Legend of Dragoon: Sin and Lullaby

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“Now… Again!”

My arm raises to block her incoming swipe. Our wrist-guards clash as her arm slams into mine. I retaliate with a right jab, but she bobs backward. I advance and throw another punch. She moves back again, then regains ground by lunging forward with a retaliatory strike. I flinch and shut my eyes as I block with both arms. The blow pushes me back as my feet slide backward on the training mat.

My arms ache. My feet hurt. My muscles are all sour from being tightened and active for so long. I’m sunburnt and drenched in sweat. I want to stop.

My sparring partner Lotta has knocked me into a spot of shade, the setting sun hiding behind a palm tree to my left. My body starts to cool down underneath the tropic shade. It’s nice… I want to stay like *this* for a minute. I want to slow down. I want to *stop*. I want this to be *over*.

“Not like *that*, Claire!!”

My father yells at me again. He only ever yells like that at *me*…

I raise my wrists back up in front of my face and tense up my muscles, bracing for more pain, exhaustion and humiliation.

We’ve been at this for hours.

An oncoming kick. I duck under her swinging leg, my hair flowing from the force of it. My backside shakes from the strain of overexertion. I wipe the accumulating sweat away from my brow. She sees the opening and strikes with no hesitation or mercy. I quickly react, barely blocking another flurry of blows as I rapidly transition from self-care to self-defense. It hurts to breathe. My heart is pounding in my chest. I just want to sit down. I don’t want to *be* here anymore.

“You’re leaving yourself open!!” He yells. “Are you even *trying!?* You’ll *never* master the Rouge School at this rate!!”

I turn to my father... to my master, to bow in apology.

“Don’t take your eyes off your *opponent!!”* He yells at me even for apologizing.

It’s no good. Nothing I say or do will assuage his hatred of me until I beat her.

But it isn’t fair.

Lotta is taller than me. Her arms are longer than mine. Her legs are stronger and she moves faster. She hits harder than I do. She hasn’t even broken a sweat yet.

She’s two years older than me. She’s prettier than me, and her blonde hair shines like gold dust in the summer sun.

Everything I try against her fails. I attack, and she dodges. I feint, and she calls it out. I defend myself, and she finds an opening.

She’s stronger, smarter, and faster than I am.

She’s everything I should have become after all of these years of grueling training. She’s everything my master wants in a student… she’s everything my father wants in a daughter… I *hate* her…

…

…I hate *this*…

I don’t want to *do* this anymore. I don’t want to *be* a martial artist! I don’t want to inherit this stupid *school*! I don’t want to teach it to my children or to anyone else!

I want to write *songs*! I want to sing underneath the stars in the Twin-Castle city of *Fletz*! I want to study botany in Donau and become a *florist*! I want a *husband*; a partner who will understand me and love me for who I *am*, instead of what they want me to *be*! I want to have *children*, and watch over them as they grow and learn, and sing and dance, and *play*!

I want to be a part of a *family*! A *real* one, where we *support* each other and *love* each other!

But my father doesn’t understand, no matter how many times I argue or protest. He would rather me be his *successor* than his daughter. *That* is what would make him proud of me.

He doesn’t even want me to leave the island… not until I’ve attained true mastery over the Rouge School Arts… not until I succeed in achieving *his* dream…

I’ll never live the life I want until I satisfy my father’s wishes.

He’ll never be satisfied… not so long as Lotta keeps *beating* me like this.

I’ll never get to achieve any of *my* dreams… not until Lotta stops standing in front of me.

Lotta is in my way.

I can’t write songs because of Lotta. I can’t learn about flowers because of Lotta. I can’t fall in love because of Lotta. I can’t start a family because of Lotta. I can’t leave the island because of Lotta.

Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta…

Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta, Because of Lotta. Because of Lotta.

I have to keep sparring… I have to keep sweating, aching and breathing heavy like this… all because Lotta is still standing on her feet. If Lotta stops standing… then I can make it all stop.  
  
 I *need…* to make Lotta… *stop*.

She’s tired of waiting for me to make the first move. She takes three steps forward, and her long arms fire out three rapid punches, left, right, and then left again.

I block, but the two lefts slam hard against my right arm. My whole body vibrates from the impact of each strike. My knees begin to buckle and give way, but I catch myself and tighten them back up.

I cannot show weakness… I cannot *allow* weakness…

Her defenses are raised. I throw two punches of my own, but I’m so tired and weak… she bats them away as she tilts her head and smirks.

Lotta must think I have no strength left. She lets her right arm dangle as she gently weaves from side to side, mocking me.

My father just stands back and watches. He scolds me for not trying hard enough, but Lotta is allowed to make fun of me.

He would rather have Lotta as his daughter instead of me. It’s so *obvious*… isn’t it…?

Lotta spins her whole body and throws a slow and telegraphed, yet nonetheless powerful roundhouse kick, aimed right at my head. She’s not satisfied with outlasting me… she wants to knock me *out*… to *embarrass* me in front of my father… to *humiliate* me…

I can feel the force of her oncoming kick as it lunges toward me, getting slower and slower… I can feel the air-pressure change… I can feel my body… begin to slow down…

It gets dark… the sound of birds and bugs; of jungle wildlife, completely stops…

My heartrate slows to a crawl, my sweat becomes cool, my body stops shaking, and the pain in my muscles subside as they relax themselves.

My vision sharpens as my eyes narrow onto my target… the point at the center of Lotta’s chest… that is where I will strike…

All of my stamina… all of my strength… all of it returns to me as I catch a second wind… no… this is more than a second wind… this is… this is *me*…

Lotta’s teeth grit and her body rotates as her sandle-adorned foot comes swinging towards the side of my head… but right before she can make contact, I crouch down low.

I can tell from the dumbfounded look on her face that I moved faster than she’s ever seen… faster than *she’s* ever moved in her whole life.

Lotta’s roundhouse kick completely whiffs over my head, leaving her helplessly exposed.

My father’s eyes widen.

*My* teeth grit. *My* muscles tighten. *My* feet slide outward. *My* knees straighten as my body springs up and forward. My elbow launches toward Lotta’s chest like an arrow.

A loud fleshy crackling thud echoes throughout the training grounds… an unpleasant sound. I can feel bone crack and skin tear as the tip of my elbow rips into her, sending her stumbling backward clumsily.

Lotta takes three steps back, then one more step. Her gorgeous brown eyes widen in completely shock. Her body isn’t responding the way she wants it to. The pain hasn’t quite set in yet. She tries to breathe, but no air comes in.

Lotta locks eyes with me, mouth agape, and I return that little smirk she gave me earlier right back to her.

…serves you right…

Her head shakes just slightly, as if she’s refusing to admit that I finally beat her… but there’s no denying it now. No one can stay *standing* after a blow like that. Only a fool would try to keep going after their chest has been caved in. I mean just *look* at her, she can’t even *breathe*! She can’t… even…?

…

Lotta tips over and slams her backside into the mat. The setting sun reflects an orange glow off of her pale face. Her eyes gaze at nothing, her face still frozen in the moment she was struck. She isn’t breathing… she isn’t moving, either. She’s stone still!

Lotta is *completely* still.

My father rushes over to her, picking her up by her back. Her neck slumps backward and her head dangles lifelessly like a doll.

“L…L-Lotta…?” I reach out to her as I whimper her name.

“You… you put a *murderous* intent into that attack, *didn’t* you!!” My father turns and looks at me with a contempt I’ve never seen from him before.

His eyes… My father’s *eyes*…

My father was older than my mother, even though she died much sooner than him. Years of training and fighting have taken a toll on his body, and in particular his face. He looks older than he really is, so much so that I rarely see his eyes, since he so often squints and hides them under his big bushy brow. Even his smile or frown hides behind his big fuzzy mustache.

But in this moment, his eyes are so wide with anger that I can see the whites of his eyes for the first time in my life. I can see his teeth grinding into each other as well. I can see veins popping underneath the red bandanna on his forehead. I’m not sure what’s making him redder, the setting sun, or my father’s ever-growing *anger*.

All this time, I thought that he hated me; that he looked down at me because I wasn’t good enough at the martial arts that he dedicated his life to… because despite all of the dedication he put into my training, I wasn’t able to become what he wanted me to be.

But I was wrong... I’ve been a fool...

*This* is what my father’s hatred looks like.

His anger swells into full-on rage as his face distorts into a maddening visage. His eyes terrify me, sending shivers down my spine. The sight of him makes my legs shake so violently that I nearly fall backward myself. I look down toward my hands, which are stretched out trying to reach Lotta... My hands… bathed in the dimmed light of the setting sun… they look red…

“Lotta…! L-Lotta, please!” I raise my voice, hoping that she’ll hear me and answer back; that somehow, she’ll give me that self-satisfied smirk one more time, and that this bout can continue, even if I’m tired of fighting, even if I’m tired of losing… anything, *anything* would be better than *this*…

But she doesn’t respond. She *can’t*… She *won’t*… Lotta will never respond to anyone’s words ever again…

Even still… I… I…

“Please get up! Lotta, I-”

“Get out of my *sight*!” My father barks, his voice hoarse. He swings his arm to shoo me away like I’m a disgusting fly; a gross and unwanted thing.

“Lotta! Please wake up!! LOTTA!!” My voice echoes loud enough for the whole island to hear my pleas… as tears roll down my cheeks, melding into the sweat on my face…

“I SAID GET *OUT*!!” My father’s fist pounds into the mat so hard that it cracks as he drops Lotta’s lifeless body. He rises, and the ground shakes with each stomp of his iron training boots as he runs toward me.

His charge startles me and I scream. Every hair on my body stands on edge as I quickly turn in the opposite direction and run as fast as I can.

I run down the steps of the training plateau, dive straight through the trees and into the island’s jungle. I keep running, and running, and running. I ignore my pounding heart, my burning lungs, the bile in my throat, the sting of tears and sweat in my eyes, the popping and aching of every muscle in my arms and legs… I ignore all of it as I just keep running.

I hear footsteps nearby, and I keep on running... I hear yelling in the distance, and I keep running. Night falls… I see the dance of torchlight bouncing off the wet palm tree leaves… and I just keep running…

The shallow beach splashes as I hop onto an old man’s raft… and I keep running.

The ocean threatens to swallow me whole as a violent rainstorm shakes my raft from side to side, but I keep rowing… I keep running

My body feels like it’s about to shut down from going on like this… the fighting, the running… the constant rowing… it’s been two days and two nights… my skin is sunburnt, my throat is dry… I’m coughing and my head feels hot… but I just keep on running… and running… and running.

I don’t stop running. I haven’t stopped running. I will never stop running for the rest of my miserable life...

If I stop running, if I look back… then I’ll have to face them… I’ll have to face myself… to see myself for what I am… what I have become… I’m… I’m nothing more than…

…

…

…

My eyes jolt open. The freezing air soothes my sweat-drenched body. My heart, which was beating loud enough to hear, slows itself as the comfort of my present-day surroundings puts my mind back at ease…

I must have fallen asleep in my coat again last night…

The white winter sky bleeds through the dilapidated walls of our rickety little cottage. It’s still a bit early in the morning, but I’d rather not go back to sleep again. It’s not as if I’ll get any rest out of it anyway…

The cabin is filled with the tantalizing scent of seasoned meat. The aroma puts a much-needed smile on my face.

Zieg woke up first, and is making breakfast already.

That’s the second day in a row that he’s gotten up earlier than me and made breakfast. I hope he doesn’t think I’m slacking in my duties as a wife. Then again, Zieg isn’t like that at all.

I slowly rise up from our bed, and make my way to the living room, where my husband is frying a thick piece of meat over the fire.

His messy long blonde hair is starting to show signs of greying, though I guess I’m not one to talk, since I’ve been finding quite a few greys lately whenever I comb my once vibrant violet hair. Such is the passage of time.

Zieg has already changed into his outside clothes, his brown leather overcoat procured from the local tailor, adorned with pieces of fiery red armor; a carry-over I assume from some military service, be it war or knighthood. In particular, the single red pauldron over his right shoulder has always stood out to me as distinguished.

Standing next to him, also wearing his little matching brown overcoat, is our five-year-old son, Dart. He’s adorably transfixed as he carefully watches his father cook, studying his every move with wide-eyed wonder.

The way our little boy views the world… what I wouldn’t give to see things through such youthful curiosity and wonder.

He certainly takes after his father more-so than me, namely his blond spiky hair and bright blue eyes. Indeed, my son’s eyes, as well as the eyes of my darling husband… looking into those eyes is just about the only time I see a shade of blue anymore, since Mille Seseau’s weather is almost perpetually overcast, and not to mention ice cold.

But I don’t mind the change in scenery. It’s a shame that so few flowers grow in this quaint little village. If I’m feeling the need for flowers, I can always visit the Evergreen Forest, although it’s rare to see any of them, even there.

Maybe someday, the three of us could hail a ship for a vacation in Donau. It’d be a long voyage, but I would love to see the Flower City one more time; to pass through the harbor and walk through that magnificent flower garden one more time… I’ve never *seen* so many different flowers in all my life, each more vibrant and beautiful than the next. And the locals, so kind and informative, they loved to talk about their town’s namesake, and all the different kinds of flowers that they grow…

I would have loved to have settled there if I could… but then I saw the posters.

It’s been seven long years since that fateful summer evening, although I still have nightmares about it as if it were yesterday.

The evening of my 18th birthday… the day I was meant to become the new master of the Rouge School, and take my place as my father’s heir.

The day… that I took a life…

The smile on my face, that was brought about by seeing my son and his father cooking together by the fire, so carefree and joyful… it slowly fades as I look down towards the open palms of my gloved hands. A heavy exhale leaves my chest as warm air visibly escapes my lips. I do my best to keep my expression blank.

I never became a botanist, and I never got any of my silly old songs published…

But… I do have a family. I’m a wife and a mother… I have everything I could have wanted…

…and I don’t deserve any of it…

Everywhere I went, people asked questions. Everywhere I ran, my past was only steps behind.

It wasn’t until I found Neet that I finally stopped running. This quiet old church-village out in the wintery rural outskirts of Mille Seseau, two whole countries away from my old island archipelago home of Rouge… it’s been my home for quite some time, now.

The villagers are welcoming and affable, and most importantly, less inclined to ask probing questions. The village is isolated from the goings-on of the bigger cities or greater kingdoms, where knights on horses ask for my whereabouts, and missing persons signs litter the streets.

I’ve never seen any *wanted* posters with my name or sketch on them, so I don’t know if Rouge seeks to punish me for what happened, but I’m certain that my father is still looking for me, and that’s enough for me to stay away from all of it. I can’t even visit Furni or Deningrad… though I’m sure Dart would *love* to see the shimmering Crystal Palace up close.

It really is a shame, and it isn’t fair to Dart *or* to Zieg. Even still… I just can’t risk it. Those beady black eyes, those grinding teeth, that furious expression. My father is somewhere out there, chasing me…

I thoughtlessly let out another sigh and let my arms fall to my side. In the corner of my vision, I see my husband take his eyes away from his cooking and over to me, concerned.

I feel a gentle grasp at my right hand.

“Mama?” It seems my little boy walked up to me while I was lost in thought. “Are you sad, Mama?”

“Oh, uh…” I’m caught off-guard by my son’s concern. He’s so incredibly sweet. “No, no, I’m fine.” I run my gloved fingers through his soft spiky hair, and hold him close to me. The static from my glove makes his hair stand up even more. My little Dart laughs with such a *cute* little laugh.

“I think your mother’s just feeling a little groggy, having slept in her *coat* again.” My husband cheekily smiles as he shakes the skillet over the fire. “It should be ready in a few minutes, dear. I’ve got a change of clothes for you in our room, atop the dresser. You remember where we’re going to day, yes?”

“Of course, dear.” I smile and bow slightly in gratitude. “It’s… Church Day.”

Neet’s a remote little village east of the Evergreen Forest, away from the bustle of Deningrad and the commerce of Furni. There aren’t too many people who live here, maybe a couple dozen at most. It’s a tight-knit community of elders mostly, with just a few younger families like ours.

The only real attraction we have is the Church. It’s unique to Neet since it specializes in the mythology of the Moon Child, or so Zieg tells me.

In truth, I haven’t yet sat in on a sermon, not once in these last 5 years. I guess even out here in the sticks, I’m still petrified of being somehow recognized by someone, as unlikely as that might be way out here.

Zieg and Dart go, however. Zieg likes to let Dart run around with the other children once the sermon finishes. It’s good for him, I think.

Today is special, however. While the village’s rules are mostly relaxed in nature, and the lot of us remain mercifully unbothered by strict laws or customs, today marks the first time in Neet’s history that the Queen of Deningrad and her husband will be visiting. This means attendance is mandatory, if only for security reasons. The knights of Mille Seseau don’t want anyone unaccounted for while the pregnant queen is here.

Zieg insists that it’ll be good for me to socialize with the other villagers, and he tells me that they ask about me quite often.

I’ve… made appearances here and there. I run the occasional errand, collecting fire wood or picking things up from the local store. I’ve met and chatted with one or two people here, though I must admit that I’m… not *great* with names.

Still though, I mostly keep myself cooped up in our little cabin. I cook and I clean, and I try to maintain our little slice of heaven as best I can, though I still haven’t fully insulated the walls, so cold air seeps in… especially at night.

I’m still not used to the climate here, even after 5 years. It’s the total opposite to the blistering sun of Rouge, which in time would have no doubt turned my skin olive like my father.

It’s fine, though. Even if I *truly* hated it here… it’s no less than what I deserve.

What sort of family would Lotta have raised if she got to be *my* age, I wonder… It’d probably be perfect like *she* was. A tall handsome husband, three, maybe four kids, all tall and strong, and beautiful like her… But all of that is impossible now… because I…

“Claire? Your grilled meat’ll get cold!”

Oh, Zieg… I bet he cut my portion much too large again. That man…

I finish changing into my spare winter overcoat, a light violet fur coat. It doesn’t really match with my son or husband, but it’s an old holdover from when I first started living here. I feel a tinge of nostalgia wearing violet again. It’s my *preferred* color, after all.

I re-enter the living room, where Zieg and Dart are already chomping away at their protein-heavy breakfast. As I surmised, my portion is indeed absurd in size. Zieg caught a particularly *large* boar two days ago, so we’ll have plenty of food for the next few days before he needs to go out again.

Zieg’s job in Neet is to hunt food for the markets to sell, a service to both the villagers and Neet’s overall economy. We make more than enough to afford our little cabin, as Zieg is quite adept when it comes to hunting in the Evergreen… He’s *so* good at it in fact that he’s home a bit more often than the other men. No one really complains since he brings in so much, but from time to time, I have detected a hint of jealousy from some of the other villagers.

I guess that’s to be expected. Zieg does socialize, but he also spends a lot of time with Dart and myself… and of course, because I keep myself cooped up in this cabin mostly, the three of us are a little more out-of-sight than the rest of Neet’s community. It’s only natural for the other villagers to gossip and ruminate… not that I’m *bothered* by this, mind you. Why, back in Rouge, I used to play gossip with the other girls in the village… *Lotta* included…

The three of us eat at the table together, Dart, Zieg, and I.

Mother, Father, and son. A happy little family, all to myself… just like I’ve always dreamed of…

Against my better judgment, I end up finishing my plate, only to regret it later as I’m overtaken by an *intense* feeling of bloat. I hold my stomach and moan, though not too loudly. I don’t want Zieg to think I’m complaining. We’re lucky to have such plentiful meals like this so often, considering our location and means.

“Hey, it’s still early, right?” I rise up from the table and raise up my arms. “I’m gonna go work off breakfast, stretch my legs a bit.”

“Sure.” My husband leans forward and gives me a trusting smirk. “Don’t stay out there too long, though. It’s a *cold* one today!”

“I’ll be back in just a bit…” I give my sweet little son a kiss on the cheek, which he responds with a giggle, and I exit through the front door. I walk around our little cabin toward the back, and walk about thirty paces away towards the outskirts of the village, leaving footprints in the heavy thick snow.

I don’t know why… maybe it’s because of the dream I had… but something is compelling me to go through my old routines again, something I haven’t done in a long time… not since my *son* was born, at least.

To this day, I *loathe* martial arts… no. Actually, it’s more accurate to say that I hate *fighting*.

War, conflict, aggression, any manner of combat, be it for sport or blood. I despise all of it with every fiber of my being.

Human beings should learn to make peace with each other with their *words*, not with their *fists* or their *weapons*. When you choose to give up on communication and take up arms, you might end up dead, or worse… you might end up like *me*…

Having said all of that… Martial Arts… the Rouge School in particular… it isn’t *all* bad.

Breathing exercises, meditation, physical upkeep, balance, stillness, inner-peace…

There are a multitude of benefits to the Rouge School that *aren’t* associated with combat. And besides… I’m not so foolish as to throw away my only means of defending what I hold dear. I can’t rely on Zieg for everything, after all.

I take a moment to scan my surroundings. Boundless snow, as far as th eye can see, with of course a line of trees leading toward the Evergreen. It’s somewhat difficult to practice in half-ankle-deep slush, but I make due.

I still remember all of my old routines from years back. The stances… the stretches… the alternating poses.

Rouge School isn’t some ordinary method of combat. If it were, it’d be much more sensible to master a *weapon*, like a sword or spear.

No, in the Rouge School Arts, our fists harness the natural energies of the world in order to exceed the limits of what the human body is normally capable of.

There are two ways to harness this energy. The first is usually the easiest; you simply gather and absorb the energy from the world around you.

This method came naturally to all of us back on the islands, surrounded by the vibrant jungle, the rushing waves, and all the bugs and animals. With one swirl of my hand, I could have gathered enough *Chi* to piece through thick stone with just my fist.

Unfortunately, Neet was founded on top of a dead clearing outside the Evergreen, so there’s not much life besides the people here. The surrounding trees are all withered right now, and the Evergreen itself, which of course has plenty of trees that remain green all year round, is too far away to draw from.

Alas… That’s just what it means to live in a perpetual land of winter, I suppose.

There is a *second* method, though it can be a bit challenging. Everyone who lives, carries an innate *power* inside of them. Our thoughts, feelings, personality, our hopes and dreams, our opinions and gripes, our purpose and sense of belonging… everything that we *are*… all of it can be considered a sort of of *energy,* which can be summoned forth and then harnessed as *Chi*.

First, what I need to do is halt my movements, and then empty my mind. After that, I must visualize the well inside of myself, and then I draw from it… though it’s been so long since I’ve tried to do this that I wonder if there’s anything *left* down there…

I take the appropriate stance, extend my arms forward, and close my eyes…

I shut myself off from the harsh winter air. I pay no mind to the moisture seeping slowly into my boots. My body stops shivering, and my breathing regulates.

My surrounding becomes a fading haze of swirling colors; spinning and mixing, fading into a single night sky devoid of stars. In the midst of that void, only *I* remain.

In that blackened void… I see an old water well. It gets closer, or rather, I get closer to it… from the bottom of that old well, a soft violet glow rises. Sparks of light bounce out, dancing onto the ground, gently illuminating the pitch-black void.

I can *feel* the energy deep within. It swells upward, out from the core of my chest and into my arms, through my wrists and rests in my finger-tips.

I haven’t felt the tingling feeling of my Chi resting gently in my hands in a very long time. As much as I hated training, there was always something… calming… about the quieter lessons of the Rouge School.

These are the lessons I first learned as a small child, back when father was still kind and considerate… back when my mother was still alive…

If Martial Arts were just *this*; meditation and oneness… then it wouldn’t have been so bad.

*This* is something I wouldn’t have minded passing down to my children.

But *this*… wasn’t enough for my Father… for my *Master*.

After Mom died, training became our way of escaping grief. We spent a lot of time together then, and it was pleasant at first… fun, even… but not long after, he saw something in me, and his outlook on my training changed. He became unsatisfied with a fellow practitioner of moderate skill; a daughter who had her own will and her own dreams. No, he began to envision me as a *warrior*.

He wished to see me become a Master that could surpass not just himself, but the very founder of Rouge. He believed with all of his heart that I could achieve this if I set my mind to it… but his enthusiasm grew into an obsession, and that obsession sparked frustration at every shortcoming.

In the end… I couldn’t surpass my Father, let alone the Founder… I couldn’t even surpass Lotta… not without *killing* her…

A single trickle of blood pours and leaks from the well, dripping down to the ground…

Sometimes… I can still feel her chest on my elbow; still hear the horrifying sound of crunching bone and tearing flesh…

And sometimes… I catch myself imagining that sound, that feeling… and… *smiling*…

Another trickle of blood… and then another… it begins to pool down to the floor, soaking my feet…

I *wanted* her to die… It… it wasn’t an accident… It wasn’t a mistake… I *wanted* to kill her. I hated her. She made herself into an obstacle between myself and the future I wanted, as well as the affection I craved from my own father.

An endless sea of red bursts forth from the well… it’s coming to swallow me up…

He said that I placed a murderous intention into my strike… as much as I’ve tried to deny it all these years… he was right… I wanted to kill Lotta… and so I did…

From within the bubbling blood-soaked well… a single bloodied hand rises, and clasps onto the edge of the well, pulling itself up…

A burning sensation swirls and expands maddeningly in my chest as it tries to rip me apart. It burns. My lungs and throat hurts. This virulent negativity… this maelstrom of self-loathing… I need… to *rid* myself of it!

The hand begins to push… something rises from the well… Someone is staring at me with a single eye…

“NO!!!” I scream as I open my eyes, rejecting all that I feel.

With a swirl of my wrists, I strike forward into the empty air with a double-palm thrust!

A squall of pressurized air blasts outward from my palm, firing through the snow, mowing it down and revealing the cold frozen dirt underneath.

The streak of icy mud in front of me stretches to about twenty feet before the gust dissipates.

The burning expanding sensation in my chest dissipates, and the pain subsides. Nonetheless, my fears are affirmed. The sin that I carry with me has poisoned my inner-well irrevocably. As a Martial Artist, I truly am *finished*.

My explosive anger, which caused me to lash out and take a life… my unrelenting cowardice, which prevents me from ever turning back to face the consequences of my actions… my astonishing hypocrisy, that I would dare to pursue my dreams of writing songs and starting a family, when I took away the dreams of someone else…

Perhaps that’s the *real* reason I’m so against visiting Deningrad… that I might look upon the reflective surface of those dazzling crystal towers… and see the face of a monster grinning from ear-to-ear as it parades around with unsuspecting angels… my husband and my child… *my* boys…

“…Claire…?”

My heartrate shoots through the heavens and my eyes widen. My legs kick up the snow around me as I quickly jolt around to see my husband standing not three feet behind me, mouth agape.

“You’re… a martial *artist*?”

Oh no… nooo no no *no*…

Zieg, my darling husband… my guardian angel… the pillar that I hold myself to in a world that rightfully seeks to swallow me whole…

It was almost six years ago that we first met in Neet. I was told there was someone who had moved in a month earlier that, like myself, was hesitant to share much about their past before coming here.

I was curious, so I sought him out and spoke with him. He was so refreshingly charming, even humorous. Crucially however, he was understanding… almost bizarrely so.

Zieg has secrets of his own. In particular, he is about as reluctant to delve into his past as I am. One might expect that those who are unwilling to share their personal histories with each other would remain distant. On the contrary, it was that unwillingness that actually brought us together in the long run.

We agreed long ago that we’d never our past to each other, even shaking hands on it early into our friendship. We both are burdened by what we cannot tell others, and we recognized that burden in each other, and so we found comfort in sharing that burden, all the while respecting each other’s boundaries.

Having said that, there *is* a little running joke that we both like to play on each other.

Every once and a while, in casual conversations, one of us will slip up and say something alluding to a minor detail about our past, and the other will point it out, leading to a narrow-eyed glare and an annoyed smile, which we of course both laugh off soon after.

In my first months living in Neet, I would often complain about the fridged temperatures.

*‘Ah, so you hail from somewhere with a much* ***warmer*** *climate?’* He’d pry while gently elbowing my arm, walking beside me.

‘*Stop that!’* I’d respond in a faux-frustrated tone, and we’d both laugh.

On another occasion, he’d ask me such strange questions about the nations of the world. Serdio, Tiberoa, even about Mille Seseau; obvious questions that you’d learn the answers to in school, or even just growing up in Endiness.

‘*You don’t even know about* ***that****!?*’ I’d cheekily grin as I’d fold my arms and lean toward him. *‘Are you even* ***from*** *this era!?’*

*‘Stop that!’* He’d roll his eyes and smile.

It was *our* little game that we’d play, and would never lead to anything serious. We both agreed that we would never push or pressure one another to talk of our pasts. We only focused on our present and future together, especially after our son was born… but every now and then, one of us would let something slip, and we’d make light of it. It was *our* way of connecting to each other, in a way that we couldn’t do with other people.

But seeing me like *this*… this is a *severe* escalation. There’s only one place in the whole world that teaches martial arts of this caliber… Rouge.

If Zieg can deduce where I truly hail from… then it’ll be trivial for him to deduce who I am… and then…

“Zieg… This is…” My words fail me. I’ve been so careless lately, and now he’s seen me practice… It’ll only be a matter of time before-

“You know…” Zieg smiles as he walks to my left, sitting on a nearby tree stump. “…seeing you *move* like that… it reminds me of an old *friend* I once had.”

…huh?

“A friend?” Zieg… could he have known someone from Rouge…?

“Well…” his striking blue eyes squint as they look from one side to the other, questioning his own words with a grimace. “Perhaps ‘friend’ isn’t the right word. Truth be told… he was quite a barbarous person, and made for rather unpleasant company.

“Kansas was his name. He was orphaned at a young age, and as a result, never picked up on manners or social customs. More often than not, his method of choice for communication was through his fist.

“*He* was a martial artist as well, and a *vicious* one at that. I’d man and beast alike fall before his fist. It was believed that he had been blessed by the War God himself…”

The War God… one of the servants of Soa, our Creator…

Rouge… doesn’t exactly have a *Church* like other villages and towns across Endiness… *our* Church exists inward. Our worship is the pursuit of attunement to the War God, who purveyed over all earthly conflicts and deciding their outcomes.

It was said that *Rouge* was actually one of the War God’s many names. That’s why it is both the name of my village as well as the School of Martial Arts that we practiced.

To be blessed by the War God means that you had fully mastered the Rouge School Arts, which is to say you had achieved a mastery over the human body, far surpassing what even the most stalwart knight could be capable of.

None of us wear armor, nor do we use weapons. We all train, meditate, and practice, in the hopes that one of us might achieve spiritual synergy with the War God, though none but the founder himself had ever come close.

It was my Father’s ambition to see *me* master the Rouge School Art and attune with the God of our culture’s namesake. He came to believe that *I* had what it took to achieve what *he* could not.

For *Zieg* to say something like this… did he really know someone from Rouge? I dare not ask… better to feign ignorance…

“How did you come to know this person?” I sheepishly ask with my head hung low. It goes against our mutual promise to ask questions like this… but Zieg seems to be in a talkative mood, and I’d rather drive attention away from myself as much as possible.

Zieg pauses for a moment, the glint of reminiscence vanishing from his eyes as he stares at nothing… Then, with a quiet sigh, he answers.

“We fought in a war together, he and I…”

“A… war…?”

So Zieg… fought in a war…? But I wonder which one?

He’s no spring chicken, but he can’t be much older than 30. Did he participate in the ongoing Serdian conflict? To be honest, that’s the only war that I can think of…

So then… is Zieg a defector? Or perhaps a retiree?

…

Ah… I see what he’s done, now… This is his way of being *polite*, isn’t it.

Zieg caught me unawares, and has learned something about me he didn’t know before. Much in the same way I’m now speculating on the information he’s given me, he must also be thinking about how I learned martial arts at this level...

And so, now we’re even again. The equilibrium of our relationship has been restored.

“Zieg…”

My husband stands up and walks over to me, trudging through thick icy snow which crunches and flattens with each step. He takes my hand, and I can feel his incredible warmth.

“You know, Claire… if ever you wish to speak about that which is that’s eating away at you, whatever that might be… I’m here. I will *always* stay by your side, no matter what.”

I give myself into his embrace, letting his natural warmth shield me from the icy winds of Mille Seseau.

“…And I you…” I force myself to give words to the desires of my ideal self, resulting in a wavering whisper more-so than a vow bearing conviction...

Zieg… my darling husband, and father to our beautiful son Dart… a kind and thoughtful man who burns with a fiery passion I’ve not seen the equal of in *any* that I’ve met in my travels…

Like me, he has a difficulty establishing true connections with those around him, as a direct result of the secrets of his past, which he keeps close to his chest. There are even times where I can tell that those secrets vex him; times where he seemingly just stares blankly into nothing… not moving, perhaps not even breathing. In times like those, I feel compelled to tap his shoulder to make sure he’s alright, to which he always snaps out of it with a forced reassuring smirk.

Even so… from what little I have gleamed of his past from our time together, it doesn’t appear to be the case that the past is something he looks back upon with regret or shame… like with me…

*‘if ever you wish to speak about that which is eating away at you, whatever that might be…’*

It’s been six years since we’ve known each other… and in that time, he’s deduced *that* much, has he…?

…

…I wonder if he really *would* understand me… if I told him everything… if he learned the truth about me… about… what I’ve done…

Would he truly stand by his word and stay by my side? Or would he abandon me, and take my son away?

No… I don’t believe that he would… even if he couldn’t find it in himself to *forgive* me… Zieg is a man that honors his word.

Be that as it may, I do not want his word, as well as the love he has for our son, to become a burden that shackles him to me against his will. Better to keep things as they are, for as long as I am able…

In the end, I know I’m just being selfish, keeping him in the dark like this... Just the latest in a long line of selfish decisions I’ve made in my life. More than my concern for *his* wellbeing… I just can’t bear the thought of how he might come to *see* me if he knew the truth. If those striking blue eyes were to look down at me, or worse, if he never looked at me again… I think that my already fragile heart might finally shatter.

Of course, *I* would forgive *anything* from his past. Murder, desertion, treason, I don’t care. Zieg is my rock, and I would support him the way he has supported me all these years.

I don’t know if these feelings of devotion can truly be called *love*… but they are why I am able to wake up every morning, and they are why I choose to fall asleep, knowing that I’ll only dream of that fateful day again and again.

“So… shall we fetch our son?” Zieg pulls away just a bit, still holding me in his arms, his smile wide and confident.

“Y-yes… I guess we should head over…” he can probably feel the vibrations as I start to tremble, the anxiety of today’s mandatory sermon… and the expected communal mingling…

“There’s no need to be *nervous*.” Zieg lets out a reassuring chuckle as he speaks. “You’ve already met just about everyone in the village at *one* point or another. It won’t do you any good to keep avoiding them. Besides, I… well, I’d *very* much like to show you *off*; let the other workers see for themselves just how *lucky* I am…”

“Oh, Zieg…” I pull in closer, wrapping my arms around his waist. His gloved index finger pulls my chin up, and my unworthy eyes lock with the tender blue sky that is my husband’s eyes.

“They’re all going to *love* you… just as *I* do…”

The soft and caring tone of his weathered voice accentuates the tenderness of his words, causing my heart to race; a nostalgic feeling, reminding me of the first time we got this close…

I’m compelled to chase that feeling further… to re-enact our first kiss…

It seems he is of the same mind as our lips gravitate toward each oth-

“EWW! BOOOOO!!!!”

A familiar-sounding child shouts from feet away, loudly booing and giving us a rather exaggerated ‘thumbs-down.’

Dart is standing behind Zieg, having circled around our cabin in search of us. I can only imagine the immense disappointment he must feel having stumbled upon an ‘icky’ scene between his mom and dad.

“It appears our son has the opposite problem.” I smile as I look upon our beautiful angry child from over Zieg’s shoulder. “While I’m a bit hesitant, our *son* is a bit too eager.”

Zieg smirks with gritted teeth, turning his head toward little Dart. “He’s certainly a *rascal*, isn’t he?”

He then separates from me, crouches down low, and weaves from side-to-side playfully as he dives toward our laughing child.

“C’mere, you!!” my husband tackles into Dart, both tumbling into the snow with a fluffy and satisfying ‘crunch’ sound. I can’t help but giggle as I watch them roughhouse each other, Zieg pretending to be overtaken by Dart, who climbs on top of his chest, declaring victory with his index-fingers pointed up into the sky.

Oh, those two…

Zieg carries Dart over his left shoulder, his arm wrapped around his son’s legs, and the three of us walk through the village toward the church. I of course am lagging behind just a little, still nervous.

I don’t have to worry too much about any of the villagers that’ll be there. If they haven’t recognized me in six years as a missing person, I doubt it’ll suddenly happen today at Church. I’m also doubtful that I’d be recognized by the Queen or her husband, nor would they be likely to look in our direction at all.

I *am* concerned about the presence of Deningrad knights in the village; an unusual occurrence in Neet. There’s not much worth looting here, so there’s little necessity for security outside of Zieg and the other able-bodied men that live here. This’ll be the first time in six years we’ll have more than two royal knights from the Crystal Palace present, any one of whom could be in charge of locating missing persons.

It’s been seven years since I was last seen by my father or the other villagers. I’ve gotten a bit *taller* since then, the youthful zeal in my eyes has long since faded, and I’ve grown my hair out. I doubt I still resemble the sketch on those posters all that much anymore.

I suppose I could have made the decision to change my name to further distance myself from my past… but I’ve never been too good at *directly* lying, let alone about something as foundational as my name. Moreover, I’ve heard ‘*Claire’* is a relatively common name for women throughout all regions of Endiness, so I suppose I should count myself lucky I was given a common enough name.

After passing many buildings, we approach the already open gates of Neet’s Church at the center of town square. On either side of the wooden gated entrance, two green-caped knights of Mille Seseau stand guard, adorned with golden helms and cufflinks, with leather kilts decorated with golden tassels. The most noteworthy trait of a Mille Sesau knight is of course their pine-colored dual-shoulder capes folded to resemble the wings of a wyvern; a testament to the Crystal Palace’s roots as a boon won from the Dragon Campaign.

The knights of this region are particularly renowned for their speed and precision. I’m still pretty nimble, but if it came to it… I doubt I’d be able to outrun a squad of Deningrad’s finest for very long…

Directly above the gate stands a stained-glass mural depicting two deities of opposing alignments.

On the far-left of the mural, there was a grizzly-looking beast, covered in pitch black fur with beady red eyes and razor-sharp teeth, bearing its claws at its eternal foe on the right. It stood all alone in a barren field of flame and death.

On the far-right side of the mural, there were a dozen or so men and women, commoners and nobles alike, all reaching out their hands to protect a babe being held by its mother. The child slept peacefully, and seemed to bathe all of those who stood by it in a radiating light.

This is not the first time I’ve walked by and noticed this mural, and I’ve always wondered about its meaning. I can understand the dualism depicted as clear as day, sure, but in particular I’m confused as to why the humans on the side of light do not seem to be holding any weapons to defend the baby from the creature. Despite the humans outnumbering it vastly, it nonetheless seems to be a one-sided struggle in favor of the beast.

I’ve asked Zieg about this before obviously, and he just smiles and says it’d be better for me to sit in on a sermon and learn the same way he and the other villagers has, or better yet, ask the priest himself. He often takes every opportunity he can to goad me into interacting more with the other villagers. It is a bit aggravating, but it’s not like I can blame him… he doesn’t know the whole story about me, after all…

“Halt.” One of the knights calmly speaks as he raises his hand, the two of them stand at attention in unison, stomping their feet loudly on the wooden floor beneath them.

“Are you on the census?” the other knight asks.

“Should be.” Zieg responds with a confident grin, tightening his grip on our son, still held over his shoulder. “Zieg and family.”

One of the knights pulls out a list from behind his cape and begins scanning it thoroughly with his eyes.

“Zieg and… *Dart*, right? But I see *three* of you here…” the knight’s eyes narrow.

“O-oh, that’s- uh…” Zieg stumbles his words, somewhat uncharacteristically. “I actually told the knight running the census that-”

“Ah!” The knight cuts my husband off as he points at the paper with his index finger. “Plus one, right next to your name, sir. That must be the wife, then. Very well, please enter.”

“You’re actually the last ones arriving today. Apologies for the inconvenience, but there will be assigned seating during this sermon due to the presence of Her Majesty the Queen of Mille Seseau, and her husband, His Royal Highness the Prince of Deningrad.

“Also, please try not to make any sudden movements or loud sounds as to distract or irritate the Royal Guard also in attendance.”

“Of course, sirs.” Zieg bends a knee slightly, unable to bow without tipping our son over. I curtsey alongside my husband, and the two of us make our way through the Atrium, approaching the door to the Nave. Hushed whispers can be heard from behind the door, signifying the presence of Neet’s entire population.

“You’re going to be *fine*, dear.” Zieg gently grasps at my hand with is free-hand, the other still occupied with Dart. “They’re all pre-occupied with each other, as well as the presence of royalty. I bet they won’t even notice us.”

“R-right…” Our gloved fingers interlock briefly before letting go, since Zieg wouldn’t have a free-hand to open the door otherwise.

My husband pushes the weighted door open, and the red velvet carpet underneath us extends through the doorway and all across the nave. The pews on either side are nearly all occupied by Neet’s residents, all varying in ages and build, all in heavy clothing like us in various shades of brown and grey.

Towards the front on the left side isle, a rather large group of knights seem to stand in place, facing in different directions as they surround the front-most pew. I assume that must be where the Queen and her husband are sitting, though I can’t see them through the crowd.

Still on Zieg’s shoulder, little Dart seems to have his attention fixed on all the various stained-glass murals all along the walls and ceiling, refracting a multi-colored dance of light-beams all along the room. I must admit, it’s quite beautiful to behold. I had no idea Neet was home to such a place.

…No… I think I’m mistaken… it doesn’t seem to be the murals that has caught our son’s attention… rather, I think he’s beginning to notice how large this room is… and his eyes widen as his child-level understanding of sound waves inspires something in him… I know that devious smile anywhere… oh no…

I tug at Zieg’s cuff to get his attention, but it’s too late, as Dart breathes in as much air as his little lungs can hold.

“I’M A BIG DRAGON!! RRRROOOOAOAAAAAAARRRGHHHH!!!!!”

Dart’s fantastical war cry echoes all throughout the Church, causing just about every single head in the building to turn their gaze directly and exclusively at the three of us.

O-oh dear… and that knight told us not to make any movements our sounds that might draw attention to ourselves, too. All these people staring at us… I haven’t felt this persecuted in years…

“Oh, Dart…” my husband face-palms as Dart belly-laughs triumphantly.

The sound of chuckling children can be heard some distance ahead of us… Dart’s friends, I take it.

“Ahem…” an usher come up from behind Zieg, gesturing us over. “Your seats are this way, please.”

The usher guides us to the right-side isle and towards the back, noticeably far away from the knights and royalty currently occupying the left-most front of the church. That might have something to do with Dart’s little outburst, but its more likely a result of limited seating.

Speaking of which, I’m seated next to my husband on my left, and to my right is a woman near my age, though perhaps a bit older. Her long blonde hair rests upon the white fur of her grey overcoat. She turns to me with a bright smile, seemingly eager to speak. I attempt to return the gesture, but come up short with a forced grimace.

“Sorry, you must be *Claire*, right?” she raises her hands to shake mine.

“Y-yes, hello.” I offer my hand, and she takes it. “I assume Zieg has mentioned me.”

“I must say…” she speaks as she gently shakes my hand. “…your son… is… *adorable*!” her tone is so impassioned, like she’s been waiting to tell me this for some time.

“O-oh…” Her smile is so friendly and trusting, like she’s speaking to me as a sister, rather than an acquaintance. “I apologize for his outburst earlier. He’s very… *excitable*.”

“It’s quite alright, hon!” she waves her hand with her palm facing down. “We all *love* his enthusiasm! He’s so cute, taking charge when all the little ones run around after the service. He’s honestly a godsend for the more introverted children, *especially* for my little Luanna.”

I hadn’t even noticed, but sitting next to the blonde woman was a little girl with striking blue hair. She didn’t seem to appreciate her mother’s comment about her being ‘introverted,’ though that’s a rather *adult* word for such a small child to understand, much less take offense to.

The room seems to quiet down around us as the hushed whispers of Neet begins to fade.

“Ah, I believe it’s starting!” Luanna’s mother whisper-yells. “We simply *must* talk after. I’d *love* to get to know you more!”

“S-sure thing…” I force an awkward smile. I wasn’t really looking for a ‘bestie’ today…

Two echoing clacks of a paper stack hitting the podium mark the beginning of the priest’s sermon. He’s dressed in red robes, and his spectacles reflect the colored light from the murals.

“A pleasant afternoon to all of you, my fellow denizens of this humble village.” The priest speaks in a soft, yet cheery and charismatic tone, pleasant to the ear. “In particular, I’d like to give a warm welcome to our *royal* guests… well, as warm as can *reasonably* be expected this time of year.”

The villagers respond with a gentle laughter that reverberates around the church. Strangely, it does feel a bit warmer now…

“In all the seriousness that is deserved of the occasion, I’d like to extend thanks and greetings to Her Majesty Queen Theresa of Mille Seseau, and her husband the Prince of Deningrad, as well as to their noble escort. It is my honor to have you all in attendance for one of my sermons. Rest assured, I’ll be sure to make *this* one count.” He shakes his fist and smirks, briefly taking his hand away from the thick stack of papers he’s been holding.

Another murmur of laughter throughout the church.

The priest places the papers down onto his podium, then clears his throat. There is a subtle change in his facial expression. The friendly façade drops, and religious fervor takes its place; a self-assured seriousness that I haven’t seen in quite some time.

“The Will of Soa is the will of the world itself. All that we know, all that we live, all that we are… all of Endiness, from Serdio to Tiberoa, from Mille Seseau all the way to Gloriano… everything that is, was, and will be… is the Will of Soa.

“Our subjugation at the hands of Winglies? The suffering endured by humans thousands of years ago? That was His Will.

“Our liberation under the leadership of Emperor Diaz? That too was His Will.

“After the liberation, and subsequent reclamation of the Old Countries after the hells of war tore the Old Capital apart, this world entered an age of Man, and it was believed that this age would usher in ten thousand years of peace and harmony, free from the chains that once bound us to servitude and oppression.

“However, as we have all come to see for our own eyes, the Age of Man has been anything but peaceful. Why, there hasn’t been an era absent of some war or another for much longer than ten years. Civil unrest, territorial disputes, bandits and thugs, monsters that roam the land in-between villages and towns?

“It seems as though mankind has been unable to find equilibrium, both with the environment we find ourselves in… as well as with ourselves. It is perhaps because of this absence of equilibrium that, in ten thousand years, we have failed to progress. Our technology, our ways of life… all of it has remained stagnant; identical to how it was in the days of our subjugation and subsequent liberation… Not even the scraps of our former masters have helped us to learn or grow…

“Yes, the Age of Man has truly been an Age of Chaos; a stagnant flame that eats away at our lives… and though *we* find comfort in our community, humans are flawed by nature. It is likely… no… *inevitable*, that conflict will one day come to even *this* peaceful little town. Such is the nature of the Age of Chaos that we find ourselves *trapped* within.

“Is it a punishment for how we conducted ourselves during the war for our liberation? Perhaps a curse was placed on us by the Winglies, the magical winged race who once enslaved us? Or, as I have suggested before, perhaps it is, as with all things, the Will of Soa alone that we are made to endure all of this…”

…I notice a *tapping* noise… Zieg seems tapping his foot, and his facial expression… he seems… *frustrated*…?

“However…” The priest continues. “… I tell you all now that His Will is not for this Age of Chaos to last forever!

“But how can I know this for certain? Indeed, how can I claim to truly know the nature of His Will? It is a simple thing to look at the events of the past as they are, and claim that they are a manifestation of His Will, rather than a series of events that unfolded naturally, untouched by the hand of a greater force. But to claim that His Will can be known in the sense of what is to come?

“Ah… but we do know. For His Will is also His Grace, and the Grace of Soa has descended upon this land before… a babe, who is born into this world, and blesses us lowly humans with the light of the Creator himself.

“Count One Hundred and Eight years, and when the Moon That Never Sets glows red, a child will descend upon the earth… the Moon Child.

“The child will be known by all those who lay their eyes upon them. They will see the light, be bathed in it… be saved by it… and they will know… they will truly know His Will.

“The Moon Child will come to us, and they will lead us out of the Age of Chaos we are forever trapped in… and on toward the Age of Peace that we have longed to see for over ten thousand years of human struggle!”

Ah… so that baby on the mural… and all of those people around the babe… are they being… *saved*…?

“Daaaad…” Dart whines. “Why is he talking so muuuuuch? I wanna go playyyy…”

“Shhh…” Zieg rustles his son’s spiky hair. “He’s doing the *long* one for the Queen. He’ll be done soon though, I *think*…” he whispers.

“Of course…” the priest exhales with a look of dread on his face. “When the Moon that Never Sets glows red… that is also when The Black Monster descends upon the earth…”

That must be the beast that stands in opposition to the baby on the mural…

“The Black Monster… hates… and fears the Moon Child…” The priest seems disturbed by his own words… is he breaking out into a sweat? “It descends upon the earth… and it kills the Moon Child… the newborn child… it swallows them whole… and kills *any* who tries to intervene…

“Count one-hundred-and-eight years… and when the Moon that Never Sets glows red, the Moon Child shall descend upon the earth to bless the world… but the Black Monster also descends… and kills the Moon Child…

“On and on and on… the Age of Chaos… this One-hundred-and-eight-year cycle… it has gone on… and on…

“Can this too be His Will? That a child would descend upon the earth to bless us… only for a monster to come and take that blessing away? Is there some sort of lesson we are meant to take from this… *barbarity*!?”

The whole room is completely silent as the priest pauses, allowing his words to settle. I hear a faint whisper to my left as Zieg gently grabs a hold of my hand.

“He’s quite the eccentric fellow, isn’t he?” my husband smirks, his little remark serves to undercut the tension that had been building up from being so enraptured by the priest’s speech.

It’s a rather strange comment to make, though. I can’t help but wonder… does Zieg disagree with the priest? Does he believe in any of this?

The priest exhales, wiping sweat from his brow.

“I… don’t *believe* it to be the case… that the Will of our creator Soa would be for us to languish in a never-ending cycle of despair… I have come to believe that the Black Monster is a manifestation of the very Chaos that has trapped us.

“It feeds upon our suffering, and when His Will would deliver us from that suffering, it sends its champion.

“It falls upon *us* then to rise up against the monster that would rob us of our promised salvation. If we could perhaps protect the Moon Child long enough for it to mature… that our savior could confront the Black Monster, not as a child, but as an adult… then perhaps… uh…”

The priest’s words are seemingly cut off by a sudden commotion from the front pew. Knights are getting up from their seats and scrambling. Whispers and gasps can be heard throughout the room.

“N-now everyone please…”

The priest tries to get everyone’s attention, but to no avail.

Suddenly, two knights rise up from their seats and circle around, heading down the center aisle. Between them, a young woman with long shimmering blue hair dressed in regal garbs. Her face is wracked with pain, and she seems to be holding her large pregnant belly… larger than *mine* was, at least…

The three of them tiptoe as they rush quietly through the aisle, quickly exiting through the doorway. Not long after, her husband follows, dressed in red and blue, his curly blonde hair like golden strands flowing behind his dual-winged green capes as he stomped and trudged across the aisle, looking deeply concerned.

“Oh my…”

“Is the Queen alright?”

“You don’t think she’s going into labor *now*, do you?”

“Could it be… Well now, you don’t think that…”

The speculative chatter of the villagers within the church grew louder and louder… a loud clap cuts through the whispers as the Priest bangs his stack of papers onto the podium, pulling attention back onto himself.

“Of course, we *all* wish Her Majesty the Queen to be in good health, and if this is indeed the hour of her delivery, then we must all pray that it is both healthy… *and*… uncontroversial…

“Nevertheless, should it be *this* day or any other day, it falls to the men of this age to stand against the Black Monster and defend the Moon Child. For us to break free from this perpetual cycle, we must see that the Will of our Creator Soa is not denied again!”

The Priest waves his arms wildly as his voice crescendos into a full-blown shout. This has felt less like a sermon and more like a call to arms from a general, indicative of this supposed Age of Chaos we apparently find ourselves in. I wonder if that is really the case, though… Zieg at least seems skeptical, judging by the scowl he’s trying to hide.

The Black Monster… I’ve heard tell of such a creature existing, though I’ve never heard about a Moon Child before now… If my memory serves, I think I heard about it from my mother, though I must’ve been very little, since she died before I truly got to know her.

This could all just be an elaborate allegory, albeit a passionately expressed one. It doesn’t really seem like anyone around us questions it. Are the sermons at this church normally like this?

The Priest adjusts his glasses and picks up his papers. With an exhale, he speaks in his normal tone of voice. “Every sunrise is a gift from our Creator Soa, and every sunset marks another page turn towards the climax of His grand masterpiece. The moon in the sky which never sets is a reminder to never forsake the *purpose* of these lives we’ve been so benevolently granted… *Peace* be with you all.”

With a wave to the remaining villagers in attendance, he steps down from the podium, and exits behind a curtain, now shielded from my view.

Well… that was… not what I was expecting to say the least. From Zieg’s description, I would have thought this to be a more peaceful and loving occasion, where we would all come together in harmonious prayer, especially in the presence of royalty… and yet, that sermon he gave just now… it was so authoritative, like orders from a commander or a general… honestly, it reminded me of my father during those last few years…

I feel a hand on my left shoulder.

“Are you alright, dear?” my husband looks into my eyes with those bright sky-blue eyes of his.

“Y-yes… I’m fine… it’s just… not what I was expecting, that’s all…” I avert my gaze. There’s a lot to think about, should I choose to take what I have heard at face value.

The Will of Soa, the liberation of humanity, the Moon Child and the Black Monster… it’s all a lot to take in… and then there’s the priest’s call to action… for us to defend the Moon Child from the Black Monster… to fight this supposed agent of Chaos…

If that is indeed what the Black Monster is… I-I mean… if it really is *real*… then perhaps I could…

“Claire… are you *sure* you’re alright?”

Zieg’s takes off one of his gloves, and with his ungloved hand, he gently wipes a single tear from my cheek. I hadn’t even noticed that I was tearing up like this…

“I’m so sorry, dear…” My husband’s shoulders drop and his head tilts as he gives an apologetic smile. “I had hoped today’s sermon would be more like how it usually is. I’m not really sure what got into that priest of ours today. Perhaps I’ll go have a talk with him later.”

“Oh…” my eyes widen. “Do the two of you have that kind of relationship?”

Zieg laughs awkwardly. “W-well, part of his job is to have that kind of relationship with *everyone*. In fact, I was rather hoping I could introduce you… though it doesn’t really feel as though he’s made the best first impression.”

“Ah… I see…” We don’t really have priests in Rouge, so I’m not really all that familiar with what is or isn’t customary in churches like this. I only know the layout due to Zieg’s descriptions of it over the last few weeks.

“Listen, Claire…” My husband’s eyes narrow. He seems serious all of the sudden. “…You are free to believe or disbelieve whatever that man tells you. It is *entirely* up to you. It is not my intention to impose my own personal beliefs upon you just because I am your husband…”

“…but there is something he said that you take issue with?” I give him a reassuring smile. Whatever he has to say to me, I will listen intently.

“Perceptive as always, Claire.” He smiles warmly. “While I will not impose my beliefs on you or anyone, I feel compelled to straighten out the facts, if to no one else, then to those that I call family.

“So, when I *tell* you this, know that it is not a *belief* that I hold, but a *truth* that I know to be the case. The liberation of humanity was not *His* Will… it was *ours*… Human beings fought long and hard, and many… many people died so that we could live freely like this.”

“You say that like you know all of this from *experience*.” I lean forward and smile.

My husband laughs, simmering down from his serious tone. “Stop *that*…”

“Though I understand what you mean, dear…” I nod and look ahead. “I don’t think it’s good… to defer everything to the will of some greater power… In the end… our actions are ours alone.”

Yes… would it be some small comfort if I were to accept Lotta’s death at my hands as the machinations of some greater will from above? Perhaps… but I know in my heart that it isn’t true. It wasn’t Soa’s Will that crushed her chest and flattened her lungs… it was *mine*…

“Can I go *play* now!?” Little Dart, who has been sitting so patiently, is now flailing his arms and legs about as he whines and sighs.

“Yes of course!” Zieg smiles jovially. “What would the other children do if they didn’t have *you* to lead the charge?”

“YES!!!” Dart raises both of his fists in the air. “FINALLY!!!”

Without even the slightest hint of hesitation or care, Dart leaps from the pew, climbing over it and out into the isle, calling after the other children who had already begun running in and out of the atrium.

“Don’t *climb* over the-… Oh for goodness sake…!” My husband calls out to Dart, only to give up halfway, hiding his smile behind his hands in a double-facepalm.

To my right, Luanna’s mother turns to her child with a smile and a head-pat. “Why don’t you go and play with the other children, Luanna?”

“…okay…” the young girl slides down the opposite end of the pew slowly, making her way to the atrium. As she opens the door, a loud cheer can be heard from the other children as they greet her.

My curiosity gets the better of me as my attention turns to the girl’s mother, who is still sitting next to me, the two of us both leaning over to face the atrium where the children play and shout just outside our view.

“She seemed rather hesitant. Does she get along with the other children well?”

Luanna’s mother sighs as she turns back around to sit proper. I follow suit and turn to her, but she doesn’t make eye-contact with me, pausing for a moment before answering.

“She used to…” her hands rest on her lap with fingers interlocked. She starts fidgeting with her thumbs. “…things haven’t been the same since her father… well… he stopped *writing back* to us…”

“*Writing back?”* I tilt my head.

“Her husband was Serdian.” Zieg chimes in.

Oh… the Serdian conflict.

It was about two years ago, or so they say. Carlo, the King of Serdio was killed, and his brother Doel was to take the throne only until Prince Albert, Carlo’s son and the rightful heir, comes of age. Apparently, there was an internal struggle within the royal family of Serdio as to the trajectory of their country’s future. Doel wanted things to change, while the rest of the royals intended to hold more strictly to Serdian traditions. There was even a rumor that Doel had murdered the King, his own brother, over these disagreements… though they were never *proven* as far as I am aware.

At some point, Doel defected and established Sandora, an empire entirely under his control, in the southwestern parts of Serdio. Since then, there’s been ongoing conflict with Serdio’s Kingdom of Basil in the northeast.

Unlike the knights of Basil, who are comprised almost entirely of men from Serdio, the Sandoran Empire is more than willing to accept the enlistments of able-bodied men from all across Endiness. I’ve even heard rumors that there are non-humans working under Doel as well.

If Luanna’s father was caught up in that conflict, then…

“I’m so sorry…” I tilt my head down in respect. “Luanna’s so young… does she understand?”

Luanna’s mother wears her grief plain on her face.

“My *tears* were enough for her to understand. She stopped asking when he’d come home. Since then, she’s become quiet… distant…

“That man… if he were here, he’d know exactly what to say to cheer her up… but no, he had to get swept up in that bastard Doel’s ideals of *equality* and *change*… though in the *World Papers* lately, all he ever seems to talk about is *strength*…

“He wanted to help Doel build a country where everyone could be equal, whether you were rich or poor, human or otherwise. He promised Luanna that she’d grow up in a world full of Humans, Gigantos, Minantos, and all of Soa’s creations living in harmony with each other. He even told her the fairies who hide deep in the Evergreen might come out and play with her…

“But instead, she gets to grow up in a world without a father… and me without…”

She wipes a single tear away from her cheek and shakes her head, burying her grief behind a façade of nonchalance.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring things down like that. And really, I say all of this so that I can express how grateful I am for how bright and welcoming your son is. I’ve even seen her *smile* again because of him. You two must be wonderful parents.”

I look over to Zieg, who gives Luanna’s mother a bashful smile.

“We do alright, I think.” He grins with pride as he puts his arm around my shoulder.

Suddenly, a loud metallic crash echoes from behind us, coming from the direction of the atrium, as if something heavy fell over and possibly broke.

“Y-you don’t suppose that was *ours*, do you?” Zieg looks over to me with concern.

“I mean there are five *other* children over there…” I add, knowing full well that only *one* child in Neet ever seems to get himself into trouble.

My suspicions are soon confirmed as Dart’s loud screaming cry can be heard from behind us.

Zieg sighs. “I’ll go get ‘em.” He takes his arm off and scoots out into the aisle.

“Oh my…” Luanna’s mother gasps.

“It’s just a consequence of raising a boy that burns so bright.” I turn to her with a smile. “Sometimes he just burns himself out.”

Zieg passes through the atrium doors, and after a brief moment, re-emerges, carrying our kicking-and-screaming son under his arm.

Oh boy… another one of his signature tantrums.

“IT’S NOT FAAAAIIRRR!!” Dart screams so loud that the reverb hurts my ears a little. “THEY WERE BEING MEAN AND I WANTED TO PLAY WITH *EVERYBODY*!!”

“Now now…” Zieg seems to legitimately struggle to restrain our little boy as he tries to bring him to the pew to sit with us. “What’s *not* fair is the extra *work* I’ll have to do to pay for that *lamp* fixture you knocked over.”

“I didn’t MEAN to!!” Zieg plants Dart, who is on the verge of tears, between the two of us on the pew. “I just wanted *everyone* to play and they got mad at *me*!!”

Dart just sits between us, shoulders slumped, sobbing to himself in frustration, and probably a little embarrassment. Clearly, he’s exhausted himself.

I know exactly what to do in this situation.

I gently take little Dart in my arms, cradle him over my lap, my chin resting over his head, and begin to hum his lullaby.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm hmmmmmm…♪”

My voice carries surprisingly far, though I hadn’t intended my song to be heard by anyone but my son.

It’s an old melody I wrote when I was just a girl dreaming of being a mother. I had always planned on using it as a lullaby for my future children, and it’s proven to come in pretty handy in raising Dart, who quite often burns brighter than his little body can handle.

This hot-headedness… these impulsive outbursts… this tendency to lash out at his environment when things don’t go his way… all of these are little curses that *I’ve* passed down to him. He’s lucky to have a man like *Zieg* as his father… as a counterweight to having *me* as his mother.

This song of mine is the only good thing about me that I can pass down to him. It’s the only good thing about *me*, after all.

I never wrote another song after I ran away from Rouge. How *could* I, after all? What would a murderer’s song even sound like? Distorted and twisted, I’d imagine.

I’m honestly thankful that my taste for music dulled after that day. I can’t imagine what sort of venom I’d have spewed into the world if I continued to write and perform, not just because I killed her… but because I know what it’s like to want someone dead… and I remember the brief feeling of joy I felt after getting what I wanted…

That feeling still remains, no matter how desperately I’ve tried to throw it away or destroy it. Even after finding a husband, even after becoming a mother… that feeling… that memory… it just won’t go away.

So, I’ve buried it. Deep down where no one will ever see it. And so, no one knows who I truly am inside. Not even my husband suspects the true depths of my depravity.

And of course, my little boy is completely unaware. He totally trusts me as his mother, as evidenced by him now falling asleep in my arms, surrendering his frustrations to my little song and giving into his exhaustion.

*‘I just wanted* ***everyone*** *to play’*

*‘it’s not* ***fair’***

Even at such a young age, my son has such a strong sense of justice.

…

I wonder how *he’d* come to look at me if he knew the truth… After all… there was nothing *fair* about what I did to Lotta…

If Dart grows up to be as strong and as kind as his father… maybe the life he lives… will outweigh the sins I’ve committed… and the life that I stole…

I can feel the heft of my son’s body as he falls totally asleep on my lap, and the vibrations of his soft snoring fill me with an immense feeling of unearned pride. He exudes such warmth, just like his father.

“Your singing voice is so *pretty*…” Luanna’s mother gasps, and I turn to look at her. She’s holding her hands in front of her agape mouth, totally shocked. “You could be a performer!”

“N-no, not *me*…” I blush, only to notice I’m being looked at in awe by everyone around us, other villagers who’ve turned around to look at me. Some of them are even gasping and *‘wow’ing*.

My husband leans in with a gentle, yet self-satisfied grin.

“See? I *told* you they were all going to love you.”

After that *slightly* embarrassing scene at church, the three of us said our goodbyes to the villagers and started our way back home to put Dart to bed. It’s not quite evening just yet, the sun is still up, but it’s starting to get colder now.

Zieg is cradling Dart in his arms, who is still fast asleep. Poor thing…

As the three of us walk together, I notice two knights standing in front of the entrance to the clinic. I recognize one of their faces as the knight in front of the church earlier today who was holding up the list of names.

That must mean Queen Theresa is in there…

It was quite the worrying scene, watching her being escorted by her knights out of the church while visibly anguished like that. Still though, she’s in good hands. The doctor here is one of the few villagers I actually speak to regularly, and he’s not only kind and understanding, but also quite competent at his profession.

I’ve been seeing him for a while now, at my husband’s behest, for my insomnia and anxiety. He’s been very accommodating in regards to the latter, even allowing me to use the back entrance of the clinic, cutting through his living quarters to avoid other patients.

Of course, I can’t really tell him about the real source of my anxiety. A crime as damnable as murder could hardly remain privileged, and if I were to reveal any personal details, it could lead to him or his assistant potentially figuring out who I am.

As such, our visitations are brief, and unfortunately rather frustrating on his part. He can tell that I’m keeping things from him, and thus preventing him from doing his job properly. Nonetheless, he’s never been aggressive in his attempts to pry.

As we walk past the clinic, a bright white light emanates from its front windows, getting brighter and brighter until it begins to illuminate beyond even the daylight.

My husband and I both shield our eyes as the light flashes brighter than the sun at midday. It remains blindingly bright like this, causing even the guards to flinch and shield their eyes. One second after the next, the light persists… until it slowly fades.

“Hmm…” Zieg takes his arm away from his face. “…Was that really the healing device?”

Clinics in Endiness utilize a sort of magic device; a large white pearl hangs like a chandelier within a circular room. Standing at its center allows the doctor to imbue their patients with a small drop of light that drips from the pearl like a teardrop. The process can cure a myriad of ailments, though it’s unknown to me how it all really works.

There does tend to be a flash of light when the teardrop touches your body… but…

“That was *way* too bright for that…”

Yes… much too bright… nothing about that light just now was natural.

One of the knights in front of the clinic notices the two of us gawking.

“Please be on your way while Her Majesty is being treated!” his tone is authoritative, but not quite at the level of threatening.

“Of course, sirs. Our apologies.” Zieg gives the two of them a friendly wave before turning away.

I smile at them and wave like my husband did… but as I look at my own gloved hand… I notice a red tint has overtaken it.

My hand is red… a deep crimson red, like the color of blood… it’s just how they looked that day, soaked under the light of the setting sun, seven years ago…

That hot summer evening… under the palm trees… my father was screaming at me… Lotta had stopped moving…

…

What am I doing? How can I stand to be amongst these good people? These kind villagers and their children, these royal knights, the Queen and her husband… Zieg and Dart…

How dare I breathe the same air as them after what I’ve done? How dare I keep living like this, as if that day never happened. How did I let myself pursue my dream of becoming a mother… of singing my silly little lullaby to my child…

How dare I let these people love me… as I lie to them with every word that I speak, every movement that I make… even this simple little hand gesture, this friendly little wave to a Knight of Mille Seseau… as if these hands aren’t forever stained in Lotta’s blood…

I’m not a simple villager… I’m not a wife… I’m not a mother… I’m a murderer. That is, and will forever be, the role that I am assigned, no matter how much I lie to myself and to others.

If, on that day, seven years ago, I had turned myself in… perhaps then I could have held on to at least some semblance of the girl who wrote lullabies to her future children… who dreamed of flowers and motherhood…

But instead, I ran from the consequences of my actions… and proceeded to live out this fantasy in spite of everything that I’ve done…

That selfishness… that instinct for self-preservation and greed, even as I stand here feeling sorry for myself… I have absolutely no intention of changing course. I’ll never turn myself in… I’ll never tell Zieg or Dart or anyone else the truth about me…

That’s how I know it wasn’t an accident or a fluke. Even more than the fleeting sense of satisfaction at seeing my opponent motionless on the floor after striking them down… the fact that I would *choose* to run and hide and lie and continue on like this… *that* proves that I’m really nothing more than a murderer.

I’m a monster… no different from the one on that stained-glass mural…

“Claire!!”

My heart skips a beat as my husband’s loud call snaps me out of my self-pitying trance.

It is only then that I notice… it isn’t just my hand that’s red. It’s the snow underneath my feet as well… and even the overcast clouds in the sky have a red hue to them.

It’s quite a strange thing to behold at this hour, especially in this part of the world.

“Claire, look!!”

I turn to my right to see my husband, about a dozen or so paces ahead of me, looking toward the horizon while pointing up at the sky.

I move my gaze upward… and up in the sky, I see the Moon that Never Sets.

This world’s moon, no matter what time of day it is, always floats above us in the exact same spot, no matter what time of day it is. Some consider it to be peculiar behavior for a moon, though I’ve never really questioned it. The moon has simply been like this for as long as I can remember.

As I ran throughout all Endiness to escape my pursuers, the Moon that Never Sets was always above me, sparkling in the sky, casting a pale blue light from the cracks over its surface.

But now… staring into the Moon, I see a sight I’ve never seen before.

The Moon that Never Sets… is emitting bright rays of crimson red, like the color blood, illuminating the night sky and the ground beneath.

My mouth opens in awe at the sight of it. My mind wanders to that priest’s sermon from earlier… I speak aloud to no one in particular.

“Count one-hundred-and-eight years, and when The Moon that Never Sets glows red, the Moon Child shall descend upon the earth…”

That bright white light just now… and this eerie red glow from the moon…

Coincidence upon coincidence… can something like this really happen? Is Queen Theresa’s child… in our little town of Neet…?

“I’m going to take Dart home!” Zieg calls out to me. “Wait for me!”

He runs toward our home, leaving me in the middle of the snowy clearing in front of the clinic.

The knights are still dutifully guarding the front entrance, though they’re both transfixed by the glowing red moon in the sky. I can’t blame them of course, since this *is* a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon.

More importantly, with their attention focused elsewhere, I can circle around back and enter through the doctor’s private quarters like I always do.

I’m not sure why… but something is compelling me to do this… I want to go into the clinic… I want to see if it’s really true…

As the knights continue to be distracted, I slip by them, tip-toing between the two buildings. I circle around, walk slowly up the stairs and onto the back porch of the Doctor’s living area. I gently open the door, careful not to make a sound, and I step into the doctor’s bedroom.

It’s messy like usual, trinkets and papers strewn about on the floor. To my immediate left is the doctor’s desk, and across from it is his bed, all rather plain and unremarkable.

To the right end of the room is the hall to the main clinic area. As I approach the hall, I can hear… it almost sounds like… two sets of newborn cries…

My goodness… has Her Majesty given birth to twins?

I go through the dark hallway, careful not to stop on any of the creeky wooden floorboards. I’ve come through here enough times that I’m able to avoid them with relative ease.

To my left, a door is slightly ajar, with light peering through. I can hear the sounds of voices from the other side.

Gently, quietly, I approach the door, widen the crack slowly, and peer through it.

At the edge of the brightly-lit room, Queen Theresa lays under the covers of a light-blue sheeted bed, cradling two crying newborn babies wrapped in small white blankets. The Queen’s long blue hair is drenched in sweat, and her face is strained with exhaustion. I bet I looked a bit like that back then…

She is surrounded by four of her knights, all standing at the ready. A man in fancy green robes sits at the Queen’s bedside on the left, likely her husband the prince.

On the other side of the bed, the doctor, dressed in light green robes, wiping the sweat away from his fuzzy grey eyebrows as he nervously flips through a thick blue tome.

“It’s the strangest thing I’ve ever laid eyes upon.” The doctor’s whispered elderly voice carries a nervous tone. “Even so, they need their rest…”

“They won’t stop crying…” The Queen seems to be on the brink of collapse as she lies there holding her two children, bobbing them up and down in vain as they continue to cry out. “How long has it been now? Is this normal? Shouldn’t they have fallen asleep by now?”

“I don’t suppose *any* of this is normal, ma’am.” The doctor flips through to another page.

“She doesn’t need to hear that right now…” The prince angrily chimes in. He has a nice youthful voice, though he doesn’t look that much younger than Zieg.

“Please don’t badger him, dear…” the Queen responds to her husband… she really does sound exhausted, especially as she tries to project her voice over the cries of her two children.

“Perhaps you should let me hold them.” The prince turns to his wife in quiet desperation. “At least one of them. You look to be on the verge of collapse. You need rest as much as they do.”

“I won’t…” The queen stubbornly cuts him off. “I won’t… let them go… I will stay with them…!”

Her arms wrap more tightly around her two children, though her grip is still tender. I think she might be delirious.

This isn’t good… everyone in this room looks tired and desperate, and the babies just keep crying… They need my help.

I knock gently on the door three times before opening it slowly and taking a single step through the doorway, sticking my head in with a nervous smile.

“Who goes there!” One of the knights watching the door sees me and yells, gripping the handle of his sword and half unsheathing it from the scabbard on his waist.

Suddenly, everyone’s attention is drawn towards me as their heads all turn, eyes widened in shock and fear. The queen, the prince, and all four of their knights all lock onto my presence as if I were a predator stumbling into a fresh and vulnerable nest.

The prince gets up from his seat and puts his arm over his wife, blocking my view of her. He stares at me with the ferocity one might expect out of a wolf defending its young.

The doctor sees me and reaches out, shaking his and as if to shoo me away.

“*Claire*!? What on earth are you doing here!?” he scolds me with a tone of shock and disappointment as if I were a child caught snooping somewhere I shouldn’t be.

“You know this woman!?” The prince growls, his eyes still glaring at me with gritted teeth.

“Yes, of course!” the doctor replies, taking a few steps toward me. “She’s one of my patients… but Claire, you don’t have an appointment for another week!”

“How did she get past the guards!?” One of the other knights calls out as his stance widens, preparing to advance toward me.

“She must’ve used the back entrance.” The doctor responds, shaking his head in disapproval. “I can’t believe you would betray my trust like that, Claire…”

This is bad… they all think I mean harm. I need to say something that will calm them down.

“I’m so terribly sorry…” I speak in a soft and shakey voice, openly displaying fear and hesitation as I gently open the door and take another step into the room, putting both of my hands up and lowering my head. “…I saw a white flash coming from the clinic and I was curious… and then I heard crying…

“Tell me, is it true that the babes have been crying like this for a while now? You all seem so tired and worried…”

There are audible gasps from around the room as they all turn to each other, cautiously weighing the believability of my words and gestures.

The doctor clears his throat.

“It’s true… we are all concerned about the health of these newborns due to this excessive crying. Even the healing device has been of no use…

“It could be that only *one* of the children is truly ill, and their crying is causing the *other* to cry. If we could just *separate* the two for just a moment, then maybe-”

“No!!” The Queen cries out. “I will not let *anyone* take them!! I don’t care about this stupid prophecy! They are *my* children!! I will *raise* them and *love* them, and they will be with *me*!!”

Queen Theresa is on the verge of breaking… I can hear it in the raspiness of her voice, and the ragged look in her eyes… if she doesn’t sleep, she really might die… but she won’t let herself… not as long as her children are crying like this.

The temperature of the room is increasing. The longer this goes on, the more tense everyone feels. These long and pained cries… it’s impossible to stay calm while in this room… and now, all of that tension is focused on me, with four knights just about ready to draw their swords.

I tepidly raise my hand to interject.

“It might not work, but… could I *sing* to them?”

The prince manages to raise his eyebrow in disbelief while still glaring angrily.

“Are you insane!? Get out of here, NOW!!”

At the implication of his command, two of the knights advance toward me, their swords now fully drawn and pointed at my throat.

“N-now hold on just a moment!!” The doctor stretches his hands out, gesturing the knight to lower their weapons. “We’re desperate, here! I honestly don’t see the harm in it!”

There’s a noticeable pause in the room. If not for the incessant crying, there would be total silence.

“Do you *trust* this woman…?” The prince’s eyes turn to the doctor, though his head and body are still pointed toward me.

“I promise you that she’s harmless.” The doctor nods and bows. “All of the villagers are.”

The prince’s eyes dart from side to side in thought… then back at me.

“Let her advance… but only six paces. That’s close enough for her song to be heard…”

“Your Highness…” I bow in gratitude.

The two knights that had advanced on me lower their swords and take two steps back, though they do not sheath their weapons and their eyes are still locked onto me, as are the other two knights behind them. The prince slowly lowers his arm, allowing me to see the pain and exhaustion on Queen Theresa’s face. It’s a harrowing sight…

As commanded, I take six paces, slowly, one step at a time. One… two… three… four… five… si-

“That’s far enough!” The prince barks, causing me to freeze up.

“I assure you all she’s *completely* harmless!” The doctor continues his peace-keeping gestures in vain. I don’t blame anyone here for perceiving a total stranger as a threat in a sensitive situation like this. Besides, depending on their combat experience… maybe they even sense how *untrue* the doctor’s words really are…

“Just keep your hands where we can see them… *please*…” I can hear the exhaustion beginning to set itself in the prince’s voice as he gives his commands. His narrowed brow softens from anger to pleading. Despite his lack of trust, I can sense that he’s hoping… praying internally that this song of mine is the salvation they’re all looking for.

As the prince commands, I raise my hands so they can be seen by the knights… and then I interlock my fingers and hold my two hands up in prayer. With closed eyes and a raised chin… I invoke the Claire that once dreamed of songs and flowers and children… and sing.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm hmmmmmmm…♪”

As I sing my little lullaby, I can hear soft and subtle gasps from the knights, though I cannot see their expressions as my eyes are still closed. I think I might crack a prideful smile if I were to let myself see their shocked faces. I bet they didn’t expect a voice like mine.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm hmmmmmmm…♪”

I remember the first time my father caught me singing to myself. I was actually drafting this very lullaby in my head.

I told him that day that I’d be dedicating the song to my future baby… He said it’d be better for me than mastering the Rouge School…

Even back then he was still so insistent on me achieving what he could not… but in that moment… even he acknowledged that my *song* was more important than my *fist*… It was probably the last kind thing he ever said to me… That was two years before it happened…

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm *hmm* hmmmmmm…♪”

This little melody of mine… it came to me in my sleep one night, during a particularly violent thunderstorm.

I used to hate the sound of thunder… it would startle me awake and make me cry… but one night, this song popped into my head, and it calmed me down.

Since then, the sound of thunder just reminds me of this lullaby… a tune that cuts through anger and violence… it reminds you just how precious and wonderful life is… even though there are times when its scary to just exist…

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm *hmmmmmmmmmmm*…♪”

Ever since I killed Lotta, no song has ever drifted into my mind the way this one did… I’ve tried to sit down and write music by force, but even before what happened, I was never that kind of artist. The music needed to flow into my mind naturally… but I’m no longer worthy of song…

A single self-pitying tear rolls down my left cheek as my song ends in silence… how pathetic can one person be…

…wait… silence?

Queen Theresa audibly gasps and sighs as if she was holding her breath for hours.

“They’ve stopped… by the Gods… they’ve stopped…”

I open my eyes to see the Queen looking to me with half-closed eyes and a weak, yet warm smile.

“Tha…nk… y…ou…”

With that, her head bobs down, and she falls asleep along with her two beautiful children…

The prince lets out an immense sigh of relief as he runs his fingers through his wife’s sparkling blue hair.

He turns to me with a smile. “Thank you…”

The prince bows his head, and the knights all follow suit. The doctor laughs nervously, scratching his cheek with his index finger.

I place my hand over my chest and bow in return. “It was nothing, your Highness…”

“So…” one of the knights interjects, speaking to the prince. “What shall we do about all of this?”

The prince’s soft expression hardens, as if he’s just been reminded of something serious.

“Get the carriage ready… and send a bird to the ship captain. We’ll be heading out before sundown…”

The knight bows, then walks past me to the doorway, exiting the room.

My attention switches from the exiting knight, over to the two sleeping children lying in the Queen’s arms… It’s none of my business… I’m just a commoner, and worse yet… I’m a sinner of the lowest rung… and yet I cannot help but to ask aloud.

“So um… w-which one of them is the Moon Child…?”

The air in the room thickens. No one seems to move in response to my question, as if they’re frozen in place, deadly silent.

“Oh, Claire…” the doctor facepalms, a grave concern carries in his old raspy voice.

The prince keeps his eyes fixed upon his queen, still holding onto her.

“We don’t know… the lightshow didn’t start until after they were both birthed, and it was so bright that we couldn’t tell which one it came from…”

“It… It *could* be possible that it’s *neither* of them…” One of the knights chimes in with an optimistic, yet sheepish remark. It’s clear he doesn’t really believe his own words, nor does he expect the rest of us to.

The prince sighs…

“Be that as it may…” He rises up, taking a defiant heroic stance as he turns to his men. “…my children can’t stay here, and neither can Her Majesty.” He turns to the doctor. “I’m sorry to ask this, but do you have any spare cradles we might appropriate?”

“But of course, your Highness.” The doctor bows. “I can procure them for you.”

With that, the doctor walks past me and leaves the room, making sure to give me a concerned nod before he does so.

The prince walks over to me.

“Claire, was it?” he offers a friendly handshake. I take his hand, and he takes mine gently. “Words alone cannot express my *immense* gratitude for the service you’ve given to your kingdom’s future heirs. Your bravery in the face of our stressed anger, and your song which cut through a dangerous situation no blade could ever *hope* to… for this and more you have my humble thanks.”

I can’t help but blush at his earnest words. I gasp as I hold my cheek. “I-It was nothing, your Highness…!”

The prince smirks. “Heh, you can dispense with the formalities. Call me Cap. Just about everyone in my service does, anyway.”

“Cap?” I tilt my head.

“Short for Captain, since I used to be one for *these* jokers.” He gestures to the other knights, who all snicker. “That was how I met my wife, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

I chuckle at his charming banter. “I’m sure it was quite the story.”

“Indeed!” he smiles… then takes a step closer to me and lowers his tone, his words aimed only to me now. “Though truthfully, part of my mind has never left my old post. I still think about all of those tasks I left behind when I became prince to Deningrad… Missing person cases in particular was a responsibility which I took to heart… and I *never* forget a face…”

My heart skips a beat… I look down and see that the prince still has a hold of my hand.

“Is… i-is that s-so…?” I try to laugh off his comment… but I know full well its meaning…

He gives me a serious look for a moment… then relents with a smile.

“You have absolutely *nothing* to worry about, my dear. Those posters came down *years* ago, and I’ll make sure you have free reign throughout *all* of Mille Seseau. If you have a family, I’m sure they’d love to see the Crystal Palace up close… and I bet they’d love a tour of the *inner*-palace even more…”

“Oh my goodness!” I hold my hand over my mouth to hide my slacked jaw. “My son would be over-the-moon!”

The former captain nods and smiles. “Yes, well, that’ll all have to wait until we *all* make it *over-the-moon*…”

The knight that had left the room returns… wait, no… this is a different knight. He has a red feather on his helmet. If I recall correctly, I believe that signifies his status as captain.

“Your Highness, the carriage is here!” The knight captain bows.

“Excellent.” The prince walks over to him. “Now… I’ll be taking *that*.”

He grabs the helm off of the knight’s head, takes off his royal cap, and places the helm over his head. It fits perfectly, as if it was meant for him all along.

“S-sir…?” The knight stammers. “A-am I being *demoted*?”

Cap smirks as he adjusts his helm. “I assure you it’s only temporary until we can get my wife and children to safety.”

Not long after, the Queen and her children are taken into a carriage that was parked outside the clinic.

I step outside of the clinic, bidding a good evening to the doctor, who elects to stay inside.

It’s been some time now, and the sun is beginning to set. The clouds have darkened, and the red glow of the Moon that Never Sets has only intensified, bathing Neet in a deep crimson light. It’s unnervingly quiet, save for the occasional distant owl cry… even the biting winter winds have stopped dead.

The Captain Prince turns to me as he stands by the carriage, ensuring his wife and children are safely secured.

“Will you be alright, dear? Do you need an escort home?” he tries at a confident grin… but I can tell that there’s an anxious fear behind it. He’s eager to get his family away from this place.

“Thanks, but my house isn’t far from here.” I smile and bow politely.

“Claire!?” In the distance, I hear my husband’s voice. The captain and I both turn to see Zieg coming down the street, accompanied by six or seven other villagers.

“Zieg!” I run over to him. He stops in place with open arms, and I jump into them eagerly.

The men that are with him walk past us and towards the captain.

“You’re leaving!?” One of the villagers, a portly man with sweaty black hair, yells in an accusatory tone.

The captain doesn’t respond, instead hopping into the carriage from the back, shutting the door behind him.

Two knights approach us from the other side of the crossing, with six more behind them.

“We’ve been ordered to stay behind. Rest assured, we will make sure all of you remain safe.” One of the knights bows to us.

“Yeah, you mean to make sure we’ll remain *here* so that you and yours will be safe, *right*?” The man scoffs.

This remark seems to spark dissidence in the villagers, who all yell and complain in unison at the knights.

The lead knight holds his hands up to gesture everyone to calm themselves, to little avail.

“Everyone please! It’s true that Princess Louvia’s safety is a priority to the Crown of Mille Seseau, but as knights of this realm, we vow to protect each and every person living here!”

An audible ‘*tut’* comes from the crowd of angry Neetsmen. “Sure, as long as we stay *put*!!”

“We’re not protecting us, you’re *USING* us!!” another raises his fist and shouts.

The complaints of the villagers are cut off by a loud snapping sound, as the two horses holding the carriage take off suddenly, dragging the carriage with them down the clearing, seeming to head south toward the coast.

This causes the uproar of the villagers to intensify. One of them throws their fist up in the air as they yell obscenities at the knights, who awkwardly continue to try and defuse the situation with their well-meaning, but otherwise hollow words.

It’s true, in a way. The heavy presence of these knights make it appear as if they are here to guard something far more important than our little village. It’s obvious that the captain is hoping to use us as a distraction, in case this Black Monster really does show up.

Though the villagers seem to be under the impression that *we* are the only ones who are being used. It’s not just us, but the knights as well. They are our first line of defense, should we come under attack. In other words, the Black Monster would target *them* first… and if the beast hasn’t faltered in its grim business in the thousands of years it’s existed, then…

It’s definitely a shrewd tactic from the prince… from *Cap*… but ultimately, I understand. After all, if it were *my* child at risk, I would-

“YOU FOOLS!!” A loud raspy shout cuts off the angry rants of the villagers.

Our attention all turns to the priest, who seemed to arrive without any of us noticing. His robes seem a bit tattered, and he appears to be quite stressed.

Zieg holds me close as the two of us watch this scene unfold.

“ALL OF YOU ARE COWARDS!!” The priest shouts at the villagers, walking toward, and then standing in front of the knights. “Don’t you realize!? This is EXACTLY what I was telling you all about!! THIS IS THE MOMENT!!!”

“F-father…” One of the villagers tepidly tries to respond, though the booming presence of our priest squeezes the words from his lungs before they can even form.

“The Moon that Never Sets glows a fiery red, and that can only mean one thing! The Moon Child has indeed descended! This is the responsibility… the DUTY that I spoke of!”

“This is nonsense!” One of the villagers calls out. “We all have families! We should at least be allowed to-”

“THIS IS BIGGER THAN YOU OR I, NOW!!!” The priest’s tongue practically launches out of his mouth as he flails his arms, screaming at the top of his lungs. “There are over a million humans living in Endiness at this very moment! Some are attending to their children, others are camped out at war, some are even starving in the streets! The Age of Chaos touches all lives, not just yours! The protection of the Moon Child falls to ALL of us!! We CANNOT break away from this endless cycle unless we FIGHT TO PROTECT THE INSTRUMENT OF *HIS WILL!!!*

“Do you think great change can be brought about with complacency and acceptance!? NO!!! It is *ACTION* AND *SACRIFICE* THAT ***FACILITATES MUCH NEEDED CHANGE!!”***

The priest goes on and on, practically spitting his words as he flails. I don’t know if he’s quite lost his mind… but his presence is beginning to *unnerve* more so than comfort…

From behind, I can hear a familiar voice.

“Come, Luanna… let’s return home… this man… he’s starting to sound like Doel…”

Zieg and I break away from the bickering crowd of villagers and knights and return to our home, where our son patiently, frustratedly waiting for dinner.

The three of us sit at our humble little dining table, huddled together as we eat more of Zieg’s signature grilled meat. Usually, we take turns doing the cooking, but my husband insisted he should cook tonight since he is able to prepare meals faster, while I like to take my time; a luxury we may not be able to afford tonight.

The foreboding silence outside is occasionally broken up by the sounds of patrolling metallic footsteps, as well as the occasional hooting owl in the distance.

The fireplace is fully lit, warming our little cottage up a bit; even more so with the wind having completely stopped tonight. Normally, the chilly winds of Mille Seseau seep through the cracks in the wooden walls, causing it to get quite chilly in here.

Now the only thing seeping through the cracks is the eerie red light emanating from the Moon. We can even tell when a knight is patrolling past our house, not just through the sounds of their footsteps, but also the way their bodies block the red light coming into the house, causing the light to briefly pulsate.

It’s all a bit unsettling… like we’re waiting for hell to descend upon Neet.

The three of us sit quietly, neither myself or my husband wanting to say anything that might upset or worry poor Dart, who while understandably unnerved by the unnatural red light, is nonetheless enjoying his thick hearty meal.

Zieg, on the other hand, has barely touched his own cooking, just poking at it with a fork. Personally, I’m still a little full from breakfast.

“So…” Zieg breaks the silence with a casual tone. “I noticed you came out of the clinic with the *prince*…”

“Ah… you *saw* that…” I laugh awkwardly.

“That was dangerous, Claire.” Zieg’s tone is low, but not authoritative so much as concerned. “Every so often you’ll do something like this that I don’t expect… I guess I’m just worried for you, that’s all…” his eyes lower as his utensil sinks into his food. “I don’t… want to lose either of you…”

His words seem unplanned, as if he’s thinking aloud. It’s a bit shocking to hear him talk like this, when he’s usually so confident.

Dart notices this as well, and frowns.

“Are we gonna be okay, Dad…?”

His soft little voice saying something like that… it breaks my heart to hear his worry.

Zieg gives our son a reassuring smile as he tussles his spiky hair.

“Don’t you worry. In fact, I know for certain that we’re gonna be just fine!”

“How come?” Dart tilts his head, his expression beaming with innocent curiosity.

“Listen closely…” Zieg lowers his head, gesturing the two of us to do the same.

We sit there quietly… the wind doesn’t blow, and there’s very little sound outside… then…

‘hooo…’

“Do you hear that?” My husband’s index finger darts up.

“That’s just an owl, Dad!” Dart looks at Zieg, seeming disappointed, almost offended. It’s so cute…

“Exactly, my son!” Zieg responds with a bright toothy smile. “Owls make their nest all the way over there in the Evergreen Forest… they hoot like that in order to signal to other owls the limits of their respective… uhh…” Zieg stops himself as he realizes that his words are a little too big for poor Dart to follow, then corrects himself. “…Owls are telling *other* owls where their home is, and where to stay away.”

“Oh!” Dart nods. “So when owls go ‘*hoo’* it’s kinda like them saying *‘buzz off, pal!’*” Dart does a funny raspy voice at the end, there.

“Basically.” Zieg nods. “But owls are only brave like that with other owls… if something bigger comes nearby, they get scared and fly away. If that happens, you won’t hear them *hooting* like that anymore.”

Dart nods and smiles wide. “Oh! So that means if I can hear owls, then nothing is scaring them away!”

“And *that* means there’s no reason to be scared.” Zieg tussles his son’s hair once again. “Now, why don’t you go tend to the fireplace. It’s getting a bit chilly in here.”

“Okidoki!” Dart enthusiastically leaps out of his seat and heads to the spare firewood in the other room. “I *like* fireplaces!”

“Is that really true, about the owls?” I ask.

“It’s an old trick I learned out in the fields. Typically, it applies to enemy ambushes, but even just *one* of those…”

Zieg stops himself short. He seemed to be reminiscing about something… that’s probably why he stopped.

He can tell by the look on my face that I know why he stopped himself as well, and I can see a hint of self-consciousness in his eyes. I reach my hand across the table for him to hold… and he takes it.

“So… *did* you see it?” Zieg asks plainly.

“The Moon Child, you mean?” I respond equally as plainly. “Not exactly. She gave birth to twins, so…”

Zieg’s eyebrow raises and he smirks mockingly. “Sooo you *saw* it, but you don’t know which one it *was*?”

“Sounds kinda *story-booky* when you say it out loud, huh…” I blush as I sigh a small laugh.

Zieg just stares back at me, wordlessly… the smile having left his face… I’m… I’m not really sure how to describe the expression he has right now… worry, maybe?

“What are you looking at me like that for?” I tilt my head.

Zieg shakes *his,* and sighs. “I don’t know… I guess… I’m wondering why you went in there at all…

“The priest talked about those who witness the Moon Child as ‘seeing the light’ and ‘being saved.’ I guess… I don’t really know why you’d risk going in there, knowing the Queen and all her knights would be wary of anyone who approached them… so…”

…

Ah… my darling husband… so warm… so thoughtful… so understanding… and so intelligent…

…just from that… he’s starting to piece it together… the source of my secrecy…

…shame…

I’ve always known that our tendency to keep our pasts a secret had different motivations. I knew that he never carried the kind of shame that I’ve lived with for so long… I wouldn’t have been able to go on for this long without him by my side…

In this moment, seeing him look at me with those sky-blue eyes… I can see how badly he wants to know the truth, now… and… I can’t help but feel the need to give him something… I owe him that much, after everything we’ve been through together…

“Zieg, I…”

He holds his hand up to stop me. “It’s alright if you don’t want to tell me, really. You’ve already given me a son and a wonderful life. I can’t ask anything more from you.”

The room falls silent as I hang my head low.

…I can’t just let things end there… even if he’s giving me permission…

“It’s just…” my words catch in my throat… but I swallow that fear, and push through my hesitation. “…I want… to commit… to you and to Dart… fully… I want to let go of my past… and… I want t-… t-to be… f-…”

My words melt in my mouth as tears fall uncontrollably down my face. I feel such incredible, unfathomable shame right now. I can’t even bring myself to look at my husband as I speak the truth to him, however vague.

It’s because I’m so ashamed… because I’m so unable to meet his eyes… that Zieg catches me by surprise with a tight grasping hug, causing me to gasp.

“You are Claire *Feld* now…” Zieg’s warmth envelops my icy cold body like a gush of magma falling into a deep, frozen lake. “You are the husband of Zieg Feld, and the loving mother of Dart Feld. *That* is how I see you, and that is how I will *always* see you, no matter what it is that haunts you so.

“The truth is… I have regrets of my own… things that I left unfinished… promises I was unable to keep… I had a life of my own before all of this, and it was taken away from me due to my own carelessness and anger…

“A long time ago… a man that I looked up to once said to me… you are free to sever the chains of fate that bind you… it is your choice and yours alone.

“I have held to those words ever since then, and I still live them to this day. I said to you before that I’ll never ask you to believe in the same things as me… but if those words of wisdom can help to calm the sorrows of your past that torment you… then I’ll ask that you live by them, too…

“You *are* free, Claire… the past is just another set of chains. Carry them if you are able, and *sever* them if you must.”

My trusting husband runs his hand over my hair as he holds me close. My arms wrap around him… but I can’t bring myself to match the intensity of his embrace.

After all… he’s wrong about me… *isn’t* he?

I am not free… nor do I deserve to be free. I am a murderer, masquerading as a wife and mother…

The chains that bind me are what holds the mask in place… if I were to truly sever those chains… then I would be forced to face the truth of what I am… as would everyone else that I love so dearly…

Worse still… I would have to face myself… I would have to look in the mirror, see my unobstructed face… and confront the smile that I wore… on the day that I took Lotta’s life…

If I allow myself to look back upon those feelings… if I ever acknowledge them as a part of who I am… then I would be a mother to my son no longer…

And so, I am left with no other choice… I swallow the truth down one last time, and embrace my husband tightly.

With gritted teeth and tears streaming down, I whisper with a hoarse voice.

“…I love you…”

“I love you more… I will *always* love you…” his voice is so calm and self-assured…

The door to the other room bursts open. Dart is holding several logs of firewood in both hands.

“No yucky stuff please.” He blurts out with the audacious nonchalance only a child could muster, not even looking in our direction as he hobbles over to the fireplace.

Zieg rolls his eyes and laughs as he turns his head to his incredulous little boy. “You know, someday *you’ll* be the one doing *‘yucky stuff’* with a wife of your own, and I can only hope that *your* child is just a *bit* more tolerant!”

“Nope nope *nope*.” Dart responds in a sing-songy tone as he gently puts the pile of wood next to him while standing over the fireplace. “No yucky for *me*. I don’t wanna *be*.”

“And what *do* you wanna be?” Zieg leans toward Dart, pulling a bit away from me.

Dart throws a small log into the fireplace and takes a step back as the fire bellows.

“A big red dragon.”

Zieg’s eyes narrow and a devious playful smile creeps onto his face as he pulls away from me and lurches, approaching Dart slowly like a predator.

“A big red *dragon*, eh? *Well*… If you *really* wanna be a dragon, you’re gonna have to win a *fight* against a dragon… *ANDTHERE’SONEBEHINDYOU!!”* Zieg lunges at his son from behind.

“*GAH!!”* Dart throws his arms up as he’s tackled by his father, the two of them rolling around on the floor like playful lions, laughing and yelping as they take turns jumping on each other.

As I look at them from my seat at the dinner table, a warm smile sneaks up on me.

Maybe the real selfishness is dwelling on my past actions, rather than embracing the things that I have now. Whether or not I deserve to be a part of this family, I am here nonetheless.

So even if it huts sometimes… I’ll still go on playing the role of a wife and mother… because the love that they give me… deserves love in return…

I rise up from the dinner table, push my chair in, then Dart’s and Zieg’s chairs… and with a narrow-eyed smile, I put my arms up, with fingers bent and outstretched like claws.

“Now get ready for the *MOMMY* Dragon!!”

After dinner and playtime, the three of us get ready for an uneasy night’s sleep. The owls are still calling from the distance, breaking the still eerie and unnatural silence of a windless red-mooned night.

Zieg is busy putting Dart to bed, likely telling him another one of his fanciful bed-time stories of ancient battles between fairies and dragons; a rather different set of folklore from the kind you’d hear uttered from denizens of Mille Seseau, who refer to the forest fairies as either benevolent or mysterious.

Then again, Zieg can be aptly described as both benevolent and mysterious. He’s so unlike anyone I’ve ever met, and yet so trusting and understanding, despite how little he really knows about me.

As I take my time cleaning our dishes, I can’t help but dwell on his words earlier.

*‘You are free to sever the chains that bind you.’*

When I first heard him say that… it burned me a little. It struck me as a kindness that couldn’t be truly offered to someone like myself; a philosophy that I have no right to embrace…

But in that moment, I was still in a spiral of guilt and shame; an affliction I am often fighting to bottle up and ignore. Now that I am in-between such eruptions, and can think on it more clearly… I can’t help but wonder if that sentiment *could* apply to me.

Whether or not I deserve to be Dart’s mother… the fact remains that I *am*. I gave birth to him, and it is my responsibility to be there for him, and to raise a healthy and responsible adult; one that will leave a *positive* impact on this world.

In that sense, has this guilt I’ve been carrying been anything more than a self-indulgence? Is the shame that I hold for my own selfishness not also a byproduct *of* that very selfishness?

Guilt… shame… fear… self-loathing… worthlessness… my endless need to compare myself to my peers, and wallow in self-pity as I deem myself forever inferior…

These constant bouts of misery and torment… aren’t they *really* just a self-imposed set of chains?

As I scrub these plates of grime and grease… I imagine myself being scrubbed clean of the guilt that I’ve carried with me for so long.

I took Lotta’s life in anger and vanity. Nothing will ever undo that or make it right. Even if I were brought to justice… even if my head were to be brought to Lotta’s loved ones… it’s not as if Lotta would magically come back to life…

Moreover, while I *did* take a life… I also brought one into this world… a beautiful sparkling ruby in this ocean of spite and conflict that Endiness so often embodies…

Therefore… instead of thinking about Lotta… I should instead think about Dart…

Dart is my responsibility… he is my son… he is… my world…

I’ve been letting myself get distracted from my responsibilities as a mother… because I can’t stop thinking about what I did to Lotta… The obvious solution then… would be to stop thinking about her…

I’ve been a distracted wife because of Lotta… I’ve been a neglectful mother because of Lotta… I’ve made for poor company… because of Lotta…

Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta…

My hand pushes the wet rag harder onto the plate that I’m cleaning.

Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta… Because of Lotta... Because of Lotta…

The squeaks from the rag get louder and louder.

Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta Because of Lotta BECAUSE OF LOTTA BECAUSE OF LOTTA BECAUSE OF LOTTA BECAUSE OF LOTTA

“BECAUSE OF-”

The plate snaps. The sound of glass hitting the wooden floorboards echoes throughout the cabin as it falls and spins before settling.

Oh… I seem to have made a bit of a mess…

No matter… I’ll just clean this all up… and then no one will have to know…

I sweep up the pieces of the broken plate into a pile, then I stack up all the smaller broken pieces on top of the largest part of the plate.

Holding the broken plate with all of its pieces on it, I open the front door and step outside to discard them. The red light has gotten even more intense under the dark of night. The white snow now resembles an endless sea of red, and the sky above is pitch black and starless.

The moment I step outside, I hear the sound of rapidly stomping metal boots sinking into thick snow from my right. I turn to see one of the patrolling knights hurriedly approaching me.

“Please go back insi-” The knight stops in place right in front of me, looks closer at my face, then gasps. “Oh! You’re *Claire*, right?”

Ah, I think I recognize this one’s face as well. He was one of the knights with the Queen at the clinic… the *optimistic* one, if I’m not mistaken.

“I apologize for causing a stir.” I bow slightly and smile. “I just broke one of my dinner plates while cleaning, so I was going to dispose of it.”

“Oh, I’ll get that for you!” The knight cheerily responds, holding out his leather-gloved hands.

I hand him the broken plate, and he places it into an empty leather satchel underneath his left green shoulder-cape.

He seems quite eager to serve and be of use, even for the standards of a knight. Most people in positions of authority over the common folk tend to exert that authority in as many ways as they can, even through their tone in small talk. This one’s different though, he’s quite soft-spoken and good-natured, perhaps to a fault… although it’s nice to see that even men like this can become knights.

“How are you doing out here, if you don’t mind me asking?” I decide to butter him up a little. I’m curious if there’s been any developments with the Moon Child. I’d hate to think the Black Monster got to them first.

“O-oh… *I’m* alright, ma’am.” The knight laughs nervously. “We’re just waiting on a supply-wagon to get here from Deningrad. They were supposed to be here an hour ago, but I’m sure they’re just running a little late on account of the short notice.”

He’s quite the forthcoming fellow, *isn’t* he. I wonder what else I can gleam from him.

“By the way…” I try my best to charm him with a side-eyed smile. “I noticed that knight earlier mention a Princess Louvia… but weren’t there *two* newborns?”

The bashful knight’s eyes widen as he shakes his hands in the air. “W-we’re not supposed to talk about that… but I mean, you were there, so I guess you *mostly* know…

“Princess Louvia is the name of the Moon Child, or at least that’s the name of Queen Theresa’s first born. After the second child was birthed, the Queen was still thinking of a name for them, but then the big glow happened, and after that the screaming started.

“Then of course *you* showed up and made all *three* of them go to sleep with that lullaby of yours, and since the naming of a royal can only be *done* by a blood royal, only one baby’s got a name… far as any of *us* know, anyway.”

“And I guess they’ll be heading out of the country, right?” I lean forward a bit with my arms held back.

“Uhhh…” The knight seems hesitant, taking a step back. “What’re you… *oh*… I guess Cap did mention the ship in front of you… w-well…”

“It’s not like *that* much is a secret, right?” I step an inch closer. “We all saw the carriage head toward the coast. Anyone who saw that would have come to the same conclusion. But were we not supposed to know about that?” I playfully frown to tease him.

“T-that woulda been ideal, yeah…” the bashful knight looks to his lower left, regret written all over his face. “We really don’t know much about what’s going on, or what’s going to happen. Honestly, you lot probly know more than any of us from Deningrad, given your Church’n’all.”

Actually, that was my first sermon… though I don’t think I’ll let that slip.

“What do you know about it? The Black Monster, I mean?”

The knight exhales deeply, shivering.

“…just that the bastard’s always gotten his way… there’s never been a record of a Moon Child surviving the night of its birth… not even a single bloody time…

“Can you imagine? What sort of awful creature would go around killin’ a baby? A damn *newborn* at that!! I can’t imagine what the poor Queen must be goin’ through… it’s just awful…”

I… don’t have any words to respond to that with… The two of us just stand there in the silent freezing crimson night bereft of wind, letting the lifeless silence speak to the grim tidings.

…

…wait… why is it this silent? Why can’t I hear the…

“*CLAIRE*!!”

A muffled should from inside our cottage. I can hear the sound of wood furniture being knocked over, and a door being flung open.

Zieg’s noticed it too… the owls have stopped… It is now completely and totally silent.

Suddenly, the sound of a loud neighing horse echoes through the town as a supply wagon barrels through the snow.

“Ah! They’re here at last!” The knight gives me a slight bow, then turns to his left to run toward the wagon in the distance.

The door of the cottage next to ours swings open, and out steps a black-haired villager.

“What’s all this, then!? We’re trying to-” the man notices the wagon parked three cottages over, as well as the three knights scurrying around it, grabbing brown sacks and various weapons.

One of those knights turns and notices the two of us.

“Everyone please get back in your homes!” he barks at us.

“No no no, what’s *this*!?” the black-haired villager, ignoring the knight’s order, takes a few steps toward the wagon. “I thought you lot were here to *protect* us in case the Monster shows *up*! *Now* it looks like you’re practically *baiting* him here!!”

“Please sir, this is just a routine resupply.” One of the other knights replies in an attempt to assuage the incensed villager.

The commotion and yelling seems to cause other villagers to come out of their homes as door after door opens. In seconds, the whole village seems to come alive with chatter and concerned murmurs.

“Everyone *get* back inside your homes!!”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Why’re you bringing wagons in through here?”

“Enough! Get back inside, *now*!!”

“Is Neet gonna become a battlefield?”

“Mom, I’m scared!”

“I said-!!”

The back-and-forth between the knights and villagers intensifies into an all-out screaming match.

Someone grabs me from behind.

“Claire, we need to get out of here!!” Zieg spins me around, a groggy Dart holding his left hand.

Just as he says this… the night gets darker… as if the source of crimson light was suddenly blocked out by something…

Instinctively, all of us, knight and villager alike, silently turn our gaze toward the Moon that Never Sets.

Up in the sky, right in front of the glowing crimson moon… a solid black shadow floats above… a winged bipedal figure.

Before I can even make out the details of the figure floating in front of the moon, a thunderously loud pop crashes through my eardrums, and a massive gust of wind blasts the village, causing all of us to recoil from the force of it.

A monsoon of snow, dust and mud tears through Neet, and a wave of intense heat burns my face as the temperature seems to drastically rise. Zieg grabs both Dart and I, and huddles us close.

As the searing squall subsides, I slowly, cautiously open my eyes and uncover my ears. Several of the villagers have been knocked off their feet, and the knights are scrambling around the empty village square. Where once was snow was now charred mud. Where once was wood was now fire.

It hasn’t even been five seconds, and Neet has already been reduced to a nightmarish hellscape. Did a single flap of its wings cause this?

I gaze back up at the moon to take another look at the creature. Its entire body seems to be solidly black, as if cloaked in smog and shadow. I can make out what looks to be a long tendril dangling off of its right arm. Its bone-like wings, absent of any feathers or patagium, remain stiff and outstretched as the creature hovers above the village. I cannot make out its face from this great distance, but I can feel its gaze as it looms down on us like an unfeeling calculating predator.

So then… this is the Black Monster. This is the creature of legend depicted in the stained-glass windows. The murals don’t do justice to how dire it feels to look upon this beast; to know that it has its sights set on your head.

Yes… I know this thing means to kill each and every one of us… because I know what that intent feels like…

“Grab the explosives!!” One of the knights calls out.

Another knight bows, and heads toward the back of the carriage.

Before he reaches it however, a single black arrow flies through the night sky at breakneck speeds, faster than any arrow that has ever been launched by man. It pierces the carriage, and immediately it erupts in a massive explosion of dancing multi-colored lights, sending two of the knights flying.

The black arrow seems to then fly backward towards the creature, who then catches it in mid-air as it slowly descends to the ground, landing on its two feet. I see now that this arrow was the tendril that I initially observed from its right hand.

Even as the beast begins to approach us, the closing distance does little to aid my eyes as they struggle to understand what it is that I’m looking at. I can’t even seem to get a good look at the creature’s head, which seems to grow and shrink in shape. Its body appears at once solid, yet also translucent; its figure both hulking *and* emaciated.

This is reality, isn’t it? This religious figure; this creature of myth that I thought only existed in stories and poems… This supposed champion of evil, who seeks to forever ensnare humanity in a perpetual age of chaos and war… this mythic thing is now laying its feet upon the place I call home… and setting it ablaze…

The air is suddenly hot and dry as smoke begins to fill the air, yet I fight through the pain and tears to continue looking at the thing, fighting to get a look into its face… a nagging feeling of fascination compels me to look into its eyes; to try and connect with whatever emotion it is that drives its will… to see if it is anything like-

“CLAIRE!!”

I’m grabbed from behind and pulled into our home, the door slamming in front of me as Zieg drags both Dart and I over to the bedroom on the opposite side of the cottage.

“Where are we going, Dad!?” Dart cries out in a panic as he’s held up by his waist under Zieg’s arm.

“Through the back entrance!!” Zieg shouts.

“Dear, we don’t have a-”

Before I can finish, Zieg full-force kicks the wooden wall, which all-too-easily gives way, creating a giant hole for us to run through.

There aren’t any houses behind us, and snow still lays on the ground, though it’s rapidly turning to slush. There’s also less smoke in the direction we’re now headed. From this direction, it’s a straight shot towards the edge of the Evergreen.

I can hear the sounds of swords clashing… then an explosion… and then screams… blood-curdling cries of agony…

“Don’t look back!!” Zieg shouts. “Just run!!”

The three of us run as explosions blow hot wind behind us. We run as clashing steel gives way to the rending of flesh and splattering of blood. We run as screams are muffled by bellowing flame. We run… and run… and run…

…just like that day, seven years ago… that hot summer evening…

Seconds feel like minutes, minutes feel like hours… we run and run and run… until finally reaching the edge of the Evergreen Forest, nearly a mile off from Neet.

In front of us lay thick green pine drenched in evening shadows, absent the sound of woodland life one might usually hear. The only thing that can be heard now is the sound of bellowing fire behind us.

To my left, I see the hollowed remnants of a large fallen pine tree; a perfect place for the three of us to hide. Little Dart runs right behind me, with Zieg holding the rear position in case we are pursued.

I stop and turn to my two boys, turning my head in gesture to the hollowed pine-tree tunnel. As Dart and Zieg catch up to me, they both see it as well.

Dart runs right to my side, huddling next to me. I check on him, and see the look of shock and fear on his face. His trembling little body clings to my right leg, and I hold him tight in my arms. He’s so young… he’s only five years old. It’s not right that he should have to face such horror at such a young age… then again, I doubt a thousand years on this earth could prepare anyone for the horrors we’ve seen and heard tonight.

The two of us look forward towards the burning horizon that was once our peaceful wintery home, now drenched in a crimson flame. Eerie black particles emerge from the flame, signifying their unnatural origin. The flames seem to persist on and on, engulfing everything like the fangs of a starving wolf on bone.

Looking into this fire… it’s like looking directly into the jaws of hell itself…

Zieg runs over to us, grasping at my shoulders first, then bending down to check on Dart; making sure that his precious family is both alive and in-tact.

Through luck and quick-thinking, it seems as though the three of us escaped that hell unscathed. Though… I don’t see anyone else *here*…. And I can’t see anyone running away from the village from where we are… were we the only ones that made it out…?

Zieg runs over to the hollowed pine-tree, carefully inspecting it inside and out to make sure it’s safe. He then nods, seemingly affirming it as both safe and reliable.

“Stay here!” He shouts, beckoning the two of us to go into the hollow. We both comply, Dart running into the hollow first, then I follow quickly after.

I then turn to my husband, waiting for his queue to delve further into the hollow.

Zieg breathes a sigh of relief… then turns away from us, walking back toward the path leading downhill; down towards the now enflamed Neet.

He’s made sure the two of us were safe… and now he’s planning to go back down there…

I walk towards him, cautiously and slowly; cherishing every step I take closer to him.

I can already see the self-assured look on his face as he gazes down at the village; reflections of flame sparkling in his eyes. There isn’t even a hint of fear, not in his eyes, his mouth, or even his hands. He seems resolute… confident, even.

Zieg is a wonderful husband, but he is a man, and men are prone to bouts of foolishness in the guise of bravery, and yet… this doesn’t seem to be what’s going on…

I’m not sure why I feel this way… but it feels less like he’s preparing himself for a fight he might not return from… and more like he’s going to meet an old friend…

Questions and concerns swell in my head and heart as I slowly walk over to my husband, knowing full well that this may be our last goodbye… our last embrace.

It was selfish of me to take my place under this man’s arm… it was awful of me to become his wife without letting him know the truth about me… and yet… I don’t want our time together to end…

And so, I take my steps to him slowly, even as knights fight and die protecting innocents Zieg might yet save… I selfishly waste one last bit of his time.

Zieg turns to me, sees the distraught look on my face, and steps in to hug me. I wrap my arms around him tightly, the two of us locked in an embrace I wish could last forever.

But it doesn’t… it can’t… Zieg is going back there… to save as many people as he can… to fight the creature himself… I’m not sure what… The only thing I am sure of, is his boundless confidence. It’s enough to almost let me believe I will see him again after this horrible night…

Zieg pulls away just enough for our eyes to meet one last time.

“Take care of Dart.” His voice is gentle and unwavering; the *meaning* of his words being the only thing that seems to betray his otherwise flawless show of fearlessness.

*‘…in case I don’t come back…’*

I respond with a wordless affirming nod as I let my husband go, pulling away from him for what might be the last time.

The thought of it is enough to cover my feet in tears, but I don’t let myself cry… After all… it’s not as if I ever deserved a man like him to begin with…

With one last inhale, and a final reassuring smirk, Zieg runs down the hill… heading down into the distant flames…

I watch him go down, down, down into that hell where the Black Monster waits… I watch and watch… until I can no longer see him…

He is gone… I can no longer see my husband… he’s disappeared into those flames…

I hear the crunch of snowy footsteps as Dart waddles over to my side, looking down toward our burning home.

I look over to his face… the shock and fear seem to be settling, and in its place, a deep and terrible sadness starts to swell in his eyes as he looks upon Neet.

I can’t begin to imagine what this must be like for him… the only home he’s ever known is now engulfed in fire as a terrible monster wreaks havoc upon it… I can only hope Zieg didn’t let him get a good look at the thing… the nightmares would never leave him…

I place my hand on his head, running my fingers through his soft spikey hair, now drenched in sweat and dirt…

This poor child… more than anyone else in all the world, he doesn’t deserve this… to lose his home, to lose all of his friends… to lose his father…

…

And now… all he has left… is me…

It’s just me now… I’m all that’s left… for him…

It’s only me, now… oh… oh no… I’m… I’m going to ruin you… aren’t I, Dart?

How could I have let this happen…? I got so caught up in Zieg’s confidence that I let him go… and now it’s just the two of us!

I can’t… I CAN’T… I could only do it because Zieg was here with me… but if it’s by myself, then…

…a single trickle of blood runs down the well…

…

I run my hands through my son’s spikey blond hair.

“Your father is a strong person.” I speak aloud while looking down at my son. “You have that strength in you. So. . . . “

I turn toward him and get down on my knees; down to his level. I look right into his bright blue eyes, wipe the tears from his eyes with my thumb, and with the biggest, brightest smile I can muster…

“…You can wait here by yourself, okay?”

My son’s eyes widen in shock, and he shakes his head, pulling away from… no, pulling *me*… pulling *us* toward the hollowed tree.

“Where are you going?” He cries out to me, his whimpering voice nearly cuts through my resolve.

“I am going back to the village to fight.” I respond, doing my best to exude that very same confidence Zieg showed to me.

“Really?” Dart raises an eyebrow, hurting my pride a little.

“I will protect your hometown with your father.”

With that, I let him go, and rise back to my feet, turning toward the village… toward hell…

I then turn back to my son… my little boy… the one good thing I ever put out into this world… and I give him the only thing I have left… my final words of advice…

“Live strong.”

With that as my parting words, I turn my back on my son, and run down to the village as fast as I am able.

I hear him try to chase after me, and I hear him stumble and fall… all of my bodily instincts scream at me to turn back and check on him, to rethink this course of action, to be with my son as I promised… but I know deep down that this is for the best.

I am a murderer… I am a martial artist with blood on their hands… such hands cannot raise a son… it was a mistake to think I could follow my dream of being a mother with such bloodied hands… without Zieg in his life, I would just corrupt him… it’s better this way…

Without a town like Neet to hide in, Dart and I would be running for the rest of our lives, all the while dealing with the pain of every thing we’ve lost… I’d never be able to tell him the truth about me, and he’d grow to resent me overtime, rightfully so… not to mention all the little mistakes I’d make as a parent along the way.

Losing my patience here, saying the wrong thing there… one wrong thing after the other, and before long, he’d turn out to be just like me… and can a murderer truly raise anything other than another murderer?

Dart is the one good thing I ever put out into this world… the only excuse I can make for the life that I destroyed… if I put too much of my influence onto him, it would only serve to undo what precious little I’ve done right…

In the end, Zieg was wrong to trust me after all… so I can only hope… only pray to Soa, or whoever else is listening… that I can find him in the flames of hell, and bring him back to us.

And if I can’t… if it’s already too late… then at the very least… I will fight… for as long as I am able…

“Hey, Dad? How did you mess up your back?”

“Remember, Claire. You need to call me Master during training, okay?”

“Oh… ok.”

“…getting tired, huh? I guess we can take a little break… so, you wanna know how I threw out my back, eh?”

“Well, yeah. I thought only old people hold their backs like that.”

“I’ll let that little comment slide, young lady… but it’s true, I injured my back pretty badly at a young age… It was the result of a stupid mistake I made. I was young, foolish, and hopelessly arrogant. I thought I was invincible. I really fancied myself the second coming of Rouge’s founder.

“Say Claire, did you know that when you draw Chi into yourself, it pools most strongly into the small of your back?”

“I think so… I can feel it there when we practice breathing.”

“That’s right, very good… Chi is an elemental force that is found all around the outside world, as well as deep within our own inner-world. You can think of it as the paint that gives our world its color. We are all painted with different shades of Chi.

“There are some people who are painted with the red Chi of fire, while others are coated in a deep blue Chi of ice. There are those that possess the stalwart golden Chi of the earth, and then there are those who embody the jade Chi of wind. There are some who illuminate this world with the silver Chi of light, and there are gloomy fellows who embody the blackened Chi of darkness.

“Our Chi is violet-colored, right?”

“That’s right, Claire! Ours is the same Chi of the founder of Rouge School; the violet Chi of thunder.

“Chi plays an important role in our development. It tends to have a certain influence over our very nature, even at a subconscious level. From the way we talk, to the desires we have, even down to the way we dress ourselves. Chi is the color of one’s soul.

“But for a practitioner of the Rouge School, it is also a tool with which we understand the world, interact with it, and if necessary, shape it with our fists.

“As you’ve come to understand, the basis of Rouge School is the manipulation of the Chi in our bodies, as well as the Chi we are surrounded by, for the purposes of exerting force through our bodies. This art was crafted by the founder, who then passed it down to the villagers of this village; our ancestors.

“There are many techniques he passed down to us… and… well, there was one technique in particular… a forbidden one… something only a person with Chi similar to the founder can even attempt.”

“Someone with violet Chi?”

“That’s exactly right. It involves gathering as much Chi in your body as you can, and then unleashing it all throughout your body by pushing it out of the small of your back.

“You see, if you were to try this with red Chi, you’d burst into flames and be burnt to a crisp. Try it with blue Chi, and you’ll freeze yourself solid. Try your luck with golden Chi and your body will turn to stone. Do it with jade Chi and you’ll create a vacuum so tight, you won’t be able to breathe. Try it with silver Chi and you’ll glow brighter than the sun and burn out your eyes. Attempt it with black Chi and you’ll disappear altogether.

“And lastly… if you try to envelop your whole body with violet Chi, you’ll electrocute your whole body. I’m sure you can imagine how painful that’d be, right?”

“Y-yeah…”

“Well… somehow, the founder found a way to do it without electrocuting himself. He was able to channel enormous amounts of energy into his body, and amplify his strength and speed ten… no, one hundred fold!

“No one since the founder has ever been able to replicate this legendary technique, and those who try either destroy their body, or worse… destroy their own lives…”

“And… you tried to use that technique, Dad?”

“Heh… like I said, I was young and stupid. I thought I was invincible; a peerless master among masters… but that technique… it burns every single inch of the body… it can hardly be called a technique at all, which is… probably why it was forbidden… it’s total suicide to try it…

“By the time I realized this, it was already too late. The Chi was igniting my whole body, and if I didn’t disperse it, the Chi would have torn me apart in 10 seconds. The only way I could do it quickly was to push it back out through my backside… and well, that’s how your old man ruined his back, hahaha!”

“I’m really sorry that happened, Dad…”

“Ha!! Don’t be! After all, if I hadn’t gotten myself stuck in the clinic for a month… well, I doubt I’d have *ever* met your mother…”

The thick and dusted smoke burns my eyes and claws at my throat like some corrosive death-mist as I stumble through the swirling swelting maelstrom of hellfire. Charred wood crumbles underneath my feet as I run across the debris of what once was a calm, quiet, isolated little village; now devastated and unrecognizable.

The smoke and fire burns and stings nearly every inch of my body, slowly draining me away, yet that pain alone comes at a distant second in the contest of horrors that now encompasses Neet. First prize goes to the unending screams I am surrounded by; the shrieking wails of men, women, and even children, as if everyone is being burned alive in perpetuity.

I nearly trip over something that clinks like metal as I brush into it with my leg. My attention moves to the mass in front of me as I struggle to orient my vision through this shroud of hot smog. It appears to be the lifeless body of a knight of Mille Seseau… though ‘body’ is somewhat misleading. Aside from its armor, the only thing remaining of this poor soul is it’s charred skeletal remains, its face forever frozen within its final death-cry.

While the body lay still and lifeless, from this distance I can hear the sound of his screaming voice. Even though he’s dead, I can still hear him screaming in pain, as if he’s being burned alive even now. Is his very soul still burning?

Worse yet… I think I recognize the sound of his pained voice… and my suspicions are confirmed as I notice the satchel he has on his side… and the broken plate spilling out from inside of it.

That poor man… so kind and thoughtful, so naïve and easy to prod… he didn’t deserve to die like this… his soul doesn’t deserve to continue suffering…

What sort of creature is this Black Monster, anyway? Is it not enough to kill the Moon Child? Not enough to kill all of us? It has to make our very souls writhe in agony as well?

As I stand there slouched over in the bellowing swirling winds lamenting the fate of my short-lived friend, I hear a familiar voice in the distance.

At first, it sounds like a scream… but on second thought, it sounds more like a war cry; as if summoning an army.

It’s my husband’s voice!

“Zieg!!”

I run blindly through swirls of smoke and ash, batting away flames and black particles with my hands as I rush toward the sound of his voice.

I reach a clearing between several broken burning cottages… it’s hard to see… but try as I might, I can’t find him anywhere… not even a trace…

I know I heard his voice… I know I heard his cry… where did he go? Where are you? Why can’t I hear you anymore? Did you join the chorus of screams that now surround me? If you have… I…

“YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!!!!”

A bloodcurdling scream pierces the droning echoing wails, coming from one of the burning cottages.

That voice… it sounded familiar too…

The shriek seems to fade, and then I start to hear it echo as it joins along the chorus of perpetual screams that haunt these charred grounds.

“Zieg!! Where are you!!” I try one more time, but to no avail. For all I know, his body could be somewhere near my feet, just like that knight… my poor husband… I can’t even bear to think of him like that…

Suddenly, ash and smoke are blown away by a scorching hot squall, causing me to avert my eyes and recoil. As the burning gust subsides, I realize that a floating shadowy figure is slowly hovering out of the cottage where the scream came from.

This eerie alien thing turns its head as if it’s looking right at me with eyes that I cannot see. Its whole body is like an outline of shadow and flame. I can make out its general shape; a bipedal humanoid body with skeletal bat wings… but the detail, the color, even the shape of its head is shrouded in some sort of illusive mist.

“Ah…” its distorted echoed voice pounds at my ears like war trumpets blowing right at my head. “…I already have the princess’s location… there is no need to waste words with anyone left here.”

Already… the princess’s location… is it talking about Princess Louvia? Is it talking about the Moon Child?

So… after it’s done here… it’ll come after Queen Theresa’s children next?

…

No… I won’t let that happen.

I take the proper fighting stance, alternating between poses as I begin to summon the strength deep within myself.

…sparks fly out from deep within the well…

“I won’t let you!!” I cry out in defiance. “You will not lay a hand upon the Moon Child! I’ll stop you, here and now!!”

The creature floats inches above the ground, tapping its foot onto the desecrated ground to maintain its unnatural hover. Its head remains still, seemingly unphased by my declaration.

“So… another evangelical, then…” it seems bemused… loathed to even acknowledge my presence…

The tendril in its right arm raises… and aims itself right at my throat. From this distance, I can make out the glint of a razor-sharp blade along the bottom end of the tendril… it almost looks like a sword or a small javelin…

I can feel its intention, visualizing my death in its mind before it’s happened. It’s a terrifying feeling… being in the devil’s line of sight like this…

But this is fine… As long as it’s looking at me, it’s not looking at anyone else. Perhaps its just wishful thinking… but maybe I can buy enough time for someone… anyone… to escape from this place and survive…

I settle on a fighting stance that’s spread out and low to the ground. This creature’s face is obscured, and its body is covered in thick smoke, making it hard to read its specific intentions. That’ll make predicting its movements virtually impossible.

In that case, I’ll have to rely on reacting to its attack… which means I have no choice but to let this creature make the first move. I have no idea what it’s capable of, after all. I’ll keep my stance wide and loose.

What’s more, the beast’s wings flutter as it hovers just a foot above the dirt floor. No matter what I do, the Black Monster will always have the height advantage, so it’s best to keep my stance low to make the best of it.

I hear a strange clicking sound… did the Black Monster… just click its tongue at me?

Before I have a chance to finish that thought, the monster floats up, then slowly glides back and around to the left… before suddenly hurdling toward me with blinding speed.

Before I can even react, the tendril on its arm is suddenly inches away from my face, an instant from skewering my head like a piece of fruit.

Just before the blade can connect, I duck, and the tendril seems to wind backward slowly, before quickly swinging across at my neck. I evade that attack the same way, and then another.

The monster then pulls the tendril back over its shoulder, then full-force swings it diagonally downward to slice me in two!

At this point, I start to see a certain pattern form in its attempts to attack me.

With all my strength, I swing my arm upward, and bat the tendril away with my open palm.

As my palm connects with the tendril, a loud \*clang\* echoes, and my whole body begins to vibrate wildly. I can feel already that something has fractured in my hand. The monster’s tendril is nonetheless flung backward, and I take the opportunity to retreat three steps behind.

I take note of my left palm… it’s still vibrating… still reeling from the shock of parrying that last attack… that tendril must be as hard as steel, and heavy as well. One wouldn’t think so with the speed at which this creature is able to swing it around.

However, even though I’ve retreated, even though I’ve been *injured*… it’s clear to me that I’ve come out on top in this exchange by a substantial margin… in fact, it’s not even close. I wonder if this creature is sophisticated enough to understand that…

The way it moves its body, the way it flies around, even the way it swings its arm… there’s a distinct pattern in the way that it attacks.

First, there’s a slow wind-up, whether it be with its body, or just its arm. Then, there’s a powerful and quick swing or swipe, which rides the momentum of the initial wind-up. Lastly, there’s a pullback after that swing, which then transitions into another wind-up.

The attacks themselves are blindingly fast and wickedly strong. No human could be capable of replicating such power on their own.

But the way in which the Black Monster is achieving this level of power is not solely a result of its physical ability, but rather the way it’s choosing to apply that force.

First, it relaxes its body as it moves away, then it hardens up as it strikes…

It relaxes as it moves back… and it clenches back up to attack… alternating between these two states…

It’s the same technique one would use while wielding a whip; a weak and limp piece of leather by itself, but when wielded properly, it can be as deadly as a freshly sharpened knife.

The Black Monster is using that heavy bladed tendril… no, it’s using it’s entire body as a whip, thus amplifying the severity of its strikes beyond what even it would be normally capable of.

In other words, it’s a technique… it’s martial arts…

This creature… The Black Monster… it’s using a technique.

And even if it’s stronger than me… even if it’s a thousand times more powerful… if it’s using a technique… then I can counter it.

…a bolt of lightning collides with the bottom of the well…

My stance changes. My knees remain bent, but I pull my arms in and tighten my fists, ready to defend and deflect.

I can’t predict what the creature will do next… but if it really clicked its tongue at me, then I can only assume that means it’s not taking me seriously. Moreover, it must have noticed how much that parry shook me. Therefore, I can only assume it will try the same attack again and again until I’m worn down.

The creature reels its whole body back, then up… perfect.

Then it dives down at me, this time readying its tendril over its head to slash me down the middle.

This time, however… I’m ready.

…a violet light emanates from the well…

I bat the tendril away from the top of my head with a whip-like motion of my own, only this time, with my palms shielded by a thin layer of my own Chi.

Violet sparks dance along the dirt and flames as my palm connects once again with the tendril, only this time the monster is sent back much further.

Undeterred, the demon uses the momentum to swing back into its pattern, floating backward slowly, then careening toward me with another swipe.

I bat this next strike away as well, matching it’s slow build up with matching arm movements of my own.

I can hear the sound of an exhale, or perhaps a growl. It’s growing frustrated.

The creature lunges at me again, only this time it tries multiple swipes up close, swinging its tendril this way and that, almost abandoning its technique altogether as if to try and overwhelm me with its base strength and speed.

Parrying these strikes a much simpler matter. Each swing is repelled back as sparks continue to fly out from our even clashes.

The pain in my palms is alarming, but I push the pain out of my mind as much as I can. If this is to be my final stand, I won’t need functioning hands in the end. Besides, I’ll keep fighting this bastard with bloodied stubs if I must!

I grow tired of staying on defense, and parry a swipe of the creature’s tendril with an extra bit of oomph, causing it to fling its arm back, exposing its abdomen.

“Yaa!!”

I clench my fist and slam it right into the monster’s stomach!

\*crack\*

The pain in my fist soars to unimaginable heights, and as I pull my arm back, I can feel two of my fingers crumble and give way.

Punching this creature’s hide was like hitting an ocean of black iron. Sturdy doesn’t even begin to describe it! And what’s worse, my Chi seemed to surrender and disperse upon impact, which means my knuckles took the full force of that attack.

“Gyah!!”

I cry out as I take two steps back to nurse and observe my very broken left hand. Blood spills from scraped skin, and bruises already begin to form around the fractures in two of my fingers.

This is bad! There’s no time to fix this, so I need to push the pain out! I need to keep my mind focused on-

“Gh!!”

In the half-second I took to look at my broken hand, the Black Monster flies over to me, grabbing me by the neck and pulling me up off the ground as if I weighed nothing.

“Burn!” The Black Monster roars with a distorted chaotic snarl.

The heat intensifies… my body is enveloped… in some kind of smoke… it’s so thick that I can’t see anything at all… no… it’s not smoke… it’s… it’s FIRE!!

My whole body is being swallowed up by jet-black flame!! I can feel it begin to eat away at my flesh, devouring my life force. The pain is unimaginable!!

My only hope… my only salvation… is that whatever this unnatural black flame is… it is the result of forces that exist somewhere on this earth, and not some alien entity unknown to the world at large.

For if the Black Monster is indeed of this earth, then this black flame is a manifestation of earthly forces… and if that’s the case… then… I… can… DISPERSE IT!!

“GAH!!”

My Chi swells and bursts out of my body, and sends scattering the black flames which sought to turn me into a pillar of ash.

The creature is sent back by the force of my desperate last act, and I drop on my knees to the floor, coughing and gasping at the piping hot air which burns my throat as I desperately take in whatever oxygen can be found in this hellscape.

The creature seems to sigh in frustration. “It’s always like this…”

…I’m going to die…

“No matter how much I try to set the stage…”

…I’m going to die here….

“No matter how little room I leave for hope…”

…I’m really going to die in this place…

“These evangelicals… always struggle to the bitter end…”

…

…struggle… to the bitter… end…?

That’s… that’s right…

This isn’t about survival for me… I chose to run into this hell, knowing full well that I would meet my end here… I knew the consequences… and in fact… it was I who sought them out…

I am a murderer… a sinner who deserves a fate worse than death… and so, yet again, I have gotten exactly what I wanted…

But this isn’t about me… it isn’t about what I want or what I deserve…

This is about them… the screaming souls I am ever surrounded by… This is about Dart, who deserves to grow up in a world where such nightmares are a thing of the past… and this… is about the Moon Child… Queen Theresa’s children, who deserve to see tomorrow’s sunrise!!

…countless sparks burst forth from the well…

I get up off of my knees and onto my feet. My stance changes to one of pure offence.

At the very least… this Black Monster shall not leave my village unscathed.

“How sad…” the Black Monster sighs once more… then it raises its bladed tendril again.

It hasn’t even noticed, or perhaps it’s too arrogant to care…

The creature lunges at me, forgoing its whip-like pattern of attack. It must believe me to be on my last legs if it’s coming at me with such a pathetic charge.

I pop the tendril up, causing its arm to fly upward. It tries to retreat by flapping its wings backward, but I advance faster, and strike at its other arm with a second palm-strike. Another fracture. I ignore it.

The monster leaves itself open yet again, no doubt confident that I lack the ability to harm it even if I can make an opening.

…let’s test that, shall we…

I pull my left hand back, adjusting the shape of my fist to compensate for my broken fingers. This is how the Chi flows, so it can’t be helped. It’d take too long to adjust the technique rightward now.

***“Rouge School!! Sacred Art!!”***

My arm winds up as my tightens. I focus all of my gathered Chi into that fist, turning it into a ball of condensed violet lightning.

***“Ferry…!!”***

My now vibrantly glowing fist flies right at the creature’s chest in an explosive burst of lightning and thunder!

***“…To The River Styx!!!”***

The Black Monster’s arms and legs seem to fling frontward like a ragdoll as its body hurdles back from the force of my Chi-infused strike, sending it crashing into one of the ever-burning cottages, which then collapses from the force of the impact, engulfing the creature in the fire and ash of its own making, and obscuring it from my view.

“Take… That…” I gasp reflexively for kinder, colder air that I know is forbidden to me in this awful place. I exerted a lot of force in that last attack, and yet there’s no real way for me to recover or catch my breath because of the sweltering heat.

At the very least, it seems as though my hand wasn’t damaged further… that’s good. It means my Chi wasn’t dispelled that time. Something about that creature’s body seems to repel my energy, but if I put enough of it into my attack, it can’t dispel all of it…

Heh… I say that… as if I could hit that hard again… but I know… that last attack was probably the best I could do… and there’s no way that was enough to…

Before I can finish that thought, the crumpled remains of that cottage explode, sending charred wooden planks flying all across the crimson night sky. The Black Monster rises from the debris, flapping its wings violently and causing a gust of hot air to blow at me.

“You… have wasted *far* too much of my time…”

Damn… not even a slight indent on its chest… I thought for sure I hit it with enough force to leave at least that much… just how strong… is this thing…?

This is… n-not good… I’m starting to get… delirious….

“Hmph… your legs are wobbling. This last attack will finish it.”

…

…

…

Yes… it will…

*“Say Claire, did you know that when you draw Chi into yourself, it pools most strongly into the small of your back?”*

*“I think so… I can feel it there when we practice breathing.”*

*“That’s right, very good… Chi is an elemental force that is found all around the outside world, as well as deep within our own inner-world. You can think of it as the paint that gives our world its color.*

*“…if you try to envelop your whole body with violet Chi, you’ll electrocute your whole body.*

*“…somehow, the founder found a way to do it without electrocuting himself. He was able to channel enormous amounts of energy into his body, and amplify his strength and speed ten… no, one hundred fold!*

*“No one since the founder has ever been able to replicate this legendary technique, and those who try either destroy their body, or worse… destroy their own lives…”*

…so that’s it, then…

It’s easy to panic… easy to give into fear at a time like this… to worry that your time will come to an end, and that you’ll draw your final breath without resolving all your regrets…

Even if you put yourself in a dangerous position, knowing full well that each moment could be your last… it’s still scary to come face-to-face with death like this…

But in this moment… strangely… I feel at peace… even though I know now… my death is absolutely certain…

I don’t know… maybe what I was afraid of… wasn’t dying… but rather… being killed…

I don’t… want to die… at the hands of such a horrible monster like him… but… if it’s my hand that chooses the hour… then… I think… that would be alright…

*“…I thought I was invincible; a peerless master among masters… but that technique… it burns every single inch of the body… it can hardly be called a technique at all, which is… probably why it was forbidden… it’s total suicide to try it…*

*“By the time I realized this, it was already too late. The Chi was igniting my whole body, and if I didn’t disperse it, the Chi would have torn me apart in 10 seconds. The only way I could do it quickly was to push it back out through my backside… and well, that’s how your old man ruined his back, hahaha!”*

I am a murderer… I took Lotta’s life, and I did so out of anger and vanity… She didn’t get to live out her life, but I did… she didn’t get to fall in love and have a child, but I did… and she didn’t get to choose the way she died… but I will…

I choose to be the thunder clap that smites the devil.

…the well explodes with blinding light…

The Chi pours into the small of my back. It burns… it feels like its eating me away through my veins… but I push it through, all throughout my body…

*“Hey, Dad? What’s this technique called, anyway?”*

My father sighed that day, deeper than I’ve ever seen him sigh… It didn’t seem like he wanted to tell me… but at the same time… the thought of his daughter surpassing not just himself, but the founder of Rouge School as well… he couldn’t resist.

*“The technique is called…”*

***“Rouge School! Forbidden Art!!!”***

My body is engulfed in a bright blue flame-like current of raw flowing electricity.

***“RAI….JIN…KOU!!!!”***

The burning village, once bathed in crimson light from the flames and the blood-red moon, is now engulfed in a bright blue shimmer emanating from my own body.

It will be like this for the next ten seconds. My teeth chatter, my bones vibrate, my skin peels, and my eyes nearly pop out of their sockets as I do everything I can to hold this immense power in place.

The pain is immeasurable, and I can feel myself being torn apart… but in exchange for this self-sacrifice, I have obtained power beyond measure. My mind races faster and faster as time seems to slow to a crawl.

The Black Monster pulls its shoulder backward and begins to float away from me in a slow and cautious retreat.

This time, it will be my turn to attack first, and the second I do, the very second I begin to move this doomed body, the countdown will begin.

I push into the ground with my feet and leap forward. The monster attempts to swipe at me with its bladed tendril, but by the time it is able to cut the air, I am already behind the creature, having moved faster and at a greater distance than I thought myself capable.

Nine seconds.

The beast’s back is exposed, and I can see where its wings are attached to its back. That seems like the perfect place for my first strike.

I slam both my fists down right in-between its wings, causing them to flutter wildly as the creature finally lands on its feet, albeit not voluntarily. Electricity pulses around the beast’s body as my Chi attempts to push itself through that impossibly thick and study hide. Even if no visible damage is made, I can see the recoil caused by my attack by the way the monster’s arms flail around.

Eight seconds.

I land back on the ground and dash forward at the monster, it’s back still turned to me. It attempts to turn to face me, swinging its tendril around as if I were some annoying fly. I strike at the creature’s chest with my open palm before the tendril can reach me, and again its arms flail forward from the force of my attack.

Seven seconds.

Another two blows to the chest, then another two, striking in pairs over and over until the creature is lifted off of its feet, all the while shaking and vibrating from the lightning crawling all over its body, seeking a vulnerability to penetrate.

Six seconds.

I throw a punch aimed for the Black Monster’s face, and before I can connect, the creature pulls its tendril up to protect itself.

It’s strange… that’s the first time it’s tried to defend itself like that. I wonder if its head isn’t protected by that thick hide…

Five seconds.

I’m running out of time. It’s taking everything I have to not collapse to the floor, and the pain continues to rise; continues to warn me… to beg me to stop this and survive.

But I know I’m dead either way. Or rather, for these next five seconds… I’m alive… I can fight… I can make a difference!!

The creature takes another two swipes at me with its tendril. I dodge the first swipe faster than I’ve ever blinked, and I slap the tendril away on its second swing. With the creature stunned, I seize the opportunity and throw a straight punch, aimed right where I imagine a nose might be.

“Ugh!”

The beast cries out as it recoils, taking a step backward and putting its other hand in front of its head.

Four seconds.

I grab that hand and pull it away, and then I strike at its face again. And again. And again!!

“Agh! Ug! Ahh!!”

The Black Monster cries out in pain, its screams ringing like music in my ears as I smash the beast in the face over and over. My fist seems to finally be doing some damage, and the surface I’m striking doesn’t seem to be as protected as the rest of its body.

Even so… the pain keeps on rising, higher and higher… It hurts so much… I’m scared… I know I shouldn’t be… I don’t have the right… but…

Three seconds.

The monster pushes me away, swiping the air in front of it blindly with its bladed appendage as it stumbles back, wings flapping violently in an attempt to reclaim its aerial supremacy.

While it’s still stunned, I ready myself for a devastating roundhouse-

“Gh!!”

Blood splatters out of my mouth and onto the dirt floor. I look down at the floor to see where it fell… and I can no longer distinguish between the red of my blood… and the red-lit dirt floor…

The shimmering blue light that had engulfed our surroundings has gone, and crimson has again reigned supreme over the ruined town of Neet.

The pain has at last subsided, though I can feel the damage that has been done, and smell the burning flesh on my body as it smokes and smolders.

I failed… I let pain and fear overtake me… If I had just another two or three seconds… I could have… but I was… I was so scared… and it hurt so much… I let it go… I could only keep it going for a measly seven seconds…

How hopelessly pathetic am I? Even in this moment, even in the depths of hell itself, face-to-face with the devil of devils… and I still can’t help but let my selfishness ruin everything… Father was right to hate me… he was right to chase me away… I should have just let myself drown in the ocean…

Zieg is gone… I abandoned my son… our home is in ruins… the devil has descended upon the earth… it’s all because of me… because I can’t stop myself from feeding into my most guttural desires… I’ve never in my whole life done the right thing… not once…

The Black Monster seems to regain its ability to float in the air, wiping its face with its hand as it hovers in place. It then whips that hand toward the ground, and something seems to splat onto the floor beneath the monster’s feet.

Heh… at least I finally drew blood… though I seem to have made myself bleed quite a bit more…

From my mouth, from my nose, even my ears. There’s no telling how much of my insides have ruptured well beyond the point of recovery. Even though the pain has subsided, my fate is sealed one way or another. And really, the only reason there isn’t any pain is because I’m standing perfectly still, albeit hunched over. I just know that the second I try to move, even slightly, that immense pain will return… and so, of course, I just stand here helplessly.

The creature seems to look upon me, alternating between pointing its face at me, and its free hand.

“Well… I can’t say I expected to see one of his techniques used by an ordinary human, let alone one from *this* era…” the creature seems to speak casually, though its voice is still distorted and echoed.

Though it’s strange… just what on earth is it talking about? One of *his* techniques? But the Raijinkou is a forbidden art of the Rouge…

“I know you’re compelled to keep struggling… you evangelicals are all like this… but you should know that this is a bad match-up for you… I’ve seen all of these techniques before. After all… I was there when they were created.”

Wh… What…?

“Y-you…” My voice is hoarse and strained. It hurts to breathe, let alone speak… and yet I have to know… “Y…you knew… the founder…?”

The Black Monster seems to stare at me for a moment, before landing on its feet and raising its bladed appendage, aiming its sharp point at my neck.

“Tell me… what need would a *corpse* have of such knowledge?”

The cadence of the Monster’s speech betrays its rhetorical nature. It has no intention of offering any final requests. It’s hell-bent on killing the Moon Child… and it’s hell-bent on killing all of us…

Well… it’s not like it’ll have any problem killing me… I already have one foot in the grave… I can feel the blood pouring, dripping down my lips, down my nose, even out of my ears. I’m crying and sweating blood at this point.

…a trickle of blood comes down the old well…

The Black Monster hovers forward, wings gently flapping, heat rising. I wonder, will it cut me down with that tendril it has pointed at me? Or will it coat me in those black flames again. I can’t do anything about it either way, but I’m curious how it’ll decide to dispose of me. A quick and efficient death to get back to its business? Or will it make me suffer for wasting so much of its time?

…a stream of blood begins to pour out of the well, pooling onto the ground…

Ah… it’s such a shame, really… I ran into this hell knowing that I would almost certainly be killed… but that’s not how I wanted things to play out… I wanted to find Zieg so we could fight together, or at least convince him to come back… and failing that… I wanted to at least save a few people… and failing that… I wanted to avenge them by beating the Black Monster… I really… thought… that I could…

…blood begins to burst out of the well like a geyser, flooding the ground beneathe…

Why did I think I could stand against the Black Monster, anyway? From the moment I learned what it was… my first thought was that I could serve some purpose, undo the damage that I’ve caused in this world by defeating it… but why did I think I’d stand a chance? I couldn’t even beat Lotta…

…a single bloodied hand grasps at the edge of the well…

That’s right… Lotta was stronger and faster than me in every way… In the end, I had to resort to killing her in order to beat…

…wait… I… I killed Lotta… I crushed her chest flat, and then she died… so how could she be stronger than me… if I killed her…?

…

…the bloodied hand pushes down upon the surface of the well, and something rises from the blood-filled well…

That’s right… in truth, I was always stronger than Lotta… stronger than my father… stronger than everyone around me… they were like ants to me… but I didn’t want to be stronger than anyone… I wanted to sing silly songs, and pick flowers, and be a normal girl…

…but I was never normal… …after all… my mother only got sick after she gave birth to me…

…

…the bloody figure looks right at me with piercing white eyes… it reaches out…

The Black Monster finally reaches me, hovering over me like a towering god of war. It raises its arm with the blade-like appendage.

Ah… off with my head, then…

But I don’t want to die… I never wanted to die… in truth, when I was running down the hill to return to Neet… it wasn’t about protecting the villagers, or saving my son, or finding my husband… it wasn’t even about punishing myself for what I did…

In truth… I was smiling ear to ear… because from the moment I laid eyes on the Black Monster, floating there in front of the crimson red Moon… I knew then that I had found… an opponent worthy of *my* fist…

The Black Monster’s tendril comes swinging down at my face.

…the bloodied hand reaches out…

And that hand… my hand… grabs the tip of the Black Monster’s tendril, stopping it in place.

“!!” The Black Monster is silent.

I rise back up to my feet, painlessly and effortlessly. The blood stops pouring out of my body, though the blood on my face and clothes dry and stain me.

My eyes become focused, and I finally can start to get a good look at this thing close up.

“Say…” I speak softly. “…I thought that this was something that was attached to your arm… but this thing you have… this is a *sword*, isn’t it?

“Tell me… what kind of Monster uses a sword, anyway? Shouldn’t you have claws or fangs? A sword is so… impersonal…”

“What?” The monster responds, seemingly aghast, grasping its sword with both hands now, desperately trying to wring it out from between my thumb and two fingers. The sword vibrates as it tries to pull with all its might… it’s almost cute…

“Don’t worry…” I gaze into the creature’s blank and clouded face, focusing on where its eyes should be. “I’ll show you how a *real* monster fights…”

With that, I strike at the monster’s chest with a single palm, sending the bastard flying backward even farther than I had while cloaked with lightning.

The beast stops itself from crashing into another ruined cottage by extending its wings, stretching out its arms and legs before pointing… it’s *sword*, I suppose… at me.

“That twisted smile on your face… you’ve lost your mind.” It tries to speak confidently, as if it still has the upper-hand. “I suppose I can’t blame you, given the circumstances… but nothing has changed. Your hands lack the strength to harm me, and your strength is all but spent.”

I can’t help but chuckle at how hollow its words are.

“Are you saying these things out loud to make yourself feel better?”

“Kh!” That seems to irritate the beast… good… I want it nice and angry… I want it to hit me with those whip-like slashes again… I want to see what this thing can really do… and I want to see the look on its faceless face when it realizes it won’t be enough…

I take a glance at my dominant hand, the one I broke earlier. The glove has long been worn from all the strikes I’ve thrown at that monster’s chest. It seems my skin has been stained grey with all the ash floating in the air, and my hand is as damaged as ever.

These echoed screams we’re surrounded by… these souls that still burn in the Monster’s black fire… I wonder…

“Say, Black Monster…” I tilt my head down. “I heard from my priest that you’ve come seeking the Moon Child, isn’t that right? Oh… but I guess you killed that priest, too, didn’t you?

“In fact, you’ve killed everyone in Neet, right? Not just the knights, but the workers? And their wives? Even their children? All of my son’s friends? You really did kill them all, didn’t you?

“That’s what all these screams are, right? The freshly dead souls, screaming in fear and agony from the death you delivered them. You can hear them, right? Screaming and crying and wailing like that? It’s like you never stop killing them, even after they’re dead!!”

“Shut up…” The Black Monster seems to snap at me with a threateningly low tone.

“Don’t be like that!” I smile from ear-to-ear as I extend my arms, gesturing to all the death and destruction this monster has caused. “I’m just saying… you’ve killed so many innocent people here today, and you’ve caused them so much pain and suffering… they’re still screaming, even after they’ve died!

“These souls… screaming and crying and burning… my oh my… what a wonderful abundance of CHI YOU’VE LEFT FOR ME TO ABSORB!!”

My screaming words herald the solution to my sorry condition as pools of glowing violet energy begin to flow into my open hands.

The screams subside.

The Black Monster seems to notice, its head moving from left to right as it appears to look around.

“What have you *done*!?” Its tone seems to change… it’s kind of bizarre, actually… it sounds like it’s judging me…?

“Whatever do you mean?” I grin happily as my wounds are slowly mended, bone popping back in place, and skin stitching together, though the blood stays stained across my face. “Though, as far as the Rouge School goes, this is a bit unprecedented.”

“Those people’s souls… you would use them as *weapons*!?” The monster points its sword at me.

“isn’t that a better fate than having your soul burn in agony?” I lower my head in confusion; a smile still painted on my face.

“Flames eventually die out, you fool! Even mine!!” The monster swipes at air. “What *you’re* doing is robbing them of the chance to pass on!! You’re *harvesting* them!!”

“Heh…” I can’t help but laugh at the hypocrisy. “You’re the one who *killed* them all… I’m just giving them a chance to avenge their own deaths. You can understand *that* much, can’t you?”

The beast seems to growl in disgust. “I thought you were an evangelical, but it seems I was wrong… you’re nothing but a *monster*!”

“*Me*? A *monster*?” The smile vanishes from my face as I feel judgment coming from the creature. “I guess you would know. After all… You kill *children*.”

The Monster flings its body at me, aiming to lunge its sword right into me.

I grasp at the tip yet again, stopping both it and the monster in place.

“Bet you thought the first time was a fluke, huh?”

I fling the blade away and strike at the creature’s center-mass with a double-palm thrust, hurling the beast away, causing it to tumble to the ground.

“Hey… how come you’re not hitting as hard as before? You know, that thing you were doing? Where you fling your body around like a whip? Is it cuz you’re too angry to focus on moving right?” I lean in with a mocking smile. “Do you need a second to calm down, first?”

“SHUT UP!!” The beast dashes at me on foot, then slides to the right, then left, before swinging its sword much faster.

I dodge by ducking under, and then I elbow it in the ribs. I can actually feel the hide start to give a little, and the beast immediately catches its rib with its free hand, stumbling back.

“I have to say, it’s kind of weird that you have to move your body like that in order to eke out an extra bit of strength… then again, I guess that would explain why I’m able to catch your sword like that. You’re actually pretty weak, huh?”

The beast growls with rage as it swipes carelessly with all its might in my general direction, stumbling around with poor footing.

“Missed.” I mock as I duck under its blade yet again.

It swipes horizontally three times.

“Too slow!” I taunt as I casually twist away from its range.

It extends its wings and thrusts forward, seeking to skewer my gut with its sword.

“Over here!” I call from behind the creature, already having dodged.

“DAMN YOU!!!” I’m suddenly assailed by a flurry of blades, more and more with each passing second… but not a single one of its slashes can touch me. These souls have filled me with enough strength and vitality to fight in perpetuity. I wonder if this monster can do the same…

After a few more seconds of proving my advantage in speed, I slip behind the beast and strike at the spot between its wings again, causing them to flutter as the monster stumbles back onto its feet, which I then sweep from under it with a spinning-sliding kick.

The Black Monster tumbles forward, rolling forward to get back onto its feet, and already I close the distance and strike at the thing with three strong punches.

The beast blocks two of them with its sword, alternating from one angle to the other, only for my third fist to whip past the sword and rushes toward its lower abdomen.

I can hear, as well as feel from my fist, a subtle crack come from the creature’s hide as my third strike makes contact.

“Guh!!” The beast stumbles back again, then falls onto its butt.

I take two steps toward the creature, only for it to crawl a bit backward as it aims its sword up at me.

“Are you… afraid?” I tilt my head and raise my eyebrow, a permanent smile frozen on my face.

“I don’t have time for this! That’s all!!” It roars back at me.

“You are, aren’t you!?” My smile widens. “You’re actually afraid of me!! You’re afraid of dying!!

“Oh my god!! How pathetic can you get!? Don’t you realize that this is what you’ve been doing to all of these people!? To children!?

“Yet here you sit, stumbling like a lost child, as if you haven’t been killing children all this time!! How can you call yourself a monster if you’re not as prepared to die as you are to kill!? Even a predator knows it may become prey!!”

“I never called myself a monster!!” It screams.

…

“…what?” my head tilts even more. “But… don’t you realize what you are?

“You kill children.”

The Black Monster begins to rise to its feet, still taking steps backward as it aims its sword at me, holding it with both hands.

“The Moon Child must die, and those around it must die as well! There can be no exceptions!!” The creature’s voice sounds so strange to me… it’s so emotional… offended, even…

“You kill children.” I respond, taking slow steps forward.

“Why do you keep on SAYING that!? Do you think I don’t *know*!?” The monster’s voice seems hoarse… it doesn’t have eyes… but it sounds like it’s crying. “The Moon Child needs to be *killed*! That’s *all* there is to it!! So I cannot fall here!! Not to you, or ANYONE else!!”

“You cannot *fall* here?” I repeat the monster’s words back to it in a mocking tone. “Isn’t that something a *hero* would say?

“You kill children. You’re a writhing beast cloaked in flame and shadow… and you kill children.”

“STOP IT!! STOP *SAYING* THAT!!!” The beast seems to cover its ears. “*YOU* DEVOURED THEIR *SOULS*!! YOU HAVE *NO* RIGHT TO JUDGE ME!!!”

I chuckle softly.

“I’m not judging you… and I know full well what *I* am… I’m just reminding you what *you* are… and what this battle is… it’s a fight between two monsters… that’s *all* that’s going on here. That is what it means… to be worthy of *my* fist…”

“Y… Y-you’re insane… You’re absolutely Ins-”

I smack the sword away from the direction it was pointed as I advance, grabbing the monster by its shoulder, and punching it in the face repeatedly with each word that I shout.

“YOU! KILL! CHILDREN!!!”

That’s right. I’ll not judge you… so long as you don’t judge me in turn. We’re kindred spirits… we are both monsters… if you, the Black Monster of legend, can’t understand something so simple and obvious, I think I might just tear my own head off in frustration.

The beast breaks free by swiping its sword, forcing me to dodge backward. It then stabs its sword into the ground, holding itself up as it bobs up and down on the floor. It’s hard to tell from the shadowy visage it covers itself with… but I think its running out of breath.

“So much for being a *bad match-up*, huh?” I mock its earlier remark. “Though speaking of, this technique isn’t really something I learned from the Rouge School, so maybe that’s a bit unfair… actually, I guess I should come up with a name for it, since it’s brand new…”

I take a look at my glowing purple hands, smiling as I see the abundance of energy swirling and biting, thirsty for the flesh of their killer.

“Hmm… I think I’ll call this… the Phantom Fist.”

“Call it… what you want… in the end… it’s spiritual… cannibalism…”

“There you go again, judging me as if you have any leg to stand on. You kill-”

“ENOUGH!!” The beast hovers, and then lunges at me again. I parry its first strike with the side of my left palm. It then flies back, then lunges forward again for another slash. I parry that one as effortlessly as the first. It continuously flies back, and then forward, slashing at me, then flying away.

I see what it’s trying to do now… It’s not leaving me a chance to counter-attack.

After a few more slashes, the beast then flies up, then falls at me with a downward thrust of its blade.

The sword collides with my body, and the two of us are engulfed in an explosion of black power.

The energy subsides, and the beast’s head seems to reel back in shock as it realizes I’ve caught its blade yet again between my two palms.

I then raise my hands up, and then slam the creature down to the ground, letting go of the sword and allowing it to smash into the dirt floor.

The creature stumbles as it tries to quickly get back up to its feet. It doesn’t realize yet that it’s too late… it’s already in range of my next attack.

The Raijinkou wasn’t the only forbidden technique my father taught me… late at night, he would leave out certain scrolls for me to read… One in particular, I could only ever find once before it disappeared… or maybe I just saw it in a dream…

My body vanishes. I push beyond the limits of not just the human body, but up against the limits of the realm that body exists within.

My body splits into four separate gods of war, and surround the creature.

“***Rouge School Black Arts: Four Gods Destruction!”***

With four strikes in unison, I strike at the creature, causing its hide to finally crack and split.

The creature finally collapses onto its hands and knees, dropping the sword it once held onto, so desperately that I mistook it for an extension of itself.

I look upon this pathetic thing in front of me, shaking in fear as all of its tricks have failed, and the last of its strength is spent.

With a smile, I close the distance between us with one final stroll.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm hmmmmmmm…♪

“Back then, all I wanted to do was sing, whether it be on a stage, or alone with my child. I wanted my songs to make others happy.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm hmmmmmmm…♪”

After I killed Lotta, I ran away, all across Endiness, looking for a hole to hide in. Looking back at it now, I’m not even sure why I bothered. It’s not like any prison could hold me… it’s not as if anyone is strong enough to hold me accountable. And if I cannot be held accountable, then can I really be called a *murderer*?

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm *hmm* hmmmmmm…♪”

Once I rip the Black Monster’s head from its neck, I’ll go back to looking for my husband. After all this hard work, I think deserve a hot prize from him.

If I can’t find him, then I’ll just go and find Dart. I’ll raise him to be strong… I’ll make sure that he’s strong… and then one day, when he’s old enough, I’ll make him fight me like this.

“Hmmm hmmm hm hm hm hm *hmmmmmmmmmmm*…♪”

I wonder if this world can really be saved if the Black Monster dies to someone like me? Then again… maybe that’s why Soa made me this way… I am His monster… My father’s monster…

“St… Sta…y… b…ack…” The Black Monster’s voice is barely audible… I think it’s telling me to stay away from it…

“You’re not going to beg for your miserable *life*, are you?” I cackle and holler. “Haven’t you been at this for ten thousand *years*!? Doesn’t the moon glow a fiery red to herald *your* arrival!? And THIS is how you plan to meet your end!? Begging for a mercy you couldn’t possibly deserve!?

I calm myself down, then ask plainly. “Are you going to make me say it again?”

No response. The beast seems too tired to move or speak.

“You kill children.” I speak coldly, seeking to cut through whatever delusion this thing is plagued by.

The monster weeps openly… it’s blackened tears drop to the floor like early rainfall.

“…I’m sorry…” it manages to choke through its pained sobs to stammer out those two words.

My eyes widen. My jaw nearly hits the floor. My entire body trembles with unrestrained anger.

“You’re sorry?... what… what does that even mean, coming from you? You’re sorry? What?” My teeth grit and grind. “You’re sorry? You? You *dare* say that!?” My finger nails dig into my palms, breaking skin. “You’re supposed to be The Black Monster!! You’re supposed to be a demon with no voice!! You’re supposed to kill and burn and destroy!!

“You don’t get to apologize! Not for what you’ve done! You get to sit there and get pummeled until you’re nothing but a stain on the floor!

“You’re a monster! And so am I! And so we fight until one of us kills the other! That’s all that this is! YOU DON’T GET TO SAY YOU’RE SORRY!!!”

I grab the Black Monster by the collar and pull it up to my eyes level, reeling my fist back in preparation for a non-stop beating.

In that moment, the fire and shadow that seem cover the monster in a shroud of smoke and cinder suddenly dissipates… and at long last I make true eye-contact with my opponent.

But the second that I do… the very instant that our eyes finally meet… my heart shatters.

My muscles relax, my eyes widen, my breath leaves me, my legs begin to shake… the chains of guilt which I abandoned so readily, coil around every inch of my body like snakes.

“You’re… you’re a… h-”

\*shink\*

A geyser of blood erupts from my chest and onto the floor as a sword thrusted into me, piercing through my heart and out of my back.

What sort of world was I born into, anyway? Can you tell me? You seem to know more than you let on. You knew about the founder of the Rouge, after all. Maybe you could tell me all about that… or maybe you could just talk to me, I don’t know… I just… I have this strange feeling… I want to get to know you better.

…

…actually… I guess it makes sense that you’d know all about the Rouge School, right? I mean… you and I grew up together, even though you’re older… we used to play together, didn’t we? And we’d help each other out all the time. I miss talking to you.

Hey, remember when you showed me where the flowers grow? I couldn’t believe Rouge had such pretty roses!

Hey, remember that time you overheard me singing to myself? You told me how beautiful my voice was! It meant a lot to me. I started to dream about performing for an audience after that!

Oh! Remember when you told me about that boy you liked? I asked if you wanted me to tell him that you liked him, and you got all flustered! That really made me laugh!

Hey… how come we stopped talking after a while? I think it was right around the time my Dad started training us. I really missed how we used to be…

And when we’d spar together, you’d get so competitive… mean, even… that really hurt me… and it made me angry at you… didn’t you know I didn’t want to be the next master?

Even still… I’m really sorry I got so upset at you… I never should have done what I did… but I’m glad that you’re here now… I finally get to apologize to you…

Hey… do you mind if I… caress your cheek?

I just… wanted to say that… I’m sorry… Lotta…