarah?"

The question cut off the conversation and made their blood run cold. They had completely forgotten about the vampire hunter! She had been knocked out by Nindech after the Ritual had started, and they had lost sight of her since then.

"I'm afraid our friend here wants her for something..." Jim said.

"Perhaps he just wants vengeance," Mei suggested.

Satsuki shook her head. "No, he proved to be far more cunning than that. Just remember what he did to his allies. For sure, Sarah is in danger. We must find her before..."

Like a response to the woman's words, the grass around them dried out and withered in an instant, leaving only bare, sterile ground. Their senses were suddenly smacked by the feeling of an enormous power, so strong that made them almost vomit. It conveyed feeling of destruction, hatred, and hunger... a never-ending hunger longing to devour, tear apart and consume until nothing would be

left. In the distance, some parts of the ruined complex shot out bright beams at the sky.

“Whatever he was planning to do, it has started now!” Mei exclaimed.

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At a point in time, the Maker found the Corrupt World...

I spent millennia moving from a world to another, emptying them of everything that lived. Each of them was a pleasure, but I was not satisfied: I longed for more, more! After all, the weaklings that confronted me were absolutely no match for me. I crushed any opposition with ease.

Then I arrived on a place called Earth...

There were some... interesting life forms there. They identified themselves as *Taur-phon* and had reached a certain level of civilization, but their better days were long past. Now a decadent population, they spent their days recalling the ages of their former glory. Their knowledge of magic was basic, but if continued, may have been a threat to my existence. Therefore, I set on a crusade to completely destroy them.

It was a genocide of immense proportions, something I thoroughly enjoyed. In the mean time, I made contact with other entities that had migrated from the Darkness... As a matter of fact, one of them had been almost annihilated by the last living *Taur-phon*. I was about to eat her alive, but then I thought that a servant may have come useful and I spared her life. Once her usefulness would end, I would kill her.

I sensed other beings like her: their power was infinitely smaller than mine, and they confined themselves in old dungeons. They worshipped an ancient god, but their religion was just an excuse to feast on souls, an activity that enjoyed as much as I did. They did not pose a threat to me so I let them live, as long as they did not get in my way.

Centuries passed, and I stalked the world as a god, for no weapon could harm me. In the mean time, another insignificant race had risen from the animal world: mankind. They were probably the weakest creatures that I had ever seen, but they seemed to adapt fairly quickly to the environment around them. Overconfident in my own power, I just saw them as fine food.

Thousands died by my hand, and I thought I was invincible... but then the resonance of a fight in the Darkness was about to have a terrifying consequence for me. Asgaroth the Ancient crashed on Earth, and by doing so, he cut off my link with the Darkness. Suddenly my power decreased, and the filthy humans took this as an opportunity to retaliate.

Their shamans called upon their primitive magic and cast a horrible curse on me. Had I been with the Darkness, this would have made no impact, but in my weakened state there was no way I could resist. My body was tattered, my eyes were burnt and my strength was sapped.

And so I fled... away from them, away from everyone... until I could get my power back.

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Deep inside the ruins there were the remains of a large shrine, probably the best conserved part of the whole complex. Circular in shape, its perimeter was delimited by a great number of conical shaped, pointed stones, and a large stone altar stood in the middle. It was decorated with strange carvings that were wrought by inhuman hands, at a time when mankind had not yet walked upon Earth.

Satsuki and the others ran inside and saw Sarah lying on the altar, unconscious. All her weapons had been taken away, but she had not been restrained.

However, that wasn't what attracted the group's attention. Nindech was next to Sarah, flailing his arms at the sky as beams of white light from the stones converged on his body. He was laughing hysterically, almost as if he had lost his sanity completely.

"I'm getting it back! I'm getting it back!" he repeated obsessively.

"Release Sarah at once!" Satsuki exclaimed as she ran towards him.

Nindech glanced at her, as surprised as if he had seen a mosquito. "Oh? You still try to stop me, you fools? There is nothing you can do now!"

He pointed his right palm at the woman and lightning shot out of his hand. Satsuki quickly set her hands in motion and the bolt broke against an invisible shield. Nevertheless, the impact was so strong that she was dragged backwards, digging deep holes in the ground with her feet.

Seeing his leader in danger, Dario opened fire with his machine gun: every bullet hit the target, but Nindech did not seem to be wounded. Klaus threw a grenade at him, but it exploded in mid-air, before even getting close.

Nindech laughed louder. "Do you realize your own powerlessness? You're just toys in my hands... and I'm tired of playing!"

More lightning darted from his hands, and only Satsuki's barrier prevented the group from being hit. Nevertheless, she knew she could not last for long. Keeping the shield up was draining a considerable amount of her strength, and her opponent's attacks were getting stronger and stronger. Soon she would not be able to keep herself in her demon form... and that would mean death for her and everyone else.



Nindech put up a defiant smile. "I will just let you suffer for now... you will have to watch as the Ritual is completed!"

* * *

The Maker lived as a fugitive, looking for a way to recover his Power...

I was angered. No, I was furious! Those stupid, wretched humans! How could they do that to me! Despite the terrible damage they had inflicted, they had not managed to destroy me. And so, as centuries passed, I devised a plan. If I could gather enough souls, I would be able to combine my own power with Taur-phon magic, creating a spell I called "The Ritual of Hell". I decided to disseminate information about it among the humans that kept loyal to me, in order to make sure it would not be forgotten.

However, I couldn't do this alone. Therefore I approached the other entities and offered them an agreement: if they helped me and they would get plenty of souls. Not knowing the real motives behind my offer, they stupidly accepted. We even created a mystic glyph to set the seal on our alliance, which would grant protection to our forces.

They lent me some of their power, and I used it to spawn my own underlings, an army of soldiers under my direct command. Being born out of my weakened state, they had great power during the night, but sunlight would burn them to ashes. Humans began referring to them as "vampires", but I defined them "the People of the Darkness".

One of them was quite intelligent and powerful. He even managed to kill a king and take his place. He followed my orders to the letter, slaughtering as many people as possible to obtain their souls. Vlad *Dracul*, you were a fine servant! You even managed to start the Ritual once!

Unfortunately, he was slain by mysterious people who claimed to defend mankind and the Ritual was interrupted.

I did not lose heart and continued scheming plans. But fate had another cruel surprise for me.

When I met with my other...allies, a stranger appeared. I took his life easily, but that didn't prevent him from launching a spell that would have erased our existences had I not countered it. For six hundred years we floated between life and death, until Asgaroth's demise enabled us to walk on this world again.

And now, I'm finally able to get my power back! Despite the failure of my original plan, I have this woman before me on the altar. She's a mixture of human and my own blood... by devouring her soul I will complete the Ritual and become invincible! And Earth shall know the fury of a god...

* * *

"This won't do," Jim commented from behind Satsuki, who was still struggling to deflect the lightning. "Can't you do something?"

"I have to focus on keeping the barrier," Satsuki replied. "A single crack means we're history!"

"But how can we get near?" Jason asked.

"If we could stop whatever is happening, perhaps we may have a chance," Dario proposed. "These stones look like the key elements for the whole Ritual."

Mei snapped her fingers. "Good idea, my lovely Dario!"

The woman directed her gaze to the stones and concentrated. Thanks to her own power, she saw a large quantity of *Chi* which moved from pillar to pillar and then on to Nindech. The weave was complex and probably the result of a very powerful magic. At first she thought there was no way of disrupting that structure, but her expert eyes identified a possible weak spot.

"I see it!" she exclaimed, triumphant. "The stones draw a huge amount of *Chi* from the surroundings, but the power is so great that is unstable, and so they are linked together to avoid unbalances. If we can destroy just one of them, the balance will be disrupted, and the rest of those rocks will just blow up!"

"You forget something," Klaus intervened. "How can we do that? He'll notice..."

"Commander, if we could direct his attention elsewhere for just a little while, it would be doable." Dario suggested.

"A good idea, Dario." Jim said. "Perhaps one of us can crawl behind the pillars and once behind him, throw a smoke grenade to confuse him. That would give us enough time."

"I have been taught guerrilla tactics, so I will do it."

Mei gave him a worried look. "Don't get yourself killed!"

Dario patted her on the shoulder. "I won't take unnecessary risks."

He ensured Nindech's attention was entirely focused on Satsuki and crouched. He slowly crawled behind the pillars, forcing his body to move only the necessary to proceed forward, his face a mask of iron concentration. He had covered just a couple of meters when a lightning bolt headed at him. Dario rolled as fast as he could and it missed him by an inch, burning the ground where he had been.

"What are you trying to do?" Nindech exclaimed. "I can see right behind your tricks!"

Dario quickly ran back under the protection of the barrier. "I'm sorry. It looks I can't advance much without being spotted."

"Can't we do anything else?" Jason asked, caught by frustration.

Satsuki yelped and fell to one knee. "Looks like this is it... The barrier will break in a matter of seconds."

"Can't luck be *ever* on our side?" Jim burst out.

He had just finished the sentence when Sarah's her eyes sprung open. Uncontrollable anger got hold of her as she saw Nindech.

"Die!" she screamed, jumping at his throat.

Nindech turned and kicked her away, but by doing so he cast his gaze away from the others.

"Now!" Satsuki yelled. "It's our only chance!"

Jason swung his rapier in the air and a large shockwave cut the tip of the nearest pillar. Klaus followed up with a grenade which blew away large chunks of rock, and Dario fired continuous bursts. Large cracks opened on the stone.

"Time for me to pull all the stops!" Mei shouted as she gathered all her remaining *Chi* in her hands.

A large beam shot out of her palms and hit the pillar: the rock dissolved into a rain of light, revealing a strange structure underneath. It resembled the one of a miniature tree, with a central body from which many branches emerged, but it was not made of wood. Its surface was black and smooth, and seemed to capture all the light that was cast on it.

Mei pointed at the strange item. "That is what's holding everything together! We need to bring it down!"

At the same time, Nindech realized what had been going on. He had to stop those lowly creatures before they broke the balance! Not even him knew what would happen if it would break...

He rushed forward. "I will not let you do that!"

He found Satsuki in his way. Trying to get rid of her quickly, he just punched forward. Satsuki avoided the rash attack easily and grabbed his arm, throwing her opponent against the altar. Nindech immediately got to his feet, but he had lost precious seconds. When he looked at the group, Jim had already pointed his gun at the structure.

"Game over," the man said, and pulled the trigger.

Jim's shot pierced the stone from side to side. For a moment it wavered then it broke in a myriad of fragments. Immediately afterwards the beams that were converging on Nindech turned red and the pillars exploded in succession, one after another.

Klaus rose his fist in the air. "We did it!"

A scream that had nothing human shattered their hopes of an easy victory. Nindech was on his knees, holding his face and contorting his body in pain. When he looked at them, his eyes had lost any resemblance to those of a human: they were completely black, and something that resembled liquid fire burnt in them.

"You... you... you..." he repeated obsessively, foaming at the mouth. "You shall die!"

He jumped on them with unexpected speed, and they had to scatter to avoid being hit. Mei rolled on the ground and kicked at Nindech's stomach, but he anticipated her attack and grasped her leg. She screamed as he swung her in the air. Dario ran towards him, trying to rescue her. Using Mei as a mace, Nindech slammed her against the man: both were thrown away like skittles.

Shots were fired, and large holes opened in Nindech's left arm. Not too far from him, Klaus had his shotgun pointed at him. He was about to fire again when Nindech covered the distance between them with a single jump. Grinning, he broke the rifle in two and punched the German in the stomach. Gurgling, Klaus collapsed on the ground.

Nindech sensed a presence above him and sidestepped just in time to avoid Jason's blade. In response, he dealt a chop that would have decapitated the Englishman had he not crouched fast enough. Missing the target left him open for a counter attack: before he could regain his balance, Jason's sword swung in the air and Nindech's right hand was severed off. Blood copiously flowed out of the wound and he stepped back, screaming.

He did not have time to retaliate. Jim fired at him repeatedly, emptying a whole magazine. In a second Nindech's body was riddled with bullets.

Even if madness had clouded his mind, Nindech felt desperation gripping what had been left of his cursed soul. At that rate, he would succumb! He had to do something, he had to...

Too late he realized Satsuki was behind him. She slammed her palm on her back and a cinereous tide spread over his body. Writhing desperately, Nindech tried to break free from the spell as his movements became slower and slower.

"I curse you..." he muttered. "I was... so close..."

His mouth moved again, but no sound came out of it. His skin now completely turned to grey, he stood still, like a statue in a bizarre pose.

Satsuki glanced him in contempt. He had been the cause of great suffering, and a menace for the whole life on Earth... just because of a lowly desire he could not control. It was time to put an end to that: she grasped Nindech's petrified head and broke it under her fingers.

The moment she did that, the rest of the creature's body dissolved into dust, and

the aura that permeated the circle of stones faded away. As the wind dispersed what had been left of the vampire, Satsuki pondered on her own existence... a minute, powerless human crushed between cosmic battles between unearthly beings. A quick look at Jim dissipated her anguish: she had people whom she cared for... and that mattered much more than raw power.

Jim massaged his back. "It was tough, but we did it. Evil Overlords 0, S.T.E.A.L. 1."

"Yes, but my beautiful body is all bruised." Mei grumbled. "How will Dario appreciate my... qualities now?"

"You should worry about tending your wounds." Dario retorted, impassive.

Mei puffed and Jason smiled at the two. Then Sarah came into the clearing, limping and holding her right arm.

"Is... it over?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Satsuki nodded.

She fell to her knees and started punching the ground, crying. "I'm such a failure! I did not want to kill vampires to turn back to myself... I just wanted to avenge my loved one... the one I killed myself! And now I wasn't even able to do it!"

Klaus handed her a handkerchief. "Well, not all's lost."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"You had a purpose in your life... well, it doesn't mean it's the only one! Just find a new one. It's that simple."

"A new purpose?"

"Didn't you say you cannot die? You have enough time to find it."

Sarah stood up and wiped her tears off. "You may be right..."

"Good. And remember, you have allies."

Allies... Sarah had always ignored them. But since she had fought alongside Satsuki and her group, it had felt different. She had to admit it: her sorrow had locked her away from everyone. Now she had a chance... a real chance to amend what she had done in the past. And perhaps... her allies will have helped her to find a new goal to believe in.

Her mood changed in an instant. "You!" she exclaimed, pointing at Satsuki.

"Me?" Satsuki answered, confused.

"Yes, you! Since you always end up in trouble, I have a proposal!"

"Sarah... I don't really understand what do you mean..."

"Let me in your group of good-for-nothings! I only require a large pay... and plenty of food! Rest assured that I will turn it into a perfect team!"

Jim sighed. "I would not want to be commanded by *you* not even if my life depended on it."

Sarah glared at him. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, nothing..."

Satsuki chuckled. "It's ok, Sarah. I will think about it."

The other woman grabbed her hands. "Thank you, thank you, my dear Satsuki! And now, let's go!"

She walked away solemnly. Everyone was too surprised to stop her.

"What a nutcase," Jim commented in a low voice.

"She's funny, in her own way." Satsuki replied.

"We have different tastes..."

"That may be, but if even someone like her has asked to join our group, it means we have worked pretty well."

The man stroke his chin. "I admit we did great. Better than I could expect."

"We may even gather all these people in a single special unit. What do you think?"

"Good idea! But let's talk it over at dinner. My treat."

Satsuki smiled. "Sure, why not?"

Despite her happiness, part of her mind was not completely at ease. She still couldn't figure how Yumiko had been involved in the situation. She had killed one of the soul eaters, according to the report of her companions, but she also mentioned being after some kind of *prey*... But if it wasn't Nindech or his followers, what could it be?

She put the thought aside. She would worry about it later: it was relieving enough that she had not forced to face her.

In an instant as her senses tingled with a feeling of danger. A second later a shadow, almost invisible, darted towards Jim. Acting instinctively, she pushed him out of the way. Pain exploded in her chest as she was slammed against the altar. Before she could stand up, a dark gas spouted out of the stones around her. It clouded her eyes, and went inside her ears and nose. She was unable to see, hear, or smell. Then she felt lifted in the air...

Jim yelled her name as the mist carried her away.

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On a hill, the watcher saw a dark cloud flying away. The event relieved him: finally he had managed to hide his tracks from whoever had been following him.

And overall, he was quite satisfied, despite the death of his subordinate. Chaos had been stopped with relative ease by those... S.T.E.A.L people. They proved to be rather efficient, defeating an enemy that was much stronger than them. That had saved him from a lot of trouble, and therefore he had been able to pursue his plans undetected.

But he knew... the moment for the clouds to dissipate was coming near. And then, even they would become his enemies: nevertheless, he wasn't worried at all. He would just crush them, like he had done with all the others.

The time for the advent of the Ruler of Order was near!

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The fog dissipated and Satsuki could see again. She was in a ruin similar to the one she had been in before, but the state of conservation was much better. It looked like a hall of some sort, but without a ceiling. Large corridors departed in several directions, their walls almost intact, and four finely decorated shrines had been placed in specific points around her.

Her senses told her she was not too far from her companions. She just needed to contact them...

A familiar voice laden with sarcasm made her shake with fear. "Do you like this place, Satsuki *onee-san*?"

Satsuki spun round: Yumiko was standing in front of her, cruel and beautiful.

"Ancient people sacrificed young children to their gods here," she continued. "It is a fitting place for an execution, don't you think? "

"Yumiko..." Satsuki murmured as she put up her guard.

The girl smiled devilishly. "Come now. It is time to die."

END OF PART TWO
TO BE CONTINUED ON BOOK THREE
"THE PATH TO THE LIGHT"



