

Monster in the Window

Selaine was born with crystalline skin and amethyst eyes. She heard them say that her mother was in agony and suffered greatly. Emperor Yulian held his wife's hand all night, even after her hand went limp. The Lightfall Chateau rang with the Empress' screams and then, quieter, the Emperor's sobs.

An abomination. A mistake. A curse.

Her father had said these words to her, although she could not remember in what order. She only knew that the last time he came, he said that she was nothing but his failure. That was about two years ago, according to her count.

He locked her away in the eastern wing from the moment she was born. He didn't want the public to see what he had given life to. She could walk around her wing of the Chateau, but there wasn't much point. She had gathered whatever leftover belongings she could find in the abandoned wing, and took them as her own. Between the voices she heard from the window and the few books she found, she slowly taught herself how to read, write, and even speak.

Although, there wasn't much of a point. There was no one to talk to. Her food was brought to her by a dumbwaiter every night. The guardswoman who watched over her, Fillianore, never spoke to her either.

Alone, she looked out the window every day, watching the distant people and families going about their daily lives in town. She saw children smiling and laughing as they ran through the legs of adults bartering and trading in the town square. She heard the parades and parties that her father would occasionally attend, as the people cheered and chanted his name.

When she was younger, her older brothers would sneak into her wing and use the lack of security to slip out a window and venture into town. Every time she heard them coming, she ran

to her room and locked the door. She had never met them before, and she did not want to hear any more names being thrown at her. They laughed and loudly whispered to each other as they passed just outside her door. She wanted to meet them, she wanted to be brave. She called out to them once. They never came back.

Selaine was only around 12 at the time. They were all quite a bit older except for her brother Nathan. Loremaster Grenik was his teacher and on one of his visits to the Chateau, she overheard him talking to their father. He said that Nathan was the most well-mannered and caring young boy he ever had the pleasure of teaching.

She wondered if Nathan was caring enough to even care for her. *I mean, I am his younger sister after all. Of course he would!*

As her brothers passed her door one night, she heard them mention that Nathan was about to be 14 and finally old enough to join them. She felt a hope that she hadn't felt before. Her chest felt as though a heavy weight was pressing against it, and the geometric shards on her skin went from its normal bluish hint to a soft pink.

Her hope quickly turned into fear and shame. As she thought about what she should say to Nathan and her brothers, her breaths became shorter and more rapid. She started to think that the idea was stupid in the first place, that she had no place to speak to them. She was an abomination. Then she heard a sweet and familiar voice.

"You are their sister, they are your brothers. Why fear your own blood, sweet child?"

"They don't know me. Father probably never even told them about me. They probably don't even know I'm alive." Selaine cradled her arms around her knees as she spoke.

"He is an emotional old man, Selaine. You must forgive him."

"Like how he forgave me?" She spat.

“Oh my dear, he doesn’t blame you for what happened. He does these things because he loves you!”

“He’s more concerned with appearances than his daughter.”

“That’s just not tru—”

“Why do *I* have to be the one who forgives and forgets? Why me? Aren’t you the adults here?”

“My dear Selaine, the bonds of blood hold tighter than any perceived differences you all may have. You are my beautiful young girl, they are my handsome young boys, and your father and I would want us all to be happy together!”

Selaine thought for a minute and gazed back at the tall mirror.

“. . . You mean it?” She asked.

“Of course, my sweet child. I wish to see my boys again, and you deserve a family!” Her mother smiled back at her in the mirror. Or was that her face? She could never really tell.

She practiced in front of the mirror for hours, as her mother gave her suggestions and calmed her nerves. She wanted to make her first appearance to her brothers, to Nathan, as perfect as possible.

Later that night, she heard her brothers talking and laughing with a new voice laughing along. As they gathered by her door, she knocked three times. All the voices stopped.

After a while, the voice of Braelin, her oldest brother, rang out. “Hey, did you hear that knocking? What was that?” His voice only slightly quivered.

She knocked three more times, in a gentle rhythm. After another few seconds, the door suddenly began to open slowly in front of her.

There she stood, in the lavender dress her mother picked out for her, with a thin white shawl over and around her black, curly hair. She breathed deeply and smiled.

“Well good evening, my dear brothers. It is I, your long-lost sister, Selaine!” She exclaimed with a wave of her hands followed by a bow. “I am so sorry for hiding away from you all this time, but I could not stay away from my family any longer!”

The men before her looked at her in mixed visages of shock and confusion. She knew her brothers were older, but four of them had thick beards and wide bellies. Her resolve was shaken and she began to feel afraid of these strange men that she had only heard through the door. Then she looked at Nathan, the youngest. She smiled at him and reached a hand out to him. Then, she saw his face twist in disgust as he recoiled away.

“What are you, freak?” He hissed.

“Oh. I—I’m not a freak. I’m your younger sister!” She stepped closer to them. “Mom said that we should all be happy together and I wanted to meet you all...” her voice trailed off as they all stepped away and one of her brothers reached for the sword at his hip.

“Who do you think you are? Our mother and sister *died* over a decade ago and you think you can screw with us like that?” The one who looked the oldest, likely Braelin, pulled out the sword and pointed the tip at her neck. “No one disrespects our mother and sister like that.” His skin was pale and he looked more afraid than angry.

“Brother, please. I—I know that I’m not like you all, but I really am Selaine.” She began to cry. “Please believe me.” She stepped forward.

He lunged forward and drove the tip of the sword at her throat. The sword glanced off her hardened skin and he slashed back and the blade caught in the crystals over her rib cage.

However, she felt a deep shock of pain ripple through her torso as she crumbled to the floor. The blade shattered some of the crystals and a thick green liquid seeped out of the openings.

She heard a clang of metal, and the angered voices of her brothers as her consciousness began to fade. The last thing she remembered from that night was Fillianore carrying her to bed as the boys ran from her.

When she woke up, she stood in front of the mirror with her arms crossed.

“Well, mother. How do you explain that?” She barked.

Her mother’s voice came out harsher than ever before. “Maybe if you didn’t fuck this up for us, we could have left this horrid place!”

“What did I do?” She yelled.

Her mother didn’t respond. She yelled, again and again, pleading for answers.

“What did I do to deserve my own brothers looking at me like that? What did I do to deserve being locked up in this place all my life? What did I do to deserve any of this?”

She wept. And she heard the quiet voice of her mother return.

“You killed me. And you are being punished.”

Selaine screamed as she punched into the glass. Hundreds of shards rained down around her.

“Fuck you and dad and everyone. I hate you all.”

“You should...”

That was the last time she had heard her mother’s voice.

Selaine’s eyes cracked open as the windows blew apart and the gusting wind raced through the room. She shot out of bed to close and barricade the windows, as she had grown

accustomed to in recent years. She tried telling Fillianore about the growing power behind the winds. As always, she did not respond.

She threw the heavy iron bar over the windows and began picking up the papers and clothes that scattered around from the wind. The crumpled-up balls of paper were there before the window shot open, but she knew that she should clean those as well. She unfurled one and skimmed the sloppy writing. She crumpled it back up and tossed it out of the room with the rest of the garbage.

The staff stopped bringing food and water to her a few years ago. Selaine was convinced at first that something must have happened, but from her people watching she knew that life went on as usual at the Chateau and the town below. After about a month, the hunger pangs kept her bedridden. Her stomach roared through the night and she was convinced somewhere her father was laughing as he heard it.

It was not long after that she realized she needed to distract herself from the pain of hunger and dehydration. She tried drawing, but she hated everything she drew. Then, she tried writing, and she hated everything she wrote. Her stories were nonsensical and uninteresting, her autobiography exceptionally uninteresting and yet rambling, and her attempts at poetry were pitiful at best.

But she kept writing. She needed to. She couldn't let herself think about the pain, she needed to escape from it. She thought about escaping for real, the way her brothers used to. But every time she began to prepare, she thought about the way they looked at her. When she went to sleep, she could see those cold and hateful eyes looking back at her. She was sure her father's eyes were also in the mix. She knew that she was nothing but a coward, and tried to write about that too. That was in the pile of crumpled papers as well.

She kept coming back to one particular character that she had come up with. Her name was Silvie and she was a pacifist knight. Selaine herself laughed at the contradiction but loved the idea so much that the few papers she kept on her desk were Silvie's frequent and short misadventures. But Silvie always saved the day in the end, and it made her feel happy to know that things worked out in the end.

When Sylvie joined the jousting tournament but refused to hit her opponent, she was able to turn the tournament into a parade of gallantry. When she marched off to battle, she made such a rabid plea to both lords that they agreed to meet to discuss a treaty. When she was tasked with teaching the prince how to fight, she taught him poetry and he grew up to be the best king the realm had ever seen. It always ended with Sylvie laughing heartily on her horse, trotting off into the horizon as people cheered and applauded.

It was fake. All of it was just stories she had come up with. Of course, it would work out in the end if she wanted it to. And she did so it always did. *No one would want to read.* She wanted to be better. She wanted to tell rich and real stories that brought forth a plethora of emotions from any future reader. *No one will ever see my work anyway.*

She tried to branch away from Silvie but kept coming back to her. Compelling narratives gave way to the childish sentiments of peace and happy endings. But it helped to keep her mind on something better than what it normally settled on. She needed the stories where everything worked out. Everything *had* to work out. After a few months, the hunger pangs faded.

She occasionally looked into the cracked remnants of the mirror and wondered what she could be. How could she possibly survive this long without food and water? But the mirror provided no answers.

Selaine looked out into the hallway and saw a mountain of crumbled papers as tall as Fillianore on the far wall. Nobody had been coming to collect garbage either, of course. She waved at the guardswoman not expecting a response and turned back into her room.

She began hanging small scraps of paper on the walls and across the ceiling. She had been planning and preparing today for months. When she ran out of string to tie up the papers, she pulled the yarn from her old clothes and used that instead. She spent hours lining up different strips and pieces in just the right places.

As the twin suns began to set on the horizon, she looked at her work and smiled. Around her were brightly colored decorations and stick-figure people all smiling back at her. Above her, the handmade streamer read “Happy 20th Birthday Selaine!” She remembered the weeks it took to get the letters just right and nodded happily to herself as she reached under her bed.

There, she pulled out a pile of tiny torn scraps of paper that she stuck to an old empty box she found in one of the other rooms. It now looked like a beautiful and tall birthday cake. She set it down on the desk and lit an imaginary candle above it.

She sat rocking gently at her desk, hearing the singing of the stick figures around her as she looked at her cake expectantly. When the song was over, she pretended to cut the cake and serve it out to all of her guests before laying back down in bed. She looked around at the smiling faces and the decorations and drifted gently to sleep. *Today was a good day.*

She was woken in the night by her father sitting next to her, holding the streamer in his hands. He looked down at it. He had bags under his eyes and looked paler than she remembered.

“Oh. Father... I was not expecting you.” She croaked quietly. Her voice did not get much use anymore so it felt weird to hear herself talking.

“No, nor should you have,” he whispered. He held onto the streamer and looked down as he spoke. “I need you to do me a favor, daughter.”

“So *now* I’m your daughter? Great. How lucky am I?” She retorted.

“You have many reasons to hate me, I will not pretend that isn’t the case. But I need you now,” his voice faltered.

She smirked. “I needed you for years but you were too ashamed of me, so excuse me if I don’t rush to your aid.”

“You don’t understand... I have done everything I could to protect you.”

She shot from her bed and grabbed his collar.

“You... protected me? From what? Living my life? From having friends? From celebrating a birthday with more than just poorly drawn characters on a wall?” She seethed. She held one hand below his neck and her crystalline skin lightly nicked his beard and sliced a few strands off.

For the first time, he looked up at her. “Yes. But I don’t need your thanks or your disrespect. I know you hate me, but do you hate those people out there?” He pointed to the window.

She hesitated. “What?”

“Do you hate them?” He repeated.

“No, of course I don’t. I mean, I probably would if they saw me, but no I don’t hate them.”

“The horde is coming, and it wants you. Creatures of all shapes and sizes with only the thought of bloodshed and consumption in their mind, are coming here because they want you. And everyone out there will suffer for it.”

She slowly released her grasp on his collar and sat back on the edge of the bed. She thought about the winds she had warned Fillianore about.

“What are you talking about?” She murmured.

He sighed. “You are a mistake, Selaine. But not in the way you think. The Arcanist and I spent decades of our lives trying to create... perfection. Time after time, failure after failure, we were running out of ideas. Child after child, none of them worked!” His voice grew louder.

“I’m... an experiment?” She trailed off.

“Yes, and a failed one at that. If I knew what you would do to your mother, I—that’s not important now. You are my punishment, and they were sent to rid the world of my mistake.”

Selaine looked at the ceiling and saw the hanging star decorations above that she had spent meticulous hours cutting out. She wondered what it must be like to lay in the grass and gaze at the stars above her head. She smiled.

“Probably overrated.” Selaine chuckled lightly to herself. “Fine, what do I have to do? Is there some sort of ritual of sacrifice ceremony?”

“No. You only have to die,” he whispered, before lunging forward with a long crooked dagger in one hand, pinning her to the bed with the other.

Selaine yelped in shock and terror as her father stood over her, the blade in his hand dripping a muddled green liquid from its edge. As the drops began to hit her shoulder, she instantly seized up in pain. The acid burned through her crystal skin and began to eat at her insides.

“My greatest regret dies with you, Selaine! I will finally have my revenge for Nathan! Whatever hell you go to, I will find my way there someday!” He slammed his hand down to her neck but stopped just short of piercing her flesh.

“No father, I will find you someday,” she whispered as she removed her hand from his chest and gazed at the beating heart in her grasp before crushing it. Emperor Yulian crumbled over her and dropped the dagger to the side.

After a few moments, she looked around the room and heard the voices singing to her again, this time the emperor’s voice mingled in the chorus. She gently sang along for a time before drifting to sleep.

When she awoke, she looked at the corpse still resting on top of her and thought about what he had said before he died. Then, the night she met her brothers spewed forth from her memory. Flashes passed before her eyes, as she saw the truth. And then she screamed.

She took everything she could carry, found the old rope her brothers used to use, and said goodbye to Fillianore as she climbed out the window and slid down the rope to the grass below.

She ran.

She ran as fast as she could, the feeling of the acid still burning in her shoulder. She ran away from the house she had spent her entire life in. She ran away from her family, the only people she had ever seen or known. She ran from her room and her stories and her drawings. She ran from her crimes.

When she entered the town, she could hear music and voices coming from the various houses and businesses around her. Everything was so strange, so *loud*. She always saw these people, she watched them every day. But to hear them? To be amongst them? She continued to run.

There were people everywhere. She bumped into several of them, and she couldn’t stop to make sure they were unharmed as she ran. She couldn’t stop to apologize. She couldn’t see those eyes again.

She found shelter under a small bridge that ran over a stream on the outskirts of town. She pulled her cloak around her tighter and waited. She listened to see if anyone had followed her or if any of the townsfolk were looking for her. Would the neighborhood children look at her like a vile beast? Would they poke her with sticks from afar? She looked at her reflection in the stream. *They probably would, and who could blame them?*

After a few hours, she finally began to relax and drink some of the water in the stream. It was strange. She wasn't sure if she missed it or hated it.

She realized quickly that it was a mistake, as she immediately grew hungry again for the first time in almost two years. And the pain was almost unbearable. She clenched her stomach as she began to wander the streets for food. She tossed the cloak around her head and face and walked around this quiet area of town, looking for anything she could finally eat. Eventually, she smelled something sweet.

She followed the scent to a small house on the edge of town. The building itself was constructed of loose and broken pieces of wood that seemed to be nailed together haphazardly. She stood on her toes to look through the window. Inside, she saw a family sitting at a small table. In the center of the table was what looked to be a cooked bird of some kind with a few small sides.

At first, she planned to jump through the window and use the dagger she now had at her side to force them to give their food to her. Right as she was about to unsheathe the blade, the image of her father standing over her with the dagger drawn flashed in her mind. She concluded that it would be safer if she just stole their leftovers as they slept.

She watched them eat. She watched them talk. She watched the mother scold the son for pushing his vegetables onto his sister's plate. She watched the sister eat a few of his vegetables

anyway while their parents weren't looking. He smiled up at her and she tousled his hair.

Selaine's face contorted into a bittersweet smile.

Would our family have looked like that, if I were different? She wondered as she watched. She could have eaten a few vegetables for her brothers, she would have eaten all of their vegetables if they wanted her to. If that would have made them happy and made them smile like that at her, she would have eaten anything.

She watched until the stars shined overhead and the family drifted off to sleep. As she looked inside, she knew it would be easy to steal whatever she wanted and get out without being seen. She sighed and turned away from the window.

When she got back to the bridge, she laid down in the grass and clenched one hand over her roaring stomach. The pain was intense, and it had been so long since she had to feel this. She thought about the distractions she made for herself back then. And then she looked up.

Dancing across the sky were billions of stars twinkling and shining before her. The light of Zenia, the beautiful blue moon she had grown so accustomed to seeing from her window, rained her moonlight directly over and around her. With one hand over her stomach, she grabbed at the grass around her with the other and felt the dew on her fingers. She began to laugh.

"Maybe not so overrated after all, right Fillianore?"

Fillianore gave no response, as always.

Selaine drifted off to sleep staring at the stars.

The wind roared overhead and through the underpass of the bridge. The splashing of the stream over her face startled her awake. The dark clouds above obscured the sky before her. She could feel the power, so much closer than before. And so much more hostile.

She heard screams coming from nearby. She recognized the voice. She ran to the house from yesterday and saw the parents and the daughter grasping at each other while screaming towards the fields just outside of town.

She followed their gaze and her heart sank. Out in the field, the young son and brother waddled and stumbled in the grass. Behind him, she saw a wave. The wave thrashed and broke and clawed in his direction. The creatures were grotesque, horrifying, and racing in his direction. No, not just his direction, but *hers*.

She looked wildly around for the guards or the soldiers but saw no one. Then it dawned on her that the Emperor was dead and the investigation must have begun.

She didn't have the time to think about if her father was right, after all. She sprinted as fast as she could past the family and towards the young boy. She could see the snarling beasts and fanged serpents closing in, and she pushed even faster. She couldn't breathe, she needed to be there. The boy seemed to not even notice the horrors behind him, but when he saw her, his face went pale. He screamed and began to cry as she quickly scooped him up and gently tossed him to the sister who followed behind Selaine. The girl looked up at her, and Selaine could see both gratitude and fear in her eyes. She turned back towards the oncoming hoard and smiled as tears began to stream down her crystalline cheeks.

"Everything is overrated, but I wish I got to see it." She whispered aloud as she reached for the dagger and ran towards the hoard. Thunder crashed overhead as she impacted the wave of monsters and abominations. Teeth and claws tore into her body. She tossed the dagger at one creature, before contorting her arms into blades as best she could and swinging wildly in their direction.

She was surrounded, everything around her a swirling mix of flesh, crystals, and blood. Was it hers? Was it theirs? Was it the boy's? She could not say for certain. But she fought. Lightning arced down into her body and her ears rang in pain as her body was sundered in half. She didn't understand what was happening, but she embraced it.

It seemed like time stopped around her. In this one moment, she looked at the creatures she was fighting. Ugly, terrifying, and bloodthirsty monsters surrounded her. And her last thought was *I'm the ugliest, most terrifying, and most bloodthirsty. We all die together.*

The two halves of her body burst forth from one other, before shooting off into the sky. The dark clouds were ripped apart as sunlight shined through the two breaks in the coverage, and two crystalline pillars rose from the ground. The pillars surged and radiated a deep and powerful force, as the monster wave crashed into the boundary the pillars created and dissolved. The pillars seemed to almost pull the creatures into this boundary, as each one was shredded and torn to nothing.

The family looked on in awe and horror as the pillars destroyed every vile creature that came before it could reach the town. They all cried as the storm subsided and the fields were left with nothing but blood and scorched rock to mark what had happened. And there remained the pillars.

On the coronation day of Emperor Braelin, he ordered the construction of a massive gatehouse between the pillars. It would forever be named Selaine's Door, in honor of the stillborn imperial princess. Centuries passed, and the monster hordes never threatened beyond the pillars again.

Since then, the only hordes attacking the gates have been human ones. The morning after each bloody battle, it is rumored that the pillars are always covered in dew. The locals have come to call this the “Tears of the Princess.”