

Hannah's First Mark
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“You’re not paying attention, Hannah.” The point of Spira Sian jabbed harmlessly into her chest as he made his point.

She folded her arms over and crossed her legs, then blew the hair from her eyes. “This is boring,” she told her father.

Tranas smirked and took a step back, pulling his training tool aside. He paced to the rear of the cellar; the makeshift barracks where he often taught her and several others how to kill in the holy name of Lyluss. It was raining out, and hard. The tin roof above *plinked* in rapid succession against the fury of the storm. Thunder boomed, rattling the very foundation of the safe-house. If the cellar had windows, there would have been a brilliant spectacle of lightning outside.

“Since when did you think that hunting vampires was boring?” he asked her while he quickly pulled another target into place.

“Since you decided to make it a lesson about your toy there and not about the killing.” Her delicate finger pointed to the contraption hung across his shoulder.

It was called Spira Sian; which translated to ‘Heart-Snatcher’ in Minlor, and it was her father’s most prized possession. It was essentially a stake launcher—a device that impaled vampires from several feet away and was capable of pulling them back via a thick, metal chain. Only now it had been altered—magically imbued and expertly tampered to be even more devastating. Now it could supernaturally wind itself back with little effort. The stake was now

able to spread prongs, capable of lodging into vampires' chests and preventing them from simply ripping through.

She had watched that weapon with lustful eyes for years. Her father built it ages ago when a vampiress named Dyne Atlin killed his wife, Hannah's mother. The weapon was fashioned upon hatred, rage and a somber need for vengeance. Now, more than a decade after the murderess' demise, Spira Sian was still being used to rip the life from vampires.

Living in the heart of evil made it easy. Bloodgate was teeming with them. One couldn't walk down the streets at night without seeing the aftermath of a feeding or the stirred ash of their deaths. They were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The city of the Black was ideal for hiding them; keeping their secrets and identities like a dark and foreboding mask. When one was killed, three more sprouted to take its place.

"Watch, Hannah," Tranas said, winding up a shot. He had erected a thick, upright wooden plank, then threw a suit of chainmail over it and then sat a leather skullcap at the top. It was a poor excuse of an opponent but it was at least laughable.

The seasoned vampire hunter took a moment to line the stake's tip with the armor—the spot where a dead, but vital heart would be—and then pulled the trigger. Spira came alive with a loud '*whoosh*' as the stake fired from the recesses of the chamber. The chain slithered behind, hissing a repetitive metallic scream as it followed through the armor and wood and out the backside.

"Right now your vampiric victim is hurt and unhappy, but he is not dead," Tranas said, taking a methodical finger from his contraption to make his point. He motioned for the makeshift, slanting dummy and called her attention to the stake. The four prongs were resting

along the back of the armor, firmly holding the metal projectile inside. “*You* have to be the killer. You can’t rely on a piece of machinery to do it for you.”

With a gentle tug, the chain began to recoil inside the metal drum sitting beneath Spira Sian’s handle. The prongs pulled tight and ripped the plank from the brick floor. The armor flew toward Tranas and a seated Hannah while the helmet soared to the ceiling and bounced twice before settling.

“Never forget the importance of a good blade,” her instructor father said. He reached into his boot and pulled a long, slender dagger and then plunged it into the breast of the armor. With a quick wench of his wrist, he tore a large gash that would have been devastating to any vampire that thought it was protected. A mutilation of the heart meant instant death to the foul creatures of the night.

“I know that lesson better than you think. How many times are you going to lecture me on this? I never even leave the safe-house!” she said, a hint of venom in her voice. It was all so true.

Eighteen years may have been young to most, but she didn’t see it that way. She had been given a different upbringing than others her age. The same vampire who took her mother away had even kidnapped her as an infant. Hannah had lived with Dyne for nearly six years before she learned the horrible truth that she wasn’t actually the birth daughter of a vampire. That kind of mental anguish was enough to force a child into a woman in just a few short years. Hannah *was* capable of going outside. She was more than ready to kill vampires. In her heart, she had every ounce of hatred for them that her father had.

Lyluss had taught him peace, though. She had been there when his nightmares came; when he screamed into the air and saw Dyne's face behind him in the mirror. It wasn't easy but Lady Good and her loving, trusting followers showed him how to let go of anger—and of revenge. At least he had a release, Hannah thought. Tranas killed her nearly twelve years ago and continued to scour vampires almost nightly, in the name of Lyluss and the coming war that would visit Mystyria in just a few months.

“So that's what this is about?” he asked, a hint of sadness in his voice. He held an oily rag which he used to wipe over the stake's point. “You want out of the house *that* badly? Is it for the adventure of killing vampires or just to be away from me?”

She mocked a very sheepish grin and said, “Can't it be both?”

“Fine,” he said, toneless. He tossed Spira Sian and his knife into her lap.

“What?” she asked, inspecting his weapons. She had only fired Spira Sian once in her life but felt like she knew the weapon front and back. After all, she helped to upgrade it.

“You want out of the house that badly, then go and kill a vampire for us,” he said, kneeling in front of her.

It was late and she was only wearing a nightgown with pants and lambskin boots. She laughed and sat his gear aside. “You're not funny, father. When you hunt, you have leads, information about where the vampires are staying, what they look like, I mean, I've got noth—”

He fished a couple of crumpled papers from his pocket and started to unfold them. His eyes were serious but there was a quaint smile on his lips, nonetheless. Tranas smoothed out the edges and sat them in her lap.

The top one was a drawing of a man. His eyes were narrowed into slits and his nose was sharp and pointed. There were piercings all along his face and there was a Mydianite amulet around his neck displaying the torch and skull emblem.

“You want me to kill him?” Hannah said, her voice rising with excitement. “But where can I find him?” this time more relaxed.

Tranas showed her the next creased parchment in the stack and said, “His name is Bryce. He lives over on Greyhusk Terrace.” The next page was a crude, hand-drawn map of what looked like that very street. Hannah recognized the Arein temple on the corner. “This is his house,” he said pointing. “It’s a pretty big estate and I doubt he’ll be alone. He’s one of Gaston’s friends, so this is going to be no easy task.”

Gaston Rhizei was Bloodgate’s ruler; a powerful man with more influence in the city of the Black than most of the gods. If this Bryce was a cohort of his, then there was a lot to be lost should she fail to kill him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tranas asked.

She was already standing and gathering the gear. She quickly folded the papers and stuffed them into the back of her pants and headed out of the cellar. The safe-house was naturally full of Lylussian priests, warriors, and spies who were sitting around the fireplace, talking and listening to the hypnotic rhythm of the rain drumming against the roof. There were no windows here either. They were still pretty far below the surface of the streets; beneath the lingering and questioning eyes of the watchful city.

Hannah darted into Daniel's room and snatched the armor from his bed. He was settling down for the night anyway, a large bowl of porridge in his lap and an interested gaze on his face. He and several others were listening to a tale from the mouth of Sigmon, a century-old vampire with a soul of righteousness. Everyone was captivated by his story of the undead dragon. Hannah knew the account better than most and besides, she had more important things to do right now.

She squeezed into the armor. Although she had her own, tonight she wanted something that was a little less noticeable of her figure---a little less noticeable of her *gender*. Her bosom pressed tightly against the narrow metal of the cuirass. After tucking the dagger into her belt, strapping her favorite toy to her wrist, and slinging Spira Sian over her shoulder, she grabbed Daniel's helmet and headed out the door.

“You're going to wear that?” Tranas asked as he slid over to block her.

“It's a man's world, father. I need as little attention as I can gather.”

“Where are the boots?” He pointed to her bare feet.

“I don't need them. They'll only get in the way.”

For a moment he just stood there and chuckled. She could feel the heat rising to her face in elevated anger. He didn't understand her methods and he never would. She might not have been smart, crafty, or well-intentioned, but she knew in her heart what she wanted to do. She let her desire be her motivation.

“Okay, then,” he finally accepted. His hand outstretched and led her on to the back door. She had been out of the house a few times since coming to this dark, dismal place, but this would

be the first time she would go two blocks away. Her heart fluttered with anxiety but there was no fear. There was nothing in this city that made her afraid. Although her father was terrified of the things that lurked by night, Hannah had been desensitized to the horrors that silently waited in the wings of the shadow.

Their hiding spot was located on the western end of Bloodgate, in the commoner district known as Bloodtrap. It was nothing more than a ten-mile wide urban neighborhood with far too much crime and far too little guards. There were cluttered streets of towering apartments and dank, smelly alleys that festered with the disease and plight of vermin or worse. The rich and noble never saw Bloodtrap and those fortunate enough to live on the other side of the city in their sound and sight-proof boxes probably didn't even know that such a place existed.

The safe-house was cleverly hidden inside an abandoned orphanage. Since the welfare of children was at the bottom of Mydian's list, the chances of anyone investigating the dilapidated remains were scarce. The top floors, the ones above ground were still empty and undisturbed but the eight sub-levels were put to good use. There was a Lylussian temple, a training room, a large mess hall, an armory, and several sleeping quarters. Hannah had always wondered why an orphanage would ever need so many underground floors but then again it was in Bloodgate. There's no telling what they were *really* doing to the children here, she thought.

A long, narrow corridor led out of their hideaway and into the sewers. The granite pipeline grew so tight in several places that Hannah had to turn sideways to slip by. There was a stinking, rotten filth in the air that made her stomach ache. A slimy muck was clinging to her toes and she hated the sensation as it smashed between them.

There were oily lanterns at the end of the corridor, marking the entrance to the sewers. Bloodgate's sewage system consisted of enormous granite and iron pipes that let gravity pull waste out of the city so that it could dump it in the ocean to the east. Those living in Bloodtrap who couldn't afford houses lived in the Pipe. It stretched for miles around Bloodgate but was heavily guarded around City Central. No one, not the beggars, the homeless, the guards, or nobles got to visit the City Central unless permitted.

Hannah threw on her helmet and stuffed her long red hair beneath it when she saw people up ahead. They were only beggars—degenerate vermin that chose to live beneath the eyes and ears of the ruthless Mydianite Horde that lingered on the streets. There were two of them; sitting around a blazing fire that released a sickly, rotten smell into the air. She simply nodded her head and passed by.

The Pipe opened up after about a hundred yards. A heavy torrent of water was washing into it through a rickety, rusty grate that she easily slipped through. Bloodtrap was empty but the distant sounds of laughter, screaming, wild dogs howling, and temple bells were all within earshot. The city was blacker than the night itself. Every building, both abandoned and inhabited seemed to have a rusted, dull and uninteresting façade. There was something in the atmosphere that made it happen, she thought. The very air in this part of the world made everything fade just a little.

Bloodgate was surrounded by towering black walls reaching nearly a hundred feet into the starless, smoggy sky. There were always guards walking along them; keeping watchful and despised eyes upon the common folk below.

Toward the heart of the city stood the Martax, a towering structure that was so high that it disappeared into the sky even on a clear day. It was Mydian's most questionable creation and the source of disturbances throughout the city. Vampires loved it—and its history, but thankfully Hannah didn't have to go in that direction. Her mark was only a couple of blocks down the street.

Greyhusk Terrace was the only nice street in Bloodtrap. There were a few nobles here, but everyone knew the reason. They were paid a nice sum of gold to keep an eye on the impoverished; to make sure people were afraid and unchallenging of their ruler. Gaston Rhizei kept his most sinister friends in the most sinister part of the city.

Hannah paused at the corner just long enough to look over the map. It was so dark out but the candlelight from a nearby window cast enough golden glow on the parchment for her to tally houses. The Arein Temple was at the far end and after a quick glance down the street she found its illuminated, web-like windows. On the map, she counted four houses up where a large star had been drawn. She turned her attention to the street and counted once more. Bryce's house was the first one on her right.

The rain and wind had picked up since she made her way onto the dark, empty streets. This end of Bloodtrap was prone to flooding and if she stayed out late, the passage back to the safe-house would have been cut off. She didn't like the idea of waiting outside for hours until the water dispersed.

A cold shiver ran up the base of her spine. There was a small trickle of fear in her head as she darted across mud puddles and to the adjacent sidewalk. She didn't know how to be afraid. Her entire life had been one big warm and fuzzy shelter. Dyne, although abominable by

nature, had taken good care of her. Her father, despite his overbearing, domineering persona, had kept her safe all the years in his company. Hannah grew up learning how to fight, although she had no enemies. She had been taught to laugh in the face of danger even though there was never a threat. This was the first time she was being thrust into harm's way and she didn't like the way that uncertainty felt.

There were whispers coming from the porch of Bryce's house. Hannah slowed her pace and took a moment to look his place over. The windows were boarded up—all three stories. There were small auras of golden light seeping through a couple of them and a shadow moved between the glow. A thick, marble patio surrounded the house and dense, unkempt shrubbery marked its boundaries.

Hannah turned to look at the door as she passed and noticed two men standing beneath the cover of the porch's awning. Their faces couldn't be seen but one sported a small golden light marking a cigar between his lips. They quickly hushed their conversation when they saw her appear near their stoop but when she headed off, they resumed just as fast.

Giving one last look over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't followed, she jumped the fence at the edge of the yard and headed around the side of the house. The vampire living there certainly didn't want people looking in, she noticed. Almost every window on the ground floor had been boarded up so tightly that it would have been impossible to slide even a piece of grain inside. With the place so firmly sealed and obvious guards barring the front entrance, it was going to take a bit of thinking to get in.

Although she wasn't a thinker, Hannah did fancy herself as being creative. That's why it only took her a moment of looking around to find a solution.

Her eyes darted up to the overhanging roof. She formed a visor with her hand across her brow to fend off the falling rain and saw there was a window up on the third floor with a gap between the boards. After examining her own breastplate, she concluded that she was probably just wide enough to fit. A thick smile found its way to her face as she wondered if her father had thought to use Spira Sian for more than just killing vampires.

She aimed the weapon above her head and fired into the air. The stake *'whooshed'* out with astonishing speed and ripped through the roof's overhang before pulling itself tight and sprouting its metal teeth. Hannah checked her dagger and helmet to make sure they were secure and then gave a slight tug to Spira.

Her arms struggled to keep hold of the weapon as she zipped up in the air, the chain winding itself back into the lodged drum. An instant later, she was hanging there, across from the window she had spied from the ground. Again, she surveyed the street and the room beyond the boarded up portal and was happy to see that her death-defying antics went unnoticed.

With shaky legs, she pulled herself to the window. Hannah latched onto the boards and slithered her way into the dark and musty room. She jerked Spira Sian free of the roof and slung the weapon across her shoulder while she looked the place over with eyes that had started to adjust.

It was darker than the streets, if that was possible. A lingering odor of burnt cedar and blood was thick in the air. There were large pieces of furniture all over the place but she could only see shapes. There was a slight glow along the ground toward the far side of the house which she assumed was candlelight bleeding through a closed door.

Hannah tip-toed across and gritted her teeth in frustration and anxiety when the floorboards creaked under her weight. At least there weren't heavy boots to contend to, she thought. The house was so still—so quiet and she wondered just how bad that made her situation. What if Bryce wasn't home? What if he learned of her intrusion the moment she stepped into his house? Either way, both circumstances were unacceptable. She had to do this. She had to prove she was able to take care of herself. It was imperative that she showed her father, and herself, that she was fully capable of making it on her own.

On the other side of the attic was indeed a door. It was ajar, so she slowly and quietly pushed it open, revealing yet another dark room. A tiny candle sat atop a dresser to the right. The coppery odor of blood here was overwhelming. Hannah put a reassuring hand across the hilt of her dagger as she started inside. She didn't get far before she stepped in something slick—and wet.

She lost her footing and hit the ground hard. Spira broke her fall but the damage had been done. With her face so close to the dirty carpet, she could tell the fluid that toppled her was blood. She didn't have time to be disgusted or wipe her feet off. There was a violent ruckus downstairs—chairs sliding out, feet hammering against steps, and raised voices that were coming in her direction. Her little slip and fall had just alerted the whole house.

Hannah scrambled to her feet. She pulled Spira back onto her shoulder and looked the room over. With her adjusting eyes, it was getting easier. There was a large wardrobe in the corner and without thinking she deftly headed to it, pulled its doors open, and hid inside. There was a stale odor of old clothing and she could feel itchy garments pressed against the exposed

places on her body. She held her breath and kept her eyes trained along the slit between the doors. The glow of a lantern was headed her way.

When the golden light grew enough to fill the room, Hannah's attention was immediately drawn to a young woman lying on the floor. It was only a few inches from where she fell. The lady's eyes were bulging and blue veins were pressed against her pale, tight skin. There were puncture wounds on her throat—three pair, in fact. This poor girl probably didn't have a drop of blood left in her.

Standing over her now was a large man with a thick grey beard and bushy eyebrows. He held a small oil lantern in his meaty hand and looked at the corpse with uninterested eyes. When he turned toward the wardrobe, Hannah saw the large splotch of blood on his shirt and the red ichor dripping from his chin. He was a vampire, but he wasn't Bryce.

His eyes narrowed into contemplating slits as he leaned toward the ground and examined the dainty footprint and skid mark across the blood. Hannah uttered a tiny curse beneath her breath for leaving such an obvious trail to her hiding spot. She didn't like boots and the sound they made but right now, it would have probably been a better choice than a feminine presence.

For a long moment, he stared at her. Even though she was well concealed inside the wardrobe, she was sure he could feel her—sure he could sense her heat and heartbeat. Slowly, he trekked across the room, stepping on the corpse without as much as a hint of recognition. His hand danced over a large cleaver-looking axe on his belt and he gazed at the door with a hesitant uncertainty.

Hannah held her breath. She knew she should have been scared. She knew that any rational person would have probably passed out from fear or anxiety by now. No one stared a

vampire in the face for this long without screaming or pleading for their life. Most people were smarter than this. Again, Hannah knew she wasn't the smartest kid in town but she still had the creativity that she knew most others didn't.

The door of the wardrobe exploded as Spira's stake ripped through like an angry demon. The unsuspecting vampire dropped his lantern and reached for his cleaver but it was too late. The large, metal stake tore into his flesh with a speed and ferocity that rivaled any wild animal. His face contorted into a grimace of anger and pain but Hannah didn't notice or care. She stepped out of the wardrobe in a flurry of relic dresses and pulled Spira back, summoning the brute vampire with more force than he'd probably ever seen.

"Where is Bryce?" she asked him, holding her weapon tight. His chest was mutilated, his body weak. He tried to stand on shaky legs but no longer had the strength.

"Who are you?" he managed with more anger than she thought would be possible.

"This man!" she said furiously, shoving the sketch of Bryce in his face. "Where is he?"

Before he could answer, the floorboards in the next room came alive with groans and creaks. There was a faint light beyond the partially closed door and it bounced around as if in the midst of an inquisitive search. Hannah held her breath and pulled the ailing vampire close.

His eyes darted toward the light and then back to her and he somehow managed a devious grin.

She caught him in mid-scream—a forceful slash across the throat that left him gurgling and trying to scoop up his falling blood. Hannah slid the dagger into her pants and tried to keep his head from rolling back. The light in the hall passed by the door and stopped for just a

moment. The kneeling, bloodied vampire was tucked tightly against her breast and she was ready to snap his neck without hesitation. A simple slice across the neck or an embedded stake through the chest was not enough to extinguish the life of a vampire. The heart had to be mangled, but she wasn't ready to do that just yet.

Once she was sure the light was moving away from the doorway, Hannah dropped to her knees and held his temples, forcing him to look her in the eyes.

“We have two ways of doing this,” she calmly spoke, casting a glance past his shoulder. “You can either help me and I'll kill you now or you can refuse and I can take you back to my place and make this last until dawn. You can figure out the rest in your head. Are you going to cooperate?”

His eyes grew wide and fearful, knowing that she meant every word of her threat. With a guttural slurp he managed a “Yes.”

“Where is Bryce?”

“Downstairs,” he said, barely a whisper. Large globs of blood were running down his chin and onto his shirt, making Hannah hold his head further back.

“How many are with him?”

“He is alone.”

“You're lying,” she said, squeezing her thumbs into his temples. His eyes looked like they were about to pop from his skull like corks.

“I'm not,” he cried out with a wet gurgle.

Again, the light from the hall returned. The floorboards were wonderfully accurate when it came to foretelling the location of the probing lookout. If Bryce really was alone, that had to be him.

It was getting far too risky to stay here, she thought. For just a moment she waited for the light to disappear again. Once she was satisfied that no one was around to see the room suddenly turn to day, she started to pry her stake free. She listened for the thunder and tried to time it with the lightning.

His bloody, gurgled wail ended when his heart turned to mush against the grinding power of the stake. Hannah pulled it free and with it, the mutilated remains of his most precious organ. His flesh was consumed by a brilliant, white light that burned with a radiant, magical fire that left everything else unharmed. A cloud of white ash and a pile of dirty, bloodied clothes were all that remained.

It seemed that now she was on a hunt to find the one bearing the light. The thunder and lightning continued to fill the night with deathly music as she padded her way back across the room. She gave a quick glance to the dead girl lying on the ground; the three bite marks on her neck were swollen and dark. Hannah carefully planted one foot on her right and another to her left and quietly hobbled out of the room.

She glanced back to the window and for a moment was mesmerized by the sheets of rain falling between the gaps. A bright flash of lightning made her pupils contract and the ensuing crack of thunder made her press against the wall. In her dazzled, hazy vision, she spotted the light across the room, simply standing there by another window.

Hannah crouched down and followed a row of large boxes and sheet-covered furniture to the edge of the window. On her left was a thick wooden rail that led downstairs. It was ominously dark past the first few steps but that wasn't where she wanted to go. The light was bleeding over the boxes to her right. If she stood up, she would be looking Bryce in the face. There was another flash of lighting so Hannah counted and readied herself to attack.

One

She pressed herself against the crates.

Two

Her tiny finger stroked Spira's trigger.

Three

With a monstrous boom of thunder, she stood, held Spira outstretched and aimed toward—

—a candle sitting quietly on a crate. The wind from the boarded up portal was blowing furiously but it didn't rival her anger and frustration. She started to turn around, to duck, to hide, but was violently grabbed around the waist and thrown to the ground.

Her hold of Spira Sian faltered and the priceless weapon skidded across the floor. Hannah jabbed her elbow into her attacker and the resounding grunt of pain was that of a woman. In the time it took her to realize her mistake, the unseen assailant wrapped her hands tightly around Hannah's face.

“Shhh!” the lady urged. “Keep quiet, Hannah. He's going to hear you!”

“Who are you?” she asked through the woman’s tight leather glove.

“Hannah, it’s me. It’s Desi.”

Hannah immediately stopped fighting. She relaxed and so did the robed woman behind her. Both rolled aside and got to their feet before looking to one another. Desi’s face was obscured by a voluminous black robe but the voice and frame was unmistakable. She was one of the Lylussians who lived at the safe-house, a friend, and a fellow vampire-hunter with just as much experience—or lack thereof.

“What are you doing here?” she asked Hannah as she handed her friend Spira Sian from the floor.

“Father sent me to kill Bryce. Why are *you* here?”

“I’ve been scouting this place for weeks now!” she yelled just above a whisper. “They have a tunnel to the City Central beneath it.”

“You’re kidding,” Hannah assumed. “If we kill Bryce they’ll just seal it up.”

A hidden passage into the City Central would be a great thing. Lylussians could easily get into the city but only through the commoner districts like Bloodtrap. If there was a lightly guarded entrance to the heart of Bloodgate within the simple peoples’ backyard then Mydian would certainly feel the prick of a hundred-thousand holy men and women storming his most hallowed temple. There weren’t nearly that many in the city, but they would certainly come.

“We need to leave him be then,” Desi said. “We can all come back and kill him when we’re neck to neck with a few thousand of our own men and women.”

Hannah nodded. That was probably the best choice of action but in her heart, she wanted more. Lyluss would be upset if she followed through with the slaying of Bryce and forsook a chance to deliver a heavy blow against Mydian. Tranas would be as equally displeased. At that moment, Hannah didn't care about either of them. She wanted Bryce dead, and by her own hand. She had to keep to the path.

"Alright," Hannah said, pointing over the railing. "Let's leave that way."

"No, no," Desi objected, her blond hair poking from the confines of the hood. "That's much too risky. He's sitting in an armchair by the fire. He'll certainly see us exit."

"Then I'll gouge his eyes out," she returned. "C'mon."

"You're making a big mistake," Desi said.

Hannah ignored her biting words and slowly trotted down the steps. There was a sliver of light against the wall, a reflection from the glass of a boarded up window. When she turned the corner, she was glad to see that the room was quite illuminated. There were lanterns on three of the end-tables and a roaring fireplace toward the rear. Bryce fancied artwork since the expansive foyer was littered with such works. Most weren't even on the walls. In the far corner was a stack of paintings that almost reached the ceiling. Directly in front of the girls was the front door. It was open; the sounds of the beating rain against the porch could be heard. To their right, in front of the fireplace was a large, overstuffed chair with its back to them. A thin puff of smoke wafted up from the unseen patron enjoying the kindled warmth.

She could stab him through the back right now and be done. She could pull out Spira Sian, launch her deadly spike through the chair and Bloodgate would be one less vampire. As

she and Desi began to creep across the room, toward the door, she knew that was exactly what was going to happen.

But something was plaguing her mind. It had been since her eyes locked onto the poor unfortunate girl upstairs. She had been bitten and drained of blood, just like so many other unfortunate women. She had been fed upon three different times.

Or was it three different vampires?

Bryce was in the chair with his back to the girls. His manservant was no more than a pile of ash upstairs but the third had to be—

Her thought ended when something slammed against the back of her head. Her legs went numb and she came crashing down against the hardwood floor that sent Spira bouncing across the room. With weakened eyes, she saw a man rise from the chair and turn around. He blew a puff of smoke and smiled but she barely saw it before the world of darkness closed in.

* * *

The violent storm was still shaking the house when she finally woke up. There was a pounding at her temples and she could feel a layer of dried blood across her face and neck. She was seated on the comfortable chair in front of the fire and her hands were bound across her lap by a little black cord. Tiny waves of pain pulsed through her head and neck as she reached to investigate the damage. Luckily the dried blood was from the wound on her head and not one on her neck.

Her eyes came into focus and saw Desi standing by the fireplace, arms folded over. The thick, billowy robe still obscured her face but Hannah could see the blood-encrusted fingernails

on her hands. Small, dainty fingers drummed against her elbow as she surveyed the captive woman.

“I told you not to go downstairs,” Desi said. She kneeled in front of Hannah and flipped back her hood. Lightning passed across her glazed eyes as she looked to her once friend in anger and resentment. Desi had two bite marks across her neck; Bryce and the manservant, she assumed. How long had she been a vampire? Hannah had seen her at the safe-house a week ago.

“When did this happen to you, Des?” Hannah asked, checking her legs and lap as subtly as possible. They weren’t bound. Only her hands had restraints.

“Last night,” she replied, a very relaxed tone in her voice. “I wanted you to go back to where you came from.”

“Where I *came* from?” Hannah asked. “It’s the same place that *you* came from, don’t you remember?”

Desi looked upset by her words but simply looked to the ground. “It’s the curse, isn’t it?” Hannah assumed. “After you were bitten, you forgot everything, right?”

“I remembered your name,” she said.

“But the curse of vampirism burns places in the brain. Do you remember your mother’s name? Or where you grew up?”

She forced her eyes to the ground and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Hannah,” she said, unable to meet her friend’s stare. “But I tried to save you. I really did. I couldn’t let you kill him.”

“Because he’s the one who bit you, right? You’re bound to loyalty by the curse.”

Again, Desi nodded.

“But did he know I was here?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. He saw you enter.”

“Then why didn’t he come after me while I was stumbling around in the dark?”

“Because I wanted you to lead Desi back to your safe-house,” came a voice from behind her. Hannah’s skin broke out in gooseflesh and she balled her hands into fists. The man known as Bryce circled around and squatted in front of her. He pushed Desi aside and looked at Hannah with a belittling gaze.

The drawing had been incredibly accurate. His face was riddled with piercings. There was a large Mydianite medallion around his neck and a thick Boudian cigar in his mouth. He belched a throaty laugh and blew smoke in her face. The stale air from his dead lungs was putrid and made her gag.

“You thought I would just let a vampire follow me home?” Hannah asked, looking the room over. She wanted to see where Spira Sian had been stashed. The dagger in her pants was gone but she wasn’t completely defenseless.

“No, I *know* you would have led a vampire home, but for some reason you are simply too impulsive and thought it best to try and kill one that’s four-centuries your elder.”

“And here we are,” Hannah said, defiant as always.

“Just tell us where the safe-house is,” Desi said from the corner.

“You’d best listen to your friend, dear girl,” Bryce added.

Hannah’s brow furrowed in anger. Again, the heat was rushing to her face in elevated frustration. “Don’t insult me,” she breathed. “Save your threats for someone it will work on. You’re nothing more than a four-hundred year old leech.”

Bryce’s face darkened with her biting words. Hannah smiled nevertheless. He bit his bottom lip as he stared at her with an unbroken, questioning look. A small trickle of blood flowed down his chin as a result.

“Do you really think this will end well for you?” he asked her.

“Do you really think this will end well for *you*?” she returned.

Hannah thought back to her father’s lessons. He loved Spira Sian more than anything. She was a beast; a mechanized angel of death that vampires came to fear, but despite that, it wasn’t going to save her life in this situation. His favorite saying was, “Never forget the importance of a good blade.” After a quick check of her wrist, she realized just how glad she was to have taken his advice.

“So this is it then?” Bryce said, his fangs growing another inch. “You won’t give up your colleagues for a painless death?”

“No. I will not,” she said firmly.

“Ignorant girl. You’d rather be a martyr to a weak god.”

Hannah looked him in the eyes as she gathered her resolve. With a quick, systematic flick of her wrist she said, “Whoever said I was a martyr?”

The cogwheel contraption beneath her wrist-guard spit a dagger up to her waiting hand. She tightly grabbed its hilt and jabbed the blade into Bryce's chest. With both hands bound together, she found driving it forward to be much easier and twice as destructive. The wailing vampire backed up, pulling her weapon from his heart. Hannah knew retaliation was on the way so she pushed back with all her might, toppling the chair and ejecting her in the opposite direction.

She rolled aside, dodging the advancing stab of a sword. With nimble fingers she twirled her blade so it faced down and then ripped the thick cord that was binding her hands. Desi was stabbing wildly at the ground, trying her best to skewer the girl she once called a friend. Hannah kicked the vampiress' legs from beneath her and used the opportunity to get to her own feet.

Bryce latched onto her ankle just as she spied Spira Sian sitting on the end table by the door. His grip was cold and dry, like a piece of dead meat. With an inch of grime and blood coating her legs and naked feet, Hannah easily slipped away.

Desi grabbed her by the armor and forced her down to the floor a second time in one night. Hannah followed suit and slammed her elbow back, this time smashing into the side of the vampiress' jaw. A thin spray of blood burst from the lady's lips. Desi spit into her hand and was marveled by the dark, crimson mess that came from inside her. It was the first time she had endured such an injury. At the safe-house, Desi kept the floors clean and watched the children. A broken jaw and broken teeth were a new experience, just like the vampiracy.

It was the only diversion Hannah needed. She tightened her hold on the dagger, gritted her teeth and readied herself for a pain that would hurt her more than the vexed vampire. "I'm so

sorry, Desi,” she said, thrusting the blade into her heart. After a mere half-turn of the sharp knife, the bleeding girl burst into flames and turned to falling ash.

Bryce let loose a guttural hiss and advanced. Hannah swatted a handful of the falling ash into his face and used the opportunity to head to Spira Sian. She didn’t get far before the vampire changed form to fog and circled around to stand in her way. His face was sinister but his body was failing. He stood on a pair of wobbly legs and kept a firm hand across the gaping hole in his chest. There was fire in his eye that was probably sparked by the first opposition in years.

“You’ll not leave here tonight without anything short of a curse,” he said, fangs growing past his bottom lip. He hissed and flicked a handful of blood into her face, forcing her to shield her eyes and crouch down.

With incredible strength, he grabbed her around the waist and heaved her back toward the wall. She hit with a solid thump that rattled her insides and made her head swim for a moment. She brought her knee up and drove it into his chin, making him stumble away long enough for her to slither out of his grasp.

She managed to get three steps closer to Spira before he grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her to the ground. Her dagger slid across the floor and she scrambled to crawl after it. Bryce grabbed her by the hair and flipped her over, then straddled her. He pinned her shoulders with his knees and laughed by her futile attempt to get up.

He ran a cold, heartless finger across her neck as he gently turned her head aside. Lighting flashed and thunder boomed but it didn’t hide the footsteps she heard behind him.

Bryce hissed again and lowered down, ready to give the prick of a horrible curse in her neck when she saw who it was.

Tranas stealthily crept up behind, sword drawn, ready to run Bryce through. Hannah was infuriated by him; infuriated by the situation and felt she had to take control again.

“Father, *no!*” she screamed, forcing Bryce to look around. Tranas stopped in his tracks and lowered his blade. He took a step back and nodded. This was *her* kill.

The momentary diversion was enough. Hannah brought her knee up and kicked him in the back with such force that his body went limp. His arms dropped to the sides and he collapsed beside of her. With lungs out of air, she breathed as hard as her little body would let her. Tranas had taken a seat by the door but as soon as he saw Hannah take control of the fight, he slid his dagger across the floor.

“You did well tonight,” he said, smiling widely. “I’m so proud of you.”

Hannah gracefully picked up the knife and held the point across Bryce’s heart. With a tiny bit of force she cut a small ‘X’ into his flesh, just above the hole she made moments ago. She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. His eyes were alert but his body was broken, at least until he regenerated during sleep.

“I’m sparing you, Bryce,” she said.

“Oh no you’re not, young lady,” Tranas interjected. “You were assigned to kill him, now do it!”

“Why?” she asked. “When we do, three more will sprout up in his place. Killing them isn’t going to make the problem go away.”

Hannah pointed over to the pile of ash that used to be Desi. “That was my friend,” she told Bryce. “You did that to her. You made her into a *monster*.” Bryce was unresponsive, but his eyes stayed with her. “When you can walk, I want you to head back to the City Central and tell them there are Lylussians all through the city.”

“Hannah,” Tranas cautioned.

“You tell them that we number in thousands. If you or any other vampire continues to take our people and make them like you, well,” she pointed to the ‘X’ that she carved into his chest, “I will come *back* to this spot.”

She closed his eyes with her fingers, stood, then grabbed Spira Sian and threw it across her back. She stood by the open door and gazed out to the dark, cool night. It was still raining hard but the storm was letting up just a bit. Her job was done. She didn’t need a kill in order to have a sense of fulfillment. All it took was the opportunity to put things on a course for the better. After a final, lengthy look at her father, she motioned for the door and said, “Coming?”