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MANY ARRIVALS

Of all the nights to be late, why did it have to be tonight? There had been many close calls before in the past, oh yes, but this time was different. This time it mattered more than ever. Several people were counting on her—some were very important and some just wanted to hear her play, but they all shared in wonder where she was at the moment.

Sky cursed again beneath her breath, shaking the snow from her hair. She stared menacingly toward her impish friend Tash who was smiling like a child who just stole a cookie while mommy wasn't watching.

"I think we may be in trouble," she said, walking around to the backside of the wagon. Four others, three men and one woman emerged from the small coach and joined her. The five began unloading instruments in the blistering cold while Sky stood watching.

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“You *think* we’re in trouble?” Her voice cracked in the cold, but the sarcasm was unwavering. “The one night we have to make an impression on Garrin and we arrive twenty minutes late. Trouble isn’t the word for it.”

Tash reappeared from behind the wagon, holding a violin case in one hand and a clarinet case in the other. Her cheeks were ruddy and her auburn hair was speckled white. Sky could see shivering in her shallow breathing. Her eyes winced at the passing wind.

The snow had picked up since the start of their short quarrel in front of the mansion. Darkness had fallen hours ago and with it came a cold that Sky had never known. There had to be an ocean nearby, she thought. *I know there is. I can smell it in the air.*

“Surely Garrin will understand our wagon threw a wheel when we were halfway out of Brookstone.” This huffy remark belonged to Frederic, a short, chubby cellist who Sky was forced to sit next to in a cramped wagon for two-hundred miles. Her thighs ached at the thought of it.

She didn’t want her and Tash’s argument to become a group discussion so she stood silent, waiting for the rest to gather and sort their instruments. Without another comment, the group of musicians headed for the main door of the mansion that loomed in front of them. The wind howled and Sky could hear the distant *REEK! REEK! REEK!* from what was most likely a weather vane.

This place wasn't this cold the last time we came, she thought. Or this unnerving for that matter.

It had been nearly a year since Sky's first visit to the Birchlock Estate. She hated the trip, the area, and most of the people, but the pay was good and could become permanent if she played her hand right. Sky and Tash—piano and violin prodigies, were musicians for hire; also called Independent Artists of Music to the inner circles of performers. They made their living by playing for nobles, region officials, and sometimes, royalty. The pay was good, great in fact, and a lot better than staying in a permanent orchestra who played night after night in the same location.

But tonight was special. Tonight Sky and Tash had an opportunity to forge something out of their lives. They had a chance to prove their years of constant study had finally paid off.

A few weeks ago, Sky received a letter from Garrin Franzworth, a man who formerly hired her to entertain his family after his first daughter's wedding ceremony. Though Sky had not been the only musician—there had been nearly forty thanks to Garrin's infinitely deep pockets—she was met with great interest. The nobleman told her in private that he would love to see her perform again. And he would, only this time he would get to hear Tash play as well. As gifted as the girl was, it was going to be hard for Garrin to pass her up.

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I guess he assumed we love traveling two-hundred miles into the bitter cold, she chided to herself.

But in all fairness, Sky was quite honored. If Garrin hired her full-time, her days of struggling would be over. This was her opportunity to give her children a good start in life. It was bad enough being forced to grow up without a father, but at least this would guarantee they would never have to go to bed hungry. It would also mean their mommy would always be near.

Suddenly she felt overwhelmed at the thought of her babies. She hadn't seen little Elana and Daniel, three and six, for over a month and just now the burden on her heart was growing unbearable. She needed to be getting back to them but that wouldn't be possible until at least another week. She had a job to do here, one that would require her to play at least two nights. She only hoped her children understood.

Turning her attention away from her loved ones, Sky looked upon the house in all its greatness just as she had the last time she visited. From where she stood, the mansion looked more like a castle than the manor house of a wealthy gold miner. The facade appeared to be made completely out of grey granite. She looked up and could see no more than twenty or thirty feet. The snow created a dark haze as it flew wildly about. A few lights could be seen so far up that had they not been golden, Sky would have mistaken them for stars. There was

a balcony on the second floor and probably one on the third, had she been able to see. As the group stepped up to the column-filled patio, the large entry doors swung inward, greeting them all with kindled warmth. The massive foyer was immensely bright, having sconces every few feet on each wall. To the left and right were stairs that joined together to create a balcony along the entire second floor. Toward the back of the room sat two more sets of elegant stairs that parted around a doorway, then twisted all the way up to meet the other half of the landing. There were several doors on each side of the upper level. The landing ran the entire length of the foyer and disappeared around the corners on both sides. This house was truly massive.

“Quite a bitter night, eh?” Came the shrill quirk of the doorman. He handed each of the musicians their customary ‘welcome note’ that had been autographed by Garrin himself. Sky stuffed hers into her pocket and walked in. “Garrin is waiting,” the doorman said as soon as the group of musicians was standing on the massive lion skin rug.

The young man, who could be no more than fifteen, quickly slammed the door shut, then braced and latched it twice. He dusted the snow from his sandy blond hair and composed himself as still as a statue.

Sky and her group hurried across the foyer, kicking snow from their boots and admiring the glamour of the mansion as they

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went. The chandelier hanging twenty feet above them, the stucco work on the walls and ceiling, the ornate oak banisters with horse motifs that lined the stairway and the landing above, the massive fireplace burning to their right was all just too beautiful to hurry by so quickly.

Once past the foyer and into the hall that would lead them straight to the ballroom, they began shedding their coats and opening their instrument cases. Sky unfastened the small black folder she had clung to for a week and pulled out several sheets of music, promptly trying to order them as she went. Groups of people littered the hallway—some musicians, others guests, a few servants. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits tonight, just like any ordinary party thrown by Garrin.

Halfway down the hall, Kendas, the second violinist stopped, a look of pure bewilderment surfacing on his face. Sky turned to him, equally puzzled. However, when he lifted his small case and gave it a quick rattle, she realized what was wrong. She made a quiet, little curse beneath her breath.

During their whole trip here, Kendas sat toward the front of the wagon, singing ballads and playing soft music on his violin. It was beautiful music, sweet and soothing, but only to his own ears. Sky had grown tired of it just a few miles out of Brookstone.

His violin was still sitting in the wagon.

Before Kendas could say anything or admit to being completely irresponsible, Sky blurted, "I'll get it. You guys get set up." She handed Tash her folder, rolled her eyes, and then headed back toward the door, draping her coat around her again.

The young doorman quickly sprang to life and removed the barricades from the entrance, making sure it was open for her when she reached it. Sky stepped off the patio with her head down to the cold. Now she was facing the wind and her sensitive skin couldn't take this kind of beating. She ran across the front courtyard toward the wagon.

Mardin, the driver thought it best to pull close to the front since they were running late, but as she got closer to their abandoned coach, she noticed something odd.

At first she didn't quite realize what it was since she looked through squinted eyes, and probably because her mind was fixed on getting back to the concert. Just before the wagon she saw footsteps. Not only did she see the six sets that belonged to her group, but several others. Not just a few, either. At least twenty or thirty people had trudged through the snow, toward the mansion. Looking back through the darkness, it appeared as if they emerged from the woods, then walked around the wagon on both sides.

A creepy sensation suddenly swept over Sky and she felt her arms break out in gooseflesh. She looked around, turning a full circle, searching for a trace of anyone, *anything*, but found nothing. It was a

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silent night, save for the occasional *REEK!* of the weather vane. Distant voices could be heard but she was certain those came from inside the mansion or the other wagons around the corner. Garrin had a regular patrol of guards but she spotted none. That was quite odd but she couldn't blame them for wanting to be inside right now.

Who the hell would be in the woods this time of night in this kind of weather? She wondered. Opening the wagon door she suddenly realized she didn't know, nor did she care.

Rummaging through the debris on the wagon floor, she found Kendas' violin nestled in a cluttered pile of unfinished music. She plucked it from its bed of parchment and slammed the door shut, noticing something else out of place.

Quickly, she jerked the door open again and stood on the stoop to lift herself up to see the roof of the wagon. "What the hell?" She said aloud, whipping her head up, trying to focus on anything that could be moving in the distance.

Atop the wagon in the four-inch snow were more footprints. There had been at least three people to trudge across it. These were the prints of some very large people, Sky noticed. Or at least wore heavy armor.

Sky shook her head and hopped back down, tucking the violin beneath her arm. As she headed back toward the entrance, she followed the footprints and noticed that all of them branched off

before they reached the patio, heading left and right of the mansion. Every path of prints ran right into the wall, and then disappeared, as if whomever left them passed through the granite facade like a ghost. The pianist looked up to the second floor balcony. A small clump of white fell to the ground and was lost in the mass of snow.

Okay, enough strange happenings for one night, she decided.

When the young man opened the door once again, Sky broke into a sprint toward the ballroom doors. The clusters of people who had been in the hallway earlier had already made their way inside—musicians setting up, guests taking their seats, servants making sure everyone had food and drink in front of them before the concert started. Sky knew what the room and all its contents looked like even before she opened the doors.

The ballroom was large, both long and high, rising thirty feet to a glass dome where snow accumulated into a white ceiling above them. A half-circular stage brought up the rear of the room where it was surrounded on all sides by a 'pit' that seated the forty-member orchestra that accompanied the singer and other performers that were to be on tonight. White clothed tables laden with food and drinks were set up to accommodate more than one hundred guests—all of which were probably full, despite tonight's horrid weather. All three kitchens were running full steam, waiters darting back and forth delivering platters of roasted ham, chicken, elk, bass, fresh

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corn, and a dazzling array of desserts. Garrin threw some of the most lavish parties and with that in mind, Sky was almost glad to be here, despite the cold, the soreness in her legs and the longing for her children.

Before she reached the massive oak doors that would give way to the ballroom, she heard Garrin's voice bellowing out. No doubt he was standing on stage, ready to introduce the orchestra and guest singer, despite the empty piano sitting in the corner. The last time Sky played here, it was the same routine night after night.

Except tonight would be different. Tonight things were going to take a turn for the worse.

Seconds before Sky pushed the door open, she heard the sound of breaking glass ahead of her, but high above. She saw Garrin standing on the stage—short, but well built—then suddenly he was moving quick. He rolled to his left to avoid the glass, powdery snow and some object that fell, landing behind the podium and out of sight. A chorus of cries and shrieks, guests and servants alike, made their way through the room.

Damn, this weather brought down a tree, Sky thought. I hope Garrin is ok. He's gonna be quite upset that an expensive thing like that dome just broke.

Only it wasn't a tree. It wasn't the weather at all. Some of the guests sitting toward the back of the room near the doorway that

harbored Sky stood and moved away from their seats. The members of the orchestra stood up and some even began backing away from the stage while others drew closer. A few of them ran and helped Garrin to his feet as the short man tried his best to back into a corner, never taking his eyes from the fallen object on the stage.

Whatever was behind the podium started to rise, and Sky could almost make it out when—

-BOOM!

Something crashed behind her. In a fit of instinct, she quickly leaped into the ballroom, tossing the violin sprawling back into the hallway. She glanced back down the hall, past the foyer only to see the young doorman pinned against the wall by the large, unhinged door. Blood was running in a steady stream across the marble floor. What looked like the hooves of a giant black steed stepped through in a shower of splinters and snow as the brace flew halfway across the foyer.

By the time she made it to her knees, looking past a table filled with wine and roasted turkey, she saw a large, dark, and fast-moving shape sweep by her, heading down the aisle to the stage, fragments of the crushed violin following in its wake. Just as she had thought, it was indeed a massive, black steed. Atop it sat an armored figure, not at all large, but looking ever as menacing. The horse hopped over the 'pit' and landed solidly on the stage, crushing the podium as if it were made of straw. It circled around so the rider could face the crowd.

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By now everyone in the room had abandoned their seats and made their way to a wall. A few servants and guests—those who heard the horse bursting through the door—had already retreated into the foyer and were helping the doorman. Their screams of anguish told Sky there wasn't much that could be done. The guests still in the ballroom exchanged nervous glances but all kept their eyes trained upon the armored rider.

Sky wasn't sure, but she thought for sure that she heard more screams far off, maybe the sound of swords clashing together. Then again, maybe she was imagining. Things were suddenly moving very quickly.

Her concentration of trying to figure out an explanation of what was going on was quickly lost when the dome above shattered again, raining down more glass and billowing snow, as well as more heavy objects. They hit the stage solid. *'Thwack, thwack'!*

Oh gods, those are people, she thought. But her short-lived grief was disrupted when she saw them rising. All of them men, all of them wearing armor. She saw Tash in the corner, a look of awe and fear in her eyes as she stared up at them.

Sky's view was suddenly broken by something that landed on the table in front of her, sending food flying in all directions and making a few of Garrin's guests scurry off screaming. It was a man lying on his back, wearing a blue uniform with Garrin's seal—the seal his guards wore—on his chest. The man's eyes were bulging from their

sockets, his throat apparently torn out. Blood was still gushing from it, running down his chest and over his side onto the table. Had he fallen from the second floor balcony or had he been tossed?

Sky began to scream—

—until she was shaken back to reality by Tash. Her small friend had a frantic look on her face. It was a look that said, *'Please Sky, let's get the hell out of here.'*

Another armored man leaped from the balcony above them, landing not far from the stage. Then from the balcony to their right, two more were in the air, one landing on a table and sending plates and glasses showering up. This one was female—having long, dark hair, and eyes—eyes that Sky thought for sure were black.

She held Tash by the hand and pulled her further to the left side of the room. There was a doorway that led back through the house, but she had no clue where it went. She had seen servants carrying trays and pitchers of wine from here. For the time being, the girls stepped inside the doorway and watched as the armored figures circled around the room, making sure they could watch everyone. Luckily there were a few overturned tables between the two cowering musicians and the armored men, hopefully hiding them.

The windows on both sides of the room suddenly shattered, drawing the guests from those walls toward the center of the ballroom. More armored men had entered, lessening the hopes for

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anyone who planned to escape that way. Sky and Tash were very lucky to be hiding where they were.

It was apparent now that the figure on horseback was a woman. She wore a tight fitting iron cuirass that outlined the contours of her stomach and breasts quite well. The leg plates of her suit were just as form-fitting. Her complete attire looked more like a decorative piece of armor a noble would have in their home, had it not been for the rusted spots. The armor looked very old-weathered even, and there appeared to be a long faded symbol in the center of the breastplate. *It's on all of their breastplates, she noticed. They all have the faded symbol, and they all look like they stole their armor from long dead corpses.*

The woman on horseback let go of the reins, grasped her helmet and pulled it off. Golden-blond hair fell to her shoulders. She was indeed very beautiful-having perfectly tanned skin and flawless cheekbones. She looked upon the room with dark eyes. Sky could see an unmistakable intelligence behind them in the way squinted as she surveyed the room.

Finally the silence was broken when she spoke. "Good evening, everyone." Her voice was small and innocent, but there was something menacing in it. Sky was certain she spoke with a Boudian accent-high north, almost at the other end of the globe from here. "My name is Dyne, and this is my faithful company." She waved her hand around and a few of the armored men smiled. There had to be

nearly twenty of them, and she could hear movement above her and in the main hallway. Tash's hands trembled.

"This is our mansion now. You can either stay and work for me or die in your fancy clothes, right here in this room." The snow continued to fall through the broken dome, painting her hair white.

A murmur of hushed cries and nervous voices sounded from one side of the room to the other. The woman called Dyne smiled a delicate grin, but her eyes held determination. She didn't appear to expect objection. Two more armored men stepped in from the main hallway and stood there, as if ready to stop a mob of fleeing people. Hopefully they couldn't see Sky and Tash from there. She kept a watchful eye behind them, hoping one of the men didn't surprise them from that direction.

"I'm sorry my dear, but this is *my* home," said Garrin from the far corner of the ballroom. He was surrounded by several of his guards and manservants. "You have damaged my manor, as well as trespassed! Now you and your corroded army are going to regret ever stepping foot here!" He waved his hand to someone on the balcony to Sky's right.

Instantly there was a low '*swoosh*', followed by a howl of pain from the stage. The entire room clamored to an uproar. The woman called Dyne was slightly doubled over, an arrow jutting

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out of her neck. She wasn't flailing about nearly as wild as she should have been.

A loud thump and a sickening, liquidly sound came from where the arrow originated. It sounded like the noise made by a butcher trying to tenderize meat with a mallet. The room was sprayed by blood and bits of gore as the assailant with the bow met some horrible demise. More screams filled the ballroom at the sight of a dismembered man. Sky's legs started to wobble.

Tash's hand was quivering so hard that Sky was forced to hold it with both of hers in an attempt to steady her. The poor girl had never been out of Brookstone, Sky realized. This was her first time on the road and it had even been Sky's idea for her to come. *What have I gotten her into?* She thought.

On stage, the woman who by all laws of nature should have been dead in a pool of blood was standing as calm as an angel, the plucked arrow in her hand. She simply tossed it aside.

"It wouldn't be wise to do that again," she said, her voice steady and collected. "You are certainly trying my patience." Blood continued to trickle down her neck and over her armor but she didn't seem to notice. Perhaps she just didn't care.

Totally ignoring her warning, two of the guards near Garrin rushed her, swords drawn. The first one never got to the stage. A war hammer-wielding man standing a few feet from the woman on

the horse struck him down. The guard's face caved in under the weight of the blow, his body crumpling to the floor in a bloody pulp, a large gaping hole in the wall behind him.

The second guard reached Dyne but before he could draw back on the unarmed woman, she leaped from the horse and landed on him, wrapping her body—arms and legs—around him so she straddled him standing up. More screams were sparked near the stage when she sank her teeth in the side of his neck. The guard squalled, thrashing back and forth, then finally staggered backwards, dropping his weapon.

Dyne hopped off him in a graceful half-flip and tossed him across the room with inhuman strength. He landed against the left wall and slid down in a forming pool of blood. The golden haired woman looked toward the assembly of guests, musicians, and guards, blood running down her chin. Spreading her arms, she hissed, spraying blood like mist. The most unnerving sound Sky had ever heard came out. Her arms broke out in gooseflesh as she looked back down at the table that held the broken body of the guard who had fallen earlier. The one who had his throat ripped out or—

Oh gods

—bitten out.

A realization suddenly manifested in front of Sky. She squinted her eyes to see Dyne more clearly. Her tongue slowly wiped the blood

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from her mouth and she licked her lips, polishing two gleaming, white fangs as she did.

“Oh gods, they’re *vampires*,” she said, more to herself than to Tash. If she’d been thinking clearly, she wouldn’t have said anything at all for fear of upsetting her. But who could be in their right state of mind tonight? She pondered.

“Allow me to enlighten you all of something,” Dyne said, collecting herself, but not losing the anger in her voice. She looked to the crowd as if giving a sermon to a church congregation. She drew her sword—a magnificent bronze blade with emeralds in the hilt and cross guard. This part of her gear appeared to be quite new. “Our armor may be faded, but we are not! Our armor may be rusted but *we* are not!” She ran to the other side of the stage, scaring a few guests back as she did. “Our armor gave way to time and age years ago but *we did not!*” Dyne shouted the last of her speech triumphantly, gathering cheers from her brethren.

The woman paced to the other side of the stage and looked to one of her soldiers. She smiled and said, “have at them, save a few.” But even before she finished, the room went into a frenzy—glass breaking, tables overturning. The ‘pit’ was abandoned as a flurry of vampires dove toward the musicians. Sky could hear the strings of instruments snapping and wood splintering. A helpless woman in the corner swatted feebly at a vampire with her flute. A random

string of hard tones came out of the piano as a young girl crawled backwards against the keys, kicking one of the creatures and sending sheet music all over the place. Sky didn't understand why there was a second pianist here tonight but felt it wasn't the most important thing to worry about right now.

"Please, spare my family!" Garrin called from the corner. Dyne smiled and walked toward him, his guards parting like water to let her pass through. Sky didn't blame them after what had happened to his hired muscle already. Dyne stood at least a foot taller than Garrin. He kept his eyes trained at the ground, not wanting to meet her gaze—her dark, eerie gaze.

But his attempt proved futile. She held her sword with the point down and rested the hilt beneath his chin, raising his head so that his eyes met hers. She still had blood dripping from her mouth.

"Then I suggest you work with me," she offered, a hint of anger in her voice. Dyne kept her tone low, composed. Garrin could only nod, dropping his head again in a tiresome defeat.

Sky hadn't seen his wife, two girls, or son tonight. Then again, she couldn't really remember what they looked like. When she played after Garrin's daughter's wedding, all the children had been present. It had been in this very room, only there were no dead bodies littering the floor. There were no bloodstains. There was no shattered glass fragments or spilt wine, and there certainly were no vampires.

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“We have to go,” Sky said, pulling Tash from her kneeling position. She backed up a bit farther and peered down the hallway that led into the rest of the house. As far as she could tell it was empty. Hopefully they hadn’t invaded that part of the manor yet. Hopefully they never would.

“What about the others?” Tash asked in between sobs. She kept looking back to the massacre that was taking place. Dyne stood on the stage, calm and collected as always, a small grin on her face. Garrin stood at her side, clearly terrified. He looked to the ground, not wanting to see what was becoming of his servants, friends, and possibly family. The legion of vampires were still unleashing terror on the guests. The room already held the stale, coppery smell of blood. Bodies were mutilated, savaged, and drained. Blood drenched everything in the room—the tables, the walls, the floor, even the remaining living were soaked with it. Their chorus of screams was dying out, their numbers growing thin.

“We don’t have time, Tash.” Sky pulled her toward the door and the two began running down the hall. “They’re gone hon, and if we stay, we’ll meet the—“

Warmth. Warm liquid suddenly sprayed Sky in the face, cutting off her speech as it landed in her open mouth. At the same time her face was doused, she heard a sickening ‘thwack’. Tash suddenly stopped. Sky couldn’t pull her anymore. She looked up—wanting to

meet her longtime friend in the eyes, but found they weren't there. Where Tash's head once was, had now become a bloody flower spreading apart just above her shoulders. Sky could see bone jutting from her neck—protruded through haggard flesh as she frantically tried to clear the blood from her eyes.

Before her headless friend's body even hit the ground, an armored creature was on top of her, soaking up the bloody goo leaking from her neck. In its hand it held a gore-encrusted cudgel. Sky spat blood on the ground and could feel something gritty go with it. She started crying when she realized it was fragments of her friend's demolished skull. Sky dropped her hand—the hand that would never again play first violin in another symphony. The vampire seemed oblivious to Sky's screaming and her backing away which was a good thing. Without giving Tash a goodbye, she turned and ran, exiting through a door leading to the house workers' rooms.

She could see another door at the end of the hallway, or at least she thought. Her fingers wiped sweat and blood from her eyes. There were no windows here so she was probably going deeper inside the mansion rather toward an exit, but that was okay. Anything to get away from here was fine.

As if her thoughts could get no heavier, her mind and heart turned to her children. What would happen to them if she were killed in this place? Sure, they were fine for now, staying with Sky's mother back in

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Brookstone, but what would they do if their own mother were taken? How would Sky's absence be explained to them? Of course it would be labeled as an unusual 'disappearance' because from the looks of things, no one was going to get out to tell what really happened tonight. It was rumored that there was a small town no more than a mile away from here. She wasn't sure if that was true, but it was her only option right now. She had to make it at least that far.

Her job had been to look after Tash but the success of that seemed to go straight out the window. She failed miserably at protecting her defenseless friend. Now her only concern was to keep herself alive. She had to get as far away from the vampires as possible, even if it meant running a mile to town on foot in the freezing cold.

Sky snapped herself back to the here-and-now, concentrating on reaching the door at the end of the hallway. Her determination rose when she heard screams from somewhere to her right, but far off enough to be out of range from seeing her. The vampires were all over this place, deeper inside.

On the other side of the door was the kitchen, or at least one of them. There was a strong smell of burnt turkey and perhaps baking bread.

A rattling from the corner of the room startled her so bad that she slammed herself against the wall, sending small needles of pain down her back. At first she didn't understand what she saw—or why

she was staring at it, even though it had once been something so common. A small, relieved sigh escaped her quivering mouth.

In the sink sat a pile of dirty dishes, all stacked to one side. A large basin of murky water served the purpose of dipping each stained plate and a small washcloth rubbed them clean. The only thing odd was that the washcloth moved on its own accord. It wiped the dishes clean, invisible hands moving it along. This cloth was a magical, enchanted item—very rare, and no doubt very expensive. At one time, such creations were abundant, but with the rise of new technology; the balance of magic seemed to be receding. Symbia, the Goddess of Magic had many temples across Mystyria, but true creators and wielders of magic were few and far between.

Sky's eyes suddenly shifted to the thick billowing smoke wafting from the center of three large stoves. Obviously it was the source of the burnt turkey. On the countertop adorning the center of the room sat two celery sticks, a tomato and a half-sliced carrot. Pots, pans, dishes, and plates were scattered all about the counter and sink. The floor was littered with broken glass and food.

She looked to the left corner and saw a fan of blood splayed across the wall, just below a rack holding serving trays. Nervously she stepped forward, craning her neck to slowly see over the utensil counter. She had a feeling she knew what she would see—

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What's going on here tonight?

–and there it was.

Lying on the floor face down was one of the chefs. His apron was completely soaked in blood, revealing some kind of chest wound that carried through to the back. He could have almost passed for a butcher had his throat not been ripped out. He still held a serving tray in his clenched hand.

What do they want? Sky asked herself. *There has to be a more convenient way for a vampire to get blood.*

Vampires were very rare, but the legends, mythology, and facts were not. Sky had seen them before, never so close, nor under such dreadful circumstances. She'd seen one captured, taken out into the streets and beat to near death and then hacked to pieces. Never had she seen an organized group of them who could pass for mercenaries take control. *But then again they all work for Mydian right? The Great God of the Underworld?* Sky knew she had heard that before—maybe it was legend. *Maybe not. Do they come for riches?* She wondered. *What could a vampire need so badly that it couldn't just take. Or maybe they are here to—*

Glass was breaking—shattering in the hallway ahead of her, just past the kitchen's north exit. It was the way she was headed—the only way she could escape unless she wanted to head back toward the turmoil—the ballroom.

Sky crouched down, looking just over the cutlery counter. She reached up and grabbed the wide-bladed butcher knife and held it close. She didn't think such a conventional thing could kill vampires, but she did feel a small bit of comfort holding it. Her hands shook violently and she bit her lower lip in an attempt to calm her nerves a little.

Slowly she eased her way around the counter, keeping herself just above eye level from it. Quietly, she stepped over the chef, planting her foot in a puddle of freshly spilled blood. Her stomach twisted in knots and she fought back the urge to vomit. Instead, she moved into view of the hallway.

This passage appeared to be much fancier than the one she had just been in. The walls were adorned with beautiful stucco designs, as well as embroidered oak railing. Two giant paintings hung on the left wall, but Sky couldn't see them in detail from here. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, swaying back and forth in the wind—which was entering from the newly broken window to the side.

A huge, armored man shook glass from his shoulders. His sword was sheathed but he kept his hand close, as if ready to strike something down any second. He first looked to the doorway at the far end of the hallway, away from Sky. He seemed to study that direction for a moment and then lost interest. The terrified musician, now aware of where he would look next started moving out of view of the door, toward the far-side wall. She was trapped here—arm against brick,

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the hall ahead of her blocked off and no way of retreating back the way she had come without the risk of being seen. Maybe she would get lucky. Maybe he would go the other way.

Please let him go the other way. Please don't let him find me.

Her prayer went unanswered.

The loud footsteps of an iron boot across a marble floor sounded from the hall. Then another. He was nearing the kitchen in a slow stride, admiring the artwork, maybe readying himself for battle. Fresh tears left her eyes as she slid down the wall into a squat.

In seconds he would be here and she would be in full view. Another step and she lowered her head, tightening her grip on the knife. The next step his boot was in the doorway and suddenly—

—Sky jerked backwards by powerful hands around her waist and mouth. Her arm was caught up in the grasp of her assailant, so she clung to the knife. Her feet dug the ground as she was quickly pulled behind a silk curtain and into darkness.

“Keep quiet,” came the voice of her attacker. Or was it savior? She didn't know what to make of anything tonight. His voice was a low purr of warm breath.

Sky tried to nod but his grip on her was too tight; leather glove almost in her mouth. She watched through the thin curtain as the armored creature paused in the kitchen doorway. His eyes darted around, taking in the disarray of the kitchen. She wasn't sure because

of his helmet, but she thought she could see a large tattoo snaking its way from his forehead to chin. She shuddered at the thought of a creature wanting to look that much more menacing.

At first he glared at the smoke—which had started to dwindle—coming from the stove. He craned his neck, as if trying to make out the distant commotion coming from the ballroom. Finally his gaze fixed on the green curtain where Sky and her helper were hiding behind.

Her breathing stopped. She could feel herself trembling and noticed the man behind her had relaxed his grip around her waist. Her numb hands felt like blocks of wood. She could feel her hold on the knife beginning to loosen.

Please, if any of the gods are listening to me, I beg you to help me hold this knife.

She shut her eyes hard, gritting her teeth. The vampire was watching them, had to be, and even if he wasn't, she was about to drop a heavy, metal knife on a marble floor. Not only was her demise coming, she was also dragging down another kind soul who only wanted to help her.

But her heart suddenly lifted when the vampire turned and headed toward the ballroom. *Let the bastard join the party*, she thought.

Sky felt faint. The darkened room was spinning and her legs were giving out. The knife slipped from her fingers, only to be quickly snatched in mid-air by a gloved hand.

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“Calm down, ma’am, you’re safe now,” said the voice of her protector. By now he had helped her into a sitting position so she was resting against the wall. The one that knelt before her was an attractive man, probably in his mid-thirties just as she was. His hair was short and fine, his skin dark and his eyes blue, but piercing. She saw a kindness and something else behind them. Probably fear. He offered her a toothy grin, revealing a perfect smile, free of fangs.

“You gonna be okay, miss?” He seemed genuinely concerned. He put his hand to her forehead, obviously expecting her to be feverish.

“I’m not so sure any of us are going to be okay,” she offered, using her shirt to wipe her face. “It looks really bad out there.” Sky could feel her breathing slowing, but she wanted to sit. Even if it was only for a little bit longer.

“Yes, I’ve seen,” he said, taking a seat against the other wall of their small hole. “I saw them kill a few of our guards and that’s Fodel lying out there with his front sliced open.” He pointed out in the kitchen toward the dead chef.

“Yeah, they killed my best friend a few minutes ago. This is all I have to remember her by.” Sky pointed to the congealing blood on her face.

“I’m sorry to hear that, dear,” he said with heartfelt emotion. “It’s a travesty which has happened to—”

"Wait a second," she interrupted. "You just said *our* guards. Do you live here?"

The man smiled and looked down, as if ashamed he hadn't properly introduced himself, despite their situation.

"I'm sorry, my name is Adam. I'm Garrin's son." He wiped his hand on his slacks and extended it to her.

She took it with her own wobbly hand and offered, "Sky Watson. I'm one of the musicians your father hired to play tonight." She gave a weak smile and looked down. "Guess I should be thankful that I arrived late or else I'd have been trapped in the ballroom when all hell broke out."

Adam stood up, a look of concern on his face. "My father is in there," he said, trying his best to stifle his voice.

Sky stood as well and realized Adam was at least a foot taller than she was. For a woman, she was quite tall, so this man had to be more than six feet high. He wasn't exactly lean either. Beneath his tight, black tunic, she could see the ripple of his chest. His clothes didn't suggest the noble that he was.

"I wouldn't worry about him," she offered. "Not just yet anyway."

He was clearly puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The leader of these things, a woman, acted like she needed your father for something. She even seemed interested in him. I heard him agree to help her if she wouldn't harm his family."

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“I don’t know what he could do for her,” Adam said, peering out past the curtain. So far none of the creatures cared enough to check out the kitchen. “He injured his back in the mines years ago and hasn’t been able to do much since.”

Sky shook her head. “I doubt she needs another laborer. Maybe your father has information she needs.”

Adam nodded, hesitantly. “Perhaps, although I have no idea what it could be. At any rate, I have to help him. I have to find my mother and sisters, as well.”

“What’s your plan?” She asked. Sky looked to the back of the pantry where numerous sacks of flour and casks of oils and wines sat. How long before the vampires would check back here?

“Well, I’m guessing if you found my hiding place then they would have soon, as well. We can’t stay here.”

“Where’s the closest way out of here?” Sky asked, edging her way to the curtain. The kitchen was getting increasingly cold due to the new broken window in the hall ahead. Adam stood next to her and pointed near the spot the vampire had emerged.

“Through the far-end doors and to the left. That’s the servants’ entrance and it eventually comes to the rear courtyard.”

Sky nodded, lowering her head. She felt ashamed for what she was about to say. “I’m really sorry for all that has happened to you and your family tonight, but Adam I have to get out of

here.” She looked up to see a weak, but accepting smile. “I come from Brookstone. I have children back there waiting on me to come home.”

He only nodded. “I understand, Sky,” then grabbed her by the hand, placing something cold in her palm. A small metal brooch was nestled in her shaky hand. It was gold and was in the shape of a torch, having a long wisp of flame coming out of its top. It was quite beautiful and strangely familiar.

“What’s this?” She asked, perplexed by such a gift.

“There is a town about a mile south of this place. The shipyard there is bound to have passage along the coast to the north. Show them that brooch, tell them what happened and I’m sure they’ll help you get back to Brookstone.”

“Town? What town?” She asked, suddenly realizing that the rumors of such a place were true.

“Yes, Hope’s Covenant, it’s called. You can find the shipyard in the southwest region. You’ll see the lighthouse if it’s still there. It’s been so long since I’ve been to Hope’s Covenant.”

Sky was so overwhelmed by a feeling of gratefulness that she reached out and wrapped her free arm around his neck. “Oh, thank you!” She said in an exasperated tone.

Adam nodded slightly but then quickly pulled her past the curtain and into the kitchen so they could see down both

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hallways. Somewhere above them glass shattered, followed by footsteps.

“C’mon,” he said, pulling her down the richly adorned hallway.

Everything was going quite well tonight. Though there had been a little resistance, things went under control much easier than she had anticipated. Sure, there was a huge, gaping hole in her neck where someone managed to get off a cheap shot, but that was okay. It may have dampened her evening a bit, but it was still okay. Her wound would be gone in time. His wouldn’t.

The woman called Dyne paced back and forth on the stage like a nervous performer at an audition. She admired how easily her small army had swarmed over this place like a disease. It wasn’t the first time they had organized an attack such as this, but if they were lucky, it would be their last. Dyne thrived on the carnage and hurt she inflicted on others—was even amused by it—but she longed for a time when it would be behind her. She longed for a time when she could retire from such things.

The golden-haired vampiress surveyed the ballroom and saw that her minions were nearing their fill of blood for the night. Most of the corpses in the center of the room were completely blue and rigid, spent and discarded. Only a handful of Dyne’s brethren remained

nearby and those few were pushing the living back out of the ballroom and into a more manageable area. The rest of the vampires were no doubt exploring their new, if only temporary, home.

Not all of the guests had been senselessly butchered. After all, there were several bloodthirsty vampires here who were going to have to feed for a few nights. In order to remedy the problem, all surviving guests, musicians and guards were being ushered into the nearby servants' quarters where they could be guarded. These rooms were easily barricaded so no one would be able to escape while they were unwatched by day.

Across the room, Dyne spotted Tali, the only other female vampire in her company. Though not as strong as the men, Tali was quite charismatic and could easily manipulate anyone, vampires included. This made her invaluable since Dyne's other minions constantly needed motivated to do anything. Dyne preferred brute force and pain but she wasn't always around to dish it out when it was needed.

"A job for you, love," Dyne purred, grabbing the vampiress on the shoulder. Tali whirled around, hand on hilt. She offered a simple, anxious smile.

"Yes?" The mortal she'd been pulling collapsed to his knees and fell over, deep claw marks in the back of his neck. Blood poured from the open wounds that Tali didn't even realize she caused.

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“Guard these rooms as long as you can tonight.” Dyne pointed as she spoke, counting how many would be needed for the job. “We don’t know how resourceful this lot is.”

Tali nodded and walked off just as another approached. This was her senior officer, Lorne. He smiled as he pulled a man down the entry hallway by the hair. The veins in his neck throbbed from fresh blood. His fangs were very visible in his grimace of his hatred to the mortals.

Dyne made her way across the ballroom, carefully stepping over corpses, blood, and any other general body part. Her minions were effective but they certainly weren’t clean killers.

Once Lorne pulled the screaming man to the first door on the right, he picked him up by the throat and hurled him inside. A chorus of screams and pleas erupted from within the human cattle farm just as he slammed the door. Tali smiled and leaned against it, lavishing in the cries of the mortals.

From the opposite side of the hallway, the door flew open and a mortal, most likely royalty came rushing out. Her minions had failed to barricade that side of the hall so that the passage would be easier to access. The mortal rushed straight toward Lorne, a panicked look across his face. He was sweating profusely and apparently didn’t realize he was coming headlong into trouble.

Lorne grabbed the man and threw him against the wall in such force that the vampire’s helmet flew off. His eyes lit up while the

mortal's glazed over. Just as he was about to sink his teeth into the man's neck for his next meal of the night, Dyne stepped between the two and separated them with iron hands that broke walls. The mortal landed ten feet inside the room, motionless from his wounds. Lorne hit the hallway wall, crumbling a few stones in the process.

Dyne wrapped her fingers around his neck—a neck so thick that her petite hand could barely grasp. With a strength that no human could muster she lifted him in the air and stared at him with eyes that hated, eyes that knew his secrets and eyes that wouldn't tolerate disobedience.

"You've had quite enough!" She yelled. "We are to ration them. There is scant food here."

Lorne's grimace darkened a little, something Dyne didn't think he would be capable of. "They are expendable," he offered.

Dyne's eyes shrank to slits and her mouth trembled with rage. Lorne recoiled and tried to turn away but Dyne's fingers were planted firmly across his jaws. "So are you," she reminded. With that, she gave him one last, hard slam against the wall, toppling a bookshelf and causing a cascade of dusty texts to pour to the ground. The entire hallway went quiet.

Lorne was a coward near her. She knew it, he knew it, and everyone else in her army knew it. If he didn't know how to swing a sword, he'd been killed long ago. It was his lack of bravery on the battlefield that landed him the job as her eternal servant. Dyne had

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spawned Lorne herself some three hundred years ago, just after the second War of Balance ended. It wasn't much longer after she had been spawned herself.

She shook off the return of horrible memories. She couldn't allow herself the time to dwell on them. It would not do for her to lose focus now, not here when she was so close to achieving her goal—the goal that had motivated her for nearly three centuries.

“I want you to set up a perimeter on each floor,” she said, clearing her mind of the cobwebs history brought along. “No one is to leave here—ever. If anyone gets out, others will come.”

Dyne sensed an approaching presence to her right and turned to see a small man wearing leather instead of armor, but clearly a vampire nevertheless, stepping through the broken main doors. A long crossbow was strapped to his shoulder. He walked through the foyer to where Dyne and Lorne stood and dusted the snow from his worn cap. He slapped it back on his head and then looked to Dyne as he spoke.

“Mistress,” he offered, then bowed over so far that Dyne could see his tattooed lower back. Lorne sneered and walked away.

This was Dunford, Dyne's errand-boy. Though he was inexperienced in battle, probably never even held a sword, he did prove to be quite useful. He did a lot of scout work and found a lot of useful information that her 'battle-hardened' subordinates would

be offended to seek out. If not for Dunford, the location of this place may have never have been uncovered.

“Any word from Docklin or Ulyn?” Dyne asked, her voice showing the faintest of concern. She was beginning to tire and wanted to find a place to rest soon. Her nights had been full of planning and organizing her attack. Her eye had been on the Birchlock Estate for nearly a month now, but efficiency was essential—and timing was vital.

“Not yet, but I did find the town. It’s about a mile south of here and it’s cradled nicely next to the ocean. It’s a damned cold place. And windy too. It doesn’t look too big, but there is a Lylussian Temple there, so I couldn’t get a good view of the west side.” Dunford shook his head, smiling a little. “The damned temple must have a huge symbol on its steeple, because I could feel it burning my eyes while they were shut, even from a hundred yards away.”

Poor, weak vampire, she almost said, but didn’t. None of them were powerful enough to look upon the holy symbols of Lyluss, Goddess of Good, much less enter her temples. Dyne had even heard stories of vampires melting to piles of slush when they accidentally entered holy ground. She had seen vampires’ eyes melt from their heads, or even explode when they were forced to look upon holy symbols too long. Vampires bore the hindrances their forsaken brethren caused them long ago. Dyne however, was exempt from

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most of the traditional rules and limitations that plagued vampires. Her spawning was something out of the ordinary.

Dyne had never tried to enter one of Lyluss' temples, but she assumed she could do it, probably suffering a great deal of pain, no less. Maybe she would die after extended exposure, but that was better than having your skin fall from the bone seconds after you step across the threshold. Luckily she could look at Lyluss' symbols, only having to deal with slight pain to her eyes. It reminded her of the way her eyes hurt when she looked at the sun during her mortal days.

You're going to upset yourself if you keep thinking thoughts like this. Now stop and get back to work. The voice in her head was right.

"Never mind the temple, I'll check it out tomorrow night," she said, turning her thoughts back. "Just keep an eye on the town—make sure no one comes here." Dunford nodded and left, heading back to the hole where the front door once stood. The snow still continued to fall in heavy doses. If it kept this up, there would be two feet by morning.

"Fix that," Dyne said, pointing to the shattered door. She grabbed Lorne by the shoulder and added, "fix the windows and the dome, as well—clean up. We're living here, for a little while, at least. Let's make the best of it."

"Consider it done, Mistress." Lorne made like he was going to walk off, then turned back to face her. "Shall I watch for Hannah and the others? They should be arriving shortly."

Dyne nodded. “Yes, do that. Also make sure you keep an eye out tonight. I’m troubled by this place. Just a little.”

“As you wish, Mistress.” Lorne walked toward the foyer, turned right and ascended the out-of-view stairs that led to the second floor of the mansion. This place seemed nice, much nicer than what Dyne was used to. She hated the rich—loathed them, but they sure knew how live in taste. The vampire of more than three hundred years cared little for decorative art or furniture, but she loved expansive rooms. Dyne looked to the gem encrusted sconces that lined the walls and pulled the dagger from her boot. She pried a rather large, shiny emerald from the collection of assorted jewels and then placed it beneath her chest-guard. It wasn’t a mere figure of speech when she said this was her mansion now. She was claiming it for herself, just as she had countless other places like it.

Dyne walked back into the ballroom where her legion was clearing up the mess. All of the patrons from the ballroom had been ushered into two ten-by-ten rooms. Anyone who was left in the ballroom now was dead or had lost enough blood to not be important. A few of her kind were straddling freshly dead corpses, draining their blood before it had a chance to ruin and become poison. Dead blood to a vampire was just as deadly as Lyluss’ trinkets or sunlight.

Across the blood-strewn floor, Dyne found the stout little man who owned all of this. He hadn’t moved an inch since his guards

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made an assault on her. His men fell all around him and yet he stayed where he was, watching the creatures rip his beautiful home apart. He looked like a scared, panicky child who lost mommy's hand in a crowded market. *He'll do what I say, she thought. I'll put a fear in him he's never known.*

The arrogant noble's beady eyes widened when he saw her approach. Apparently he felt that all had forgotten him—that if he stayed in his corner they would just leave him alone.

Not hardly.

Dyne grabbed him by the collar and jerked him up. A small, stifled scream snaked its way from his throat. She clung to him, wrapping her arm around him like an old pal. The short man trembled which was understandable when a beautiful vampire with a foot height advantage hugged you like a companion.

“Walk with me,” Dyne said, ushering him back down the main hall. “What was your name again?” She leaned over, getting inches from his face. He couldn't seem to match her stare.

“G-Garrin,” he managed. “Garrin Franzworth. Please don't hurt my family.”

“I need your help with something, Garrin,” she said, completely ignoring his plea. “How long have you lived in this manor house?” She stopped, then turned to face him, making sure his answer was straight and didn't divert to such trivial things like his family.

“About f-five years or so,” he said, trying his best to avoid eye contact with her. “We’re the only f-family to live here, other than th-the original owners.”

“Five years here? That will do I suppose.” Dyne pulled him into the loving hug again and started walking back toward the foyer. “Garrin, I need maps, blueprints, or any kind of history you may have on this place. We’re very interested in something that lies within your home. *Deep*, within your home.”

“W-what is it?” He asked, closing his eyes as they walked. Dyne noticed that he took interest in one of the corpses that was lying bloodied on the ground. Apparently it was someone close to him.

“That’s a story for another day. It is no concern to you now. Besides, you don’t even know it’s here,” she said, dismissing his inquiry. “If you help me get to it, my army and I will leave this place and never return.”

Garrin seemed to relax when she said this. It looked as though he realized she wasn’t out to kill him—just yet anyway.

“There’s a few maps in the library upstairs. I think there’s even a book on the history of the area, but as far as blueprints of this place, I’m not sure.” Garrin’s voice seemed completely steadied now.

“Good work, dear.” Dyne said. She held out her arm and the door behind Garrin flew open, hitting the wall with its force. He was startled so bad he didn’t see Dyne reach out and shove him into the dark room. He simply stood there, looking out with saddened eyes.

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“This is *your* room now. I’ll call you when you’re needed again.” She flicked her wrist slightly and the door slammed shut before he could even offer a single plea.

Dyne turned and headed up the stairs that overlooked the foyer, sliding a huge cabinet in front of Garrin’s door with unseen hands as she went. This is where the more extravagant bedrooms had to be. Garrin seemed like the type of person who would try to impress his guests with lushly decorated bedrooms.

The hallway at the top of the stairs was adorned with fancy stuccowork and beautiful plants. She noticed that most of the artwork in this place—paintings, woodwork, and stained glass windows—all depicted horses. All of the doors on this floor held some sort of horse motif. There were five doors—three on the right, and two on the left. One of them would probably reveal the library, but she was much too tired for that tonight. It wasn’t going anywhere. This could wait just one more night.

Dyne rolled her head, trying to crackle the bones in her neck. At one side there was no popping noise, probably since the arrow that pierced her earlier had severed the bones, arteries and veins. She needed her regenerative sleep. It was the only way such wounds went away, no matter how mundane or severe. Vampires didn’t heal naturally.

She opened the first door on the left and discovered it to be a grand bedroom, complete with a king-sized bed, three dressers, a

wardrobe, and even a fireplace. This room even had its own bath chamber in the back. Dyne had never seen such an extravagant thing but had heard stories of royalty enjoying such pleasures.

She smiled. "This room is *mine*." She closed the door with her foot and started stripping. After creating a small pile of weapons, clothing and armor in the corner, the naked vampire started to look into the mirror that sat atop one of the dressers but decided against it. She didn't want to see how bad she looked tonight. Blood had dried on her mouth and chin, as well as her neck. A steady trail had made its way down her breast, ending just above the emerald piercing on her navel. Her hair was unkempt now, largely due to the helmet. She longed for a change of clothes, a hot bath and clean hair. In her mortal days she had a loving fiancé who would never let her look the way she did now. Many considered Dyne a beautiful woman and she agreed completely. She was absolutely self-absorbed, but it never hindered her judgment or decisions. Her mind was fixated on her task—it only worried about getting her to her destination. She was rarely seen by any these days and those who normally saw her other than her subordinates didn't live long enough to care how she was dressed or how she fixed her hair and face.

Dyne walked over to the single window of the room and looked out. The snow was falling just as hard, building up on the sill. To mortal eyes, there was nothing out there but a blackened haze. To

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her dilated perception she could see snow-covered trees hundreds of yards away. There were lights, far off, but still discernable to her acute vision. And a spot that made her head hurt slightly. *So that's the town*, she thought. *At least if we run out of food here, I know where to find a renewed source.*

She pulled her belt from the pile of unwashed clothing and rusted armor and used it to fasten the curtains together as tight as she could. It wouldn't pay for the sunlight to pour in while she slept. After she was satisfied the wind wouldn't pull the curtains apart, she gazed to the bathing chamber, which looked very inviting, especially being caked with three different flavors of blood. It could wait one more night.

She collapsed on top of the bed, blood dried all over her body. She simply laid there for a while, listening to her minions roam the mansion, searching it, preparing it and making it more comfortable for the next few nights. With her last ounce of conscious strength she dwelled on things past, and things to come until finally the troubled world of sleep came, if only for a little while.

Sky ran to the closest desk of the servants' common room and ripped the drawers from them, frantically searching for a knife, letter opener, or anything feasibly considered a weapon. She cursed herself for leaving the butcher knife in the pantry.

“We don’t have time for this, Sky,” Adam wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her from the desk. “There’s nothing here that could possibly help us.” She agreed and let him lead her on.

The town below sounded so promising right now. She wanted—needed to get back to Brookstone. Sky felt like crying when she realized that *she* would be the one to break the awful news to Tash’s parents. *Mr. and Mrs. Naufin, I’m sorry to tell you that your daughter’s head was ripped from her shoulders by a wooden cudgel hitting her face, who I might add was being brandished by an armor-clad vampire. So sorry for your loss.* Sky shuddered and put the horrid thoughts away.

Adam stopped at a small, wooden door that was so cracked and riddled with holes that it was a wonder it didn’t blow right off the hinges. Beyond was the outside. No doubt about that, she thought. The cold air rushed in from the cracks and holes, causing Sky to shiver and pull her long coat tight.

Adam opened the door just a crack, its hinges squealing in protest. Sky was sure they were going to hear it—sure they were going to come after them, bursting through that door.

Adam looked around, as if trying his best to survey the area. Although she couldn’t see anything with him in the way, Sky had a feeling this was the rear courtyard. The wind was blowing pretty hard, and the small man struggled to keep the door closed down to an inch.

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“It looks clear to me,” Adam said. He let the door shut a bit and then turned to face her. “This is the rear courtyard. We’re going to run across it, then leave through the gate at the far end. To your left, you’ll find the stable house. Take a horse and ride down the south path. You’ll find Hope’s Covenant.”

Sky nodded, but just before she could say anything, something hit her hand, making her tense slightly. It wasn’t much—neither hard, nor hot, but it *was* warm—and wet. A small trail of red was running across her hand, dripping from her thumb. As she watched it, another drop hit, splashing slightly.

Slowly she craned her head up, looking past a clueless Adam, past the unfinished woodwork of the hallway and finally to the ceiling. She saw the blood drop again and backed up. Another drop fell to the dirty floor, coming from a pair of razor-sharp fangs. The fangs of the vampire that was clinging to the ceiling—watching their every move. His eyes were red-rimmed and his mouth was turned in the most horrible grimace Sky had ever seen. He hissed and let go of the ceiling, letting his body free fall toward her.

Before the creature could pounce on its prey, Adam intervened. He stepped forward just as the creature reached a crouching Sky and grabbed it, using its inertia to throw it aside, crashing through the window. The creature let out a howl as it rolled down a now visible cliff, a flurry of glass chasing it.

Sky sat in a squatting position, hugging her legs with her head down. It felt like her heart was beating in her throat. She felt that sick feeling again, the one she felt over and over tonight. These things were everywhere—closing in on her. She couldn't breathe anymore. All she wanted was to get out of here, to get to town.

"Is it gone?" She asked, not even looking up. Tears were burning her eyes again.

"For now, but we have to go." Adam pulled her to her feet. "It *will* be back."

That last bit got Sky moving. She knew these things were hard to kill, but could it possibly fall so far and still survive? Sky didn't want to find out so she followed through the rickety door and into the night air.

Before them was a vast field of virgin-white snow. At the furthest end of what had to be fifty yards stood the gate, which looked so very far away at the moment.

Impossibly far.

The house loomed behind them, stretching up and to the left as far as she could see. Garrin's mansion was a piece of work, she thought. It didn't look nearly this large from the front.

Ahead of them was a small fountain. It was completely lost in the five-inch snow, but from what she could tell, it looked like angels playing music. The granite scene was probably quite beautiful had it not been so cold out. Had there not been snow on it.

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Had there not been vampires chasing them.

Sky noted that walls that stood about four feet high set the boundaries of the courtyard. To their right, the house ended, replaced by a dense forest and sudden cliff that faded off in the snow and darkness. In the distance to their left, the mansion rose up in blackness. Small lights could be seen in windows that had to be half a mile away, yet they came from the mansion's upper floor. It was too dark to see, but Sky thought for a moment she could see a balcony far off in the distance. A single torch rested near it, probably being held by one of those things keeping guard, she thought. Sky squinted her eyes so she could see and then—

—a horse neighed, far off in the direction they were looking, but still clearly discernable. Not long after that, the sounds of hoof beats could be heard—several, and they were approaching.

Adam led Sky to the left side of the courtyard so they could look over the wall. From here they could see the rear doorway to the mansion. It wasn't as decorative as the main entrance, but it was still far more luxurious than the servants' entryway. The doors to the rear antechamber were open but no lights were burning inside, only the ones on the upper floors.

Three pairs of horses pulling buggies emerged from the south path—the path Sky needed to get to—and pulled up next to the door. Their drivers hopped off and opened each of the doors, letting out—

God, not more.

–armor clad men–no doubt more vampires. After a few minutes, there were almost twenty of them standing on the grounds, not one breathing fog in the cold air. Three more greeted them from the mansion, embracing their brothers in a spiritual grip. Half of them walked into the mansion, while the other half waited outside, talking and laughing heartily about something. *Probably relishing in the carnage their brothers caused tonight*, she thought.

Before Sky could turn and ask Adam what he thought of it all, another wagon emerged from the path and pulled up to meet the others. The driver hopped off, opened the door and let four more vampires spill out, as well as someone else.

The small, delicate slipper of a little girl stepped out. She couldn't have been more than five or six. Her hair was long and red, having streaks of blond in it. A beautiful green nightgown clung to her in the harsh wind. Her skin was slightly tanned and her face seemed to hold contentment–kind of like a porcelain doll. She walked over and joined the vampires, who all seemed to look upon her with great fondness. One lifted her off the ground before her ankles grew cold.

“She's not one of them,” Sky said, nudging Adam. Not a vampire at all, Sky noticed. Her breath rose up in the frigid air and she could see her eyes from here. They held life–and seemed to hold happiness.

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But why not fear? She seemed to laugh and partake in the jokes and humorous gestures of the vampires. Who was this girl and why would they harbor her? Tonight was not the night to try and make sense of things, Sky thought.

“Let’s get out of he—” Adam’s words were cut off when something crashed through the door behind them. Sky, who was still watching the girl dance with one of the vampires, spun around, only to see two creatures step into the courtyard. Their armor shined in the moonlight, but not as bright as their fangs. One of them held his head down slightly, blood pouring from the side of it. His left leg drug long tracks in the snow, leaving red spots behind. This was the one who fell off the cliff just minutes ago. Adam and Sky backed away toward the rear gate, ending up in the center by the fountain. Sky trudged through the snow, keeping her eye on the vampires and using Adam as a support to guide her.

She thought she saw movement in the sky, and for one brief second she took her eyes off the approaching creatures, and looked to the balcony above them. Another armor-clad vampire stood there, watching what was going on. Although his face was hard to see from here, Sky was sure it was the creature with the horrendous tattoo on its face. He smiled, then turned around and walked back inside. She heard a door slam shut.

The creatures drew steel, letting their blades cast long, glowing streaks in the snow. Shoulder bones from the injured vampire cracked in resistance. A few more seconds and they would be on them. Sky felt like crying all over again. For once she felt like she was close to getting out, and now this. Her stomach knotted up at the thought of lying in the snow, freezing to death, bleeding to death, and her children back home thinking that their mother was playing the piano right now.

Suddenly Adam stopped. Sky nearly toppled over, having most of her weight already pressed against him. His breathing seemed rigid like something else had startled him. His arms wrapped around her and held her tight, as if he knew she was going to faint at any second. Slowly she turned around and saw their exit was no more than twenty feet away. She could even see the stable house not far beyond it. The only problem was three more approaching vampires had cut off their way.

Just like the other two, these drew their swords and one even went a step farther to twirl his in a graceful manor. *Vigilant warriors*, she thought. Then she started to tear up just thinking how stupid it was to think such a thought at a time like this. When she turned around, she saw the two vampires were upon them, swords brandished and raised above them. Sky could see the malice in their eyes. She could see centuries worth of killing, pillaging, and razing in them. Those

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eyes had seen a lot, had looked upon many victims and watched many die before them. It appeared they would gain two more tonight.

Without even so much as crying, Sky got down on her knees and buried her hands in her face. She rocked back and forth, thinking only of her children.