

A glittering castle of lights. All made possible through the steam and gears that lived underneath the mansion of Lord Cartige, one of the most affluent men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How I would adore to ‘accidentally’ take a peek. A sharp elbow hit me in the ribs and I felt a bruise begin to form. “Stay focused brother dear. We are not going to this party so you can ‘accidentally’ look at Lord Cartige’s castle of lights guts.” She hissed into my ear with a smile. I gave her a wounded expression. Or what would’ve been one if I weren’t wearing a mask over my face. “Big sister, you doubt my ability to focus on our task?” I asked. I could feel her trying not to let her tongue slip into a tirade on how easily I am distracted by the marvels of engineering and heir to a booming technological business. She found a single phrase to prove me flighty “Automaton.” “It seemed perfectly fine until it began to develop an emotional program!” I protested with a smile painted onto my face. We were approaching the doorman holding a guest list. “You’re a wurm.” she whispered. I was about to reply when the doorman stopped us. How typical of her to get the last word. As usual. “Names.” stated the doorman. “Vincent and Skylark O’Brien.” I stated. He searched his list then looked back up at us warmly. “Welcome Lord O’Brien and Lady O’Brien. Enjoy your evening of masquerade and dancing with our Lord’s blessings.” He said. Skylark simply placed a single finger to his temple with a smile. “You will forget us when we pass through that doorway.” She said. The doorman stared at her for a moment dazed then smiled back. “Of course sprite.” I pulled Skylark along through the door. The man snapped back to attention and greeted the next couple as if we had never passed.

“Must you always have them call you sprite when they are bespelled?” I asked. She shrugged. “Humans hate to say the word so it is the fastest way to know they are under my control.” Skylark said. “I see.” I said. We calmly drifted into the main ball room. For a masquerade ball, everyone comes out. Especially when hosted by a wealthy bachelor. I tried not to gag as a wave of perfume hit me, from the debutant girls trying to catch a wealthy husband and the desperate mothers hovering nearby. I felt my sister preen at being above such disgusting displays and nudged her slightly. “Stay on task. Remember the plan: mingle, talk only as needed and find the source. Capture. Leave quietly.” I stated. She barely contained her laughter “Oh Vincent, you never cease to amuse me. Quietly he says! You are telling me to not cause a scene in a ballroom surrounded by the very thing that explodes in my presence? A jester could not do better!” “Need I remind you how important this mechanic is for your plans?” I said. Her mask tilted slightly and she fixed it. “Inform me when you feel any repulsion.” she said before leaving to mingle in a group of debutants. “I intend to do nothing less dear sister.” I muttered before stalking off to a quiet corner.

I sat down in a hidden seat right next to a glittering lamp. One of the many Lord Cartige is so proud of. I looked around me. Nobody would mind if I take it apart as long as I put it back the way I found it would they? I disassembled it using the tools I always kept on hand quietly into a few neat piles. A pretty little work but missing a key component. Any gears or steam generating light energy were missing. It is impossible to create something out of nothing. Unless there is magic involved. “Is my father’s lamp interesting to you?” a female voice spoke. I looked

up to see a girl with butterflies and flowers in her hair looking down at me. Made of copper, glass and numerous tiny intricate gears, I admired my creations in use. "Very, Miss..." I prompted. "Alexandra. Alexandra Cartige. And you must be Vincent O'Brien, heir to the O'Brien Workshop with the royal warrant." Alexandra said. "We are very proud of achieving her majesty's recognition. I do see that you are wearing one of our most popular accessories. I created those originally myself as a present for my sister when we moved from the country side to London. She missed the flowers and animals so I made these to mimic her favorites." I said. Alexandra sat down next to me with a smile "Your sister must have been very happy to have her brother go so far for her. I know that I would have enjoyed having a caring family around when the illness struck." I scoffed at her "You have clearly not met my sister. Skylark is a force of nature rather than a debutant trying to seduce a man away from his company." Alexandra rose from her seat in anger "How dare you?! I am the only daughter of Lord Cartige himself! If I desire it then you will be banned from society itself for as long as you do business in London. Nobody would be your patron!" she threatened.

A gem around her neck flickered with light and I felt a wave of nausea and dizziness pass over me. The butterflies in her hair started to sputter and flowers stopped moving individual petals along with all the lights in the room suddenly intensifying. Even the one I had disassembled on the bench. I suddenly felt an oppressive need to both hurl and run away as far as possible from Alexandra Cartige. She was using magic from the stone around her neck. Alexandra leaned closer to me with worry on her face. I tried to back away from the magic rolling off her and not regurgitate everything back up again. "What is wrong? Do you need medical attention?" she asked turning away to call for a doctor when Skylark ran up in a perfect picture of distress. "Brother, are you alright? Here drink some water. I brought a flask just in case. Thank you Alexandra for looking after him personally. You see, he gets rather claustrophobic with so many different people all crowded into one space. We country gentry get that way sometimes. Especially after we work absurd hours to finish our pet projects. I will take care of him now. Please leave us to our devices and enjoy your lovely ball. I haven't seen you in society since illness struck you a few years back. Allow on me to call on you for a walk in the park sometime. We can listen to the birds' sing." chatted Skylark. With a relieved smile, Alexandra escaped the flow of Skylark's tongue.

Skylark moved the pieces of the lamp off the bench and made me lie down beside her. Slowly I recovered from the nausea and dizziness to the point I could breathe again normally. "Are you feeling up to par?" asked Skylark. I quietly nodded my head. She slowly helped me to sit back up and handed over the flask. It was filled with a pure clean spring water that slid down the throat better than wine or champagne. I felt my nausea fade away as my body relaxed. "I never thought there would be so much magic in one object. Usually it is only enough to make me want to gag, not almost swoon." I said. Skylark stared at the dance floor filled with couples waltzing. "I apologize for putting you in danger Vinnie. I should have stayed by your side instead of leaving to gather information from debutants and dandies until I knew where the

magic was.” She said. I sighed and lightly hit her head. “Ow! What was that for?!” Skylark asked. Her confused expression of misplaced dignity was a privilege only siblings have. I smirked “For having a pity party while working. I am fine now that you gave me some of your fresh fairy water. We need to go over our plan again. What do we need to do Skylark?”

“We need to get that stone. It is strong enough to power Lord Cartige’s entire famous palace of light alone while sparing energy for sickly Alexandra. From what I gathered, the stone is something of a good luck charm he, being Lord Cartige, brought back from his trip to Romania for Alexandra. It attaches itself to a host then converts their life force into magical power. An old remnant of the Duclara Clan who kept human slaves at one point for magical nourishment. Alexandra is only so lively due to the Duclara’s love for watching pretty organisms being tortured without knowing it. If memory serves, they also placed bets on who would last the longest.” informed Skylark. “That is disgusting. Is it even possible to remove the gem from her without killing her at this point?” I asked. She fell silent and I watched her lips tighten into a thin line. That was all the answer I needed. There was no way out of that resulted in Alexandra living. “The human girl child is not even alive anymore. She is barely better than a ghoul and will soon lose control if we are unable to stop her. There are too many humans to resist temptation.” stated Skylark. As if on cue, we heard a scream coming from the dance floor.

We picked our selves off the bench and ran towards the crowd. Alexandra stood silently in the center with blood running down her dress and incisors bared. “Is that a?” I asked. “Worse than ghouls. Vampires. Positively insatiable little curse spreading rats.” said Skylark. “Spreading?” I said. The other three bodies lying near her rose up and bared nasty grins at the humans. “Spreading.” repeated Skylark. Then all hell broke loose. I could barely keep myself standing with the chaos that followed. Humans running and screaming for their lives while the vampires ruthlessly chewed them to pieces. Yet amongst it all stood my sister calmly staring at Alexandra. She had taken off the chain lantern around her neck and tossed aside her mask. Orange eyes slit like a cat eyed Alexandra while blue hair caressed her cheeks. Not a wig as everyone believed. She quietly spoke a word in a language no human understood to make the lantern grow to a normal size along with the chain she wrapped around her arm. Alexandra laughed at Skylark “How did I not see it before? You must be the changeling who has been tasked to guard London from us. They toss you away then force you to work protecting these mortals. And you do it willingly like one of their dogs. Truly unbecoming.” “I am Skylark O’Brien of the lantern and you have only two options. Willingly or forcefully leave. I would prefer we settle this peacefully.” Skylark said. “I would not”, grinned Alexandra.

A silver flash nearly made impact with Alexandra’s skull. Alexandra looked smug until she realized that she was on fire. She screamed and tried to put out the fire in vain. In a few moments all that remained was a pile of charred ashes with a single gem shining in the middle. One of the other vampires edged towards it until they saw the lantern sputtering flames. Smiling broadly, a wisp of smoke escaped my sister’s mouth between all those pointed teeth. They all promptly turned tail and ran. Nobody wants to face a vengeful serpent. She picked up the stone

and promptly swallowed it whole, grimacing. I offered her my arm. "Shall we Skylark?" "Indeed." she said accepting. Together we slipped past the clueless doorman and kept walking to our automated carriage. "Vincent?" asked Skylark. I turned "Yes?" "Are you going to pay for the damages to my dress?" I opened the door and we got in "No, not this time." I replied. "Wym." she said. Always the last word.